



Refusing Dramatisation: Cinematic Strategy as an Ethical Stance in the Documentary Film "Kumpul" (A Glimpse of Palu Liquefaction)

Menolak Dramatisasi: Strategi Sinematik Sebagai Posisi Etis Dalam Film Dokumenter "Kumpul" (Secuil Catatan Likuefaksi Palu)

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Keywords

Participatory documentary;
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ABSTRACT

This article presents a practice-based analysis of the documentary film "KUMPUL" (A Glimpse of Palu Liquefaction, 2021), a participatory documentary capturing the collective memory of two survivor families from the Palu liquefaction disaster of September 28, 2018. The study examines how the film's cinematic choices, uniform framing, rejection of disaster footage, absence of supporting music, and formal interview style simultaneously function as representational strategies and ethical stances toward survivors' trauma. The researcher is also the filmmaker of the work under analysis; methodological transparency regarding this position, including systematic bias management protocols, is therefore foregrounded. The study employs a practice-based research framework combined with reflective textual analysis. Specifically, the analysis finds that uniform framing functions as a mechanism for equalising testimonial authority among subjects, while the absence of music transfers the entire dramaturgical burden to subjects' oral narratives.

Kata Kunci

Dokumenter partisipatori;
Likuefaksi Palu;
Memori kolektif;
Etika representasi trauma;
Penelitian berbasis praktik

ABSTRAK

Artikel ini menyajikan analisis berbasis praktik dari film dokumenter "KUMPUL" (Catatan Singkat tentang Likuefaksi Palu, 2021), sebuah film dokumenter partisipatif yang menangkap memori kolektif dua keluarga penyintas dari bencana likuefaksi Palu pada 28 September 2018. Studi ini meneliti bagaimana pilihan sinematik film, pembingkai seragam, penolakan terhadap cuplikan bencana, ketiadaan musik pendukung, dan gaya wawancara formal secara bersamaan berfungsi sebagai strategi representasional dan sikap etis terhadap trauma para penyintas. Peneliti juga merupakan pembuat film dari karya yang dianalisis; oleh karena itu, transparansi metodologis mengenai posisi ini, termasuk protokol manajemen bias sistematis, diutamakan. Studi ini menggunakan kerangka penelitian berbasis praktik yang dikombinasikan dengan analisis tekstual reflektif. Secara spesifik, analisis ini menemukan bahwa pembingkai yang seragam berfungsi sebagai mekanisme untuk menyamakan otoritas kesaksian di antara subjek, sementara ketiadaan musik mentransfer seluruh beban dramaturgi ke narasi lisan subjek.

1. Introduction

On September 28, 2018, a magnitude 7.4 earthquake struck Central Sulawesi and triggered a cascade of disasters: a tsunami, landslides, and—most devastatingly in terms

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of social impact—liquefaction. In the Petobo and Balaroa subdistricts of Palu City, liquefaction transformed solid ground into a liquid mass that consumed entire residential areas within minutes (Warman & Jumas, 2013). This was not only the largest liquefaction disaster in Indonesian recorded history but also left deep social wounds that remain largely undocumented both visually and orally.

Against this backdrop, the documentary film “KUMPUL” (A Bit Note of Palu Liquefaction, 2021) represents a collective archival effort. The 26-minute film records the testimonies of five members from two survivor families: the family of Bapak Nasrun from Petobo and the family of Muhammad Magdis from Balaroa. What distinguishes this film from conventional disaster documentaries is a consistent set of cinematic choices that minimise filmmaker intervention: no footage of physical destruction, no emotional background music, no voice-over narration, and all subjects filmed with an identical framing in a static interview setting.

