
International Journal of Creative Multimedia

Unveiling the Cinematic Aesthetics of Dain Said: Exploring Influences and Artistic Vision in Filmmaking

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to examine how Dain Iskandar Said articulates a distinctive Malaysian cinematic aesthetic through transnational stylistic influences and a sophisticated artistic vision in filmmaking. In the process of producing a film, it is important to consider the rules of composition so that it has effective communication with the audience about the meaning of certain things and why it is projected in a certain way as well as the aesthetic values throughout the whole film. There are several Malaysian films known for their aesthetic values, displaying visually striking cinematography, art direction, and overall artistic sensibility. To name a few, we have some notable ones such as “The Red Kebaya” by Oliver Knott, “Lelaki Harapan Dunia” by Liew Seng Tat, “Bunohan” by Dain Said and Yasmin Ahmad films “Sepet,” “Gubra” and “Mukhsin.” In this study, the re-searcher will focus on three things. Focusing on cinematic aesthetics, stylistic influences, and artistic vision, this study positions Dain Said’s work as a stylistic genealogy that translates European contemplative cinema into a locally grounded Malaysian visual and atmospheric language.

Keywords: Cinematic aesthetics; Influences; Artistic vision; Filmmaking; Transnational stylistic

Received: 1 March 2026, **Accepted:** 24 April 2026, **Published:** 30 April 2026

Introduction

Few forms of artistic expression have so profoundly captured viewers and evoked emotions as the film industry. According to John Hospers (1955) in one form or another, for the past 200 years, the aesthetic scene has been dominated by the expression theory of art, as much as the imitation theory did in previous decades. He also mentioned that expression is an action of the artist during the creating process; expressing is something the artist performs. Cinematic experiences can take us to far-off lands, arouse intense empathy, and spark stimulating conversations. Every emotionally stirring moment and every aesthetically gorgeous scene are the result of the meticulous work of filmmakers who uphold aesthetic standards. These guidelines act as guiding principles, affecting the creative decisions made in a movie and determining the viewer's overall visual and sensory experience.

A wide range of components, such as cinematography, production design, wardrobe and makeup, sound design, and visual effects, are included in the definition of aesthetic standards in film. These guidelines are not strict restrictions but rather a framework for filmmakers to express their creativity and intention while aiming for a seamless fusion of form and substance. Following these guidelines enables filmmakers to build compelling narratives, engross viewers emotionally, and create immersive environments.

One of the most important components of film aesthetic standards is cinematography, which is the practice of photographing moving objects. It includes a variety of techniques that all contribute to the overall visual composition of a picture, including framing, lighting, camera angles, and camera movements. Filmmakers can influence the viewer's perspective, create mood and atmosphere, and emphasise the key elements of a tale by making careful cinematographic decisions.

Although they act as a set of rules and guidelines in films, aesthetic standards are in no way restricted. Filmmakers persistently push the limits of these norms, questioning accepted practices and attempting novel techniques and aesthetics. The constant redefinition of what is aesthetically engaging and inventive ensures that the world of film remains a vibrant and dynamic art form.

Literature Review

Aesthetics in Cinema

Jerome Stolnitz (1960) compiled a few aesthetic philosophy theories in his work for *Aesthetics and the Philosophy of Art Criticism*. Stolnitz primarily outlines the circumstances that result in "aesthetic value" a term used to denote beauty. As "sensory attractiveness or pleasantness, relatively great complexity in the object, conspicuous formal values, pleasing or edifying subject matter, and conventionality of

subject, form, and treatment" Stolnitz (pg.271) are some of its characteristics, "beauty" can be seen here as roughly synonymous with "good" for our purposes.

Understanding the interplay of visual aspects including cinematography, production design, and composition is crucial to understanding cinematic aesthetic standards. A key element of film aesthetics is cinematography, which includes methods like camera angles, lighting, and movement. According to Thompson and Smith (2019), cinematography acts as a visual language that can evoke emotions and improve storytelling. They contend that a film's mood, ambiance, and narrative interpretation can all be affected by the camera angles and lighting choices made.

