

Klonoan: Artistic Research-Based Film Creation as Cultural Identity Representation and Traditional Art Revitalization

Khiva Rayanka¹, Adlino Dananjaya² and Safrudiningsih³

¹Pascasarjana Institut Kesenian Jakarta (IKJ)

^{2,3}Institut Media (Digital EMTEK, Jakarta, Indonesia)

Abstract: This article explores the creation process of the film *Klonōan*, a work that is based on artistic research and focuses on the revitalization of the Topeng Gethak dance—a traditional art form that is nearing extinction in the Blora region, Central Java. Employing a philosophical and symbolic approach, the creation is guided by three main theories: cultural identity theory, media representation theory, and Derrida's deconstruction. The research applies a qualitative methodology through reflective-critical analysis by the creator, in which personal involvement, creative choices, and the cultural context are interwoven to shape the narrative and aesthetics of the film. Through the use of color symbolism in cinematography, along with traditional attributes and experimental storytelling, this film aims to present a new form of cultural expression that not only preserves tradition but also reconstructs it for contemporary relevance.

Keywords: Film Creation, Cultural Identity, Representation, Deconstruction, Topeng Gethak, Revitalization.

INTRODUCTION BACKGROUND

Indonesia, as a nation rich in cultural diversity, possesses a vast and varied artistic heritage. One such tradition is *Topeng Gethak*, a traditional mask dance native to Blora, Central Java, which is now approaching extinction. In the contemporary era, where global popular culture often dominates the media and influences public perception, traditional arts are at risk of being forgotten and losing their relevance. The urgency to revitalize these traditions is not merely a matter of preservation, but also of cultural reconstruction—finding new ways to express and reinterpret them through contemporary media such as film.

Film, as a form of audiovisual expression, holds the potential to function not only as entertainment but also as a medium for cultural representation and critical reflection. The creation of *Klonōan*, as an artistic research-based film, is positioned within this context—where the medium of film is employed to explore the symbolic richness of traditional performing arts while engaging in a dialogue with modern identity discourse. The film does not merely document the Topeng Gethak dance but attempts to deconstruct and re-present it through a narrative and visual language that resonates with today's audiences.

This research-based creation raises several fundamental questions: How can film be used as a means of cultural revitalization? In what ways can cinematic symbolism contribute to the reconstruction of identity? And how does the presence of tradition within a contemporary medium challenge or reaffirm existing cultural narratives?

To answer these questions, the process of creating *Klonōan* is examined through three theoretical lenses: cultural identity theory, media representation theory, and Derridean deconstruction. These frameworks allow for a layered interpretation of tradition, media, and identity, where meaning is not fixed but is continually negotiated within various contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Why is Topeng Gethak considered an important cultural heritage within the local context of Blora and the broader Indonesian cultural landscape?
2. How can film serve as a medium for the reinterpretation of traditional performing arts, such as Topeng Gethak, in contemporary Indonesian culture?
3. Can semiotics be used to deconstruct and reconstruct cultural identity in the context of traditional art forms?
4. How does the presence of tradition within a contemporary medium challenge or reaffirm existing cultural narratives?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The creative and analytical process in the film *Klonōan* is underpinned by three interrelated theoretical frameworks: Cultural Identity Theory, Media Representation Theory, and Derrida's Deconstruction. These frameworks are employed to guide the interpretation and transformation of traditional cultural elements into a cinematic narrative that reflects both continuity and change in cultural identity.

Cultural Identity Theory

Cultural identity is not a fixed essence, but a fluid, dynamic, and continuously constructed process. Stuart Hall (1990) argues that identity is formed through difference, representation, and the interplay between history and personal experience. In the context of *Klonōan*, the concept of cultural identity is explored through the lens of the Topeng Gethak dance tradition, which serves as both a cultural heritage and a medium for self-expression. The film attempts to articulate how traditional identities can be reconstructed through artistic creation, without losing their roots.

