



COPYRIGHT AND USE OF THIS THESIS

This thesis must be used in accordance with the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

Reproduction of material protected by copyright may be an infringement of copyright and copyright owners may be entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.

Section 51 (2) of the Copyright Act permits an authorized officer of a university library or archives to provide a copy (by communication or otherwise) of an unpublished thesis kept in the library or archives, to a person who satisfies the authorized officer that he or she requires the reproduction for the purposes of research or study.

The Copyright Act grants the creator of a work a number of moral rights, specifically the right of attribution, the right against false attribution and the right of integrity.

You may infringe the author's moral rights if you:

- fail to acknowledge the author of this thesis if you quote sections from the work
- attribute this thesis to another author
- subject this thesis to derogatory treatment which may prejudice the author's reputation

For further information contact the University's Director of Copyright Services

sydney.edu.au/copyright

CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN CINEMA

GENRE, GENDER AND TEMPORALITY

Norman Yusoff

FACULTY OF ARTS AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
THE UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY

A thesis submitted in total fulfilment of requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Sydney

2013

DECLARATION

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person nor material previously published or written by another person nor material which to a substantial extent has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institute of higher learning, except where due acknowledgement has been made in the text.

Norman Yusoff

28 March 2013

ABSTRACT

This thesis provides close, contextualised readings of representations of gender and temporality in a number of contemporary, post-millennial genre films. The focus is on textual analysis of the films, placed within the contexts of their production and critical reception both within and outside Malaysia. This study lies at the intersections of scholarship on Malaysian cinema, film genre, and Asian gender and cultural studies.

This thesis argues that the directors' reworking of genres renders a more dynamic and hybrid nature of generic forms, reiterating certain conventions of old media and cinematic forms such as the culturally-specific mode of melodrama, and elements of magic and superstition. In doing so, they fall outside and question the assumed binary between realist and non-realist genres in US films based on generic regimes of verisimilitude.

I further argue that this reworking of genres complicates the dominant notion of gendered subjectivities, which is contained within the binaries of Old Malay and New Malay, Malay and non-Malay, rural and urban, and professional and working-class. In all of the films I examine, such binaries, which have been spawned by the combined forces of the postcolonial capitalist state and resurgent Islam, are destabilised through diverse representations of time, narratively and aesthetically. In the process, they question and fracture the chronology of 'homogeneous empty time' that underlies the linear narrative of nation. For example, in romance and horror films, notions of 'modern' femininity are represented more ambivalently whereas in comedy and action films, anxieties about modernity are projected on marginalised forms of masculinity. The ultimate

aim of this thesis is to reflect upon the ways in which the transformations of both genre and gender lead the films examined to critique contradictory aspects of modernity in postcolonial, contemporary Malaysia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The completion of this thesis would not have been possible without the help, support and engagement of a number of individuals.

First and foremost, my heartfelt gratitude goes to my supervisor Dr Jane Chi Hyun Park for having faith in my humble project ever since it was at its nascent stage in the form of a brief preliminary proposal. Since Dr Park has been the most patient reader of all of my drafts, I especially appreciate her meticulous supervision, continuous guidance and constructive criticism. I am also indebted for her undivided commitment and unwavering support throughout these years. I am grateful to my associate supervisor Professor Adrian Vickers from the Department of Asian Studies for providing some valuable suggestions and comments.

I also would like to thank Dr Laleen Jayamanne from the Department of Art History and Film Studies for her insight and inspiration during our stimulating conversations. I extend my special thanks to Dr Estelle Dryland from Macquarie University for her help in editing my manuscripts and advising me how to write a better form of English.

I thank all of the academic staff and fellow PhD candidates at the Department of Gender and Cultural Studies, especially those I have had the chance to talk to over the past three years. Deep appreciation goes to the friends in Sydney for their genuine friendship and support: Qiu Zitong, Wei Miao, Hon Wai

Fong, Timothy Laurie, Priyantha Fonseka, Luz Hincapie, Ivana Prazic, Amy Kuo and Sachin Haldankar.

To many of my colleagues, friends and students in Malaysia for their unfailing support and encouragement, I express my sincerest gratitude.