The audio dimension is included in the aesthetic standards of film and the visual ones. A film's entire aesthetic experience and emotional impact are influenced by its sound design, which includes speech, music, and sound effects according to Johnson (2017). He explores how sound aspects might affect viewers' perception. He does this by using examples from well-known films and delving into their auditory aesthetics.

Film is an emotive art form. Films aim to evoke emotions in viewers through a compelling tale, sympathetic characters, and the audiovisual portrayal of a cinematic universe based on Plantinga (2009) and Tan (1996). According to arguments made by Busselle & Bilandzic (2009) and Bordwell (1991), this so-called emotive experience of film is crucial to engaging with and understanding the story. According to Plantinga (2012), it has been claimed that the emotional experience of a film completely shapes its abstract meaning, or the "message" it sends.

Filmmakers have evolved techniques throughout the years to draw in audiences and tell tales using a variety of audiovisual techniques, encompassing the application of colour, music, editing, and framing; in other words, cinema style based on Bordwell (1997). The overall aesthetics of a film are influenced by stylistic devices along with narrative devices such as topic, characters, plot, genre, and story based on Bordwell & Thompson (2008). As they provide audiovisual texture that allows the audience to engage with the story, they also carry a huge portion of the burden in terms of the emotive experience.

Dain Said's History, Cinematic Aesthetics, and Influences Towards other Filmmakers

Dain Said (see Figure 1), was born in Kuala Lumpur and raised in Tumpat, Kelantan, Cairo and London. Growing up in Tumpat, Kelantan, a coastal town shaped by ritual, folklore, and a slower rhythm of life, provided Said with a formative cultural and atmospheric sensibility. This environment is later reflected in *Bunohan* through its emphasis on silence, spatial emptiness, ritualised violence, and a contemplative engagement with landscape, all of which contribute to the film's distinctive atmospheric storytelling.

In the 1990s, he received his degree in film and photography from the University of Westminster in London. *Dukun* (2006), his debut feature film, was officially released in Malaysia in 2018 after previously being withheld due to legal sensitivities surrounding the Mona Fandey case (Aziz, 2014). The legal request made by the relatives of the people involved in the murder case involving Mona Fandey, the titular traditional doctor who is supposed to be the inspiration for the film, could be one reason. Dain also won the 2007 Nippon Foundation Asian Public Intellectual Award, which served as the impetus for the film *Cinema of Terror*. Additionally, he has directed advertising from both home and abroad as well as short films, media material, and documentaries that have won awards.



Figure 1. An image of Malaysian filmmaker Dain “Iskandar” Said taken during his interview with “TimeOut” Magazine (2016).

Dain “Iskandar” Said (hence referred to as Dain Said) has become well-known in the Malaysian film industry thanks to his award-winning 2012 film “*Bunohan: Re-turn to Murder*”. Positive reviews progressively showed that this film is headed for greater heights and is a slow burner, despite the audience's first chilly response. John Anderson (2011) from *Variety* applauds the film and writes:

“With a list of ancestors that includes Shakespeare, Tran Anh Hung, “The Godfather” and the Bible, “Bunohan” serves up a feast of archetypes and violence amid a story that twines like a basketful of cobras to deliver a movie that is ripe as a mango for a U.S. remake.”

(John Anderson, 2011, *Variety*)

In an interview with Jamaludin Aziz (2014), Dain Said noted that his major influence is Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, who is regarded as one of the finest and most influential filmmakers in cinematic history, is known for his slow pacing, long takes, surreal visual imagery, and

focus on nature and memory (see Figure 2). Dain Said also uses the same approach (see Figure 3). Tarkovsky films also address spiritual and metaphysical issues that Dain Said adhere.



Figure 2. A scene from the film “The Mirror” (1975) directed by Andrei Tarkovsky that shows his way of filmmaking that communicates with actions, not dialogue.



Figure 3. A cinematic aesthetic shot from film “Bunohan” directed by Dain Said which uses the same technique of visualisation rather than dialogues.

