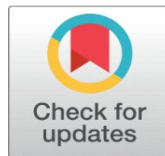


# REALISM AND COMPOSITIONAL REPRESENTATION OF REALITY: AN ANALYSIS OF THE MANIPURI DOCUMENTARY FILM “FRIED FISH CHICKEN SOUP AND A PREMIERE SHOW”

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## ABSTRACT

The debate around realism in documentary cinema has evolved significantly over the years reflecting broader shift in filmmaking techniques, compositional forms, audience expectation, cultural and political contexts. The realms of realism and compositional documentary have been in a constant state of flux, each genre pushing the boundaries of what is considered truth, authenticity, and artistic expression thereby blurring the lines between reality and fiction, and challenging the traditional notions of documentary filmmaking. Several Manipuri documentary films have made endeavors of recreating the reality through their representation on cinematic canvas. Depicting Manipur's cinematic journey and its socio-political context in a compositional form, the documentary film “Fried Fish, Chicken Soup, and a Premier Show” (2012) relies heavily on editing with found footage and presents an even greater challenge with the inclusion of historical narratives. It intricately combines observational account of a film crew at work during the filming of the Manaobi MM's Manipuri feature film “21st Century Gee Kunti” (2010) with intertitles, archival footage etc. to depict the history of Manipur. This paper explores the realism and compositional representation of reality in the film which skillfully blends diverse elements to document the trend of change and transformation within the cinematic landscape and the lived reality of Manipuri society in transition.

**Keywords:** Realism, Manipuri Documentary, Fried Fish, Chicken Soup

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The debate around realism in documentary cinema has evolved significantly over the years reflecting broader shift in filmmaking techniques, compositional forms, audience expectation, cultural and political contexts. The realms of realism and compositional documentary have been in a constant state of flux, each genre pushing the boundaries of what is considered truth, authenticity, and artistic expression thereby blurring the lines between reality and fiction, and challenging the traditional notions of documentary filmmaking. Stella Bruzzu in her seminal work delves deep into the intricate relationship between documentary film and the concept of realism, providing a nuanced and thought-provoking perspective on this long-standing debate. She acknowledges the inherent tension that exists between the documentary genre and the notion of realism drawing parallels between the structure of a trial and that of a documentary film, noting

that both rely on a similar arc of accusation, evidence, and judgment, akin to the classic three-act structure of a fictional narrative (Morton, 2021). This observation highlights the performative nature of both the judicial process and the documentary medium, where the audience is invited to engage in a process of evaluation and judgment, much like a jury in a criminal trial. The observational mode of documentary filmmaking, as conceptualized by Bill Nichols (2010), offers a unique and captivating approach to cinematic storytelling, which has profoundly influenced the evolution of the documentary genre. It has shed light on the nuances and complexities inherent in this mode, highlighting its potential to provide a more authentic and unmediated representation of reality (Middleton, 2002).

Several Manipuri documentary films have made endeavors of recreating the reality through their representation on cinematic canvas using different techniques. Depicting Manipur’s cinematic journey and its socio-political context in a compositional form, the documentary film “Fried Fish, Chicken Soup, and a Premier Show” (2012) relies heavily on editing with found footage and presents an even greater challenge with the inclusion of historical narratives. It intricately combines observational account of a film crew at work during the filming of the Manaobi MM’s Manipuri feature film “21st Century Gee Kunti” (21<sup>st</sup> Century’s Kunti) in 2010 with intertitles, archival footage etc. to depict the history of Manipur. This paper explores the compositional representation of reality vis-à-vis realism in the film which skillfully blends diverse elements to document the trend of change and transformation within the cinematic landscape and the lived reality of Manipuri society in transition.

## 2. REALISM IN “FRIED FISH, CHICKEN SOUP AND A PREMIER SHOW”

The 1hour 30-minute documentary film “*Fried Fish, Chicken Soup and a Premier Show*” directed by Mamta Murthy was released in 2012. It won the Jury Choice Award at the Mumbai International Film Festival-2012. The documentary follows a film crew at work during the making of the Manipuri digital feature film “*21st Century Gee Kunti*” in 2010. Murthy chose observational mode to tell the story of the film crew which hustles in the heart of Imphal, the capital city of Manipur, while making the Manipuri feature film.