Most importantly, I would like to express my special appreciation to my mother, who has shown her profound love and care, and prayed for my well-being and success. Thanks also to all of my siblings for their love and support.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this thesis to the memory of my late father Yusoff Din, who first exposed me to the world of cinema.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT iii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT v

INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER ONE

Genre, Gender and Temporality:
Framing Contemporary Malaysian Cinema 19

CHAPTER TWO

Temporalising Genre:
The History and Development of Malaysian Cinema 65

CHAPTER THREE

Reclaiming the Past; or, Haunting the Present?
Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam and *Susuk* 115

CHAPTER FOUR

Moral Tale or *Fin-de-Siècle* Tragedy?
Budak Kelantan and *Bunohan* 160

CHAPTER FIVE

Homage to the Old or Lampooning the Contemporary?
Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang and *Sell Out!* 205

CHAPTER SIX

In the Mood for Nostalgia:
Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* 246

CONCLUSION 294

FILMOGRAPHY 305

BIBLIOGRAPHY 308

INTRODUCTION

... not only the traditional genres but the cultural myths they once embodied are no longer fully adequate to the imaginative needs of our time.
– John G. Cawelti¹

As a child, I looked forward to viewing a Malay movie every Friday night through the now-defunct slot *Tayangan Gambar Melayu* (lit. ‘Malay Movie Screening’) on RTM, the national television channel. After dinner, my parents, my great grandmother, my siblings and I would sit huddled in front of the television set in our living room eagerly awaiting the start of the movie. Perhaps that was my earliest encounter with Malaysian cinema – the cinema I grew up with and still care about, alongside Indonesian, Indian, Hong Kong and American films. These Malay-language movies, mostly black-and-white classics, were made during the cinema’s golden age in the 1950s and 1960s. Generically speaking, they were wide-ranging: legendary P. Ramlee’s comedies and romantic melodramas, indigenous *purba* films based on local folklore and myths, Mat Sentul’s slapstick comedies, and horror films featuring the mythic oily man, *orang minyak*.

However, my fondest memories of viewing Malay movies were the times when my late father took the whole family to the cinema, when we experienced the pleasure and magic of viewing films on the big screen. I still remember the first Malay movie I saw with my family at the cinema. The film was *Dia Ibuku* (‘She is My Mother’, 1981, Yassin Salleh), and happened to be my mother’s

¹ John G. Cawelti (1999), *The Six-Gun Mistique Sequel*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, p. 244

favourite (we saw it at her insistence). *Dia Ibuku* was about a single mother Rohani in the *kampong* (village), who works extraordinarily hard to raise her two adolescent sons amidst a series of crippling hardships. The younger son, Jamil, is a high school student who lives in the city with his uncle while the older, Jamal, is pursuing a degree overseas. Because she fails to pay her debts, Rohani loses her house and land. After Jamal returns, complications arise when his girlfriend Rosie's father Kudin, a wealthy industrialist who knew Rohani, accuses her of being a prostitute. Rohani defends herself, saying that Kudin was the man who ruined her marriage when he attempted to seduce her, resulting in her husband's tragic death.

After this first cinematic viewing experience, I watched the film several more times when it was repeatedly screened on our national TV. What continues to linger in my mind is the image of the suffering yet resilient mother. The film's opening montage depicts Rohani struggling to support her family through back-breaking physical labour. We see her tapping a rubber tree at dawn, processing the latex, toiling in the paddy fields, and preparing and selling traditional cakes and delicacies on the open market. Rohani is portrayed as a warm and selfless mother figure, always ready to make sacrifices. At the same time, she displays qualities traditionally considered masculine such as physical strength, assertiveness and self-reliance. For example, she does not easily submit when a lascivious *kampong* moneylender attempts to seduce her, and she adamantly refutes Kudin's claims that she is a prostitute. By foregrounding the strength and suffering of Rohani, *Dia Ibuku* fits the gendered model of the melodrama defined by Warren Buckland as follows:

The genre of the film melodrama is frequently defined as a woman's genre, because it represents the questions, problems, anxieties, difficulties and worries of women living in a male-dominated, or patriarchal, society. The first and most prevalent property, or common attribute, of melodrama is that it is dominated by an active female character.²

As was the case with many Malay melodramas of the golden era, 1980s melodramas such as *Dia Ibuku* were very much concerned with the erosion of traditional values. Most were set in environments wherein emerging forces of modernisation appeared to conflict directly with traditional 'Malay' values. In *Dia Ibuku*, this conflict is portrayed through the travails of the single, self-employed mother and the dichotomisation of *kampong* and city: scenes of *kampong*, rivers and lush paddy fields are juxtaposed against those of Kuala Lumpur as a social space characterised by markers of modernity such as tall buildings, cars and motorbikes.