Dain Said also mentioned he is also influenced by a Polish film director and screenwriter Krzysztof Kieslowski who is known to received numerous awards during his career, including the Cannes Film Festival Jury Prize (1988), and Prize of the Ecumenical Jury (1991); the Venice Film Festival FIPRESCI Prize (1989), Golden Lion (1993), and OCIC Award (1993); and the Berlin International Film Festival Silver Bear (1994). In 1995, Krzysztof Kieslowski received Academy Award nominations for Best Director and Best Original Screenplay. On the Sight & Sound list of the top ten contemporary film directors published by the British Film Institute in 2002, Kielowski came in at number two. He was voted No. 47 on Total Film magazine's list of the "100 Greatest Film Directors

Ever" in 2007. Three Colours: Blue also won the Venice Film Festival (1993) for best actress (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. A Shot from Krzysztof Kieslowski's film "Three Colours: Blue"

Dain Said also likes great documentary filmmakers like Chris Marker who dealt with memory and time. He is a French author, photographer, and filmmaker of documentaries, multimedia artist and film essayist. Marker's most renowned films include *La Jetée* (1962) (see Figure 5), *A Grin Without a Cat* (1977), and *Sans Soleil* (1983). His close friend and collaborator Alain Resnais (2012) described him as "the prototype of the twenty-first-century man", a view echoed by film theorist Roy Armes (Armes, as quoted in Wakeman, 1988) who mentioned that: *"Marker is unclassifiable because he is unique. The French Cinema has its dramatists and its poets, its technicians, and its autobiographers, but only has one true essayist."*



Figure 5. A Scene from Director Chris Marker's film "La Jetée"

Analysis of Dain Said's Influences in Cinema

John Anderson (2011) mentioned in an article from *Variety Magazine* that director Dain Said combines magical realism with frightening mayhem akin to Tran's "Cyclo" and intellectual side trips that might derail another film. While this comparison evokes European and transnational art cinema, the film's magical realism is deeply rooted in Malaysian cultural memory, drawing from local folklore, rural moral codes, and the harsh coastal geography of Kelantan, where violence and spirituality coexist as part of everyday social imagination. This demonstrates how ambitious standards are used by director Dain Said while establishing and enforcing aesthetic standards in his films.

Based on Dain Said's influences the Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky we can assume he also follows Andrei Tarkovsky style of spiritual and metaphysical themes, as well as slow pacing and long takes. Slow pacing or slow cinema is defined as a kind of art film distinguished by a minimalist, observational, and narrative-free aesthetic that frequently emphasises long takes. It is referred to as "contemplative cinema" at times.

According to (Çağlayan, 2014) he mentioned that although it has a longer prehistory, slow cinema is a stylistic tendency in modern art cinema. Its distinctive qualities relate to narration: the minimalistic films slow down the speed of the story and obfuscate causality. Its artistic qualities include a tactful use of the long take and a steadfast emphasis on dead time; mechanisms promoting a method of narrative that initially appears perplexing, obscure, and genuinely unintelligible and gives an extended sensation of duration on screen. This notion of 'dead time' is clearly observable in *Bunohan*, particularly in scenes where characters are shown waiting or moving silently within the landscape, allowing duration and stillness to foreground metaphysical concerns such as fate, guilt, and moral consequence rather than narrative progression.

To substantiate the influence of contemplative cinema on Dain Said's filmmaking, a technical analysis of shot duration was conducted on a pivotal sequence in *Bunohan: Return to Murder* (2012), specifically an early coastal waiting scene framed in prolonged stillness against the Kelantan landscape. A manual count of shots indicates an estimated Average Shot Length (ASL) of approximately 18–22 seconds, markedly longer than the 4–6 second average typical of mainstream narrative cinema. This extended duration foregrounds silence, spatial presence, and ambient diegetic sound such as wind and distant waves over causal action or musical scoring. Such formal restraint corresponds with Çağlayan's (2014) conception of contemplative cinema, where 'dead time' is used to encourage metaphysical reflection. In *Bunohan*, this strategy allows themes of fate, moral consequence, and spiritual unease to emerge through duration and atmosphere rather than narrative exposition.

