



Vidyottama Sanatana
International Journal of Hindu Science and Religious Studies

Vol. 10 No. 1 May 2026

MERLEAU-PONTY'S PHENOMENOLOGICAL INQUIRY INTO THE MEANING OF RELIGIOUS EXPERIENCE IN THE BALINESE CREATIVE PRACTICE OF WAYANG TANTRI

By:

A.A. Putra Dwipayana^{1,3}, Mukhtasar Syamsuddin², Iva Ariani³

^{1,2,3}Universitas Gadjah Mada

¹gungtra3@gmail.com, ²etsar@ugm.ac.id, ³iva.ariani@ugm.ac.id

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| Received: November 06, 2025 | Accepted: May 31, 2026 | Published: May 31, 2026 |
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Abstract

This study aims to disclose the meaning of religious experience in the creative practice of Wayang Tantri through the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty. Employing a qualitative approach grounded in library research and hermeneutic analysis, the study demonstrates that the creativity of Wayang Tantri is not merely an aesthetic product, but an existential event unfolding through the embodiment of the dalang's lived experience. The findings indicate that religious experience is disclosed through the dalang's engagement with three horizons of the world: the social, the cultural-religious, and everyday experience. Religiosity does not appear as symbolic representation, but as a shared mode of inhabiting the world within the practice of performance. Through the concept of perceptual faith, religious experience is understood as the immanence of the body in its relation to the world. Accordingly, Wayang Tantri emerges as a site where artistic expression, religious experience, and existence converge within a single, interwoven horizon of experience.

Keywords: Wayang Tantri, Religious Experience, Art, Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology

I. INTRODUCTION

Wayang Tantri reveals a form of religious experience that emerges from the lived reality of Balinese society. What appears phenomenally within Wayang Tantri is, at its core, an expression of the artist's religious experience. The world of *wayang* performance does not stand as a static representation of ideas or textual doctrines; rather, it constitutes the embodiment of the *dalang's* lived experience—rooted in the ways Balinese people understand and enact their religious life (Satyawati et al., 2025). In each performance of Wayang Tantri, the collective worldview of Balinese society is disclosed, particularly concerning the relationships among humans, nature, others, and cosmic forces as mediated through religious practice. This reflects a general mode through which Balinese artists realize their spirituality within artistic media (DeBoer et al., 1992).

In practice, the creativity of Wayang Tantri manifests in three principal forms: the creation of characters, the presentation of animal figures, and the contextual structuring of narrative. First, Wayang Tantri introduces new characters that differ from those found in earlier Balinese wayang traditions. While the *punakawan* pattern is retained as a defining feature, its development exhibits significant innovation. The *punakawan* function both as a dramatic element and as mediators between the Kawi language of the narrative and the Balinese language of everyday life, thereby opening a space for direct communication with the audience (Wicaksandita, 2019). This transformation affirms that Wayang Tantri revitalizes tradition as a dialogical space. Second, the creation of animal figures as characters serves as a distinctive marker and demonstrates the emergence of a new artistic style. These figures appear in both realistic and anthropomorphic forms, supported by technical innovations such as multi-axis movement that enrich visual expression. Third, the structuring of narrative is contextual, presenting reflections of the practical life of Balinese society. The integration of figures such as *barong* and *rangda* into the

storyline, although not derived from Tantri texts, demonstrates the capacity of Wayang Tantri to articulate the lived religious sensibility of Balinese society within the dramatic structure of performance (Goodlander, 2013).

Furthermore, religiosity is manifested in the manner in which the world is brought forth through narrative, character, and the dynamics of performance. Through the *dalang's* creativity, cosmological values—such as the balance between benevolent and malevolent forces, the relationship between humans and nature, and the connection to supernatural powers—are not merely represented visually, but are re-enacted as part of a shared aesthetic experience. In this sense, Wayang Tantri functions not only as a medium of artistic expression, but also as a site for the re-articulation of Balinese religiosity as it is directly lived within the event of performance. Accordingly, the world of Wayang Tantri may be understood as a manifestation of religious experience in artistic form—an experience that is lived, embodied, and expressed through artistic action. Within this framework, the religious does not appear as a set of dogmatic symbols, but as a mode of existence inherent in the everyday praxis of artists and their communities (Jacob, 2024). Wayang Tantri, therefore, discloses a mode of religious sensibility that operates through artistic creation.

