

# Historiophoty: Reinterpreting the History in Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan (2022)

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## ABSTRACT

Robert A. Rosenstone's concept of historiophoty clarifies how historical films can transform facts into visual narratives by integrating factual accuracy with fictional elements, thus crafting creative storytelling that shapes communal memory and meaning. Historical films, as Rosenstone argues, do not depict history; rather, they produce it by fusing drama, narrative, and visuals to bridge the gap between the past and present. Syamsul Yusof examined this method in his work *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (2022), which reinterprets the valour of the Malay warrior Mat Kilau in the context of the resistance against British colonisation during the Pahang Uprising from 1891 to 1895. The film integrated historical events with fictional storytelling to align the narrative with societal collective memory. By portraying Mat Kilau as a figure of anti-colonial resistance and heroic myth-making, his character transcends mere historical individuality to become a lasting emblem of national identity and sovereignty. This paper examines how historiophoty weighs historical fact and fiction in constructing a cinematic narrative for the satisfaction of contemporary aspirations. The paper shows how historical film can create a new sense of collective memory and cultural identity by reinterpreting historical reality in a film and placing an emphasis on national resistance. It thus places *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* as both a new historical document and a cultural artifact, adding to the wider debates about the role of visual media in historical representation and societal narrativisation.

**Keyword:** Historiophoty, Historical Film, Mat Kilau, Malaysian Cinema, Southeast Asia Cinema

## INTRODUCTION

The past is not just about reproducing the facts in traditional industries, it is about new stories that resonate with the present and the audience in historical cinema. Historiophoty, a term coined by Robert A. Rosenstone, are helpful in understanding the ways films present and reinterpret the past and how history is reconfigured within visual media — particularly in film. “To the popular imagination, historical films don't only represent history they actually help to build new meanings of it,” Rosenstone says. As stated, historical film by visual images, dramatic narratives and fictional elements film creates a version of history that is as much about the present as it is about the past, (Thomas Leitch, 2018).

In *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (2022) director Syamsul Yusof takes creative liberties to make Mat Kilau a legend even more legendary as a symbol of resistance against colonialism. This historical film reimagines the life and struggle of Mat Kilau a Malay warrior who resisted British colonisation in the late 19th century. Directed by Syamsul Yusof the film combines historical events and creative storytelling to fabricate a new version of the past that resonates with the current Malaysian socio-political context. Through anti-colonial resistance, Malay cultural symbolism and fictionalised account of Mat Kilau's personal heroism the film turns history into a cinematic spectacle that speaks to present day anxieties and aspirations of national identity and sovereignty.

To see how Mat Kilau in *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* rewrites history this research uses Rosenstone's historiophoty framework to analyse the film's narrative structure of the event of the Pahang Uprising 1891-1895 through the film's visual images and symbolic imagery. This analysis will show how the film constructs Mat

Kilau through its version of historical reality by mixing fact and fiction to create a story of Mat Kilau as Malay heroism. By looking at the film's manipulation of historical facts and its fictionalised version of national resistance this study will show how the film uses the cinematic medium to reimagine and reinterpret the past and create a new historical narrative that speaks to the present-day audience.

Using Rosenstone's historiophoty this research looks at how historical films shape collective memory and national identity. It looks at *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* as a historical document and a cultural object to see how visual media interacts with the past to inform our understanding of history and identity. The study not only contributes to the growing body of scholarship on historical cinema but also provides a framework for future analyses of how films create and manipulate historical narratives through visual storytelling.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Historiophoty: Redefining the Past Through Historical Film Narratives

