

## SOJOURN *Symposium*

**On *Wayang and Its Doubles: Javanese Puppet Theatre, Television and the Internet* by Jan Mrázek. NUS Press, 2019.**

Review essays by Marianna Lis and Ward Keeler, with a reply from Jan Mrázek.

**Keywords:** wayang, Javanese, puppet theatre, media, television, pop culture, Indonesia.

### Review Essay I: Marianna Lis

The year 2020 proved in many ways to be an extraordinary one, particularly for the theatre. Theatres around the world have been closed for months or compelled to operate under new rules affecting viewers and creators. Rather than step into a real theatre space, a trip to the theatre is now, more often than not, a virtual journey into the internet. A new pandemic theatre sub-genre is being created at an accelerated pace. It is being realized in several forms: streaming of performances played live, but without the audience; interactive performances shown over Zoom, video calls and video conferences; performative readings conducted via probably every possible platform and communicator; and endless resources of archival performances to which theatres, artists or fans themselves provide access.

Discussing the situation of theatre during the pandemic raises an increasing number of questions about how the internet influences theatre and how theatre influences the internet. Admittedly, 2020 is not the first meeting of these two worlds—the theatre has been flirting with radio, television and the internet since their inception.

However, present times force a deeper reflection not only on the mutual interactions of theatre and the internet (or television), but also on the role of the viewer. How does the perception of the performance change with the change of medium? How can theatre build community and how can this community function? Does the repertoire change and if so how? Do the changes caused by an oft uneasy marriage with the new medium enable a permanent change to the shape of the productions?

These thoughts were on my mind when I returned to Jan Mrázek's *Wayang and Its Doubles: Javanese Puppet Theatre, Television and the Internet* (2019) for this review, amidst heightened concerns globally about the COVID-19 pandemic. The book is not only about *wayang* but also (perhaps most of all) one of the most important books devoted to the culture of contemporary Indonesia and, more broadly, the presence and interactions between traditional art such as theatre (not only *wayang*) and television and the internet.

I first read the book *Wayang and Its Doubles* in August 2019 in Yogyakarta, between *wayang* performances. I learned about most of the performances not from posters around the city but from posts on Facebook, messages sent via WhatsApp and sometimes from live stories on Instagram uploaded by friends. I had the impression that most viewers were having conversations with several people via different messengers and streaming or recording interesting fragments while watching the shows. For them, the action of the spectacle did not take place only on the screen, but it split and moved into the virtual world, where they could comment live, discuss and report what they had witnessed.

Mrázek's book, which is a continuation of his research that began in the 1990s, turned out to be an excellent commentary on what I observed during each of the performances I watched at that time—it shows how *wayang* found its place in radios, cassette players, television sets, laptops and mobile phones of modern Indonesians. The author uses interviews with artists, viewers, producers and sponsors of performances in his analysis. Combined with his own experiences from over twenty years of watching *wayang* live, on television and

on the internet, he shows the complexity of new television and internet forms of wayang in their entirety. He is interested not only in the changing aesthetics of the described performances but also in the technical aspects of television production, including problems with the duration of performances or different understandings of space, the viewers' experience, and cooperation between artists and television producers.

Mrázek focuses on television and “a marriage full of conflicts” of wayang and television (p. 97). The first three chapters are a look at wayang's biggest ‘boom’ in television, which began in 1995, when *Indosiar* began its weekly broadcast of wayang. The next two broaden this perspective by going back to the 1970s and onwards to show what was happening on television and on the internet in the first two decades of the twenty-first century. For Mrázek, the relationship between wayang and television is a special relationship that affects both sides. Both, as the author proves, constitute a similar type of entertainment for viewers, and both underwent profound changes under their mutual influence.

Telewayang cannot attract the viewer with the promise of meeting and creating a community—the viewer remains anonymous, and it is much more difficult to interact with him or her. Therefore, from the very beginning, it had to look for other elements that would make it attractive to potential audiences and television—in “a marriage full of conflicts” (p. 97) described by Mrázek, the interests and needs of wayang, *dalang* (puppeteers) and viewers constantly clash with the interests and needs of television producers and channels for which wayang is a niche product, and airtime is converted into real sums of money.