This phenomenon challenges the conventional boundaries between “religion” and “art.” If religion is generally understood as a system of belief oriented toward the transcendent, and art as a domain of aesthetic or expressive practice, then in the Balinese context the religious dimension is instead disclosed through artistic experience. Within its narrative unfolding, the ways of living, feeling, and acting characteristic of Balinese society are manifested as a form of life inseparable from everyday existence. In other words, Wayang Tantri presents a mode of religiosity grounded in existential experience—a way of inhabiting the world in its fullness. Art thus becomes a

medium of encounter between value, meaning, and life itself. It constitutes a lived world that precedes all rationality, value, and being within the field of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1964).

Most existing studies on Wayang Tantri, however, continue to position creativity primarily as an artistic achievement. This tendency is evident in a number of works, such as Suparta (1993), which focuses on the formal or visual aspects of Wayang Tantri; Murtana, (1996), which highlights the concept of *rwa bhineda* in the narrative of “Batur Taskara”; Goodlander (2013), which emphasizes the sociological dimension as a negotiation between tradition and innovation; Wicaksandita (2019), which analyzes the development of technical innovations; Ardiyasa (2020), which investigates the aesthetic dimensions of innovative forms; and Kodi (2021), which identifies postmodern aesthetic tendencies in the *bebondresan* of Wayang Tantri.

These approaches tend to conceptualize creativity as an object manifested in the form of artistic products and technical aspects of performance. Such an orientation shifts attention away from the *dalang* as the subject who experiences and enacts the creative process. Consequently, the experiential dimension underlying creativity remains insufficiently explored, leading to an understanding of Wayang Tantri that privileges representation over existential experience.

This study adopts a different position by situating creativity as a process of disclosing the meaning of the world through the *dalang's* existential engagement. From this perspective, the *dalang* emerges as a subject in relation to a lived social and cultural world, such that creativity is understood as a mode of being that reveals the meaning of lived experience.

From the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, religious experience in Wayang Tantri arises from the intertwining of body, world, and meaning as lived by the subject. The body appears as a subject that is always already in relation with the world, thereby becoming the site where meaning is disclosed (de Saint-Aubert, 2005). Through the

body, the subject participates in the world while simultaneously undergoing it in an immediate manner (Tjaya, 2020), reflecting a unity of passivity and activity. Within this framework, religiosity is manifested in everyday existential acts as a mode of engagement with the world. Wayang Tantri, therefore, presents a form of religious immanence within culture, in which aesthetic experience functions as a space for the disclosure of meaning that unites the religious and the sensible dimensions (Alloa, 2014).

This study proposes an alternative approach to understanding Wayang Tantri through a Merleau-Pontian phenomenological perspective, which situates art and religion as two modes of experience that mutually disclose the meaning of the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*) through embodiment. In the Balinese context, religious experience does not originate from a system of belief separated from life; rather, it emerges from the immanent ways in which Balinese people inhabit their world through action, ritual, and artistic expression, affirming the intertwining of subject, others, nature, and cosmic forces (Davies, 2007). Thus, religiosity is not understood as a symbolic structure to be represented, but as an experience that is lived and enacted through artistic practice.

Building on this position, the novelty of this study lies in a shift in perspective on the creativity of Wayang Tantri: from an understanding of creativity as an aesthetic product to its reconceptualization as an existential event unfolding through the *dalang's* embodied engagement with the world he inhabits. This study demonstrates that creativity is not merely the capacity to produce new forms, but a mode of being through which the world is disclosed as lived meaning. Within this framework, Wayang Tantri is understood as a space of experience in which artistic expression, religiosity, and existence converge within a single phenomenological horizon.

Accordingly, this research not only extends the study of Wayang Tantri within the context of Balinese culture, but also offers a conceptual contribution to phenomenological discourse, particularly in understanding the relation

between body, world, and meaning in aesthetic–religious experience. It proceeds from the assumption that artistic expression is grounded in the body’s *perceptual faith*—its primordial trust in the world—namely, the body’s fidelity in disclosing the meaning of lived and embodied experience, as articulated in the phenomenology of Maurice Merleau-Ponty.

II. METHOD

This study employs a qualitative approach grounded in library research. It adopts the phenomenological perspective of Merleau-Ponty to examine religious experience in Wayang Tantri. For Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology is not a method but a distinctive mode or style of thinking (Merleau-Ponty, 2012); accordingly, it is employed here as a philosophical foundation rather than as a procedural technique. To generate interpretive clarity, philosophical hermeneutics is utilized as a methodological bridge for explicating and interpreting data derived from textual sources.