Historical film has similarly changed its mode of narration hand in hand with written fiction history such as novel or any form of historical literature, where filmmakers devised a myriad techniques to represent the present as well as the past. According to Thomas Leitch (2019), films differ from written history which term as historiography, in regard to the nature of the latter being a dramatic narration or symbolic imagery giving rise to meaning in filmmaking. These features of narration license filmmakers to reinterpret events and therefore charge them with new meaning. He argues that 'even history itself always and adaptation of some earlier history', (Megan de Bruin-Mole, (2020,8). Drawing on historiography perspective, de Bruin-Mole states that 'all textual accounts are reliant on, and related to other accounts linked together in a 'web of intertextuality', (G. Rose 2005,75)'

On the other hand, *History on Film/Film on History*, by Robert A. Rosenstone, fourth edition (2024), grapples with the relationship between film and history; he offers a critical framework through which historical narratives have been created and represented on film. According to Rosenstone, film is a medium with equal right to represent and present history alongside the conventional supremacy of written historiography. He recognises that films can capture an emotional truth about the past that textual records often cannot, even while they usually condense, dramatise, or fictionalise events.

Central to his argument is the concept of historiophoty, a term first coined by Hayden White to refer to the visual representation of history. In Deniz Gurgun Atalay (2018, 40):

*White define historiography as "the presentation of history and our thought about visual images and film discourse (1193). The presentation of history through the use of pen and paper (metaphorically) is abbreviated as historiography*

Rosenstone's analysis of historiophoty equates it with traditional historiography. For him, historical film through the concept of historiophoty were in some way function or serves as a tool of historiography but in the notion of showing method. Where historiography focuses on written aspect. He argues that films utilise several techniques—such as mise-en-scène, cinematography, and editing—to construct historical narratives. Films captivate audiences on multiple levels by combining visuals, audio, and storytelling, so creating an immersive historical experience, (2024). According to Deniz Gurgun Atalay (2018), Robert Rosenstone (in his earlier edition):

*Confronts historian who find historical films inappropriate for serving as a tool of historiography. He claims that the fictive characteristic of the film medium disturbs the professionals of historiography. [...] [He] opposes the historiographer's arguments, on the constructed character of filmic representations of history by pointing out that the same methods are utilized by the written practices of historiography. (40)*

Rosenstone states that both historians and filmmakers interpret history rather than simply reconstruct it. Where written history is reliant upon documentation and critical analysis, film utilises images, narrative and signification in its explanation of historical events. He therefore claims this visual interpretation has its validity—

it provides insights not likely to emerge from an analysis of texts alone, for example. In this respect, then, historiophoty for Rosenstone enables filmmaking to capture the spirit of history in such a way that the spectator’s experiential approach increases the intellectual results of textual histories. To Rosenstone, films not only represent history but create it—they change one’s view, interpretation and emotional connection with the past. Historical films for him differ from written history through their use of cinematic devices like images, performance and narrative structure to provide meanings different from traditional academic historiography. They are not bound by the limitations of recorded history, which often prioritize authenticity and truthfulness. Instead, they apply cinematic methods: creating emotional involvement, dramatisation and symbolism. Complex periods of history can often be condensed into thrilling, accessible narratives.

Further, elaborates on Deniz Gürgen Atalay’s work in *Historiography of World War II in Contemporary American Cinema*, (2018), highlighting its exploration of how American cinema portrays World War II. It aligns with Robert Rosenstone’s concept of historiophoty, emphasising how films do more than represent history—they shape public memory and interpretation of the past. Atalay examines the dual role of cinema as both an artistic and historical force. By dramatising and simplifying complex events, films make history accessible but may perpetuate selective or biased views. His analysis, framed by historiophoty, underscores cinema’s power in influencing collective perceptions and shaping the narrative of historical events (2018). This approach echoes Rosenstone’s vision of film as a vital, legitimate form of historical representation, blending artistic storytelling with historical discourse. Atalay enriches Rosenstone’s ideas, demonstrating the significant impact of visual storytelling on memory and understanding of history.

