

# SHOT LENGTH AND NARRATIVE IN ISHANOU

□ Dr. Ganesh Sethi  
□ Dr. Kamaljit Chirom

## Abstract

The statistical analysis of films is one way of studying films and it has been there for some time now. Some very renowned film scholars and theorists have done such kind of studies till now. Many variables of filmmaking can be studied using this technique and how these variables are expressed can be an indicator of the style of the director which, subsequently, can be used in making a generalised statement for that particular director. This method of analysis can be done in different ways. One way of doing the statistical analysis of films is to use the open source online software called 'Cinemetrics.' In the research conducted using this software, the highly acclaimed Manipuri feature film entitled *Ishanou* (Aribam Syam Sharma, 1990) is analysed to find out the relationship between the shot duration and the narration of the film. *Ishanou* is the story of how a small happy family is disturbed when Tampha, the young wife, is 'chosen' to become a *Maibi*. The film is analysed shot by shot taking down the shot sizes and duration of each of these shots. The pattern of shots forms a key constituent in building up the narrative of a film. The details are then analysed and a comparison is made with the narrative of the film to bring out a relationship. The quantitative statistical analysis of films gives an aspect of the grammar of cinema in building key concepts of narrative.

**Keywords:** Manipuri cinema, statistical shot analysis, film narrative, Cinemetrics.

## Introduction

Statistical analysis of films has been there for some time now. **Barry Salt, David Bordwell, Kristin Thompson, and Charles O'Brien** are some of the scholars who have used statistical analysis in their studies<sup>1</sup>. Cutting et. al “reported that the structure of film acts – the four relatively equal-length stretches of film determined by the progression of the narrative – influenced shot lengths and shot transitions.” (Cutting, Brunick, DeLong 2012: 142)

The importance of cutting style and shot lengths in the analysis of films have been stressed by many film scholars and they feel the need for it is increasing. “In the process of film-making, the characteristics of a shot (i.e. an uninterrupted run of camera take) are among those variables that are most directly under the director's control, such as shot length, intended as shot duration, shot type in terms of closeness of the camera to the subject, camera movement such as pan, tilt, zooms, shot transitions (cut, fades, dissolves, wipes), etc.” (Canini, et al.

2011: 253)

Barry Salt did analysis of films using statistical tools. He was of the opinion that in order to make a generalization, it would require to have a number of films by a director to be studied. “To establish the existence of an individual formal style in the work of a director, it is necessary to compare not only a sufficient number of his films with each other, but also- which is always forgotten-to compare his films with films of similar genre made by other directors at the same time.” (Barry Salt 1974, 14) It would be difficult to gauge the style of one director from one film. The main concern in this paper is not generalising the cutting style of Syam Sharma, but of bringing a relation between the shot length and the narrative of *Ishanou*. Nick Redfern used statistics to determine the relation between film styles shot scale, camera movement, etc., and the narration of *Roshomon* (Kurosawa Akira, 1950).

## Narrative in *Ishanou*

*Ishanou* is a 1990 Manipuri language feature film directed by Aribam Syam Sharma. *Ishanou* is the story of how a small happy

1. <http://www.cinemetrics.lv/>

□ Assistant Professor, Department of Mass Communication, Manipur University, Imphal, Manipur.

□ Assistant Professor, Department of Journalism & Mass Communication, North Eastern Hill University, Shillong, Meghalaya.

family is disturbed when Tampha, the young wife, is 'chosen' to become a Maibi. In the beginning of the film, they are shown as living a simple life with the husband Dhanabir having a government job and the wife Tampha as the housewife looking after her daughter Bembem. They live with Tampha's mother in her home. The conflict in the story is created when Tampha slowly becomes closer and closer to becoming a Maibi. Nobody knows what is happening to her as she acts in strange ways as if she is possessed. Many forms of treatment are tried on her – medicines, exorcism, etc. – but none of them work. One night she runs off herself and comes to the house of an older Maibi who takes her under her tutelage to train her to become a Maibi. Towards the end of the film, Tampha finds out that her mother had sent her daughter Bembem away with Dhanabir so that she doesn't have to live with Tampha due to the fear that Bembem would also become a Maibi. Tampha becomes separated from her husband and after many years she finds out that Dhanabir has married for the second time. The film ends on a note of pain of Tampha as she watches her husband and daughter going away from her.

