



Designing the Narrative Aspects of the Documentary Film Ulos Cloth in Contemporary Fashion

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Abstract. This paper explores about Ulos, a woven textile heritage of the Batak people, is sacred and full of meaning. It is recognized as a symbolic fabric rich in significance, used in various rituals and traditional ceremonies. However, in the midst of globalization and the rise of contemporary fashion, Ulos faces challenges of relevance. In the role of director, the author presents a documentary film that traces the journey of Ulos from its traditional roots to its transformation into a modern fashion element. The documentary combines an observational cinematic approach with in-depth interviews, showcasing the process of weaving Ulos, the philosophy embedded within it, and the creative dialogue between traditional weavers and contemporary designers. From an academic perspective, this documentary makes an important contribution to the study of cinematography: first, by positioning documentary film as a medium of cultural preservation; second, by exploring how visual language can bridge traditional values with contemporary aesthetic discourse. Through this work, it is hoped that new insights will emerge on how cinema not only records but also nurtures and re-contextualizes cultural identity in the modern era.

Keywords: Documentary Film, Ulos, Director, Batak Culture

1 INTRODUCTION

Batak are the third largest ethnic group in Indonesia. The Batak homeland is centered around Lake Toba and partly extends from the Bukit Barisan Mountain range in North Sumatra Province. In general perception, “Batak” refers to an ethnic group whose cultural region is located in North Sumatra, particularly in the Bukit Barisan Highlands and the Lake Toba area. The Batak people consist of several sub-ethnic groups, including Toba, Karo, Pakpak-Dairi, Angkola, Mandailing, and Simalungun. These subgroups speak seven related Batak languages and share a common Batak cultural identity. The separation of Batak subgroups historically relates to the geographical conditions of hills and forests. The Batak community is inseparable from its traditional ceremonies, which include rituals for birth, marriage, death, and many others. Marriage is regarded as one of the most important traditional ceremonies in Batak

culture, as only those who have undergone marriage are entitled to participate in other customary rituals. Ulos is a traditional woven cloth of the Batak people. Each type of ulos carries distinctive designs, woven according to specific customary rules. Ulos symbolizes social status and is used in rituals, as gifts, offerings, and markers of identity. Each region has its own stylistic variations of ulos, shaped by customary laws and historical territorial divisions [1]. Documentary films employ a strong visual and narrative approach to connect facts with subjective interpretation, aiming to provide a deeper understanding of an issue, phenomenon, or human experience [2]. There are four key criteria for documentary films: first, every event depicted must be an actual recording of real occurrences, captured spontaneously in their original situation and context. Second, the narrative must be based on real-life events or realities. Third, the director conducts observations of real events and records images as they are. Fourth, documentaries prioritize content and exposition over story structure or plot, as commonly found in fiction films [3].

2 METHODS

From the survey data collection, a total of 30 respondents participated. Of these, 46.7% were aged 18–21 years. The majority of respondents reported watching documentaries 1–2 times per year. The most popular themes for documentary films were history and socio-cultural issues. Furthermore, 33.3% of respondents agreed that documentaries are more engaging than fiction films, while 46.7% expressed interest in watching more documentaries. Based on the observation data, the type of documentary most favored by young people aged 18–21 was Participatory Documentaries. The main reasons include engaging themes, inspiring storytelling style, strong character connections, high-quality visuals, and dynamic narratives.

Audiences showed a strong interest because this type of documentary presents real life with a natural approach and minimal intervention, making it easier for viewers to connect with the narrative. Conversely, the least favored type was Expository Documentaries. Although this type provides well-structured information, audiences found it less engaging compared to other types, as its focus is more on delivering facts rather than developing emotional connections or dynamic visuals. As a result, viewers appeared less inspired and tended to show lower levels of curiosity.

A moodboard is a tool used to help the director create the film's "visual language." A moodboard can assist in designing a consistent atmosphere throughout the film. Keywords in a film are themes that appear throughout the story. Keywords in a film can be seen through visuals, audio, and narrative. They play an important role in the structure and development of a film so that it can effectively convey the intended message or meaning [4]. The keywords in this Ulos documentary are Elegant, Juxtaposition, and Personal.

In this film, framing and composition are divided according to their purposes. The grouping of composition and framing in this film consists of three: left side facing right, right side facing left, and center. The following explains the framing according to its

purpose. The interviewees who are positioned on the left or right are placed on the left or right line of the Rule of Thirds. The rule of thirds is a technique used to create visual balance and direct the viewer's focus to the main element within a frame [5]. In the context of a documentary film about Batak ulos, for example, placing ulos motifs or the facial expressions of the weaver along the rule of thirds line can help emphasize important elements in the figure.



Fig. 1. Corry Panjaitan Interview Session (Personal Documentation)

All interviews use two cameras to create visuals that are interesting and not monotonous: one camera with wide shot framing and one camera with medium shot framing (Figure 1). A wide angle is used to show the environment around the interviewee and the relationship between the interviewee and their surroundings. Meanwhile, the medium angle is used to capture detailed expressions and body gestures of the interviewee. A closer figure can also be used to emphasize what the interviewee is saying.



Fig. 2. B-roll with Rule of Thirds & Center Composition (Personal Documentation)

B-roll is secondary footage that supports the main story. B-roll helps provide visual variety, clarify the story, add context, and smooth transitions between scenes in the film. In the Ulos documentary (Figure 2), to achieve balanced shots and more interesting compositions, we used the Rule of Thirds and Center. The Rule of Thirds gives a natural and 5 non-monotonous impression to the B-roll. It can subtly guide the viewer's gaze and focus. Meanwhile, centered composition is used to emphasize the subject so that the audience focuses on what is shown on screen.

3 RESULTS & DISCUSSION

The Ulos documentary “Cerita Kita Tenun Batak” is a documentary film that highlights one of the elements of Batak culture and how this culture continues to live today. This study used a cinematic approach so that the intended message could be conveyed effectively to the audience. Through this film, the director gained many new insights—from the early stages of film design, pre-production, production, to post-production. The director played an important role in determining the storyline, visuals, and audio so that they formed a cohesive whole and made it easier for the audience to understand the story the film aimed to tell.

4 CONCLUSION

This study is expected to serve as a reference for future cultural research and to reach broader audiences. The documentary also has the potential to be developed into a series or mini-documentary format, with each episode focusing on different types of Ulos, the philosophical meanings embedded within them, as well as the personal stories of weavers from various regions. In addition, combining cinematographic techniques with interactive approaches such as digital documentaries or media-based exhibitions could further expand the film’s educational reach, particularly for younger generations who are growing up in the midst of visual culture and technological development.

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