From the perspective of a first-time spectator of the all-night wayang spectacle in 2010, after the ‘golden period’ of wayang on television, it was extremely valuable for me to see how many of the elements that were permanently inscribed in the first decade of twenty-first century wayang had appeared under the influence of television and the *dalang* appearing on television. Since the mid-1990s, these performances have become an indicator of the skill

of the puppeteer and a model followed also by less popular artists. Live wayang reflected the features of telewayang, influencing the aesthetics and content of the performances, the different ways of preparing for these performances, and the sense of time, content and space. One of the most important changes was the introduction of rehearsals—necessary on television, but practically unheard of in the case of traditional performances. There was a conviction that the television spectacle merited better preparation and planning than the live performance—even the usual improvisations of comic parts were scripted and rehearsed in telewayang.

Among the many innovations that made a lasting impact on wayang, scenarios stand out. Another was the appearance of the dalang superstar, to whom Mrázek pays considerable attention. Both the creators of wayang and the television strove to achieve mass popularity—here the changes had already begun before wayang made its way to *Indosiar*. The 1990s fuelled this trend. Every move by the television dalang could be observed in a close-up; each word from a prepared script, transcribed. This became an inspiration for less-popular artists. The style of television dalang has become dominant, leading to unification in the practices of animating puppets or constructing individual scenes. At the same time, television dalang, wanting to keep the attention of viewers, had to propose something different and new each time—playing at a different venue each night, they could allow themselves to repeat jokes or the stories told. On television, they could not count on new viewers to watch them every time, so, as Mrázek notes, “Wayang is developing toward a medium which, at certain moments, becomes more like the television news, or television generally, and which depends on innovations that, in their newness and otherness, are nonetheless like each other—the replacement (*ganti*), the production of newness, is continuous (*terus*)” (p. 48).

This change led to the shortening of the performances, which tried to adapt to the modern, faster pace of life. Many *wayang kontemporer* (contemporary wayang) performances I have watched in the last decade lasted no more than an hour or two. Today, in

almost every performance, strong lighting, a powerful sound system or screens placed around the stage on which the spectacle is broadcast are associated with changes introduced by television, for which the wayang space should be clean and perfectly visible—on television there is no place for dirt, mess or the characters disappearing into the darkness surrounding the performing space. There is also no room for unnecessary words on television; the shows are shortened as all unnecessary issues are removed in order to focus on the visuality—there is no need to talk about something that can be presented in an attractive way. At the same time, the visuality is also changing. Wayang more often imitates everyday life, and its own visual language becomes less comprehensible to viewers. Hence, in the performances, characters taken from the world of contemporary politics or pop culture and movements taken, for example, from kung fu movies are easier to recognize and understand for viewers than the characters from the Mahabharata or Ramayana.

I read Mrázek's book for the second time in September 2020, in Warsaw, still remembering one of the first pandemic wayang performances I had watched on YouTube six months earlier. For the first few seconds, the camera showed the *kayon* in the centre of the screen—a symmetrical puppet shaped like a large leaf that opens and closes each spectacle. After a while the camera turned towards the approaching dalang, followed him for a brief moment, then focused on the gamelan instruments. Musicians normally sit next to each of them, and the *pesindhen* (the female soloist) next to the screen. Behind them, spectators normally sit or stand. The entire place normally resounds with music and the murmur of conversations of the excited audience waiting for the dalang to enter. However, dalang Ki Purbo Asmoro was all by himself. There were no musicians, no singers, and no audience. There was only the dalang, his voice, the screen, the puppets and the invisible camera that broadcast this to a community of viewers scattered all over Java, Indonesia and the world. The community, which, as Mrázek repeatedly emphasizes is essential to wayang, could not, at that moment, have emerged in any other way.

Ki Purbo Asmoro appears many times in the final parts of the book devoted to wayang's presence on the internet. He is one of the pioneers of streaming spectacles on YouTube who at some point gave up his presence in the virtual world and returned to the 'offline mode'. I belong to a generation for which wayang on television is a thing of the past, while wayang on the internet is an everyday reality. Some of the dalang described by Mrázek have a similar perception of the internet—YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are for them the same space as the *pendopo* (pavilion). The internet is a geographically unlimited space that makes it possible to meet viewers and build a community. This community transfers, as Mrázek describes, the experience of watching wayang live on to the internet, reconstructing the way viewers behave while watching real performances. "The introduction of internet (especially YouTube and social media) can be thought of as further decentralization and diffusion of production and control, as just any netizen can in some way participate, in striking new ways, in the 'production' (in a broader diffused sense) of wayang on the internet" (p. 253). The viewer can choose what interests him. He can 'exit' and 'come back' at any time, rewind, stop, cut a fragment, mix it with others, add a comment or filter and become a creator—a new dalang.