Existing scholarship on Indonesian documentary film tends toward the functional dimensions of disaster communication—for instance, the use of documentary as a medium for disseminating disaster risk information to the public (Rezaldi & Soeprihantoro, 2015)—or toward framing analysis of disaster representation through montage technique (Tarmawan & Fikri, 2022). Research that specifically analyses formal aesthetic choices in disaster documentary as expressions of the filmmaker’s ethical position remains limited within Indonesian film studies (Hermansyah, 2022). Yet cinematic decisions—how something is filmed and how it is edited—are not merely technical matters but epistemological statements about what counts as ‘real’ and who holds the authority to represent that reality (Nichols, 1991).

Given this gap, the article poses the following research question: how do the cinematic choices in “KUMPUL” simultaneously function as representational strategies and as an ethical stance toward the trauma of disaster survivors? Drawing on a practice-based research framework and documentary theory, the article argues that the film’s minimalist aesthetic strategy constitutes an ethical commitment—not merely an artistic preference—that places the oral narratives of survivors at the centre of representational authority.

The academic contribution of this article is twofold: it offers an analytical framework linking formal cinematic decisions to the ethics of representation in Indonesian disaster documentary, and it demonstrates that practice-based research with explicit researcher positionality and systematic bias management can generate knowledge generalisable beyond the individual practitioner’s experience.

The theoretical framework of this article rests on five interlocking bodies of scholarship. The first concerns the participatory documentary mode. Bill Nichols (2010) in *Introduction to Documentary* classifies documentary into six modes: expository, poetic, participatory, reflexive, performative, and observational. The participatory mode is characterised by the filmmaker’s direct engagement with subjects through interviews, conversation, or provocation. Nichols (2010) asserts that in this mode the filmmaker exists on “the same plane of human existence” as their subjects, rendering the relationship personal and complex. Recent scholarship has also examined how the participatory mode generates distinct legitimating strategies through witness testimony and direct address (Yu & Yan, 2022).

Plantinga (1997) demonstrates that the filmmaker’s physical and emotional involvement directly shapes the construction of reality in the resulting work. Corner

(2002) cautions that proximity to subjects in participatory documentary can produce subtle yet powerful representational biases—a tension that in the present study is managed through the use of external theoretical frameworks as critical distance.

The second relevant framework concerns cinematic reality and layers of mediation. Bill Nichols (1991) conceptualises the camera not as a neutral window onto reality but as an expressive instrument that uses aesthetic techniques to reinforce meaning and heighten emotional response, adding to Bazin et al. (1967) tradition the crucial dimension that every technical decision constitutes an active intervention into the reality being recorded.

This framework is especially relevant to disaster documentary. If the camera already reduces lived experience to a “second reality” mediated by the lens, then each subsequent layer of editing, music scoring, and cutting creates a “third reality” increasingly remote from the survivor’s direct experience. An understanding of these layers of mediation is foundational to the analysis of the cinematic strategies in the film under study.

Third, the article draws on scholarship on audience expectations and the ethics of representation. Bill Nichols (2010) characterises documentary’s relationship with its audience as grounded in three fundamental expectations of documentary: that it presents real people, unmanipulated images, and a genuine “sense” of a past event. These expectations constitute an implicit contract between text and audience that, if violated, can simultaneously damage trust and reduce survivors’ experience to spectacle.

Sontag (2003) warns of the danger of a “porn of suffering”—the excessive use of images of pain that paradoxically creates emotional distance and numbs empathy. Aufderheide (2007) develops the related concept of “ethics of access”: access granted by subjects must be honoured by representing them as they wish to be represented, not solely according to the film’s dramatic requirements.

Fourth, the methodological grounding of this study draws on practice-based research frameworks. Nelson (2013), in his framework for practice-as-research, argues that arts practitioners can generate valid knowledge through critical reflection on their own work, provided the researcher’s position is declared transparently and analysis is mediated through external theoretical frameworks as critical distance. Smith & Dean (2009) reinforce this argument by demonstrating that the insider knowledge available to the researcher-practitioner—access to decision-making processes unavailable to external researchers—constitutes an epistemological advantage rather than a liability, so long as it is managed through adequate reflexivity protocols.