The data sources of this research consist of three principal categories: (1) literature on Wayang Tantri, including studies of its form, function, and performance development; (2) academic works on Balinese performing arts and the religious practices of its society; and (3) the writings of Merleau-Ponty that are relevant to the conceptual framework employed in the analysis.

Data collection was conducted through a critical examination of selected written sources. The analytical process proceeded in three main stages. First, the identification and categorization of key themes within the literature, such as the creativity of the *dalang*, performance structure, and expressions of Balinese religiosity. Second, a phenomenological interpretation of these themes using Merleau-Ponty’s concepts, particularly *being-in-the-world*, the relation between the *dalang* and the lifeworld (*Lebenswelt*), the embodied dimension of religious experience, and art as the disclosure of religious meaning. Third, a process of conceptual synthesis to formulate an integrated understanding of the research problem, guided by interpretative,

heuristic, holistic, and descriptive methods (Bakker & Zubair, 2007).

Through these stages, this study seeks to disclose how the creativity of Wayang Tantri may be understood as a process of embodied experience. In this way, the methodological framework enables an analysis of Wayang Tantri as a site of encounter between body, world, and meaning, while also functioning as a medium for the disclosure of the religious dimension as lived within the practice of performance.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. The Concept of *Being-in-the-World* in Wayang Tantri

A common assumption about Balinese *wayang* is that every performance represents a literary work. This assumption is not entirely incorrect, as several *dalang* (puppet masters) in Bali indeed adapt the content of literary texts into their performances. However, such adaptation is not executed in its entirety but rather in a fragmentary manner. In other words, only certain parts of the literary narrative are utilized—those that encapsulate a concise story, usually focusing on a single character. For instance, the *Kakawin Bhratayuddha* narrates the entire sequence of the Bharatayuddha war, yet in practice, only a portion of the text is typically employed, such as the episode of Bimanyu’s (Abhimanyu’s) death or the fall of Jayadratha. This model of partial adaptation is commonly found in Balinese *wayang* performances, including the chanting of verses from *kakawin* that directly illustrate particular events or scenes within the play.

Beyond the model described above, the creativity of Wayang Tantri presents its performances in a non-representational manner—introducing a new way of bringing the world into presence, distinct from conventional modes of *wayang* performance. This difference appears as “the way a literary work is disclosed within artistic experience.” In other words, the literary text is never merely represented or transferred into another medium; instead, it always emerges through the artist’s lived engagement and creative struggle. This is the model exemplified in the creativity of Wayang Tantri. To clarify this point, it is important to

note that, textually, the Tantri tales are stories within stories—narratives framed by two central figures who recount the behavior of animals: Diah Tantri and King Aiswaryadala (Suarka, 2007). In the tale, Diah Tantri narrates the lives of various animals to King Aiswaryadala throughout the night until dawn. The animal stories describe relationships among creatures such as goats and tigers, monkeys and turtles, and others (Soekanto, 2013). However, this narrative structure is not directly reproduced in Wayang Tantri's performance model.

What distinguishes Wayang Tantri is the presence of animal figures integral to the performance's narrative. However, these figures do not emerge as “a story within a story”—as in the textual *Tantri* tales—but rather as elements that complement the dramatic structure, functioning as continuous supports that connect with the events introduced in the exposition (the initial stage of conflict in the *wayang* narrative). The inspiration drawn from animal behavior seems to serve as the creative model that characterizes Wayang Tantri as a fable-like performance. In addition, other figures appearing in Wayang Tantri are entirely unrelated to the original *Tantri* text, such as *Barong* and *Rangda*. These figures are Balinese mythological entities representing dualistic forces (Goodlander, 2013). Their appearance as part of the resolution in the performance underscores that the opposition of two forces never entails mutual negation but rather expresses a principle of balance (Murtana, 1996; Eiseman, 2011). In its later development, Wayang Tantri has adopted modern technology to illuminate these figures through creative innovations in glass-based puppets (Wicaksandita, 2019).