Writing about television, Mrázek remarked how it influences the shape wayang takes, while wayang has no influence on how it is shown. The internet has many more opportunities to be used, explored and described.

The year 2020 induced creators and viewers to take a different look at the theatre. Television defined wayang as *seni tradisional* (traditional art) beyond modernity. The pandemic increased the presence of wayang and its creators on the internet. Perhaps it accelerated certain processes that, as Mrázek's book shows, began many decades ago. Perhaps they will influence the shape of both theatre and the internet, just as they influenced the shape of theatre and television several decades ago. And perhaps, as the author notes, the internet paradoxically creates an opportunity to return to the past, to the former reception of theatre, to build communities closer to

those that existed among the pre-television theatre audiences. So, are we witnessing a step forward? Or rather backwards?

### Review Essay II: Ward Keeler

In the closing pages of his book, Jan Mrázek writes the following:

The ... clickable images notwithstanding, reading the chapters of [Miguel Escobar Varela's] online dissertation feels to me like reading a book, more so than in the case of many academic books today—the writer takes the time to dwell and slowly explore thoughts, details, or the atmosphere of a performance. (p. 313)

Mrázek's writing reflects his preference, evident in this praise for someone else's work, for 'dwelling' on thoughts, details and atmosphere. His own book consists of analyses—sometimes a better label might be 'ruminations'—on relations between Javanese *wayang kulit* (shadow plays) and to a lesser extent Sundanese *wayang golek* (rod puppets), on the one hand, and television, on the other. As is Mrázek's wont, he has a great deal to say, although at only 318 pages this volume comes in way shorter than his earlier 567-page *Phenomenology of the Puppet Theatre*.

The book's five chapters look at how wayang and television interact. Mrázek calls the relations between them a marriage, and by this he clearly intends to suggest players' affinity, tension and often mutual exasperation. In his first chapter, he shows how wayang has been deeply influenced by television even when it is not being shown on television. The ever-increasing tendency for a performance to turn into something very similar to a television variety show, with human comics, dancers, pop music and so on, bears the unmistakable mark of a media landscape in which television's aesthetic affects everything and everyone involved. The second chapter looks more closely at the ways wayang has been presented on television, especially on a private channel, *Indosiar*, in the decade 1995–2005. People's various thoughts on how attending a performance in-situ compares to watching one on television makes up the third chapter.

In the fourth chapter, Mrázek relates other ways in which wayang has been mass mediated, whether in other television programming or on cassette tapes. The final chapter looks at wayang's recent encounter with the internet.

The introduction and first chapters are marred, for me, by invocations of European theorists whose abstruse remarks on the nature of reality rarely illuminate the material at hand, although other readers may have more patience with citations from Heidegger, Derrida and Merleau-Ponty. Mrázek's ethnographic accounts of what happens when wayang is shown on television are much more interesting. Particularly entertaining, but also very telling, is Mrázek's record of complaints and recriminations, full of impatience and righteous indignation, made to him in conversation by puppeteers against television personnel, and by television personnel against puppeteers.

Mrázek assumes his readers' familiarity with the genre of wayang, which is probably fair. It would be gratuitous to provide an introduction to it in a book in which what is at issue is the way it diverges, in its contemporary versions, from anything remotely classical. The critical question for all concerned is how to adapt a performance that is traditionally long, leisurely, talky, linguistically challenging (even for native Javanese speakers, let alone other Indonesian citizens) and under the sole command of a puppeteer who is not used to taking orders, in such a way as to make it appropriate, or even in any way amenable, for presentation on television, a medium predicated on speed, action and the assemblage of discreet parts readily interrupted for advertising.