Schön (1983) distinguishes between reflection-in-action (reflection during the creative process) and reflection-on-action (analytical reflection after the work is complete). The present study falls into the latter category: the film was completed, submitted, and formally assessed by an independent panel before this analysis was undertaken, creating the temporal distance that enables separation between “voice as artist” and “voice as researcher”.

Halbwachs’s (1992) concept of collective memory establishes that memory is never purely individual but always shaped by shared social contexts. In disaster survivor communities, collective memory functions both as a mechanism of healing and as resistance against institutional forgetting.

Gluck & Patai (1991) emphasise that oral history interviewing is not merely data collection but a co-construction of narrative between interviewer and subject—a process

that is inherently ethical and political. This demands active reflexivity on the part of the researcher regarding the power relations present in every interview situation, a consideration that, as this analysis demonstrates, is directly internalised in the cinematic decisions of the film under study. This relational and ethical dimension of oral history practice has been further examined in contexts where filmmaker-researchers use documentary film as the medium for capturing and transmitting survivor testimony across time (Barkai, 2024).

2. Methods

The following sub-sections describe the research approach, researcher positionality, research object, units of analysis, and analytical procedure. This study employs a practice-based research approach (Nelson, 2013) combined with film textual analysis (Stokes, 2003). Documentary film has also been advanced as a mode of qualitative inquiry in its own right, particularly where filmmakers adopt participatory approaches with their subjects (Borish et al., 2021). Practice-based research is selected because the researcher is also the filmmaker of the work under analysis. Textual analysis is used as the primary method to systematically read the film and identify how meaning is constructed through formal cinematic choices. The combination allows the study to capitalise on the epistemological advantages of insider access while maintaining the analytical rigour required of scholarly research.

Regarding researcher positionality and bias management: The researcher in this article is the director of the film “KUMPUL,” the object of analysis. Transparency regarding this position is a non-negotiable methodological prerequisite within the practice-based research framework (Nelson, 2013). The practitioner-researcher holds epistemic access unavailable to external researchers: knowledge of the intentions behind every cinematic decision, the context of negotiations with subjects, and the ethical deliberations that occurred during production.

Three mechanisms are applied to manage potential confirmation bias. First, temporal distance: the work was completed, assessed, and formally evaluated by an independent panel before this analysis was undertaken, enabling the researcher to occupy the position of reflective observer rather than active decision-maker (Schön, 1983). Second, external theoretical frameworks as the primary analytical instrument: all interpretive claims in this article are verified and mediated through theories developed by other scholars (Nichols, Bruzzi, Aufderheide) rather than relying solely on the filmmaker’s own authority. Third, an explicit distinction between intentional data (what the filmmaker sought to achieve, sourced from production notes) and textual data (what is factually observable in the film): the two are treated as separate, mutually controlling data sources rather than a single unified truth.

A concrete instance of this reflection-in-action occurred during post-production: the director's initial editorial decision was to standardise all five subjects to a medium close-up framing, but this was revised, on the recommendation of the examining supervisors, to the medium shot ultimately used in the film, owing to concerns about image quality consistency across varying shooting conditions. This episode illustrates the distinction Schön (1983) draws between reflection-in-action, the in-process negotiation between aesthetic intention and practical constraint, and reflection-on-action, the retrospective interpretation undertaken in this article. The episode also resonates with

recent practice-based scholarship in which filmmaker-researchers explicitly theorise their own aesthetic choices as part of the research output itself (Pater, 2023).

The research object and data sources are as follows. The primary research object is the documentary film “KUMPUL” (2021), with a running time of 26 minutes. Primary data consist of the film text itself—cinematic aspects directly observable by any viewer of the film. Secondary data consist of production notes and methodological reflections documented by the filmmaker during the creative process. Secondary data are used for triangulation to corroborate or interrogate interpretations generated from the film text, not as the sole determinant of meaning.

