

Visual Analysis of Muzaffar Ali's Umrao Jaan

Aditya Mohan

Research Scholar
Institute of Mass Communication and Media Technology
Kurukshetra University, Kurukshetra (Haryana)



Abstract

Bollywood is known for producing some of the biggest films, including the 1981 epic Umrao Jaan starring Rekha and Farooq Sheikh. Umrao Jaan is based on the Urdu novel 'Umrao Jaan Ada' by Mirza Hadi Ruswa and the film is written, directed and produced by Muzaffar Ali. Ali shot Umrao Jaan in Lucknow, the City of Nawabs and the nearby areas of Malihabad and Faizabad. He was also engaged with Bansi Chandragupta and Manzoor in the Art Direction of the film. The cinematography and art direction of the film is exceptional. A world of wealth and beauty is created through detailed sets, lavish jewellery, and colourful costumes. This paper is based on the visual analysis and the narrative which conveys the journey of a courtesan from Amiran to the Umrao Jaan. Content analysis and observation methods are used to analyse the film. The film is also known for its stunning visuals, which perfectly represent the luxury and beauty of 19th-century courtesan society in Lucknow, India.

Keywords: Film, Visual Analysis, Umrao Jaan, Muzaffar Ali, Rekha

Introduction

Umrao Jaan is an Indian period musical drama film starring Rekha, Farooq Shaikh and Naseeruddin Shah which is written, directed and produced by Muzaffar Ali and released on 2 January 1981 in India. The film portrays the story of a Lucknow courtesan played by the lead actress Rekha. It is based on the Urdu Novel Umrao Jaan Ada by Mirza Hadi Ruswa. The film depicts Umrao Jaan's life, beginning with her early years as the little girl Amiran and ending with her kidnapping and subsequent occurrence as a courtesan. The film examines themes including love, grief, and the harsh situations of being a courtesan. The film is noted for its beautiful cinematography by Pravin Bhatt and Rekha's mesmerizing performance. Her graceful gestures, attractive postures, and soulful expressions represent the essence of a courtesan. The film's musical and dance performances are

magnificent, and the narrative clearly depicts traditional Indian dance and music. The film won four National Film Awards in the category of Best Actress, Music Direction, Female Playback Singer and Art Direction. Additionally, the film won two Filmfare Awards in the Best Director and Music Director categories. Rekha was also nominated for Best Actress at the Filmfare Awards. In 2002, it was also screened at the Locarno International Film Festival in Locarno, Switzerland.

The film portrays a young girl named Amiran who is sold into prostitution and given the new name Umrao Jaan after being kidnapped from her family and sold to a brothel in Lucknow. The story traces Umrao Jaan's rise from a young girl to a famous courtesan as she learns poetry, singing, and dance under Khanum Jaan, her master. Along the way, she develops feelings for the wealthy aristocrat Nawab Sultan, but their rela-

relationship is forbidden because of their different social backgrounds. Umrao Jaan desires to leave her life as a prostitute behind as she gains fame and wealth and rejoin her family, but she faces numerous difficulties along the way, including the beginning of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and a jealous rival courtesan.

Methodology

Content analysis may be briefly defined as the systematic, objective, quantitative analysis of message characteristics. It includes the careful examination of human interactions; the analysis of character portrayals in TV commercials, films, and novels; the computer-driven investigation of word usage in news releases and political speeches; and so much more. (Neuendorf 1)

Content analysis has been used to analyze the visual style of the film. The observation method is also used to study the film. Primary and secondary data are used in this research to study the details of the film.

Characters



Fig. 1: Rekha as *Umrao Jaan*
Source: MUBI



Fig. 2: Farooq Shaikh as *Nawab Sultan*
Source: MUBI



Fig. 3: Naseeruddin Shah as *Gohar Mirza*
Source: MUBI



Fig. 4: Shaukat Kaifi as *Khanum Jaan*
Source: MUBI



Fig. 5: Raj Babbar as *Faiz Ali*
Source: MUBI



Fig. 3: Satish Shah as *Daroga Dilawar*
Source: MUBI

Visual Analysis

Visual analysis is the process of critically analysing the various elements of a film's visual language to examine and appreciate its meaning. This involves analyzing the cinematography, editing, sound and mise-en-scene.

Mise en scène is the arrangement of scenery and stage properties in a play. Translated from French, it means "setting the stage" but, in film analysis, the term mise en scene refers to everything in front of the camera, including the set design, lighting, and actors. Mise en scene in the film is the overall effect of how it all comes together for the audience (StudioBinder, par.3).

Filmmakers can use mise-en-scene to achieve realism, giving settings an authentic look or letting actors perform as naturally as possible. Throughout film history, however, audiences have also been attracted to fantasy, and mise-en-scene has often been used for this purpose (Bordwell, et al. 113).

Cinematography: Cinematography is the art and craft of making motion pictures by capturing a story visually. Though, technically, cinematography is the art and the science of recording light either electronically onto an image sensor or chemically onto film. Taken from the Greek for

“writing with movement,” cinematography is the creation of images you see on screen. A series of shots that form a cohesive narrative. Cinematography composes each shot, considering, where everything in frame demands attention (Studio-Binder, par.2).