To conclude historical films function as a dynamic medium for the reinterpretation and representation of history, comparable to written historiography. Robert A. Rosenstone's notion of historiophoty highlights the validity of films as instruments for historical representation, accentuating their capacity to convey emotional verities, distil intricate occurrences, and construct immersive narratives. Filmic history employs cinematic techniques such as mise-en-scène, cinematography and narrative structures to present history in a way that is more evocative in the sense of intellectual and emotional engagement, while written history relies on documentation and critical analysis. This visual storytelling influences public memory and communal understanding, challenging conventional ideas of historical authenticity and the constantly changing relationship between film and historiography.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a qualitative method with a textual analysis approach to explore the Malaysian historical film *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (2022). Guided by Robert Rosenstone’s historiophoty framework, the study focuses on how the character of Mat Kilau is constructed within the narrative. This film was chosen because of its representation of Mat Kilau as a historical figure, together with the role that film has played in shaping both collective memory and historical interpretation. Secondary data for background and depth were obtained from historical records and related literature on Mat Kilau to support this analysis. The film’s narrative is examined through the lens of historiophoty, analysing how Mat Kilau’s character is depicted, and evaluating its alignment with or divergence from historical facts. By following this structured approach, the research provides a nuanced understanding of *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan*—offering insights into its narrative design and its contribution to historical discourse and cultural memory.

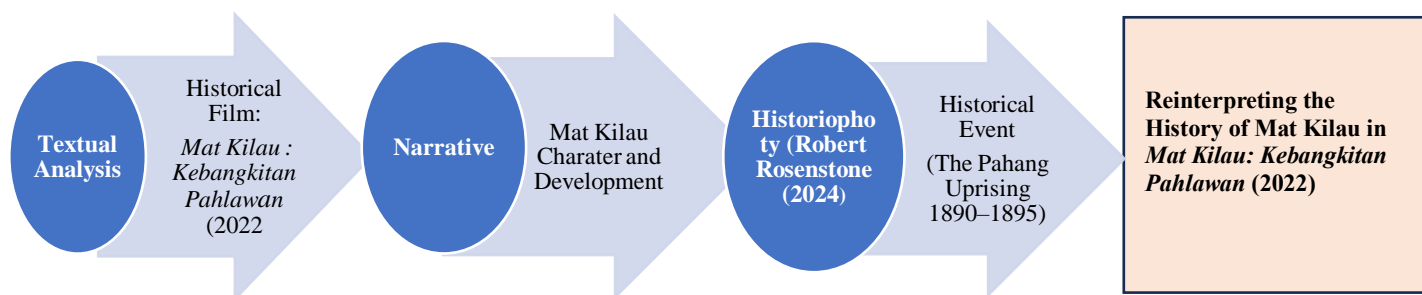


Figure 1: Qualitative Research Methodology: A Textual Analysis – Reinterpreting the History of Mat Kilau:

in *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (2022)

## FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Table 1: Reinterpreting the History of Mat Kilau in *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (2022)

Aspect	Historical Facts	Fiction
Events or Incidents	<p>At the end of 1894, Dato' Bahaman, with Mat Kilau, Teh Ibrahim, and Awang Nong, launched an attack on Kuala Tembeling and successfully captured the Jeram Ampai fortress. However, the British eventually drove them back. They retreated to the borders of Kelantan and Terengganu, where British forces pursued them (Razak et al., 2019: 540-542).</p> <p>The fighters from Pahang had ties with religious scholars in Terengganu, such as Tok Ku Paloh, who inspired the jihadist spirit in the fighters (Zakari, 2012 in Razak et al., 2019: 540-542). In March 1895, British forces scoured Terengganu and Kelantan but failed to capture them.</p> <p>Eventually, Siamese forces apprehended them, although another account claims they surrendered voluntarily and were taken to Bangkok (Abu Talib Ahmad, 2016:43).</p>	<p>Kuala Tembeling Jetty: Mat Kilau, alone, attacks Sikh (British) soldiers collecting taxes from the local community.</p> <p>Pulau Tawar: Leads an attack on a British fort to rescue Wahid (in British custody). Wahid is successfully rescued. This incident shocks the British and angers them.</p> <p>Forest (outside Pulau Tawar): Mat Kilau and the Pahang warriors hide in a cave while being hunted by the British. Their location is eventually discovered, leading to a fierce battle. Mat Kilau's forces win, forcing the British to retreat.</p>