Units of analysis were defined as follows. The units of analysis comprise five cinematic aspects identified purposively on the basis of what distinguishes this film from conventional disaster documentaries: (1) shot composition and scale, (2) editing and montage decisions, (3) use or rejection of music and sound effects, (4) interview style and format, and (5) narrative structure.

The selection of these units followed three principles consistent with purposive sampling in qualitative practice-based research (Poerwandari, 1998): the number and characteristics of subjects were not fixed in advance but determined by the criteria of survivorship relevant to the work's conceptual aims; the final composition of subjects and units was allowed to evolve as conceptual understanding developed during fieldwork and production; and subject characteristics were ultimately matched to the contextual fit of the research rather than to a predetermined demographic quota. This iterative, fieldwork-responsive logic of selection is consistent with broader qualitative practice; for instance, Poerwandari (1998) similarly frames purposive sampling in psychological research as contingent on emerging conceptual relevance rather than predetermined sample size.

The analytical procedure consisted of three stages. The analysis proceeds in three stages. The first, descriptive stage, identifies and inventories the cinematic choices that appear consistently in the film through direct observation of the film text, without evaluative judgement. The second, interpretive stage, connects each choice to the relevant theoretical framework. At this stage, intentional data from production notes is introduced as triangulation—not as the analytical starting point—to confirm or interrogate interpretations already generated from textual observation. The third, argumentative stage, synthesises the findings into a coherent argument about the relationship between aesthetic strategy and ethical stance.

3. Results

Textual analysis of the film “KUMPUL” yielded five empirically observable findings. These are presented descriptively based on direct observation of the film text, prior to theoretical interpretation in the Discussion section.

3.1 Uniform Framing Across All Subjects

All five subjects—Bapak Nasrun, Ibu Maya, Zahra Ramadhani, Muhammad Magdis, and Ibu Ima—are filmed at an identical shot scale: medium shot with uniform framing. Throughout the film's 26-minute duration, no variation in shot scale toward close-up or wide shot is found in any interview segment. Camera position is consistent in height and distance for each subject, with no change of angle. Lighting is consistent across subjects despite the different physical locations in which each interview was conducted.

This framing consistency extends to camera height: in all five interviews, the camera is positioned at eye level with the seated subject, producing a horizontal sightline that neither looks down on nor up at any subject. The absence of high-angle or low-angle shots further eliminates the visual signalling of hierarchy or vulnerability that such angles conventionally carry in documentary practice (Bordwell et al., 2017). The result is a visual grammar in which all five subjects occupy exactly equivalent positions in the image, before a single word of testimony has been spoken.

3.2 No Visual Footage of Physical Destruction

No footage of physical destruction—collapsed buildings, cracked earth, evacuation processes, or any other disaster imagery—is found in the interview segments that constitute the bulk of the film. The only non-subject visual elements present are four static disaster photographs that appear between sequences as transitional markers. Each photograph is displayed as a full screen for several seconds without accompanying narration or sound before the next interview segment begins.

The four static photographs used as inter-sequence markers constitute a carefully bounded exception to this principle. Each photograph is archival in nature, documenting the physical landscape of Palu before or immediately after the liquefaction, rather than capturing the disaster itself in motion. Their function is cartographic and contextual rather than dramatic: they orient the audience to the geography of the event without supplying moving images of suffering of the kind that Sontag (2003) identifies as capable of numbing rather than deepening empathic response. The deliberate choice of static archival photographs rather than video footage as the sole visual concession thus reinforces rather than contradicts the film's overall rejection of disaster spectacle.

3.3 Absence of Music Throughout Interview Segments

No diegetic or non-diegetic music is found during the interview segments. The only non-diegetic audio elements present are confined to two moments: the opening sequence, which uses news broadcast sounds and cries as markers of historical context, and the film's closing, which uses a recitation of Surah Al-Kahfi. Outside these two moments, the only sounds heard are those of the subjects themselves—including pauses, tears, and changes in vocal tone that occur spontaneously.