The four *punakawan* (servant) figures in Wayang Tantri follow the model of traditional *wayang* performances. The use of four such figures is everyday in Balinese dance-drama, including shadow theatre. However, the depiction of *punakawan* in Wayang Tantri differs from that in traditional Balinese *wayang* (Ardiyasa, 2020). The figures—Pan Kayan, Pangkur, Punta, and Wijil (Wicaksandita, 2019; Kodi, 2021)—are divided into two pairs: Pan Kayan and Pangkur align with the protagonists,

while Punta and Wijil align with the antagonists. This narrative structure is typical in Balinese dramatic performances, where the *punakawan* serve as mediators between opposing forces (Hobart, 1979). Thus, despite its innovations, Wayang Tantri remains deeply rooted in the conventions of traditional *wayang* (Goodlander, 2013).

According to Sedana, this model of creativity represents a contemporary form of *wayang* performance. Contemporary *wayang* can be identified through two main criteria: (1) modification of technical performance requirements and (2) the introduction of inventive design elements that enable new characters and distinctive visual effects, such as colored shadows or illustrated backgrounds (Sedana, 2005).

Technically, the creativity of *Wayang Tantri* shows a significant departure from traditional *wayang* models, particularly through the emergence of new character forms. Although its realization remains rooted in traditional methods, the deeper distinction of *Wayang Tantri's* creativity lies in Wija's approach as a *dalang* to unveiling creativity, especially in technical aspects. What makes it distinctive is this unveiling through an orientation toward existential experience. This dimension encompasses all technical innovations that may appear fragmented—seemingly lacking coherence between one figure and another—yet are unified through the meaning of Wija's lived experience as a Balinese artist.

The encounter with technical concerns shapes the very essence of artistic expression in *wayang* performance, namely, the interweaving of all technical innovations into the meaning of the event itself—an existential idea. The event constructed in Wayang Tantri embodies the practical realities of traditional Balinese life, in which praxis is intimately tied to religious experience, communal life, and traditional forms of cultural expression. This is precisely what Dalang Wija brings into the creative process of Wayang Tantri. Through this, the apparent fractures within technical innovation instead reveal the depth of meaning within Wija's lived experience as the creator of Wayang Tantri.

First, the Wayang Tantri narrative refers to the ritual practices of Balinese Hinduism. In each play, the religious life of Balinese Hindus is depicted from the very beginning of the exposition (the introduction of the plot) through dialogues that describe the performance of a sacred ritual intended to resolve a particular problem. This is usually presented through scenes involving royal figures—such as the king or the *Bhagawanta* (royal advisor)—who command the ritual to be performed. Second, the play portrays the lives of ordinary people, such as farmers and herders, who bring their livestock as ritual offerings. This depiction is reinforced by scenes showing groups of villagers working collectively to prepare for the ritual. Such representation embodies the spirit of communal life that Wayang Tantri seeks to express through its creativity. Third, the dimension of existential attunement with the world is revealed through the appearance of Balinese mythological figures, *barong* and *rangda*. These figures symbolize the principle of balance (Murtana, 1996), illustrating that duality is not conceived as opposing forces that negate one another (Hynson, 2015). The dialogues throughout the narrative are likewise dominated by discussions centered on the Balinese worldview.

The realization of Wayang Tantri explicitly reveals the meaning of *being-in-the-world* in its creative process, wherein the world disclosed through artistic creation manifests the relationship between the artist and the world—an interweaving of the artist's experience and life within the dimensions of space, Time, history, and culture. Thus, the model of artistic representation—whether empirical or symbolic-textual—does not serve as the creative framework for the Dalang Wija. Instead, the technical innovations in his creative process reveal a more radical dimension: the embodiment of the artist's lived experience and existential attunement with life, materialized through the artistic medium of *wayang*.

2. The Meaning of the World as the Relation between the *Dalang* and the Lifeworld

What Wayang Tantri seeks to disclose through its creativity is the problem of the world of experience—a world that is revealed within the domain of perception. This does not imply that perception directly produces the artwork; rather, the conceptual foundation of Wayang Tantri constitutes a manifestation of the perceptual experience of the creative subject (the *dalang*). This analysis is grounded in the notion of a primordial world situated between the *fundierende Welt* and the *Lebenswelt*, as articulated by Dreyfus and Todes (1962) in their interpretation of Merleau-Ponty. The disclosure of the perceptual world through the creativity of Wayang Tantri indicates that the meaning of the events it presents must be understood within this primordial dimension. In other words, the conceptual formation of Wayang Tantri is neither reductive, deterministic, nor fully objective; rather, the meaning of experience is interwoven through technical modalities as realized in the form of performance.

