

The Tension Between Historical Accuracy, Authenticity and Creative License in Historical Cinema Costume Design: A Study Based on the Costume Design Experience of the Film *Maharaja Gemunu*



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Abstract

The costume design process of historical cinema production encounters a continuous dialogue on achieving the correct balance between historical accuracy, authenticity, and creative license. This research aims to analyze the friction among historical accuracy, authenticity, and creative license in the costume design process of the *Maharaja Gemunu* cinematic creation. Interviews, self-reflexive writings, production documents, visual sources, and production plans were used to collect data. The researcher, being the principal costume designer, interpretatively investigated his lived experiences, their meanings, challenges, and contextual dynamics of self and the costume design team during the meaning-making stage of the costume design process. Internal conflicts, limitations of decision-making, creative adaptations, and feelings that occurred during the creative process were analyzed through the self-reflexive methodology. The research approach was qualitative, following an interpretative case study method based on the philosophical foundation of Max Van Manen's phenomenological approach. The study revealed that the costume design process was a creative interpretation rather than a historical reconstruction due to the lack of direct archaeological and visual evidence in the Anuradhapura Era. The design process was found to be a creative interpretation due to the current gaps in knowledge, raw materials, technology, and skills compared to the Anuradhapura era. It was concluded that the costume design process was an effort to build consensus among historical facts, cinematic requirements, technical and financial constraints, popular cultural beliefs, and memories. Based on the study findings, it can be argued that costume design is a dynamic and adaptive process that negotiates among historical accuracy, historical authenticity, and creative expression.

Keywords

Creative License, Historical Accuracy, Historical Authenticity, Historical Cinema Costumes, Interpretative Case Study

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Introduction

*Maharaja Gemunu*² is a historical cinema production directed by Jayantha Chandrasiri, a renowned Sri Lankan cinema director, in the year 2013. This cinema is based on the life story of Prince Gemunu and his efforts to unify Sri Lanka in the second century. According to contemporary Sri Lankan society, this cinematic creation was built on chronicles that consist of socially, culturally, and religiously sensitive characters and incidents.

Historical cinema is a medium that maintains a complex relationship between historical facts, cultural authenticity, and creative expression to depict history. In the process of cinematic costume design, the designer faces a major challenge due to the friction among historical accuracy, historical authenticity, and creative license. It is not a reconstruction of historical facts; instead, it is a type of cinema that *focuses* on creativity to gain social attention (Stubbs, 2013). Therefore, though historical cinema is based on historical facts, it is not a complete reconstruction; hence, leading to an artistic interpretation (Stubbs, 2013).

Based on this fact, the designer must decide between the accurate reconstruction of historical costumes and visual attraction, which leads to a conflict between maintaining historical authenticity and sustaining the attention of the modern audience. Burgoyne (2008) explains that artistic value, cultural value, fame, and commercial success of historical cinema interconnect with each other. Attraction of the audience, visual effects of characters, and commercial success also need to be prioritized to sustain a balance between historical authenticity and cinematic attraction.

Rosenstone's (2005) ideology further provides grounds for this argument. He states that history is not a mirror image, but a creation based on a special vision, theory, or interpretative process (Rosenstone, 2005). Based on this concept, cinematic costume design in historical cinema is not an exact copy; instead, it could be described as an interpretative reconstruction. Historical cinema costume design is a mechanism of storytelling through the character (Makendrick, 2004). Therefore, cinema costume design is not merely the designing of costumes, but an artistic medium that expresses the era, culture, and characters. The main concern and challenge during the cinema costume design process in *Maharaja Gemunu* was reaching the correct balance between historical accuracy and creative freedom. There was also a continuing dialogue about what percentage of history should be represented and to what extent the creative

²Maharaja Gemunu (161-137 BCE) was one of the most celebrated and respected rulers of ancient Sri Lanka, praised for unifying the country and safeguarding and sponsoring the development of Buddhism.

intervention should occur. This situation provided a strong researchable background for studying the interrelationship between historical accuracy and creativity in the cinema costume design process. Further, this can be referred to as valuable guidance for future cinema costume designers and researchers.