The list below shows the characteristics comparison between the three filmmakers that have influenced Dain Said in his filmmaking career.

Andrei Tarkovsky from Russia

Marisa H. (2016) describes Andrei Tarkovsky (see Fig. 7) as an enigmatic filmmaker who is a chief exemplar of slow cinema. His films are characterised by their quiet yet incredibly atmospheric and poignant nature. Rather than relying on dialogue, he uses auditory sounds to immerse the audience. Although his films can be difficult to understand, they are a stream of consciousness, avoiding standard symbolism and allowing the audience to connect their own meanings to the visuals, making the experience more personalised.

His films are not meant to be logical but instinctual. Characters in his films communicate through actions rather than words, creating a unique form of storytelling. Instead of following a logical foundation for editing, he opts for a poetic one. This filmmaker frequently cuts between the past, the present, and dream sequences, with the significance of each moment shaping the character rather than the plot.

This approach to filmmaking, as Marisa H. (2016) notes, creates a deeply immersive and personal experience for the audience, emphasizing the emotional and instinctual over the logical and straightforward.

This shared contemplative approach is further illustrated through a direct visual comparison between Tarkovsky's framing and Said's composition in *Bunohan* (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Side-by-side Comparison Illustrating the Shared Contemplative Visual Approach between Andrei Tarkovsky (Left) and Dain Said's *Bunohan* (Right), Particularly in the Use of Prolonged Duration, Restrained Camera Movement, and Atmospheric Stillness

Krzysztof Kieslowski from Poland

Matt (2023) describes Krzysztof Kieslowski (see Figure 7), a renowned Polish filmmaker, as a master of visual poetry, emotional resonance, and intellectual depth. His films are cohesive and deeply moving

meditations on the human condition. Notably, "Dekalog" (1989–1990) features gorgeous cinematography, with each frame carefully composed and full of meaning. Kieslowski's work is known for its complex, character-driven storytelling and exploration of deep philosophical and ethical questions.

Kieslowski's innovative narrative structure, nuanced character development, and thought-provoking exploration of the role of chance in human life create a thought-provoking and aesthetically beautiful cinematic experience. He frequently uses visual metaphors and symbolism to convey deeper meanings and emotions. "A Short Film About Killing" is highlighted as a masterwork of cinema, with remarkable colour utilisation and breathtaking views of Warsaw. Kieslowski frequently tackles difficult moral conundrums and philosophical issues in his films, delving deeply into subjects like morality, spirituality, love, and loss.

Chris Marker from France

Sukhdev Sandhu, William Gibson, Mark Romanek, and Joanna Hogg (2014) describe Chris Marker (see Figure 7), a French filmmaker, as a shapeshifter, escape artist, and phantom. Sensuous humanity and an almost anthropological inquiry are hallmarks of his art, creating a dreamlike quality. Marker is frequently referred to as a writer, he is frequently recognised as an early pioneer of essay films, a reflective and introspective genre of non-fiction.

His films showcase the poetic capacities of cinema, continuously investigating the connections between page, screen, and picture. Marker admires filmmakers Francis Ford Coppola and Terry Gilliam, and his work reflects a deep engagement with the interplay of visual and textual elements.



Figure 7. From left, Andrei Tarkovsky, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Chris Marker

Findings

Dain Said has benefited greatly from the work of renowned directors like Andrei Tarkovsky, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Chris Marker, who are known for their innovative storytelling and beautiful visuals. The significance of these influences is notable since Dain has been given the skills and artistic talent needed to create exceptional cinematic experiences because of his exposure to these directors' works.

The thorough examination from the comparison demonstrates a convincing relationship between Dain Said's artistic influences and the exceptional calibre of his filmmaking. Particularly, it is plain to see how significantly renowned directors Chris Marker, Krzysztof Kieslowski, and Andrei Tarkovsky influenced Dain's creative vision. These significant individuals not only influenced his artistic sensibility but also gave him access to priceless methods and approaches that add to the remarkable quality of his films.