The introductory title at the beginning of the film says, “The film is based on the life of Maibis of Manipur. They belong to an ancient institution of Meiteis' faith. One becomes a Maibi, not by choice, nor initiation but when chosen by the deity.” The filmmaker's message to the audience is that no one becomes a Maibi by choice but is chosen by gods through some divine process. The last introductory title says this, “Generally no one desires to be a Maibi. A common belief is that a Maibi's daughter would become a Maibi. Even the Maibis suffer from this belief.” The main storyline in *Ishanou* is based on this belief – it is not just about the becoming of a Maibi of Tampha, but also about how, and this is the bigger part of the film, because of the belief, Tampha has to lose her family. Throughout the

whole film, the director tries to bring our attention to the fact that there is some form of divine intervention according to which one is chosen to become a Maibi and there is no human power that can stop it. This is proven to some extent by the fact that in the film Tampha's family and friends try to cure her through various means, including modern medicine, traditional form of exorcism, and many other known forms of treatment, as per the story. But the main point here is not the choosing of Tampha, but the fact that she can't live a normal life because her mother won't let Bembem to stay with her because of the 'belief' that a Maibi's daughter would become a Maibi.

The plot revolves around Tampha, although it is not entirely from her point of view.

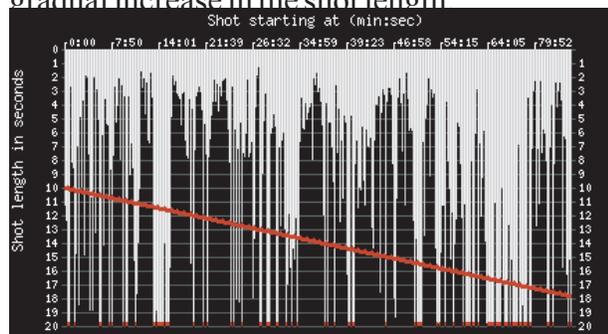
### **Shot Length and Narrative**

The narrative of the film is divided into the following six parts. The first one is the introductory sequence. The second sequence is the *yagya* sequence or the ear-piercing ritual sequence of Bembem. The call sequence where Tampha gets the call and her usual life is disturbed. The next is the becoming the Maibi sequence where Tampha finally meets a 'guru' who guides her and makes her a Maibi. The next sequence is when Tampha finds out she has lost her family. The Lai Haraoba sequence. And the final one is where Tampha meets her husband and daughter after about 5-6 years and finds that she can never go back to that life again.

The film was analysed using Cinematics, the open source software available online. The link to the page of the analysis is [http://www.cinematics.lv/movie.php?movie\\_ID=18866](http://www.cinematics.lv/movie.php?movie_ID=18866). The shot lengths chosen in this film are: ECU, CU, MCU, MS, MLS, LS, ELS, Others. All the abbreviated shot lengths have their usual meanings, while the Others category included some particular kinds of shots that are very common in the films of Syam Sharma. In this film and some other films

within this period, Sharma uses a shot where he starts with a close up of the subject and zooms out to come to a point in the framing where the subject is in MS or LS and the surrounding space is shown. Sometimes, this zooming out is accompanied with tracking back or panning or all together. This type of shot is used by Sharma in many of his films and it is found in this film also.

The shortest shot length in *Ishanou* is of 1.2 seconds while the longest shot length is of 103.4 seconds. The average shot length (ASL) of the film is 13.9 seconds, and the medial shot length (MSL) is 8 seconds. The ASL is greater than the MSL, which means that most of the shots are of shorter duration while some are of relatively longer duration. The total number of shots is 367 and is divided as: ECU-4, CU-29, MCU-48, MS-77, MLS-66, LS-61, ELS-70, and Other-12. Syam Sharma concentrates more on the longer shot sizes, especially medium shot and extreme long shots to tell the story. The trendline, in one degree, shows that there is a gradual increase in the shot length



**Fig. A graphic representation of the shot length of *Ishanou***

A relative trend is found between the shot length pattern and the storyline of the film. In the first few minutes of the film, which we can call exposition part of the film, the shot lengths are mixed with long and short lengths. In the second sequence of the film a religious ritual or *yagya* is being performed for Bembem where her ears are pierced for the first time. The

shot lengths in this sequence are long as the *kirtan* performance (which are usually part of such a ritual in the Manipuri culture) as well as parts of the *yagya* ritual are shown in long shots. These long shots help in capturing the complete ambience of the event in the film by showing the simultaneous actions and reactions of the various characters in the frame. One such shot in this *yagya* sequence is when the ear of Bembem is pierced and her scared mother looks away. The piercing and the mother's reaction are shown in the same shot and within the same frame. This shot is about seventeen seconds long. Keeping the action and the reaction in the same frame in the same shot helps the audience to understand when and how the mother reacts.

From the 12<sup>th</sup> minute of the film, the next sequence starts which is about the buying of the scooter. Here are around ten continuous shots which are longer than the average shot length of the film. These shots show how Tampha and her family are enjoying their new life brought to them by the coming of the scooter.