Media Representation Theory

Media representation refers to the ways in which meaning is constructed and conveyed through symbols, images, and narratives. Hall (1997) emphasizes that media does not merely reflect reality, but actively constructs it through selective representation. In *Klonōan*, visual elements such as costume, mask, movement, and color are carefully chosen to recontextualize the Topeng Gethak tradition in a cinematic form. This process of representation becomes a site of negotiation, where cultural meanings are redefined and reimagined for a contemporary audience.

Derridean Deconstruction

Deconstruction, as proposed by Jacques Derrida, is a method of reading that seeks to uncover internal contradictions and question binary oppositions within a text. In artistic creation, deconstruction can be used as a strategy to dismantle rigid cultural narratives and open up spaces for new interpretations. *Klonōan* applies deconstruction to challenge essentialist notions of tradition, identity, and authenticity. The film does not present Topeng Gethak in its original performative form, but rather as a symbolic and fluid expression that crosses boundaries between the traditional and the modern, the sacred and the profane, the real and the imagined.

These theoretical perspectives are not applied in isolation, but intersect throughout the creative process. Together, they provide a critical foundation for understanding how the film constructs meaning and engages in a dialogic process with culture, identity, and media.

RESEARCH METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative artistic research approach, emphasizing the role of the artist as a creator and researcher. Artistic research is a form of inquiry that prioritizes the process of creation as

both a method and an outcome of research. In this context, the film *Klonōan* is not only the object of analysis but also the primary site where knowledge is produced, expressed, and reflected upon through artistic practice.

The methodology used in this study is reflective-analytical, wherein the creator engages in critical reflection on the artistic process, including the exploration of ideas, symbolic choices, visual experimentation, and the construction of meaning. This method is grounded in the understanding that the creation of art involves intuitive, affective, and contextual dimensions that cannot be fully captured through conventional scientific methods.

Data were obtained through direct involvement in the creative process, including field observations, participation in traditional dance rehearsals, interviews with cultural practitioners, and documentation of the production process. These qualitative data sources were then interpreted through the lens of the selected theoretical frameworks.

The research stages consisted of: (1) exploration and identification of cultural themes; (2) conceptual development and visual design; (3) production and cinematographic experimentation; and (4) post-production and reflective analysis. Each stage was documented and analysed to reveal how traditional elements were transformed into cinematic language and how cultural identity was reimagined through the filmic medium.

This methodological approach supports the objective of this research: to demonstrate how film, as a contemporary artistic medium, can serve as a tool for revitalizing traditional arts and reconstructing cultural identity in a modern context.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The analysis of the film *Klonōan* focuses on how traditional elements are reconstructed through cinematic language, particularly in terms of visual symbolism, narrative structure, and cultural expression. This analysis is conducted using an interpretive-qualitative approach, with emphasis on the reflective perspective of the creator as both artist and researcher.

Symbolism of Color in Cinematography

Color plays a central role in the symbolic construction of *Klonōan*. Inspired by the aesthetics of traditional Javanese performance, particularly in Topeng Gethak, the film employs a carefully

curated color palette to signify emotional and philosophical dimensions. Red, for instance, is used to symbolize vitality, rebellion, or mystical tension, while white represents purity and spiritual transformation. Black, on the other hand, connotes ambiguity, darkness, and the realm of the unknown. These colors are not merely decorative, but serve as visual metaphors that reflect the inner journey of the protagonist and the cultural transformation occurring within the narrative.

The Reinterpretation of Topeng Gethak

Rather than presenting Topeng Gethak as a documentary subject or reenactment, *Klonōan* transforms the dance into a symbolic narrative device. The masks, movements, and musical elements are deconstructed and reassembled into a contemporary audiovisual language. This process illustrates how tradition can be revitalized through reinterpretation—preserving the essence of cultural memory while allowing it to evolve. The choreography in the film, for example, integrates traditional dance gestures with abstract movement, reflecting the fragmented yet persistent nature of cultural identity.