Costume designers' span of work extends beyond just following historical evidence to developing them to suit the characters. This approach leads to a fair application or base for creative license. Over adoption of this concept adversely affects historical authenticity. Cinema costume design is a mandatory requirement in character development and storytelling, and it acts as a connector between the script, actors, actresses, and the director (Jablon, 2016). Based on this ideology, historical cinema production is not only a tool for interpreting historical reality but also a tool that provides a narrative signal about a character's social status, power, gender, and mentality. Therefore, the costume designer must make a compromise between historical accuracy and character requirements.

Historical authenticity is not simply a reconstruction of historic costumes, but an effort to make the audience feel the cultural vibration and lived experiences of the historic era. Trinidad (2021) further explains how cinema costume design affects the audience's sensitive experience and helps shape the emotional relationship with the creation. Through symbolism and cultural interpretation, costume design plays a vital role in giving a fictional experience to the audience (Trinidad, 2021). Though historically inaccurate, costume designs that give a sense of history to the audience could be justified based on creativity. Moreover, based on the work of Fortin (2022) and Sobchack (1991), cinematic visual language connects with experiences of the audience, body sensations, and cultural readings. Therefore, in the context of historical cinema creation, the task of the creative designer is not simply to recreate historic costumes but to create an interpretation of a trustworthy and emotional experience.

Street (2001) states that cinema costume design helps actors and actresses get into their characters while guiding the audience to identify the characters and enter the cinematic world. Further, cinema costume design was identified as a visual language that expresses the social, economic, cultural, and personal background of a character (Street, 2001). These factors make the costume designer more responsible for delivering the same and lead to a requirement for in-depth research.

Although research exists concerning historical accuracy, authenticity, and creative license, they contain a gap, as per the literature review, by virtue of being unable to capture the authentic

experiences of costume designers. Moreover, there were no similar studies conducted in Sri Lanka according to the available literature.

A continuous tension exists among historical accuracy, historical authenticity, and creative license. Historic authenticity ensures that historical facts and evidence are being honored. Historic authenticity makes certain that the culture of the era and sensational truth are being interpretatively reconstructed. Creative license permits cinematic narration, character development, attraction of the audience, and interpretative changes. Therefore, successful cinema costume design creations could be identified as processes of sustaining a sensory balance among the above three factors.

Methodology

This study follows a qualitative approach based on the interpretative case study method and a philosophical foundation, namely, Max Van Manen's (1990) phenomenological approach. He explains that understanding the meaning of experiences through identified themes is important (Manen, 1990).

The research does not intend to document the process of reinterpreting history through the design process. Instead, priority is given to interpreting lived experiences, studying their deep meanings, and understanding their creative contexts. Therefore, this study could be identified as being grounded in lived experience and contextually sensitive. In the application of the phenomenological approach to study costume design, it is obvious that a costume is not just a material object but also a symbolic and sensitive object that shapes the audience's perspective and experience of historical events.

A case study approach aims to descriptively analyze an event or a phenomenon. An interpretative case study intends to analyze underlying meanings, experiences, socio-cultural contexts, and human dynamics to obtain a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. It goes beyond asking "What happened in the costume design process?" and asks questions like "Why did it happen?", and "What is the meaning of the experience?" Through a qualitative research approach, a self-reflexive methodology was used to reflect the experiences, thoughts, feelings, decisions, and internal conflicts that took place during the design process. As the researcher is a direct participant in this research, his personal experiences are critically important. This self-reflective process enabled the researcher to ask himself questions like "How can I interpret this experience?" and "What is the deep meaning of this experience?" By doing so, the researcher

attempted to uncover the underlying meanings embedded in lived experiences, thereby gaining a deeper understanding of the social, cognitive, emotional, and creative dynamics that shape the creative design process.

The study incorporated data triangulation by utilizing multiple data sources. This ensured greater depth and reliability in the data collection process. The researcher maintained self-reflexive writing, production notes, planning documents, and other documents as major sources of data collection. In addition, he, being the principal costume designer of this movie, conducted open-ended interviews to collect the lived experiences, challenges faced, decisions made, and creative motives of the costume design team. Photographs of the production process, artworks, sketches, progressive costume designs, and videos were also used to collect data to understand the evolution of the costume design process and creative changes.