The meaning of the world in Wayang Tantri emerges from the concrete relation between the *dalang* as subject and three horizons of life that he inhabits: the social world, the cultural-religious world, and the world of everyday experience. The social world becomes visible in the direct interaction between the *dalang* and the audience, through which a shared world is constituted. Through *punakawan* dialogues delivered in everyday Balinese language, the *dalang* incorporates contemporary issues—such as interpersonal relations, social ethics, and communal situations—into the narrative flow of the performance. In this moment, the performance becomes a space of communication, such that the social world is not merely narrated, but enacted as an ongoing shared experience.

The cultural-religious world is articulated through the elaboration of symbols and dramatic structures. The presence of figures such as *barong* and *rangda*, along with the *dalang's* orchestration of tension and resolution within the narrative, actualizes the

value of cosmic balance that is lived within Balinese society. This value is not conveyed as doctrine, but embodied through the rhythm of performance, vocal modulation, and the dynamic movement of the puppets. Such processes are inseparable from the stability of the artist's perceptual experience—namely, a cultural world that is continuously lived and inhabited, thereby forming a *perceptual faith* in recognizing the diversity of cultural expression (Dreyfus & Todes, 1962). Accordingly, the *dalang's* relation to the religious world unfolds as a performative act that reactivates the meaning of balance, order, and the human relation to cosmic forces. This is the *Lebenswelt* as an already structured world within experience. Such structuration emerges through contact and the sedimentation of prior meanings, such that present understanding is constituted on the basis of these experiential sediments (Singer, 1993).

Meanwhile, the world of everyday experience becomes evident in the way the *dalang* transforms personal experience into an integral dimension of the performance. Improvisation, the selection of characters, and spontaneous responses to audience situations indicate that the *dalang* operates from his own lived experience. Dalang Wija's assertion that *wayang* is a "reflection of life" finds its concrete expression in this process: life is not transferred onto the stage as a mere artistic construct, but is reinterpreted as action that can be seen, heard, and felt as part of a shared world. This is particularly evident in the presence of popular characters in comedic roles (*bebondresan*), which function as alternative figures that complement narrative structures centered on royal themes (Kodi, 2021), especially kings and priests as principal characters. In this way, the everyday relational life of traditional Balinese society becomes embedded within the meaning of the performance.

The relation between the *dalang* and these three worlds is reciprocal. The *dalang* shapes the performance from lived experience, while simultaneously renewing his understanding of the world through the practice of performance itself. The meaning that emerges from this relation is that Wayang Tantri presents a way of

living the world, rather than merely representing it. The performance thus becomes a space in which social experience, religious sensibility, and everyday life are brought into relation and transformed into a shared experience.

Accordingly, the meaning of the world in Wayang Tantri lies in its capacity to present life as an ongoing process. The world does not appear as an object to be displayed, but as a relation enacted through the *dalang's* actions. In this process, creativity becomes the means by which the *dalang* connects himself to the world he inhabits, such that the performance functions as an event that reveals how being Balinese is lived in concrete practice. In explicit terms, the creativity of Wayang Tantri is not merely a repetition of narrative (the Tantri texts), but a reconfiguration of shared experience that seeks to capture the meaning of events within the performance as events of life itself. In this sense, the creativity of Wayang Tantri reflects the lived experience of *being-in-the-world-with-others*.

3. The Embodied Dimension of Religious Experience

This section seeks to reconsider how a religious experience manifests in a work of art. It may be said that religious experience in art belongs to the reflexive domain of the body, revealing the interconnection between beauty, lived experience, and human existence as a subject. In a broader sense, such an experience does not arise within the context of institutional religion, but rather in moments when human beings encounter a dimension that transcends themselves. This encounter is only possible through the existential sphere, wherein the subject is no longer distanced by rational capacity (Merleau-Ponty, 2012). Such a meeting constitutes a direct contact with life itself through praxis and the lived engagement with existence. In the Balinese context, these dimensions are inseparable and cannot be treated as distinct categories. What are often perceived as separate domains—such as religion and art—are, in fact, intimately intertwined within the existential dimension. At this point, the aesthetic and the transcendent

emerge together as the very force of existence itself.

The fact that art is always intertwined with the sacred dimension reveals a profound interrelation: through art, humans do not merely take pleasure in the beauty of form, but may also encounter a greater presence—one that cannot always be articulated through rational or conceptual language. It is at this point that religious experience can be understood as an event that unveils the mystery of existence. This experience is both unsettling and alluring, binding awe and fear together, as Rudolf Otto articulated in his notion of *das Numinose* (Farid, 2024).