The “*Fried Fish...Show*” opens with a jerky shot of an airplane flying through a gloomy sky, framed with an electric pole in the foreground and a grainy texture, creating a slightly uneasy atmosphere. The scene abruptly shifts to a dimly-lit space as the camera tilts downward, accompanied by the sound of fish frying in a large cast iron *kadai* (*khang* in Manipuri). The setting is an outhouse shed, *Mamang Sanggoi*, traditionally used in Manipur for storing grains and wood, weaving, and sometimes for cooking during rituals or when hosting many guests. The act of cooking is an anticipation of something that will happen and a woman is frying fish over a firewood flame that crackles with intensity. The woman picks up a phone and urgently requests for a briefcase needed for the shoot. It’s unexpected to see a woman in her private space, cooking, while simultaneously coordinating film production. However, in reality, the woman on phone is H. Neki, the producer of the film currently in the middle of shooting. Her act of cooking symbolically parallels the film’s ongoing production, representing the creative process in motion. The whole family is involved in the process of the filmmaking. The documentary film crew moves into a space where a man says, “*Please have some tea*”. The subjects in the film are comfortable even with the presence of the camera and reality doesn’t seem to be altered by the very presence of the ‘hostile’ camera. There is trust between the filmmaker and the subjects which establishes the understanding of the importance of telling story. There is no attempt to intervene the tonal gradient of the room. The film is shot with almost no artificial light and it gives a sense of reality captured as it is.

Amidst the shooting, conversation among the subjects recalls the nostalgia of days of the celluloid life even as Manipur also has witnessed the evolution of cinema as a medium. With the arrival of the digital era, the art of filmmaking became democratized thereby providing opportunities of experimentation with different techniques including compositional form and realism. The lead actress of the film, Maya Choudhury preparing herself for the shoot is introduced with photographs montaged across her childhood and teenage days to her winning Miss Contest, to her wedding and her travelling across India with her son. Here the film crew used this device effectively with sound supposedly mimicking background suiting the environment of the photographs.

In the documentary, where the otherwise linear narrative structure, which mirrors the reality of the film crew’s process, is interrupted by a reflective intervention. The introduction of the lead actress, Maya Choudhury, is achieved through a montage of photographs that chronicles her journey to becoming a renowned figure in the local film industry.

This technique disrupts the temporal flow, blending past and present, and offers a biographical insight that enhances the documentary's exploration of cinematic realities.

Then, the camera returns to her while she waits for the make-up artist at the residence of the filmmaker where members of the film unit gather and prepare for the production together. The banner of the film is shown and the camera tilts downward slowly and it reveals that the whole crew is having food together in the Meitei traditional way and one of the crew members says, "*We will have to carry some food for them*" which is for the rest of the team already stationed at the location. The feature film is the debut film of the director and the excitement and the nervousness are in the air while they prepare to move out. It is clearly shown that they have limited resources and they pull together all the resources they have at home to make the film.

### 3. COMPOSITIONAL REPRESENTATION IN "FRIED FISH...SHOW"

After the crew moves to the shooting location of the film (Time Stamp: at 6 min. 1 sec.), with music in the background, still shots of closed shops appear like the time has become still and a narration begins using excerpts from a book titled "*My three years in Manipur*" published in 1891 by Ethel St. Clair Grimwood, wife of the then British Political Agent. Her memoir describes the beauty of Manipur in the following lines which are in the narration.

"Manipur, a valley buried amongst hills difficult to access near Burma border. We had not been in India for many months when my husband was offered the post of Political Agent at Manipur. It's a pretty place. More beautiful than many showcases of the world. Beautiful in its habitable parts but even more beautiful in those tracts covered with forest jungles where the foot of man seldom treads and the stillness of which is broken by the cry of the monkey or the scream of a night bird hunting its prey."