Thematic Analysis and phenomenological interpretation were used to analyze the collected data. As the first step, ideas, feelings, human moments, and creative implications of the costume design team were collected and phenomenologically coded through interview notes, self-reflexive notes, and visual data.

The gaps between creative expectations and the reality of raw material availability, creative setbacks, and emotionally based challenges are the thematic clusters identified. These clusters were grouped and developed into cluster themes. Finally, the thematic context was interpreted in relation to the meanings of participants' lived experiences, resulting in a rich, nuanced, and meaningful analysis of the phenomenon under investigation.

Analysis and Discussion

The study revealed that creative intentionality was shaped by factors such as the creative requirements of the director, lighting, camera frames, and the attraction of the audience. A commonly acceptable and most needed creative idea was then conceptualized and used as input for the art sketches and design plans for the production. Considerations such as the comfort of the actors, the mobility required by the characters, and the quality and functionality of the costumes were found to be decisive factors influencing the evolution of the design. Designs were found to be impacted and shaped by the budgeting restrictions as well. The limited technical and material availability between Anuradhapura and the contemporary era, and the tightened time frames, were considered challenging as well. Finally, it was interpreted that the

nature and intensity of the above factors influenced the shape and direction of creative intentionality.

The study revealed that costume design in *Maharaja Gemunu* was challenging, as it was required to preserve the *Lebenswelt* – the shared experience and common sense of the people about the world of life in the second-century Anuradhapura Era - while simultaneously adhering to contemporary cultural and social norms. This was prominent when the costume designer failed to reconstruct the second-century human lifestyle, as historical evidence suggests that women were often fully or partially unclothed, men commonly wore minimal clothing, and children were typically unclothed. Furthermore, the devotional respect of the society towards King Dutugemunu and the requirement to gather ideas about the audience's sensitivity also impacted the direction of the creative intentionality.

The cinema costume design process is a highly dynamic and evolving process. Therefore, the direction of creative intentionality was observed to be impacted throughout the process of costume design, starting from the research stage of *Maharaja Gemunu*, concept drawing, the model costume development stage, rehearsal stage, reprocessing stage, and even at the recording stage. Initially, the principal costume designer's creative intentionality was shaped by historical accuracy and authenticity, but finally it was found to interact with the cinematic requirement despite being recognized as a vibrant expression of the creative process. This led to the understanding that creative intentionality is a meaning-making process of the designer and is based on his embodied experience; hence, a highly dynamic process. This continuous change and evolution of the costume design process resulted in achieving the right blend of historical accuracy and authenticity while adding creative cinematic concepts to the costume design process. The main finding of the research is that creative intentionality in the cinema costume design process of *Maharaja Gemunu* was built upon a continuous dialogue between historical accuracy, historical intentionality, and creative license. In addition, based on research findings, there was no direct and complete visual evidence regarding the costumes related to the Anuradhapura Era, especially during the dynasty of King Dutugemunu (also known as “Gemunu” in short). It was revealed that sources like chronicles, historical findings, sculptures, carvings, and paintings did not provide adequate details. Therefore, the decision of what the actual dress code was became debatable. In this situation, the designer's lived experience was not only a reconstruction of history but also a journey to find a meaningful experience based on facts and uncertainties.

From the angle of phenomenology, the designer faced the dilemma of fathoming what is seen as history and what can be known as history. Therefore, the design process is not a method to find complete accuracy, but one that builds a reliable interpretation based on available facts. The director's vision was identified as a main factor that shaped the intentionality of the designer. As per the director, *Maharaja Gemunu* is not only a historical script, but it is also a creative interpretation of history.

Another important finding of the research was that historical authenticity and the audience's understanding of historical authenticity are two different concepts. In this case, historical authenticity was not satisfactorily provable through historical factors. There was not enough historical basis to prove such authenticity. The images of Dutugemunu, Vihara Mahadevi, and Elara in the minds of the audience were more powerful and acted as the cultural reality. Therefore, drawing inspiration from school textbooks, popular cartoons, famous paintings, and religious imagery could be identified as a creative decision made by the costume designer.

It was clear from the research that authenticity was not only based on historical facts, but it was also premised on culturally shared interpretations. The research revealed how technical, economic, and organizational limitations impacted creative intentionality. Changes occurred in coloring, lack of raw material, time restrictions, demands of actors and actresses, and production pressure, leading to changes in initial plans. These limitations led to new solutions and innovations rather than acting as a barrier to the costume design process. Finally, it was obvious that creative decisions were not a direct result of pre-planned concepts, but were born of lived experiences within the costume design process.