### Mat Kilau's Heroism Through the Historiophoty Lens of Rosenstone

*Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan*-oriented films explore the relationship between historical novelty and cinematic narration through the seminal work of Robert A. Rosenstone's notion of historiophoty. His explanation views film not just depicting history but creating it to change viewer perception, interpretation, and attachment to the past. According to Rosenstone, historical films are not visual representations of the real; rather, they are kinds of creative reimagination of history. They carry an analytical and emotional force unreachable by textual historiography. Historical accounts reveal that Mat Kilau, Dato' Bahaman, and others attacked Kuala Tembeling and retreated into Kelantan and Terengganu, but the film has inflated this version with a hyper-melodramatic presentation of Mat Kilau's heroic representation as earlier alluded to in *Table 1*. Mat Kilau single-handedly pounces upon Sikh soldiers collecting money from villagers. The heroic rescue to save Wahid from being taken by the British back to prison is symbolic, of course. These fictionalised enhancements create emotional intensity and make the historical tale of personal relevance to the audience. It is not history that the audience is getting; rather, it is experiencing through the valour of Mat Kilau.

*Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* (2022) becomes a manifestation of Rosenstone's definition where the film engages in cinematic devices such as visual image, performance or acting, narrative condensation, and symbolisation in creating meanings distant from written history. The battle or rescue scene, whereby triumph is achieved when the contingents of Mat Kilau turn out to be successful upon exposition from hiding, demonstrates strong resilience and defiance against imperial domination. Such cinematic devices are more precisely powerful narrative tools than the limitations of truth can ever allow. The immediacy with which colonial tyranny and the immediacy of uprising was occurring could be fathomed by the audience. While historical records implicitly point to a protracted guerrilla warfare campaign across Kelantan and Terengganu, marked by constant retreats

and re-advances, the film narrative reduces this all to meaningful, dangerous moments and moments of confrontation, for which clarity and dramatic suspense are ensured. For Rosenstone, it is in carrying out such a simplification that films reduce complex histories, which do not necessarily lose their emotional or moral resonance in the process.

The film transposes an extended historical struggle into an exciting narrative arc, where every battle serves the development of Mat Kilau into a legendary hero. Such condensation retains emotional truth, despite the lack of factual accuracy. As Rosenstone said, historical films are not bound by the requirement for factual accuracy imposed by academic historiography. They aim to evoke emotional and moral truths. The persona of Mat Kilau transcends the specifics of his actions into an icon of rebellion. Scenes such as the rescue of Wahid and Mat Kilau resonate to higher concepts of justice, freedom, and anti-colonial struggle. It's a truth of emotion attached in these fictionalised events more so than staunch historical accuracy inspires viewers to relate to the history in a deeply personal way.

Considered under Rosenstone's historiophoty, *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* develops from historical narration into a cultural artifact of connecting real history to emotional resonance. Even if it were at the cost of fidelity to historical veracity, these decisions serve a larger purpose—to fire up communal memory and effective investment in history. This captures Rosenstone's argument on how historical films are capable of breaking out of those shackles of the written record into a creative re-creation that gives audiences an emotive and sensory experience with history. As Rosenstone writes, historical films transform perceptions and emotional commitments of the past by fusing representations of history with dramatic narrative. It does not just tell history; it reconfigures how it is remembered and bequeathed into the psyche of modern-day audiences.