Narrative Structure and the Myth of the Hero

The narrative structure of *Klonōan* draws on archetypal patterns of the hero's journey, which is often found in mythological storytelling. The protagonist undergoes a personal and cultural quest, navigating between past and present, self and society, reality and dream. This journey is framed through a non-linear structure, emphasizing moments of reflection, disruption, and transformation. The mythic dimension of the story parallels the revitalization of Topeng Gethak, suggesting that cultural survival depends not only on preservation but also on the courage to reimagine.

Tradition and Modernity in Dialogue

Klonōan positions itself at the intersection of tradition and modernity. By presenting traditional symbols through experimental cinematic techniques—such as slow motion, montage, surreal imagery, and non-verbal sequences—the film fosters a dialogue between cultural heritage and contemporary artistic language. This dialogue is not always harmonious; it involves tensions, ruptures, and moments of uncertainty. However, it is through this very tension that the film finds its creative energy, allowing tradition to speak in new ways.

The analysis reveals that *Klonōan* does not offer a singular, fixed interpretation of tradition. Instead, it invites the audience to participate in a process of cultural inquiry—questioning, feeling, and reinterpreting the meanings embedded in traditional forms.

DISCUSSION

Representation of Cultural Identity Through Experimental Film

The short film *Klonōan* articulates cultural identity not through ethnographic documentation but via symbolic visualization. The Topeng Gethak dance, as a cultural artifact, is presented not as an exotic spectacle but as a dynamic and contested site of meaning. The male protagonist—a young dancer—embodies tensions between tradition and modern identity, aligning with Stuart Hall's perspective on cultural identity as an ongoing process of becoming, rather than a fixed essence.

The mise-en-scène, dominated by empty studio spaces, dim corridors, and minimalist stage design, evokes a sense of temporal and cultural dislocation. These spatial choices serve not only aesthetic purposes but also symbolic functions, representing a culture waiting to be reactivated. Culture, in this cinematic representation, is not inert; it is performative and constantly renegotiated.

Gender Identity and the Deconstruction of Normativity

The film's representation of gender identity subverts binary constructions through its visual and narrative strategies. The protagonist, while biologically male, is portrayed in ways that resist conventional masculinity—his movements, emotional expressions, and embodied contradictions become sites of performative inquiry.

Drawing on Derrida's notion of deconstruction, the film dissolves fixed boundaries between male/female, tradition/modernity, and body/self. The use of mirrors, masks, and obsessive choreography functions not only as symbolic tools but as mechanisms of psychological revelation. The instability of identity is mirrored in the fragmented cinematography, asymmetrical framing, and handheld camera movements—each reinforcing a sense of disorientation and fluidity.

The Mask as Cultural and Philosophical Symbol

In Topeng Gethak, masks traditionally represent specific characters; however, in *Klonōan*, the mask

is recontextualized as a metaphor for unstable identity. The act of wearing and removing the mask does not signal a transformation from one identity to another but emphasizes the lack of finality in self-construction. Identity is shown as layered, performative, and impermanent—an open text in Derridean terms.

The ambiguity of the mask mirrors the ambiguity of cultural inheritance. Who are we without the symbols we inherit? And to what extent are these symbols constitutive of the self?

Narrative and Spatial Strategies: Microcosm and Macrocosm

Klonoan constructs its narrative through visual fragmentation and spatial transitions. The doors appearing throughout the film function as symbolic thresholds—between memory and reality, tradition and modernity. Inspired by Paul Thomas Anderson's visual language in *Daydreaming*, these transitions frame identity as an ongoing passage rather than a destination.

The interplay between personal and collective memory, between microcosmic gestures and macrocosmic signifiers (e.g., urban noise, traditional flags, voiceovers from the dance teacher), creates a dual-layered structure. The stage becomes both literal and metaphorical—a site of performance and a site of cultural estrangement.