The two non-diegetic audio elements that do appear merit closer attention precisely because of their exceptional status. The opening use of news broadcast sounds and cries performs a specific documentary function: it establishes historical context and anchors the film within the public record of the disaster, providing the informational frame necessary for an audience unfamiliar with the Palu liquefaction. The closing recitation of Surah Al-Kahfi serves a different function: it marks the end of the testimonial space with a cultural and spiritual gesture drawn from the subjects' own religious and community context, returning interpretive and symbolic authority to the survivors rather than to the filmmaker. Neither element constitutes emotional direction toward the testimony itself; together, they demonstrate that the rejection of music in interview segments is a discriminated ethical decision rather than a categorical prohibition of all audio elements.

3.4 Formal Interview Style Conducted in Contextual Settings

Interviews are conducted in a formal style: subjects face directly into the camera, lighting is consistent, and framing is static. No interviewer is visible in the frame. Distinctively, however, all interviews are conducted in the subjects' own displacement shelters rather than in a studio or filmmaker-selected neutral space. Background visuals reflect the actual physical conditions of subjects' post-disaster living environments: improvised walls, simple furnishings, and elements indicative of displacement shelter contexts.

The backgrounds visible behind each subject further reinforce this observation. Rather than using neutral backdrops or controlled studio environments, the film's visual frame includes improvisational walls, displaced household objects, and the material traces of post-disaster shelter conditions. These environmental details are not staged: they reflect the actual living circumstances of subjects at the time of filming. Their inclusion in the frame shifts the visual register from performance in front of a backdrop to testimony within a lived space, consistent with Friedman's (2024) argument that conducting film interviews within participants' own everyday environments can produce a qualitatively different form of testimony, one that is grounded in embodied experience rather than abstracted from it.

3.1. Chronological-Thematic Narrative Structure

The film is organised into four sequences arranged chronologically according to the order of events: "September 28, 2018," "Self-Rescue," "The Search," and "Trauma and Loss." Within each sequence, the narratives of both families—the Nasrun family from Petobo and the Magdis family from Balaroa—are interwoven alternately according to the thematic similarity of their experiences. Screen time allocated to each subject does not show significant difference; no single subject dominates the film's running time.

It is notable that the four sequence titles, "September 28, 2018," "Self-Rescue," "The Search," and "Trauma and Loss," are entirely event-driven and survivor-centred: none name the disaster itself, the physical scale of destruction, or any institutional response. The titling strategy foregrounds the experiential trajectory of the survivors rather than the objective chronology of the disaster as a geological or governmental event. Within each sequence, the alternating presentation of the Nasrun family and the Magdis family prevents either narrative from becoming the authoritative or representative account of the disaster: both timelines are maintained as parallel and equally weighted throughout the film's running time.

4. Discussions

The five empirical findings presented in the results section are not isolated observations. This section interprets each finding within relevant theoretical frameworks and synthesises them into a coherent argument about the relationship between cinematic strategy and the filmmaker's ethical stance.

The first finding concerns uniform framing. In conventional documentary production, shot scale variation is used to create visual hierarchies and emphasise dramatic moments (Bordwell et al., 2017). The consistent absence of variation documented in Finding 3.1 constitutes an active decision working against this established convention.

Triangulation with production notes reveals that this choice is grounded in a symbolic deliberation: uniform shot scale is intended to symbolise the equality of the disaster experience shared by all subjects. The consistency between intentional data and textual data indicates that the cinematic effect achieved is commensurate with the stated intention: no subject receives greater visual emphasis than any other, and the testimonial weight of each individual is cinematically equal. In terms of Nichols's (2010) framework, this constitutes a concrete realisation of the participatory filmmaker's responsibility toward subjects.

From Nichols (1991) perspective, uniform framing also carries epistemological implications: by declining to grant greater visual emphasis to any one subject, the film minimises the filmmaker's intervention in the construction of reality, approaching a more equitably distributed representational authority among the five survivors.