One of the most striking recurring motifs in the film is that of the lamp. When Rohani's second son Jamil returns home after completing his high school studies in the city, he brings his mother an electric table lamp, which contrasts sharply with the out-dated, traditional oil lamp still being used by his rural family. Later, Jamil accidentally breaks the electric lamp when he rushes to greet his mother in the paddy fields. The following scene shows Rohani dejectedly looking at the broken lamp and Jamil insisting it does not matter since they have no electricity. In this respect, the lamp becomes a marker of temporality to highlight the desired, but ultimately failed, transition of the family from tradition to modernity.

² Warren Buckland (2003), *Film Studies*. London: Hodder Headline Plc.

As a genre film and a form of mass-mediated contemporary myth, *Dia Ibuku* ultimately resolves all forms of social conflict and disorder. The film ends on a positive note with the realisation of Rohani's wish. Jamal returns home and asks for forgiveness for mistreating her after Kudin's accusation of her sexual immorality. In addition, he returns to Malaysia to become an oil engineer, and his future father-in-law finally repents and promises to leave his wealth to Jamal. In this respect, *Dia Ibuku* conforms to the moral conventions of both the classical Malay and global melodrama: an overtly villainous character persecutes the morally good protagonist who is ultimately rewarded for her virtue.

In order to fulfil the expectations of targeted female viewers like my mother, the film depicts the reality of the traditional *kampong* single mother who must confront patriarchal biases against a landscape of rapidly changing values as the country attempts to modernise. As the ending of *Dia Ibuku* implies, it also provides viewers with a burgeoning sense of hope, signified by the recurring tropes of light. Along with the lamp motif mentioned earlier, other forms of light appear as symbols of optimism throughout the film. For example, the film begins at dawn when it is still dark. Rohani, who is tapping a rubber tree, has a torchlight strapped to her forehead which generates a ray of light. Towards the end of the film, the now severely-ill Rohani asks Jamil and her neighbours to take her out onto the veranda because she wants to see the sun rise. In the background, *Azan Subuh*, the Muslim call to morning prayer, can be heard.

I open this thesis by invoking *Dia Ibuku* because it provides a wonderful example of the intersections between genre, gender and modernity in Malaysian cinema. The film depicts the complexities of modernisation in Malaysia,

coterminous with consumerism, industrialisation and urbanisation, which threaten traditional family ties, radically challenge gender roles and open up new ways of imagining national identity. This particular maternal melodrama, which was relatively popular in the 1980s, not only showcased women as mother figures or wives but also situated them within a changing world, portraying them as mediators of the transition of Malaysia from an agrarian, Third World nation to an increasingly industrial, developing one. More pertinently, the temporal contradictions that emerge out of this transition are embodied in and performed through gender: the mother, the female character with whom we are most supposed to identify, represents stasis and traditionalism while her two educated sons epitomise progress and development.

In contemporary Malaysian cinema, gender issues continue to correspond closely to – and help to constitute – certain genres. For example: issues of rural-urban migration, crime and violence among male youth have shaped certain action films; issues of superstition and spirit possessions among women as well as patriarchal abuse and ill-treatment towards women have defined the characteristics of local horror films; and, issues of girlhood and female adolescence have underpinned a number of romances and romantic comedies.

Such consistent patterns suggest a need to look more closely at the relationship between the formalist conventions of genre and the ideological messages conveyed through contemporary popular films in Malaysia. This thesis attempts to do precisely this in readings of a number of commercially successful romance, comedy, horror and action films that were released from 2004 to 2011.

More specifically, I focus on the question of genre for the following two reasons. First, many Malaysian filmmakers consciously use genre as an aesthetic, narrative and marketing strategy due to the enormous popularity of specific genres such as horror, comedy, romance and action. To date, the action film, *KL Gangster* (2011, Shamsul Yusof) has broken all box-office records for a local film.³ Following the success of *KL Gangster*, a columnist for an English-language daily expressed her great relief when the film attained enormous commercial success, seeing it as a welcome break from the slew of horror movies that Malaysian filmmakers had been inflicting upon moviegoers of late. She went on to question the producers' penchant for horror movies, claiming that the commercial success of *KL Gangster* proved that horror was not the only genre that could attract Malaysian moviegoers.⁴ Other popular genres include romance and comedy as evident in the huge box-office success of the romance *Ombak Rindu* ('*Pining Wave*', 2011, Osman Ali), which almost outstripped the success of *KL Gangster* and Chinese-language comedy *Ah Beng The Movie: Three Wishes* (Jack Lim), which was released during the Chinese New Year holiday and emerged as the most commercially successful Malaysian film in 2012. Other more transnational genres have also emerged recently on the scene such as the musical (e.g., *Hoore! Hoore!*, 2012, Saw Tiong Hin), fantasy (e.g., *Misteri Jalan Lama*, '*Old Road Mystery*', 2011, Afdlin Shauki), psychological thriller (e.g., *Psiko*

³ *KL Gangster* emerged as the top grossing local film breaking local box-office records and managing to collect RM (Malaysian Ringgit) 11.7 million.