Rudolf Otto explains that the core of religious experience lies in the awareness of the sacred, which he describes as *mysterium tremendum et fascinans*. Humanity encounters both fascination and reverence intertwined with a sense of trembling before an ineffable presence (Farid, 2024). For Otto, such an experience cannot be reduced to mere rational or theological interpretation, as it is immediate and non-rational in nature (Farid, 2024). In other words, religious experience is not the outcome of thinking about the sacred in a metaphysical sense, but rather a phenomenal condition of encountering the sacred that transcends thought itself.

However, Otto's explanation primarily concerns the personal dimension of the sacred experience. In the context of this study, however, a philosophical framework that encompasses the collective dimension of religious experience is required. This is because the disclosure of the world within Wayang Tantri performances reveals the lived world of Balinese religious praxis—that is, a collective form of religious experience. To grasp this conception of religious experience, Merleau-Ponty offers a line of thought that can be extended into the collective domain through his notion of embodiment. Although Merleau-Ponty's works do not explicitly address religious themes, his philosophy nonetheless provides, at least implicitly, a conceptual grounding for understanding the embodied and communal nature of religious experience.

A question that may serve as the starting point

for expanding Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment is: what grounds our belief in the world? Merleau-Ponty emphasizes our primordial (fundamental) belief that precedes any act of reflection. This refers to his ontological critique of the assumptions held by objectivist thinkers, as well as by physicists and psychologists of “psychism” (Merleau-Ponty, 1968). Such a fundamental belief can only be understood within the dimension of existence, whether or not it is interpreted through the methods proposed by objective thought. All objectivist attempts to establish truth are themselves rooted in this primordial belief, since their theoretical assumptions rest on it; therefore, this belief cannot be questioned through rational operations (Dillon, 1997). The anthropological implication of this view is a return to the understanding of the subject as an embodied being who is always in the condition of *being-in-the-world*. This becomes Merleau-Ponty's point of departure for comprehending our primordial belief in the world, one that is not founded on the epistemologies of empiricism or intellectualism. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, this primordial belief is referred to as *perceptual faith* (Merleau-Ponty, 1968)—a postulate through which the grounding of truth in experience first becomes intelligible.

Grounded in the concept of *perceptual faith*, this discussion takes a new path by extending Merleau-Ponty's idea into the foundation of religious experience. The assumption that we already possess a fundamental faith in the world reflects the very manner in which we recognize and inhabit the world, without the necessity of complete reflection. This constitutes the lived world that will be further elaborated. The primordial faith in the world represents the sedimentation of the body from the past and the potentiality of the future that manifests in the present. In other words, this faith has existed since human beings first came into the world and began to orient their lives within it. Within the context of religious experience, the subject is confronted with two interwoven modes of experience—namely, the *fundierende* experience and the *Lebenswelt* (the life-world).

The *fundierende* experience situates the primordial mode of experience, characterized by its wild and pre-reflective nature. In contrast, within the *Lebenswelt*, this raw perception finds its stability in the domain of culture (Dreyfus & Todes, 1962). In the realm of lived experience, both dimensions intertwine in such a way that, factually and concretely, they are difficult—if not impossible—to classify distinctly without falling into reductionism. What Merleau-Ponty's perspective reveals in the case of Balinese life is that everyday existence and religious praxis cannot be explicitly separated, as they mutually permeate and presuppose one another. In daily life, religious praxis is always present as a mode of living, and the everyday is imbued with a sense of the transcendent. This demonstrates that the existential dimension of Balinese being manifests as an embodied condition, in which the body finds its “grip” on the world (Carman, 2020). Moreover, it establishes a fundamental faith in the world through the very moment of embodiment.

This embodiment thus necessitates the presence of religious experience as an integral mode of Balinese daily life. The body serves as the ontological foundation through which the interrelation between the subject and the world—comprising the cosmos and the magical dimension—finds its meaning in the lived experience of embodiment. In other words, religious experience in its collective form constitutes a shared world, or *être à deux*, wherein the secular and the sacred do not appear as separate entities but are mutually intertwined. This reflects the Balinese reality in which religion, art, and culture are not discrete domains but interpenetrate one another within a primordial condition ontologically grounded in the event of embodiment.