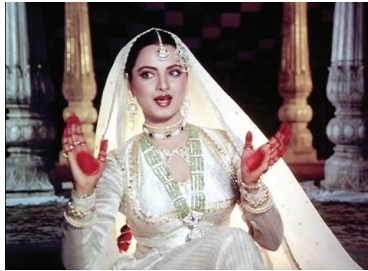


Fig. 7: Umrao Jaan performing Dance
Source: MUBI



Fig. 8: Umrao Jaan performing Dance
Source: MUBI



Fig. 9: Umrao Jaan Closeup
Source: MUBI



Fig. 10: Umrao Jaan sitting in front of Mirror
Source: MUBI



Fig. 11: Nawab Sultan and Umrao Jaan Closeup
Source: MUBI



Fig. 12: Wide Shot of Outer Palace
Source: MUBI

The film is shot on a 4:3 aspect ratio. A variety of shots are used to portray various feelings and emotions in the film. Umrao Jaan is often in the centre of the frame throughout the film, highlighting her role as the main character and her journey. The film consistently showed Rekha's face in close-ups to show her feelings and emotions. The close-ups are particularly visible in the film's musical sequences, where Rekha's face and upper body are repeatedly tightly focused as shown in figure 1, 7, 9 and 11. Additionally, wide shots are used in the film to set the scene and show how magnificent the places are as shown in figure 12. The close-ups are often shot with soft lighting and a narrow depth of field, which highlights Rekha's performances. The camera was

static on her face for extended periods in many scenes, catching the depths of her expressions and emphasizing the makeup and beautiful jewellery she wears.

Lighting: Film lighting refers to the process of controlling the natural and artificial light that appears in a scene. The goal of film lighting is to create an environment for actors that looks realistic on screen (Matt, par.3).

It is the art of using various lighting techniques and tools to improve the aesthetic value of a film or video. It involves the use of various types of lights, including key lights, fill lights, backlights, and special effects to create the desired look and mood of a scene. The achievement of a sense of depth and density in the image is one of the main

objectives of film lighting. This can be done by adding texture and contrast to the scene with shadows and highlights. By placing lights at specific angles or by using flags and other tools to block light, shadows can be produced. Stronger lights can be used to illuminate particular areas to produce highlights.

Diffusers, reflectors, and gels are among the most common lighting modifiers that are used in film lighting to change the light's quality and intensity. Reflectors can be used to bounce light back onto the subject and eliminate shadows, while diffusers can be used to soften harsh light and produce a more realistic-looking glow. Gels can be used to change the light's colour temperature or produce special effects like moonlight or streetlights.

Both natural and artificial lights are used in the film to establish the mood and setting. Many scenes include soft lighting that gives it a beautiful and dreamlike feel. This is particularly true during the musical scenes, which are usually flooded with bright, golden light that draws attention to how lavish the sets and costumes are. Low-key lighting, High key lighting, Natural lighting and Practical lighting are used in the film.

Costumes and Makeup: The film's makeup and costume design play a big part in creating the atmosphere of Lucknow in the 19th century and are an essential component of the visual style of the film. Umrao Jaan and other female characters use striking makeup and lavish costumes as shown in figure 1, 4, 7, 8 and 10. Rekha appeared in a variety of beautifully embroidered and detailed outfits throughout the film, including long, flowing Anarkalis, Shararas, and Lehengas. These are usually made from expensive materials like silk and chiffon, her dresses featured detailed embroidery, sequins, and gold threadwork. Heavy kohl eyeliner, crimson lipstick, and detailed mehndi drawings on her hands and feet define her beautiful look. The makeup is intended to draw attention to her beauty and highlight her expressive features while also invoking the traditional makeup styles of the era.

In the film, the men's characters were mainly shown as wearing traditional Indian garbs like

kurtas and dhotis. These garments frequently included minor embroidery and decorations and were coloured in neutral hues like grey, cream, and white. Wealthier characters wear more elaborate and expensive clothing, which was meant to reflect their social status. To properly depict the historical and cultural background of the film, makeup was also carefully applied. The actors frequently appeared with moustaches, beards, and long hair pulled back into buns, all of which were standard features of 19th-century Indian men's clothing.

Production Design: Production design is the visual art and craft of cinematic storytelling. A production designer is responsible for interpreting the script and the director's vision for the film and translating it into physical environments in which the actors can develop their characters and present the story (LoBrutto 1).

The film was shot in Lucknow, a historical centre of Indian politics, art, and culture. It focused on capturing the atmosphere of Lucknow's old architecture, which was known for its elaborate and complex designs. Rich fabrics, carpets, and pieces of art were used to decorate the sets, which had exquisite designs and decorations. Traditional Indian fabrics like silk, velvet, and brocade were used to help create an expensive and luxurious environment that was suitable for the wealthy and influential characters in the film. Large gardens and courtyards with waterfalls, marble structures, and other aesthetic elements were chosen for the outdoor settings to portray the historical period and cultural setting of the film.