Depicting the beauty of Manipur in contrast to the visuals of army men in fatigue roaming around the streets of Imphal city, and the image of Kangla in the heart of the Imphal city with a faceless rickshaw puller in the foreground, gives a glimpse of the struggle of the common people. A large billboard showing three men in the picture with the written words "Let not our blood go in vain. Stand up for a better Manipur", a street-side flex board displaying "Study MBBS in China, Unemployed Youth, Car Washing Centre, Namdulong are some of the pictorial contexts given in contrast to the romanticizing narrative of the British colonial agents. Just after the narration, the film cuts to black intertitles and the title of the documentary film appears on screen in both Meitei Mayek (Meitei script) and English.

The juxtaposition of the British narration, which romanticizes the beauty of Manipur, against visuals of the contemporary struggles of its people creates a stark contrast. This tension is heightened by the recurring imagery of the Army's presence, which interrupts the scenes of everyday life in Manipur, symbolizing an external intervention that disrupts the normalcy of local existence. The film employs a rigorous inquiry into Manipur's history, aligning with Michael Renov's assertion that "the primary goal of poetic documentary is to subject aesthetic forms to thorough analysis, focusing on their composition, function, and impact." Mamta Murthy skillfully manipulates the pictorial context of found footage, integrates verbal irony, and utilizes metaphorical restaging within the montage, generating a complex, multifaceted tension throughout the film.

Murthy's decision to begin her documentary with the text of first-hand account of a British could be interpreted as a deliberate framing device to foreground the region's colonial history. By starting with an external perspective, particularly that of a colonial authority, she may be highlighting the ways in which Manipur has historically been represented and understood through an imperial lens. This choice underscores the enduring impact of colonial narratives in shaping contemporary perceptions of the region.

As a filmmaker from mainland India, Murthy also seeks to position herself as an observer offering an exploratory account rather than presenting definitive or authoritative statements. In the context of a compositional documentary that seeks to depict realism, this approach allows Murthy to contrast the colonial gaze with the complex socio-political realities of Manipur, thereby reinforcing the film's commitment to a more authentic and localized representation of the region. This approach also aligns with the principles of compositional documentary, where various elements - found footage, narration, and imagery - are deliberately structured to convey layered meaning. The juxtaposition of colonial-era descriptions with contemporary struggles creates a complex narrative that blends history, metaphor, and lived experience. Rather than presenting a linear account, the film assembles fragments into a cohesive whole, inviting viewers to engage critically with its themes. This technique reflects the compositional documentary's emphasis on form and content, constructing a dialogue between past and present to deepen the film's socio-political impact.

#### 4. LIVED REALITY OF MANIPURI CINEMA IN "FRIED FISH... SHOW"

From silent era to Lumiere brothers' capturing of everyday activities in simple unembellished way (such as workers leaving factories) and Italian neoliberalism that inspired many to capture the real life of common people, cinematic efforts have been representation of the reality in the form of people's lived experiences. In the documentary "Fried Fish... Show", by showing the Ethel St. Clair Grimwood's text with the subsequent exploration of Manipur's present-day realities side by side, Murthy may be inviting the audience to critically reflect on the tension between these external, authoritative narratives and the lived experiences of the local population. The use of such a framing device calls into question whose voices have historically been prioritized in the telling of Manipur's story and sets the stage for a more grounded, nuanced portrayal that seeks to reclaim agency for those historically marginalized in these narratives.

The narrative of the "Fried Fish... Show" is not linear and the reality of the struggle to make a feature film in the present takes the audience back to the past glory when pioneering Manipuri filmmakers like Aribam Syam Sharma emerged not only in the local film industry but also marked a place in the world cinema. The reference of the popular culture in the past surfaces as flashbacks reminding audience where Manipur Film Industry have come so far.