4. Artistic Expression as a Space for the Unfolding of Religious Experience

The assumption that art in Bali is inseparable from various domains such as religion and everyday life places embodiment as the ontological foundation for understanding this condition. What is manifested in the Wayang Tantri performance as an artistic presentation represents the Balinese mode of religious

practice and lived devotion, wherein what is experienced and what is enacted appear as inseparable dimensions of daily existence. In constructing the *lelampahan* (narrative plot) of the performance, the *dalang* in Wayang Tantri draws on the characterization in the literary work *Tantri*. For example, in the Wayang Tantri story *Sang Prabu Aji Dharma*, the characterization is drawn from the prose text *Tantri Carita*, in which Aji Dharma serves as a central figure in shaping the plot (Wicaksandita, 2019). However, the *dalang's* reconfiguration of these elements into a *wayang* performance always touches on the dimension of his own Balinese religious experience. In this discussion, religious experience does not denote a purely individual, unidirectional encounter between the human and the transcendent, but rather a collective religious experience. In this sense, actions related to the religious sphere are understood as intersubjective relations with the transcendent, realized through a series of embodied practices oriented toward that sacred dimension.

This orientation in Bali reflects a view that the transcendent is immanent within the universe—a form of pantheism in which divine power manifests directly through the visible world. Such a worldview is encapsulated in the Balinese conceptual orientation of *Tri Hita Karana*, which emphasizes harmony among three interrelated dimensions: human beings, nature, and the transcendent (Hynson, 2015). Within this view, these relationships cannot be understood as separate or hierarchical categories—such as relations with others, with nature, or with the sacred—but as existentially intertwined modes of being. Through this interweaving within the dimension of existence, religious experience assumes a collective character, in which communal activities play a decisive role in its manifestation (Eiseman, 2011).

In Wayang Tantri, this collective religious experience is embodied through the events presented within the performance's dramatic structure. Two significant aspects of this dimension of Balinese religiosity are: first, collective religious activity; and second, the

representation of devotion to the transcendent. The first aspect appears in the exposition of the narrative, which typically revolves around the king's (as leader) responsibility to preserve harmony and peace within his kingdom. The resolution of such problems is often portrayed through the performance of sacrificial rituals (*yadnya*). Subsequent scenes depict villagers coming together in *ngayah*—a communal act of voluntary service performed without personal gain—bringing offerings and resources as contributions to the ritual. The second aspect concerns the representation of divine figures, creatively and innovatively rendered in the play's concluding scenes. In Wayang Tantri, these divine characters are projected through luminous silhouettes, symbolizing their manifestation as radiant or light-formed entities. This includes depictions of gods, as well as the mythological figures *Barong* and *Rangda*, who embody the dual cosmic forces of *Rwa Bhineda*—the dynamic balance between opposing but complementary powers (Eiseman, 2011).

Both aspects represent dimensions that are inherently present within the religious life of the Balinese people, between what is experienced and what is practiced in their daily existence. This existential dimension is expressed in the Wayang Tantri performance through the medium of wayang itself. As Kocur notes, Balinese *wayang* performances commonly mirror the lived realities of Balinese daily life. In this sense, the textual, contextual, and situational elements—between literary sources and existential experience—interweave within the creative act of performance (Kocur, 2013). The foundation for understanding this issue lies in examining how artistic expression reveals the artist's own religious experience and how these two domains mutually constitute one another. This interrelation brings together the aesthetic and religious dimensions, in which both converge and participate in shaping the very configuration of art itself.

Merleau-Ponty offers a radical perspective on this issue. What underlies the relationship between the seemingly distinct realms of art and religion is the dimension of existence itself, which is inseparable from the phenomenon of

embodiment. The body serves as the foundation and key to understanding how such interconnectedness becomes possible. For Merleau-Ponty, the tendency to dichotomize embodied experience represents an epistemological error. This error stems from a worldview grounded in *kosmotheoros*—a mode of perception that presupposes a pure observer standing apart from the world or from experience itself. Such methodological distancing, often found in scientific or objectivist frameworks, mistakenly assumes that the relationship between subject and world can be fully grasped within a single methodological model. In contrast, the understanding of intertwined and paradoxical experiences must begin from within—from the very condition of *being-in-the-world* (Matthews, 2002). Only by acknowledging this ontological situatedness can one grasp how meaning arises in the embodied relation between the subject and the world. A diagram below further illustrates this conceptual relation.