Needless to say, the results have been mixed but rarely altogether happy. One obstacle, it appears, is an unwillingness on the part of almost everyone to engage intensively in finding new solutions to consistent problems. A few individuals Mrázek names seem to have made some effort. Yet most of these attempts have fallen by the wayside. Television moguls and famous puppeteers have been content to try to benefit from the opportunities each genre offers—lots of cheap content with a certain appeal to Javanese television

audiences for the television people, chances to win still greater fame and prestige for themselves for star puppeteers—without going out of their way to think through the nature of the challenges their ‘marriage’ poses.

This raises a larger question that Mrázek never really addresses: what explains the profound alteration of wayang performances in recent decades? Like the people he spoke with, it seems that for him it suffices to say that wayang is now all about entertainment—comedy as provided by the puppeteer and invited actors, plus sexy women singers and dancers—and audiences do not have the patience for old-fashioned performances. Television’s aesthetic is now the only game in town apparently, and Mrázek is insightful and engaging about how that implicates wayang. But a few of us (whether Javanese or interested outsiders) can recall performances—rare, it is true, even in the 1970s—that were dramatically compelling, and musically rich, as well as entertaining. The complete loss of such an aesthetic—Ki Anom Soeroto’s performances do not, despite claims to the contrary, come close, and Ki Purbo Asmoro’s reflect quite a different approach—deserves more critical attention than it gets.

#### Author’s Response: Jan Mrázek

As with other kinds of theatre, one of the pleasures of watching wayang is the back and forth of contrasting voices. A.L. Becker writes that when two puppet-characters meet, “two worlds, two epistemologies coincide for a moment”; they “live in different conceptual worlds and ... their meeting is ... a coincidence of these worlds” (1995, p. 34). Each voice embodies a world; a dialogue is a meeting of worlds. Speaking of the “multiple time and multiple epistemology” in traditional wayang, Becker writes: “In *wayang*, we might say that Gatsby, Godzilla, Agamemnon, John Wayne, and Charlie Chaplin—or their counterparts—do appear in the same plot, and that is what causes the excitement; that clash of conceptual universes is what impels the action” (1995, p. 40).

Listening to the coincidental meeting of Marianna Lis and Ward Keeler—the counterparts of Godzilla and Agamemnon on my screen—I hear clashing, characterful voices. Each stems from a different “conceptual universe”, experience and time.

Both reviewers explicitly relate my book to performances they watched—Keeler in the 1970s and Lis between 2010 and 2020. I began to watch wayang around 1990; Becker in the 1960s. Are we talking about the same wayang, same Java, same world? Yes and no—and “that clash of conceptual universes is what impels the action”.

*Lis:* I belong to a generation for which wayang on television is a thing of the past, while wayang on the internet is an everyday reality. Some of the dalang described by Mrázek have a similar perception of the internet—YouTube, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok are for them the same space as the *pendopo* (pavilion).

*Keeler:* But a few of us (whether Javanese or interested outsiders) can recall performances—rare, it is true, even in the 1970s—that were dramatically compelling, and musically rich, as well as entertaining. The complete loss of such an aesthetic ... deserves more critical attention than it gets.

Keeler’s most insistent question concerns loss of what was “rare ... even in the 1970s”. Lis focuses on the present, change and the future, and is interested in the past to help her understand the present.

I am reminded of the multiplicity of positions, times and worlds, not only among the puppet-characters on the screen but also among the people I spoke with while doing research for my book. Their conversations and disagreements about wayang and electronic media, too, revolve around change and loss (among other questions); many speak rather like Lis and share her experience—social media “are for them the same space as the *pendopo*”; many speak like Keeler about the loss, deeply felt, of old-style wayang—while enjoying it on YouTube. There is a fluid diversity of attitudes, conversations

and disagreements. In *Wayang and Its Doubles*, I tried to represent this polyvocality, and like when several leather puppets represent Homeric armies of thousands, it is re-enacted in this symposium (which in Greek means ‘the drinking party’) by the two reviewers.