Yet another finding was that the creative intentionality underpinning the costume design process for *Maharaja Gemunu* was not shaped by a choice between historical accuracy and cinematic expression. Rather, it emerged through the development of a dynamic dialogue between these two creative imperatives. Although historical facts were used as a base, the final creation was done through creative interpretation, matching the expectations of the audience, cultural memories and beliefs, production limitations, and the director's vision.

In *Maharaja Gemunu*, the cinematic costume design process was not an effort to build a historical copy, but a creative process that tried to achieve a balance among historical factors, cultural memories, and cinematic requirements to build a cinematic truth that was trustworthy to the audience. Therefore, creative intentionality could be referred to as a complex

phenomenon resulting from the interaction among historical, cultural, technological, and biological factors rather than personal artistic decisions.

Recommendations

To strengthen the historical foundations of creative decision-making in Sri Lankan historical cinema, a multidisciplinary team comprising costume designers, historians, art historians, and scientists should be appointed during the production process. Such collaboration would help ensure that creative cinematic expression is informed by rigorous historical scholarship while allowing for artistic interpretation. In addition, it is suggested to develop a digital database consisting of visual images of sculptures, carvings, wall art, coins, artifacts, and jewelry in relation to Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa, and other eras. This would allow easy access to cinema costume designers to gather direct historical visual factors.

Further, a national-level consultancy unit should be established to provide necessary consultation and guidance for historical cinema productions in the areas of costume design, jewelry design, and set design. It is suggested to display a statement in promotional materials and at the end of the movie, such as “These costume designs are based on both historical and creative interpretations”. This will guide the audience to differentiate between historical accuracy and visual interpretations.

There is a need to conduct more research on costume design in Sri Lankan historical cinema; especially, more comparative studies should be conducted regarding historical accuracy and cinematic authenticity. Researching historical clothing, metal jewelry, and historical clothing and jewelry techniques will add to existing knowledge and contribute to more realistic historical costume design productions in the future.

Therefore, the friction among historical accuracy, historical authenticity, and creative license in the costume design of the movie *Maharaja Gemunu*, operates as a continuous dialogue, fostering creative intentionality in reinterpreting history while simultaneously shaping and enriching the final creative outcome.

Conclusion

The analysis of the cinema costume design process of *Maharaja Gemunu* revealed a direct and continuous dialogue among historical accuracy, historical authenticity, and creative license. Due to the lack of archaeological evidence related to the era of King Dutugemunu, the costume

design process became a historical interpretation rather than a reconstruction of history. Since the costume designer did not have reliable sources to refer to what is historically verifiable, he was compelled to be artistically inspired by the relevant chronicles, sculptures, carvings, and paintings of the same era to construct a historical look and feel to the costumes.

The findings suggest that authenticity in cinema is not equivalent to historical accuracy; instead, it can be identified as a constructive authenticity that exists based on the consensus among historical factors, cinematic requirements, and expectations of the audience. For example, utilizing approaches like change of colours, usage of lightweight materials for armour, and symbolic jewelry to distinguish between the characters is not in full compliance with historical accuracy, but it has contributed to building a sense of historical reliability for the audience.

The study revealed that, to some extent, creative license adversely impacts historical accuracy, but it is still mandatory to fill the gaps arising due to the unavailability of historical facts by visually interpreting history. The headdress of Queen Vihara Mahadevi³ royal symbols of King Dutugemunu⁴ and Chola influences to interpret Elara⁵ are practical examples where creative license played a vital role in creatively interpreting history. Conversely, creative freedom may lead to confusion regarding historical reality and may foster an overly romanticized understanding of the past.

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³Queen Vihara Mahadevi was a royal figure who lived in the second century BCE. She was the mother of King Dutugemunu and was popular for her wisdom, courage, and for nurturing Prince Gemunu to kingship.

⁴King Dutugemunu – Another name for Maharaja Gemunu.

⁵Elara is a Tamil king who once ruled Sri Lanka in the second century BCE and was later defeated by Maharaja Gemunu.

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