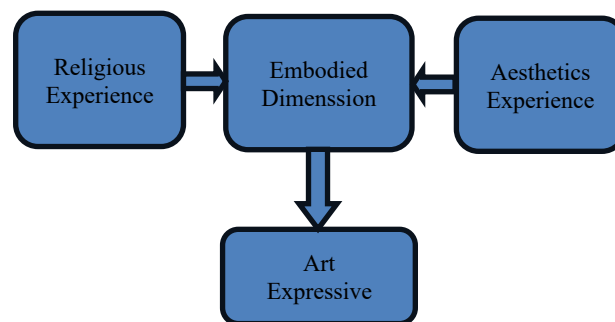


Diagram 1: The Presence of Religious and Aesthetic Experience as Revealed in Embodied Expression through Art

Based on the diagram, the existential dimension of the body positions two distinct yet interrelated experiential contexts: religious experience and aesthetic experience. In the case of Wayang Tantri, these two forms of experience intertwine and manifest simultaneously within artistic expression. This is precisely what Merleau-Ponty emphasizes regarding the dimension of existence as a structure of intertwining (*entrelacs*) (Syamsuddin, 2010). The key to understanding how these seemingly separate dimensions

appear in unity lies in *perceptual faith*—the primordial belief that the world exists prior to any act of reflective thought (Dillon, 1997). The dichotomous model separating religious and aesthetic experience is, in fact, a product of reflection upon lived experience. Reflection presupposes that objects and events possess autonomous status. In contrast, *Wayang Tantri* demonstrates that both religious and aesthetic experiences are co-present and revealed through the embodied act of artistic expression.

Thus, the meaning of the *Wayang Tantri* world can be understood as follows: the world that appears within *Wayang Tantri* is the very moment of embodiment itself. This existential condition makes the emergence of any world possible. In art, the foundation of creativity does not merely arise from the intellect, for such a view is reductive in explaining how an artist produces a work of art. In contrast, from Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological perspective, the presence of an artwork is not a simple derivative of imagination, nor is it merely a representation of an unavoidable reality. What is often forgotten in such analytical models is *perceptual faith*—the primordial belief grounding our relation to the world. Therefore, to understand the manifestation of the world in *Wayang Tantri*, which reflects the Balinese religious experience, one must return to *perceptual faith* itself as the fundamental basis of all reflection that unfolds through art.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the meaning of religious experience in the creative practice of *Wayang Tantri* does not appear as doctrine, symbol, or a representational schema. Rather, it is disclosed through the *dalang's* embodied experience in relation to the lifeworld and the shared world. From the perspective of Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, religious experience is understood as an existential event that emerges from the intertwining of body and world, concretely manifested in the practice of *wayang* performance.

The findings of this study affirm that the meaning of religious experience in *Wayang*

Tantri is constituted through the *dalang's* engagement with three disclosed horizons of the world: the social world, the cultural-religious world, and the world of everyday experience. Within performative practice, religious experience is enacted through action—such as *punakawan* dialogues that establish social relations, the structuring of dramatic elements that actualize cosmic balance, and improvisation rooted in lived experience. In this context, religiosity appears as a shared mode of inhabiting the world, rather than as something merely represented visually.

Furthermore, this study shows that religious experience in *Wayang Tantri* is both immanent and collective. Through the concept of *perceptual faith*, it becomes evident that the ground of religious experience lies in the body's primordial trust in the world, which allows religious meaning to emerge within experience prior to reflective formulation. In Balinese society, this condition is manifested in the intertwining of ritual practice, social life, and artistic expression, which are inseparable from one another; thus, *wayang* performance may be understood as a form of religious experience lived collectively.

Theoretically, these findings extend Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological discourse into the domain of art and collective religiosity by affirming that the body is not merely a locus of individual perception, but a field of intertwining social, spiritual, and cultural meanings. The *dalang's* body, through its artistic experience, articulates religious experience as a mode of world-disclosure. Accordingly, the creativity of *Wayang Tantri* can be understood as possessing an ontological structure that reveals how aesthetic experience becomes a concrete disclosure of the meaning of religious experience. Practically, this study contributes to the study of religion and art by demonstrating how a phenomenological approach can uncover the deepest dimensions of artistic practice as a mode of living religious experience. Ultimately, *Wayang Tantri* shows

that art is a way in which the subject, through the body, affirms its existence within a meaningful world, where the aesthetic and religious dimensions are inextricably intertwined within the field of experience.

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