Keeler’s question (or its variations) about loss is shared by wayang performers and viewers. As we ruminate on it again here, we are participating in a discussion going on in Java and beyond, on and around wayang, on laptop and smartphone screens. I have written extensively about change in wayang and how people usually perceive it in relation to broader social change. Speaking of ‘loss’ shows change in a particular light. It brings up issues that are central in the conversations and disagreements with which my book is engaged, including authenticity and nostalgia, the latter understood also in the original meaning as ‘homesickness’, as a longing for home, a community and a ‘*rasa*’ (sense and sensibility). Polyphonically intertwined with these motifs are people’s justifications, cheering or not, of innovations, intermediality and ‘*elastis*’ (elasticity, a puppeteer’s term) that enable wayang to adapt and live on. The old and the new are entangled in a dialogue; they mediate each other. Watching wayang on television and on the internet is often discussed in relation to the increased movement of people as a return to the past, to one’s childhood home and a pre-electronic togetherness. Television producers capitalize on presenting “authentic-but-entertaining” (p. 97) wayang as “medicine” for nostalgia and homesickness (p. 103). Conflicting notions of authenticity and nostalgia/homesickness persist on the internet, as netizens upload and enjoy recordings of older performances, reminiscing about older aesthetics, puppeteers, wayang as they knew it in childhood, and wayang on radio and television. As viewers all over the world chat while watching live-streamed wayang, a return to something of its particular socializing becomes the source of new pleasure and play; they are the other side of homesickness, loneliness and loss.

Becker writes that wayang is a “a means for contextualizing the past in the present, and the present in the past, hence preserving the

expanding text that is culture” (1995, p. 51). He refers particularly to the multiplicity of historical languages (Sanskrit, Old Javanese, Arabic, modern Javanese and Indonesian) interacting in wayang, each with a distinct role, each representing a universe, somewhat like puppet-characters. Recent changes break with the past, but perhaps contemporary performances, in which multiple media interact rather like (and along with) the multiple languages, can be seen as “contextualizing the past in the present, and the present in the past, hence preserving the expanding text that is culture” (p. 51)—often through polemics and ruptures. A counterpoint voice, in the essay by Lis entitled “The History of Loss and the Loss of History” (2018), shows how contemporary Indonesian theatre recovers history by staging its loss. And Matthew Cohen, in words resonating with Becker’s “expanding text that is culture”, writes about “*wayang* in the age of digital reproduction” that “old puppets are having children, debates are being aired and rejoined internationally, audiences are extended, the scope for celebrating and mourning together is increased” (2019, p. 55).

Keeler, a cultural anthropologist, analyses wayang primarily in relation to traditional Javanese culture. Lis began as a scholar of theatre in Poland and she publishes on contemporary Indonesian theatre—wayang and more—with its worldwide inspiration and references. It seems to me that our dialogue is part of a shift in emphasis in wayang studies, from wayang as primarily a Javanese cultural phenomenon to wayang as a (puppet) theatre. Neither emphasis excludes the other; ideally, they blend or dialogue.

The introduction of Lis’s review is about “theatres around the world” and how they “build community” in the “extraordinary year” 2020. My “book shows”, she goes on to write, that the latest developments “began many decades ago”. I could not have known what the 2019 book would “show” in the “extraordinary year” 2020. But this, too, is what I feel today: the book “shows” me what I did not expect it would. Lis gives evocative examples of loss and absence (watching “pandemic wayang”, without musicians and physical audiences, on YouTube in Warsaw), which are also

instances of the will to live and the will to play together. I watched such “pandemic performances” on YouTube in Singapore. Having experienced the warm communality of wayang, one feels the loss and the puppeteer’s determination to go on alone, as a general without an army, “build[ing] community” while ‘self-isolating’. Other performances handle the pandemic in other ways, with Koronayaksa (‘Corona Ogre’) represented by new puppets that combine internet images of the virus with traditional iconography. ‘COVID-19’ is conversed with and battled on the screen. In this extraordinary year, wayang—appropriating and appropriated by the internet—struggles again to be ‘elastic’ enough not just to survive but to help us survive, and to help us to gather and reflect on something that puppeteers could not have envisioned a year ago. Yet again, “the scope for celebrating and mourning together is increased”; as is the scope of these words (Cohen 2019, p. 55).