This approach also aligns with broader developments in participatory documentary scholarship, which has increasingly emphasised that the mode of address constructed through the camera — including framing choices — shapes the relational ethics between filmmaker and subject (Yu & Yan, 2022). Uniform framing, in this reading, is not merely a stylistic neutrality but an active construction of relational equality: each subject is addressed in the same terms, and the audience is positioned to receive each testimony with the same degree of attention and openness. The consistency of framing thus functions as a visual enactment of the participatory mode's core commitment to subjects as co-producers of meaning rather than objects of the filmmaker's gaze.

The second finding concerns the rejection of disaster footage. Finding 3.2 documents the complete absence of destruction footage, a significant departure from mainstream disaster documentary conventions that almost invariably rely on dramatic visuals as emotional anchors (Hojjer, 2004).

Analytically, this choice carries direct implications for the mechanism of reality construction. If destruction footage were inserted between subjects' oral narratives, the audience would construct its imagination of the disaster from images selected by the filmmaker—an intervention into an imaginative process that should be driven by the survivors' own voices. By removing such footage, the film maintains oral narrative as the sole source of reality construction for the viewer, approaching the most minimally mediated form of reality available within a cinematic context.

This choice also directly engages Sontag's (2003) warning about the risk of a "porn of suffering." By minimising visual provocation, the film transfers the burden of imagination to the viewer, who constructs an image of the disaster from subjects' words according to their own capacity for empathy—an approach consistent with Nichols (2010) account of documentary's implicit contract of authenticity of authenticity between documentary and audience.

The ethical implications of this choice gain additional clarity when considered in relation to recent scholarship on documentary representation of traumatic events. Koch (2024), examining ethical frameworks across documentary films dealing with extreme violence and genocide, argues that the ethical stakes of representing subjects of catastrophe are not located solely in what is shown but equally in what is withheld: the decision not to include certain categories of visual material is itself an ethical act with consequences for how audiences relate to the subjects on screen. Understood in these terms, the absence of destruction footage in 'KUMPUL' is not an editorial omission but

an ethical affirmation: it places the boundary of what can be seen precisely where the survivors themselves are positioned, and no further into their experience than their own words carry the audience.

The third finding concerns the absence of music. In film theory, music is the element that most directly and effectively manipulates audience emotional response (Gorbman, 1987). Finding 3.3 demonstrates that with the absence of music across more than eighty percent of the film's duration, the entire dramaturgical burden is transferred to the subjects' own voices, facial expressions, and body language.

The interpretive consequence of this finding is that the audience is not directed toward a predetermined emotional response before or during any subject's testimony. The dramatism present in the film is entirely inherent in the oral narrative itself—spontaneous tears, unscripted pauses in speech, unrehearsed facial expression (Corner, 2002).

The differentiation of audio function documented in Finding 3.3—where non-diegetic audio appears only at the opening and closing with contextual and spiritual functions, not emotional manipulation—demonstrates that the rejection of music is not a dogmatic minimalist stance but a carefully discriminated decision based on the function of each audio element in the construction of meaning.

This disciplined distinction between audio elements that carry informational or spiritual meaning and those that carry emotional manipulation is also consistent with what Borish et al. (2021) identify as a core methodological commitment in participatory documentary filmmaking: ensuring that the meaning generated in a film emerges from the participants' own contributions rather than from the filmmaker's post-production shaping of the audience's response. In documentary contexts involving trauma, where survivors' emotional states during testimony are themselves data of the highest significance, the absence of music functions as an act of methodological integrity as much as an aesthetic choice.

The fourth finding concerns the formal contextual interview style. Finding 3.4 reveals a distinctive compromise: formal interview conventions are applied, yet interviews are conducted in the subjects' own spaces rather than a space controlled by the filmmaker. This compromise reflects an ethical awareness of the power relations inherent in the interview situation (Gluck & Patai, 1991)—choosing to occupy the subject's space rather than the reverse constitutes a gesture of respect toward the authority of the subject's own experience.