### **Rosenstone's Historiophoty: *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* Bridging History and Collective Memory**

The fictional elements in *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* serves a significant role in shaping contemporary political and social narratives in Malaysia. While the film is rooted in historical events, its deliberate dramatisation and reimagining of Mat Kilau's resistance transcend mere recounting of history, offering a layered vision of national identity and collective memory that resonates profoundly with present-day audiences. It explores how the film's fictionalised aspects contribute to the construction of Malaysia's political and cultural discourse fostering a renewed understanding of resistance, justice and identity.

In *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan*, history is not merely recounted—it is reimagined, reshaped, and emotionally revitalized. Robert A. Rosenstone's concept of historiophoty posits that historical films are not restricted to faithfully replicating historical facts but are instead capable of conveying profound emotional and moral truths. In this light, *Mat Kilau* transcends the boundaries of conventional historiography, serving as both an artistic and cultural artifact that bridges the past and present.

The film condenses the complex historical events surrounding Mat Kilau's resistance into powerful moments of heroism and sacrifice. For instance, the dramatised rescue of Wahid is not just a plot device but a symbol of defiance against imperial power. Such scenes transform abstract historical accounts into visceral experiences, ensuring that audiences not only understand but also *feel* the weight of historical struggles. The film transcends the protagonist's historical actions, elevating Mat Kilau from a historical figure to a symbol of anti-colonial resistance. His character is imbued with moral clarity, representing justice, sacrifice, and unwavering defiance against colonial oppression. In Rosenstone's framework, this transformation is not a betrayal of historical truth but a necessary act of historical reimagining. The cinematic Mat Kilau becomes a cultural touchstone—a hero whose legacy extends beyond historical documentation into collective cultural memory.

Historical films, according to Rosenstone, play a critical role in transforming history into shared emotional experiences. *Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* does not present history as a detached series of events but as an intimate, emotionally resonant journey. The film condenses complex wartime strategies into emotionally potent scenes, enabling the audience to internalize historical events on a personal level. Through this emotional bridge, the film reshapes historical knowledge into communal memory, fostering a shared understanding of colonial resistance.

In *Mat Kilau*, the visual representation of acts of defiance—whether in the form of heroic stances, charged confrontations, or symbolic rescues—carries more weight than detailed accounts of military tactics. The emotional resonance of these visuals ensures that history is not just *told* but *felt*. The urgency, fear, and moral clarity embedded in these scenes communicate truths that transcend academic historiography. The narrative constructs history not as a static recounting of events but as an ongoing dialogue between past and present.

## CONCLUSION

*Mat Kilau: Kebangkitan Pahlawan* exemplifies Rosenstone's vision of historiophoty by transforming historical events into emotionally and morally charged experiences. While the film takes creative liberties with historical details, it remains faithful to the emotional and moral truths of the anti-colonial struggle.

In Rosenstone's terms, the film does not just *tell* history—it reshapes how history is remembered, felt, and understood. It emerges not merely as a historical representation but as a cultural artifact, ensuring that *Mat Kilau*'s legacy continues to inspire contemporary audiences with its enduring message of heroism, resistance, and justice.

## RESEARCH CONTRIBUTIONS

The research contributes theoretically by validating historiophoty as a framework for analysing historical cinema in general and Malaysian historical cinema in focus. Demonstrating its relevance how cinematic techniques serves significantly and effectively reinterpret historical events for contemporary audiences. On the other hand culturally, this research underscores the historical film's role in shaping a certain cultural national identity and collective memory within the discourse of cinema and historical discourse. It emphasises how cinematic narratives not only recount history but connect deeply with historical struggles. Practically, the study provides insights for filmmakers and cultural theorists on balancing historical authenticity with emotional storytelling. It advocates for historical films as powerful tools for cultural education and societal reflection.

In conclusion, this research positions and construct as both a new historical document and a cultural artifact, bridging past struggles with contemporary aspirations. It reinforces the significance of historical film in reshaping public perceptions of history and preserving cultural heritage through emotional engagement and narrative creativity.

## AUTHOR 'S BIO

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