Colours: The range of colours used in a film to create a particular visual mood or atmosphere is known as a colour palette, also known as a colour scheme. It is an essential part of filmmaking which helps in setting the mood and expressing emotions to the audience. A filmmaker chooses a colour palette based on the desired emotional effect they wish to create. For example, warm colours like red, orange, and yellow can create a feeling of warmth, excitement, and happiness. Cool colours like blue, purple and green can create a feeling of peace, calmness and sadness.

The colour scheme of the film is vibrant in depth, with a focus on saturated tones. The costumes and sets are decorated with bright, jewel-like colours like ruby red, emerald green and sapphire blue. The richness and luxury conveyed by these deep hues are suitable for the powerful and wealthy characters in the film.

Sound: The film is notable for its poetic and soulful music, which beautifully enhances the emotions of the characters and complements the plot. The music of the film is considered to be one of the attractions of the film. The “Umrao Jaan” soundtrack includes ghazals, thumris, and Indian classical music. The sitar, sarangi, tabla, harmonium, and other traditional Indian instruments are used to enhance music’s classic Indian sound. The slow tempo, literary lyrics, and expressive vocals that characterise the songs of “Umrao Jaan” are its defining qualities. Shahryar, a legendary poet, wrote the song’s lyrics, which perfectly express the feelings of the characters and the essence of the narrative. Although the music frequently has a melancholy tone that matches the film’s gloomy mood, it may also express joyful moments.

Editing: Film editing is most important in shaping the final form of a film, as it determines the sequence and timing of scenes, enhances storytelling, and creates an emotional impact. It helps to establish the pace and mood of the film and ensures that the story is organised and engaging for the audience.

The film’s editing is characterized by its thoughtful pacing and seamless blending of the musical scenes with the narrative. Because the film is a historical drama set in the middle of the 19th century, the editing style makes use of long takes and deliberate, slow camera movements with continuity editing with the use of fades and dissolves. The editing highlights the glamorous sets, costumes, and choreography of the musical sequences, allowing the viewers to fully enjoy the beauty and grandeur of the visual design of the film.

Findings and Results

The various aspects of the film, such as the lighting, colours, production design, costumes and

makeup, and sound are examined in the film. Various shots are used to convey emotions and feelings in cinematography, which uses a series of shots to create a unified story. Both natural and artificial lighting is used to create a realistic environment for the actors, setting the scene and establishing the mood. The visual style of the film depends heavily on its elaborate and striking makeup as well as its lavish costumes, which are used to capture the atmosphere of Lucknow in the 19th century. Rich fabrics, carpets, and works of art are used to decorate the sets as part of the production design, which aims to capture the ambience of Lucknow’s historic architecture. The music is notable for its poetic and soulful sound, and the film’s colour palette is striking with a focus on saturated tones. The soundtrack includes ghazals, thumris, and Indian classical music, and the slow tempo, literary lyrics, and expressive vocals match the film’s gloomy mood.

Conclusion

All the elements of the film are portrayed perfectly and convey the feelings through its narrative. The cinematography of the film is used to portray the character’s feelings, establish the scene, and highlight the aesthetic of the film and different lighting techniques of the film is used to create a feeling of nostalgia and melancholy. The production design of the film is defined by its unique and lavish sets, which are beautifully detailed and serve to create a realistic and immersive visual experience. Richly crafted costumes help to capture the luxury and grandeur of Lucknow. The music has a rich and soulful feeling since it combines poetry with classical Indian music. The film’s editing style highlights the visual design of the film and provides a smooth and gripping storyline. Overall, the film perfectly portrays mid-19th century Lucknow and the journey of Amiran to Umrao Jaan in beautifully captured frames.

References

1. Bordwell, D., Kristin, T. & Jeff, S. (1993). *Film art: An introduction*. Vol. 7. New York: McGraw-Hill, pp. 113.

-
2. LoBrutto, V. (2002). *The filmmaker's guide to production design*. Simon and Schuster, pp. 1.
 3. Matt. (11 June 2022). *Basics of Film Lighting: An Essential Guide*. Filmmaking Lifestyle, filmlifestyle.com/basics-of-film-lighting/.
 4. Neuendorf, K.A. (2017). *The content analysis guidebook*. Sage, pp. 1.
 5. *Cinematography Essentials: The Art and Craft*. *StudioBinder*, 24 Jan. 2021, www.studiobinder.com/blog/what-is-cinematography/.
 6. *Mise-en-scene and the Directors the Mastered It*. *StudioBinder*, 1 Feb. 2021, www.studiobinder.com/blog/mise-en-scene/.
 7. *Umrao Jaan*. MUBI, mubi.com/films/umrao-jaan-1981.
 8. *Umrao Jaan*. IMDb, www.imdb.com/title/tt0083248/.
 9. *Umrao Jaan (1981 Film)*. *Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia*, Wikimedia Foundation, Inc, 17 Dec. 2022, [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umrao_Jaan_\(1981_film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Umrao_Jaan_(1981_film)).