The decision to position subjects facing directly into the camera produces an effect interpretable as a fundamental shift in the audience's relational position: from observer to listening companion. This ethical shift changes how audiences experience others' traumatic testimony—from distanced observation to a more personal, empathic engagement.

This spatial dimension of the interview — conducting testimony within survivors' own post-disaster environments — also has methodological implications for the quality and authenticity of the testimony obtained. Friedman (2024), reflecting on the production of a participatory documentary with conflict-affected communities in Sri Lanka, argues that filming within participants' own everyday spaces, rather than extracting them into filmmaker-controlled environments, enables a qualitatively different register of testimony: one in which environmental cues activate embodied and affective memory that may not surface in neutral settings. Although the production contexts and disaster types differ substantially, this observation is consistent with the approach documented in

'KUMPUL,' where subjects' post-disaster displacement shelters are not merely backdrops but active elements of the testimonial space.

The fifth finding concerns the chronological-thematic narrative structure. Finding 3.5 documents a structure that places the narratives of two families in equivalent positions across all four sequences. Within Halbwachs's (1992) framework, this interweaving of two narratives is not merely an editing technique but an active construction of collective memory: the audience builds understanding of the disaster not from a single perspective but from an accumulation of two resonating testimonies.

The equitable allocation of screen time documented in Finding 3.5 also carries ethical implications: no subject is positioned as the "primary" narrator and others as support. This is consistent with the logic of distributed representational authority present across all five findings—from the uniformity of framing to the equality of narrative weight.

Recent practice-based scholarship on documentary film further supports the reading of this narrative architecture as an ethical as much as a formal achievement. Barkai (2024), examining the role of oral history in documentary film and the transmission of survivor testimony across time, argues that the structural decisions made at the editing stage — how testimonies are sequenced, weighted, and juxtaposed — constitute the primary site at which a filmmaker's ethical orientation toward subjects either manifests or is betrayed. In 'KUMPUL,' the chronological-thematic structure that allocates equivalent narrative weight to two families across four sequences is precisely such a structural decision: it enacts, at the level of editing architecture, the same commitment to distributed representational authority that uniform framing enacts at the level of the individual shot.

Before synthesising these findings, a critical counter-reading of the minimalist aesthetic is warranted. The interpretation developed across the five findings has, to this point, been broadly affirmative of the minimalist aesthetic system as an ethical achievement. A critical counter-reading must be entertained before this position is consolidated. The most significant risk concerns Finding 3.4, the uniformity of formal interview style, applied identically across five subjects from two distinct families, could be read not as an equalising gesture but as a homogenising one. If every subject is framed, lit, and addressed in the same manner regardless of the specificity of their individual experience, there is a risk that the film flattens five distinct survivors into a single undifferentiated category of "disaster victim", which would itself constitute a form of representational violence against the particularity of each testimony.

This concern, however, is substantially mitigated when the formal uniformity documented in Finding 3.4 is read together with the narrative structure documented in Finding 3.5. While the visual and interview format is held constant, the content of each testimony is allowed to diverge fully: Bapak Nasrun's account of forced separation, Ibu Ima's account of evacuating with a one-month-old infant, and Ibu Maya's account of escaping with her children each retain their distinct circumstances, decisions, and emotional registers within the shared chronological-thematic frame. In Halbwachs's (1992) terms, collective memory does not require the erasure of individual memory; rather, individual recollections become meaningful as collective memory precisely through their juxtaposition within a shared social frame, without each account losing its particular content. The uniform formal apparatus, in this sense, functions less as a homogenising filter and more as a constant against which the specific variation in each

subject's testimony becomes more legible to the audience, consistent with Nichols's (1991) observation that formal consistency can itself become a vehicle for, rather than a suppression of, individual testimonial difference.