Visual Semiotics and Soundscape as Meaning-Making Tools

The absence of dialogue shifts the weight of meaning to semiotic elements: movement, lighting, costume, and sound. The film's visual grammar relies on repetition, contrast, and rhythm. Traditional gamelan is deconstructed—at times reversed, distorted, or silenced—marking shifts in psychological tone. This auditory instability parallels the character's internal rupture and the fragility of cultural continuity.

Drawing from Hall's theory of encoding/decoding, *Klonoan* presents an open text, inviting the audience to interpret meaning based on their own cultural positioning. This approach allows for affective engagement and diverse readings.

Representational Strategies and Cultural Relevance

The film seeks not to preserve tradition in a static frame, but to revitalize it through contemporary artistic language. The central motif of the stage—an empty space in which the dancer performs alone—symbolizes both the loss and potential rebirth of cultural expression. This metaphor aligns with the idea of culture "returning to the stage" not as a nostalgic act, but as a strategic recontextualization.

The protagonist's inner journey parallels the larger struggle of traditional arts seeking relevance in modern society. The title *Klonoan*, which references a wandering royal figure, metaphorically positions Topeng Gethak as a displaced cultural subject searching for its rightful place. The dancer becomes a vessel for this search—simultaneously personal and collective.

Innovation and Cross-Cultural Resonance

The film's formal innovation lies in its hybridization of tradition and experimental form. Rather than showcasing dance for ethnographic purposes, it foregrounds existential tension and identity conflict. This aligns *Klonoan* with international works such as Hiroshi Sunairi's *The Shadow of the Pine Tree* and Toshi Fujiwara's *E-toki*, which also explore tradition through fragmented, poetic, and contemplative cinematic languages.

Its lack of dialogue further enhances cross-cultural accessibility. Through gestures, music, and symbols, *Klonoan* communicates beyond linguistic barriers, situating itself within global discourses on cultural memory, identity, and the role of experimental cinema in heritage revitalization.



Figure 1: Symbolism of emptiness at backstage
Source: Klonoan Film, 2025



Figure 2: The dancer walkthrough before show, a space of doubt
Source: Klonoan Film, 2025



Figure 3: The empty audience scene
Source: Klonoan Film, 2025

CONCLUSION

The process of creating *Klonōan* has provided profound insights into the intersection between artistic practice and cultural discourse. As an artist-researcher, I was not merely an external observer of tradition, but a participant engaged in a dialogic relationship with the cultural materials. This position allowed for an embodied understanding of Topeng Gethak—not just as a historical artifact, but as a living practice capable of transformation.

One of the primary challenges in this creative process was negotiating the boundaries between preservation and innovation. There was a constant tension between the desire to remain faithful to the philosophical and aesthetic principles of traditional art, and the need to translate those principles into a cinematic form that would resonate with contemporary audiences. This tension was not viewed as a limitation, but rather as a generative space for creative experimentation.

The film medium offers tools that traditional performance does not—such as montage, framing, lighting, and digital manipulation—which were used to reconstruct the symbolic universe of Topeng Gethak. However, this transformation

required a deep sensitivity to the source material, ensuring that innovation did not become cultural appropriation or distortion. The creative decisions were made with careful reflection on the cultural meanings embedded in every gesture, sound, and visual element.

Through this project, I also reflected on my own positionality—as a cultural subject shaped by modern experiences yet drawn to ancestral expressions. The film became a space to explore questions of identity, memory, and continuity. It revealed that tradition is not a static repository of the past, but a dynamic process of becoming—always open to reinterpretation and reinvention.

Ultimately, *Klonōan* affirms that artistic creation can serve as a powerful medium for cultural revitalization. By engaging traditional forms with contemporary methods and critical theory, we can not only preserve what is valuable in our heritage but also contribute to its future evolution.

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Source of support: Nil; **Conflict of interest:** Nil.

Cite this article as:

Rayanka, K., Dananjaya, A. and Safrudiningsih. "Klonoan: Artistic Research-Based Film Creation as Cultural Identity Representation and Traditional Art Revitalization." *Sarcouncil Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 4.3 (2025): pp 20-25.