A significant film movement emerged in the early 1980s with the introduction of VHS and VHS-C formats, which allowed for immediate recording and preview capabilities. The first VHS feature film in Manipuri (Meiteilon) was *Nonglei* (Storm) directed by Ramchandra and released in 1986. The transition into the digital video era is marked by the release of Kangla Films' *Lammei* (Wildfire) in 2002. This film was the first video production which got a theatrical release in a conventional cinema hall, signalling the beginning of the digital video/cinema period in Manipur. (Wahengbam, 2015)

The "Fried Fish... Show" includes a digital satirical film *Mantri Dolansana* based on a corrupt Minister with the intertitle "*Mantri Dolansana* (1993) directed by Dinesh Tongbram, was shot on VHS and sold in Video Parlours like other low budget Manipuri films in 1990's. Many years and formats later, it still survives through YouTube uploads by young fans. So does the corrupt minister surrounded by gallantry aspirants." The documentary also included the first digital film *Lammei* (2002) directed by Oken Amakcham, and *Eekhenglakta Red Rose* (2008) directed by Romi Meitei which depict the conflict among friends, families, and brothers who find themselves on opposing sides of law and insurgent groups. Since the arrival of digital films, the opportunity for experimentation raised and the rapid changes in the socio-political realities are reflected in the films made in digital format.

Manipur local film industry which runs on the most limited resources struggles to make a bare living. In the year 2000, Hindi film was banned by proscribed insurgent group the Revolutionary People's Front (RPF). This was perceived as an attempt to aid cultural regulation in principle rather than censorship in terms of legality. There was a duality in terms of who gets to govern the cultural practice. Cinema was one contested space for the non-state actors where they could assert their influence in shaping the popular culture of Manipur. The ban and its effects are described as in the following quick read-

"On October 14, 2000, RPF, a proscribed militant group in Manipur, put a ban on all forms of Hindi media in Manipur, including Hindi films. This ban came couple of days after a captain of the RPF, Captain Mangal, died in the custody of the Indian Army. The ban was very strictly imposed by RPF - there were reports of RPF cadres confiscating and burning CDs and cassettes containing Hindi films and songs in the first couple of years following the ban. The ban has been particularly effective in the cinema halls of Manipur." (Kshetrimayum, 2011)

After Hindi film was banned in Manipur, the distribution scene and the cinema halls had to bear the burden of the void left by the ban. The local film industry could not fill the gap with the limited resources to keep up with demand of the public in terms of frequency. Cinema halls came to a halt but a new opportunity rose for the local Manipur Film Industry to navigate new ways to tell story with the void left by the Hindi Cinema.

The depictions in the "Fried Fish... Show" follows the journey of the film crew of the feature film "*21st Century Gee Kunti*" and their experiences in a conflict zone - characterized by interruptions and limited resources. These illuminate the complexities surrounding cinema as a contested medium in Manipur. Depicting the intricate journey of the film team, from pre-production to post-production and organic film distribution, "Fried Fish... Show" highlights the significance of cinematic memory in shaping narratives within the region. The resilience of the local community emerges as they navigate the challenges posed by bans and censorship on Hindi films, persistently negotiating the intricacies of storytelling. The volume of attendance at the film premiere serves as a testament to the profound affection for cinema

and a collective desire to escape the harsh realities of life in Manipur. This engagement with film not only offers hope but also underscores the commitment of storytellers, who remain undeterred by adversity, reflecting the vital role of cinema in fostering resilience and hope among the people of Manipur- the socio-political realities that are intricately explored throughout the documentary.

## 5. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be concluded that the exploration of realism and compositional forms in documentary cinema, particularly through the lens of Manipuri films, reveals the intricate interplay between representation, authenticity, and artistic expression. As demonstrated in *"Fried Fish, Chicken Soup, and a Premier Show,"* the compositional approach to documentary filmmaking allows for a nuanced examination of Manipur's socio-political context and cultural identity. By seamlessly integrating found footage, observational narratives, and historical accounts, the film transcends traditional documentary boundaries, challenging viewers to reconsider their perceptions of truth and reality. The evolving nature of documentary cinema reflects broader shifts in societal narratives, pushing the boundaries of genre and technique. As the landscape of realism and compositional documentary continues to evolve, scholars and communication researchers must grapple with a range of important questions. These include the changing forms and functions of documentaries, their commercial and amateur applications, and the ethical implications of the medium's increasing reach and impact. The compositional representation of reality in Manipuri cinema not only documents the region's rich cinematic heritage but also serves as a vital commentary on the ongoing transformations within the lives of its people. Through this intricate blending of elements, the film captures the essence of a community in transition, underscoring the importance of cinema as a powerful medium for preserving collective memory and fostering cultural understanding in a rapidly changing world.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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