A second, related limitation concerns generalisability. The mitigation argument above depends on the chronological-thematic structure carrying sufficient narrative weight to preserve individual particularity; this analysis cannot determine whether the same formal strategy would succeed under a different narrative structure, for instance one organised by theme alone without the chronological anchor that allows each family's distinct timeline to remain visible. The argument developed here therefore applies most directly to films that, like "KUMPUL," pair formal uniformity with a narrative architecture that preserves distinct individual trajectories; it should not be read as a general endorsement of formal uniformity in disaster documentary regardless of narrative design.

The five findings together constitute a coherent ethical stance and their interpretations above reveal a consistent pattern. The consistency itself is an analytical finding: no cinematic choice in the film is found to contradict the logic of minimising filmmaker intervention. This indicates that the five cinematic strategies are not separate decisions but manifestations of a single coherent aesthetic-ethical position.

Within Aufderheide's (2007) framework, this aesthetic system constitutes a concrete realisation of the ethics of access: the access granted by survivors to the filmmaker is honoured by representing them as human beings telling their stories, not as victims whose suffering is put on display. This is the point at which aesthetic decision and ethical decision become inseparable.

The central argument of this article is therefore: in "KUMPUL," there is no separation between aesthetic and ethical decision-making. Every cinematic choice is simultaneously a statement about how disaster survivors deserve to be represented—with dignity, without exploitation, and with their own voices as the highest authority.

These findings also carry brief implications for documentary practice. Beyond its analytical contribution, the minimalist aesthetic system identified here suggests a practical heuristic for filmmakers working with disaster survivors under resource constraints. Production notes indicate that several of the choices documented, including the limited crew, simple recording setup, and restricted shooting time available in the field, were initially conditioned by logistical and pandemic-related limitations rather than chosen purely on aesthetic grounds. That these constraints converged with, rather than undermined, the ethical stance ultimately articulated in the film suggests that practical limitation and ethical restraint are not always opposed; under certain conditions, a constrained production apparatus can itself become a resource for an ethics of representation. This observation aligns with recent calls in disaster media scholarship for production approaches that minimise additional intrusion on survivors during sensitive moments of testimony (Kurtoglu et al., 2026). This implication is offered as a heuristic for practice rather than a generalisable claim, given the absence of comparative production data from other documentaries.

5. Conclusion

This study has analysed the documentary film "KUMPUL" through five primary cinematic strategies using a practice-based research approach with reflective textual analysis. The analysis demonstrates that these five strategies form a minimalist aesthetic

system that simultaneously functions as a representational strategy and as an ethical stance toward the trauma of disaster survivors. Specifically, uniform framing was found to function as a mechanism for equalising testimonial authority; the rejection of disaster footage maintains oral narrative as the sole source of reality construction; and the absence of music transfers the entire dramaturgical burden to subjects' spontaneous expression.

The most significant finding is that in "KUMPUL," aesthetic and ethical decision-making are inseparable. Every cinematic choice consistently moves toward a single end: placing the oral narratives of survivors at the centre of representational authority. This finding carries generalisable implications for disaster documentary practice: that in representing trauma, the decision not to do something—not to add music, not to insert dramatic footage, not to vary shot scale—can constitute a more powerful ethical statement than the decision to do so.

From a methodological standpoint, this study demonstrates that practice-based research with transparent researcher positionality and systematic bias management can produce intersubjectively testable knowledge. The insider access available to the practitioner-researcher enriches analysis without sacrificing scholarly rigour, provided it is managed through temporal distance, external theoretical frameworks, and an explicit separation between intentional data and textual data.

The study's primary limitation lies in the scope of reception data: analysis is focused on the film text and production data without empirical audience response data. Future research integrating reception studies would strengthen the validity of claims regarding the ethical effects of the cinematic strategies identified here. A comparative study with other Indonesian disaster documentaries would additionally help assess whether the minimalist aesthetic strategy identified represents an individual phenomenon or a broader tendency in contemporary Indonesian documentary practice.

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