Lis situates “pandemic wayang” in the context of how “theatres around the world” move online and a “new pandemic theatre sub-genre is being created”. For me, the book was never simply about Java, but in 2020 the sense that “we are all wandering in the same storm” (to avoid another *s*-word) has grown in unforeseen ways (O’Connor 1995, p. 155), also with respect to how media affect how we are at a place and how they displace us, how they connect us, ‘build communities’ and create new forms of loneliness. With the world under ‘lockdown’, the book’s ruminations on digital isolation and togetherness, and comparisons to prehistoric caves, resonate with unexpected intensity.

I dedicated the book “to Javanese puppet masters, in admiration”, not only because of their artistry. I mentioned the puppeteer who said, with admiration, that wayang cannot disappear because it is “elastic”. I feel admiration for the performers’ ‘elasticity’, as they take risks and get involved in the messy world, determinedly treading a narrow path between elasticity and spinelessness, between creative transformation and loss. It is rarely a path of uncompromising adherence to principles and established sensibility. They navigate in bad visibility and unpredictable currents; it involves both resistance

and (all manners of) collaboration, with “lots of cheap content” (in Keeler’s words) along the way, as well as moments, or whole nights, when theatre animates life.

I just learned—from WhatsApp—that Ki Seno Nugroho passed away. He was forty-eight. I got to know him in the 1990s, when we were both in our early twenties. His shows emphasized entertainment, often inspired by television, but with lots of personal character, an affinity for the creativity and wisdom of older puppeteers, and a sense of humour that transcends time. He went on to become the most popular Yogyane puppeteer, and the most popular puppeteer anywhere in terms of the number of YouTube performances (nearly nightly) and their spectators (normally about ten thousand during live streaming, with hundreds of thousands of ‘views’ thereafter). During the pandemic, “to raise people’s spirits” (as he said in performance), he too performed wayang on YouTube alone at home, singing hilariously frantic imitations of gamelan instruments and female singers’ voices, comically/desperately struggling to breathe, smoke, drink and fight off his house cat all at the same time (“socializing with flora and fauna”, he interjected). Seno’s funeral was streamed live on YouTube, with thousands of bereaved fans posting messages. Their sense of loss, gratitude, *kelangan* (affected/overcome by loss) and *kangen* (to miss something/someone, feel homesick) feel raw and personal. They mourn the loss of the puppeteer, his performances and puppet-characters (whole lists) as brought to life with his particular style and voice. Some messages nostalgically re-enact greetings customary on YouTube wayang chat (“WEST KALIMANTAN, present... 🙄🙄🙄”). Others evoke wayang voices with a playfulness that expresses loss more overwhelmingly than any eulogy: “Goooooonggg ... *sepiii tanpamuuu goooong...*” (the voice, evoking the stylized intonation that expresses anguish in wayang, calls the clown-servant Bagong, “it’s quiet/desolate/lonely without you”). Self-identified ‘millennials’ express gratitude for being brought into the world of wayang and “Javanese feeling/sensibility”. “Like being abandoned by a lover 🙄🙄🙄🙄 Every evening I watched Ki Seno’s wayang, streaming or recording. As

an expression of my love, I will continue watching the videos of Ki Seno Nugroho ♡♡”.

The loss of a young puppeteer, “the king of live streaming in Indonesia”, “the hero of the digital era”, the shock and unquestionable reality of *this* loss, as it reverberates in people’s hearts and throughout a community, reveals wayang—as it blends with YouTube—as a living force, forcefully alive, an heirloom that continues to help us to survive, mourn, celebrate and to face loss, displacement, isolation and our own elasticity, as we too blend with the internet. “Your Bagong will be eternal. Amen”. “Amen, I will always play your performances [on YouTube]”.

Seven days later, there is a wayang at Seno’s house and on his YouTube channel. During a comic scene, a netizen comments: “UP THERE *Pak* Seno is laughing with us”.

### **Marianna Lis**

Polish Institute of World Art Studies (Polski Instytut Studiów nad Sztuką Świata), ul. Foksal 11–6, 00–320 Warsaw, Poland; email: marianna\_l@gazeta.pl.

### **Ward Keeler**

Department of Anthropology, WC Powers Building, C3200, University of Texas at Austin, TX 78712; email: ward.keeler@austin.utexas.edu.

### **Jan Mrázek**

Department of Southeast Asian Studies, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, 10 Kent Ridge Crescent, AS8 Level 6, Singapore 119260; email: seajm@nus.edu.sg.

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