The call of Tampha starts from around the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> minute into the film. For the next fifteen minutes, there is suspense and tension in the story as Tampha slowly gets into the world of the Maibi. Corresponding to this, the length of the shots goes from short to long. Some of the shortest length shots are in the 26<sup>th</sup> minute of the film – a scene where Tampha's mother brings some catfish and places in front of her. There is quick cross cutting between the fishes and Tampha's CU creating suspense. During the whole sequence of the fifteen minutes, the symptoms of Tampha becoming a Maibi are seen.

Till around the 47<sup>th</sup> minute, Tampha suffers more due to the 'symptoms' and all the treatment done on her. The shot lengths also become longer and longer. At around this time in the film, a new sequence starts. Tampha finds her 'guru' in an elderly Maibi who takes her as

her disciple and trains her to become a Maibi. The 'sickness' of Tampha is now determined and the story takes a new turn. Tampha is now a 'novice' learning the ways of a Maibi while she is separated from her family.

From this point onward, the story has become 'stabilised,' as Tampha's 'illness' is now identified as that of a Maibi and her initiation and 'education' starts, and the shots are also mostly of longer length and rarely are there any comparatively short shots now. By showing the processes in longer duration a feeling of reality is created bringing out the naturalness in the performance of the actors (although all the Maibis in the film are real except the actor playing Tampha).

Around the 69<sup>th</sup> minute, Tampha comes back to her home having completed her training and now able to live a family life. But she finds that her husband and daughter are gone. In this sequence, there is one scene where she learns from her cousin the details of her family leaving her. This scene is around the 71<sup>st</sup> minute of the film.

There is a medium shot of Tampha and the cousin standing at his gate. She is closer to the camera and we can see her side profile while he is facing her with his front towards the camera. He explains to her why her husband and daughter had to go away. As he tells her, "People believed that Maibi's daughter often becomes one too..." she looks at him in surprise and shock. This is done in one shot wherein the words of her cousin and her reaction are seen in one shot only. Cutting to a close up of her face would have given a close look of the reaction on her face, but by not cutting and keeping the shot size same, the timing of her reaction to the words of her cousin is more impactful. We know exactly when she got the shock and when she is hurt. This shot becomes a turning point in the film as well as in the life of Tampha.

Tampha's life is now totally a life of a

Maibi. The film from here on also shows only Lai Haraoba scenes in long shots. In all the shots from here to the 83<sup>rd</sup> minute Tampha is shown performing rituals, dance and songs in different forms of Lai Haraoba and in different stages of Lai Haraoba. We can see from her dress that she is gradually going higher up the rank of a Maibi. The shots here are mostly longer than the average shot length. There is very less cutting.

Around the 83<sup>rd</sup> minute of the film, in a Lai Haraoba event in Jiribam, Tampha sees her husband. She talks to him and find that their daughter is now around ten years old and she doesn't recognise her mother any more. This shows they are meeting after about five to six years. Here the shots are of mixed length as they have a conversation and Tampha talks to Bembem. The film ends with this scene where Tampha looks after her husband and daughter walk away from her while she stays back.

### **Conclusion**

Statistical analysis of films whereby the shot lengths and shot types are systematically studied could give an idea of the style of a director especially in how he cuts or edits the films, although it would be difficult to generalise the style from one film. Nevertheless, one film, *Ishanou*, of the renowned filmmaker from Manipur, Aribam Syam Sharma, is being analysed here with the help of Cinematics, the online open source software.

Since only one film is taken here for the analysis, the approach is not to analyse the works of the director, but to bring out the relationship between the narrative of the film and the cutting technique. It is found that there is indeed some relationship between the shot lengths and the narrative of the film. As the narrative of six sequences develops, each sequence has a cutting style of its own as shown above.

## REFERENCES:-

- Barry Salt. Statistical Style Analysis of Motion Pictures. *Film Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 1 (Autumn, 1974), pp. 13-22. Published by: University of California Press Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1211438> Accessed: 11-10-2015 06:02 UTC.
- David Bordwell. *Ozu and the Poetics of Cinema*. Princeton University Press. 1988. New Jersey.
- Dorothy B. Jones. Quantitative Analysis of Motion Picture Content. *The Public Opinion Quarterly*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (Autumn, 1950), pp. 554-558. Oxford University Press on behalf of the American Association for Public Opinion Research. Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2746012>.
- **James E. Cutting, Kaitlin L. Brunick, and Jordan DeLong. On Shot Lengths and Film Acts: A Revised View. *Projections. Volume 6, Issue 1, Summer 2012: 142–145. doi: 10.3167/proj.2012.060106.***
- Luca Canini, Sergio Benini, and Riccardo Leonardi. “Affective Analysis on Patterns of Shot Types in Movies.” 7th International Symposium on Image and Signal Processing and Analysis (ISPA 2011). September 4-6, 2011, Dubrovnik, Croatia. P. 253-258.
- Nick Redfern. Film Style and Narration in Rashomon. *Journal of Japanese and Korean Cinema* 5 (1-2) 2013: 21-36. DOI: 10.1386.