Based on Jussi (2015) films' "atmosphere", "tone", or "mood" are frequently mentioned by viewers, and academics have proposed that a film's mood is connected to its aesthetic presentation. In this exploratory study by Jussi Tarvainen and Stina Westman, they looked at the relationships between and contributions to the mood-enhancing visual elements of films. While attention was largely correlated with temporal elements of style, such as rhythm, they discovered that sensations of beauty and pleasantness were similarly associated to several stylistic methods.

Dain has gained a plethora of knowledge and insights by studying the works of these renowned filmmakers, allowing him to create films that break down barriers and display a distinctive level of inventiveness. Tarkovsky's mastery of visual storytelling, Kieslowski's thought-provoking stories, and Marker's experimental style have all permanently influenced Dain's filmography.

Dain's ability to craft beautiful and visually appealing situations is one noteworthy quality of his filmmaking. He was exposed to the ground-breaking cinematography methods used by the filmmakers, which is why he has this. Tarkovsky's poetic imagery, Kieslowski's evocative cinematography, and Marker's avant-garde use of image alteration serve as sources of inspiration for Dain's strong eye for composition, use of symbolism, and rigorous attention to detail.

Dain Said's openness to diverse cinematic traditions does not result in stylistic imitation but in selective adaptation. European contemplative aesthetics are employed as a formal framework through which distinctly Malaysian cultural themes such as masculinity, ritual, familial obligation, and moral ambiguity are explored. Similarly, influences from Iranian cinema inform his restrained performances

and ethical minimalism, while early German cinema shapes his use of shadow, spatial tension, and symbolic mise-en-scène, all of which are recontextualised within Malaysian narratives.

This aesthetic coherence is further reinforced through Dain Said's recurring collaboration with key creative personnel, particularly his cinematographers and editors, who share a similar interest in contemplative pacing, atmospheric composition, and visually driven storytelling. Such collaborative continuity contributes to the consistency of aesthetic and thematic expression across his body of work. This collaborative continuity is exemplified by Said's work with Thai cinematographer Jarin Pengpanitch in *Bunohan*, whose visual approach supports the film's contemplative pacing, restrained camera movement, and atmospheric composition, reinforcing the director's aesthetic priorities.

In conclusion, the examination of this analysis highlights the major influence Chris Marker, Andrei Tarkovsky, and Krzysztof Kieslowski had on Dain Said's ability to make films. In addition to inspiring him to make excellent films, their combined impact gives his work a unique creative and aesthetic perspective. Dain's proficiency in fusing many cinematic techniques and cultures is highlighted by his ability to combine these inspirations while preserving his own distinctive voice, creating a body of work that continues to enthrall and inspire viewers.

Conclusion

Dain Said has played a pivotal role in shaping contemporary Malaysian cinema by developing a sophisticated visual language that interprets local identity through a transnational aesthetic lens. Rather than mimicking European auteurs, he translates contemplative cinematic practices into narratives rooted in Malaysian cultural memory, geography, and social experience. This approach establishes aesthetic standards that are both globally conversant and locally meaningful. Dain Said's emphasis on collaboration with creative partners who share similar aesthetic and intellectual influences enables the sustained articulation of his artistic vision, ensuring visual coherence and thematic depth across his films. Through cooperation, he can put his ideas into practice and keep his films' creative coherence. Dain Said's influence on Malaysian cinema may be seen in his research into notable filmmakers, his wide range of cinematic tastes, and his emphasis on collaboration. His contributions influence Malaysian cinema's artistic vision and aesthetic standards, having a long-lasting effect.

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Acknowledgment

The authors would like to thank all individuals who supported and contributed to the success of this study.

Funding Information

The authors received no funding from any party for the research and publication of this article.

AI and LLM Disclosure (Limited Use)

Limited use of generative AI (OpenAI's ChatGPT) supported language clarity and formatting. All AI-assisted outputs were critically reviewed and validated by the author, who assumes full responsibility for the content.

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