⁴ Chok Suat Ling (2011, 16 June), 'Frightening Logic and Fearful Gaps in Local Horror Flicks', *New Straits Times*, <http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-259066943/frightening-logic-and-fearful.html>

Pencuri Hati, *'Psycho: Thief of Hearts'*, 2013, Nam Ron) and science-fiction (e.g., *Mantera*, 2012, Mohd Aliyar Al-Kutthy) (see Chapter Two).

The second reason for looking at genre films is that, in contemporary Malaysia, they continue to serve as a means for initiating dialogue about potentially controversial and contentious cultural issues. In a recent example (which will be discussed in more detail in Chapter One), the former Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad expressed his view regarding the proliferation of local horror films as 'counter-productive' to building a progressive and developed society. His claim reflected the feeling espoused by conservatives that horror movies might instil 'backward' modes of thinking and behaviour in already superstitious Malaysian audiences.⁵ Prior to the former Prime Minister's comments, some clerics in Malaysia had urged the government to curb the proliferation of local horror films which, they claimed, could prove detrimental to the minds and souls of Muslim viewers. They added that horror movies might encourage Muslims to deviate from the right Islamic path and turn them into polytheists. One in particular expressed his apprehension, arguing that viewers might start worshipping Satan in order to destroy other people.⁶

⁵ As reported in the media, Mahathir also urged Malaysians to find more scientific solutions to life's many problems. It is useful to note that it was during his leadership (from 1981-2003) that filmmakers were discouraged from making horror films. Beginning in 1990, horror films were banned. Rozanna Latiff and Aisyah Sulaiman (2011, October 3), 'Horror films reflect beliefs in society', *New Straits Times*, <http://www.asionone.com/print/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Malaysia/Story/A1Story20111...>

⁶ These claims, I will suggest, have no basis and are preposterous, given that most of the films reflect and are very much in line with the status quo; these films were censored by the venerable Censorship Board. Almost all show the triumph of good over evil in their 'moralistic' narrative endings. April 30, 2011, 'Malaysian preacher warns "horror movies" could turn Muslims into polytheists', <http://my.news.yahoo.com/malaysian-preacher-warns-horror-movies-could-turn-muslims-101816793.html>

Equally controversial was a series of popular Malay biker *Rempit* films which addressed urban youth as a social problem and highlighted working class youth subcultures such as *rempit* (illegal motorcycle racing). As well, they focused on other perceived social ills such as juvenile delinquency, violence and premarital sexual activity. Besides appealing to viewers who may have been able to identify with the on-screen troubled youth, the films also position youth as a subject of sensationalism and exploitation. Some of these *rempit* films were banned by government authorities for endorsing this subculture which was seen as dangerous and subversive, and engendering a moral panic.⁷

The controversy that surrounds these horror and action films highlights how particular expressions of genre may challenge and destabilise the dominant status quo. As Barry Keith Grant notes, this is true in the experience of any genre film, whether it fulfils, violates or subverts generic convention. Grant further states that '[i]n their mythic capacity, genre films provide a means for cultural dialogue, engaging their audiences in a shared discourse that re-affirms, challenges and tests cultural values and identity'.⁸

In addition, my classification of the films according to their broad generic categories is not an attempt to define and categorise them taxonomically. Rather, I aim to show the ways in which, within these broad categories, contemporary Malaysian filmmakers rework and hybridise dominant genre forms – and how, in the process, initiate particular kinds of conversations about national identity and

⁷ 2009, July 20, 'Rempit Ban: Ministry Won't Compensate Filmmakers', *The Malaysian Insider*, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/index.php/malaysia/32823-rempit-ban>

⁸ Barry Keith Grant, *Film Genre*, p. 30

culture. In order to do this, I draw on Andrew Tudor's notion of 'the empiricist dilemma', which he describes in the following way:

To take a genre such as a 'western', analyse it, and list its principle characteristics, is to beg the question that we must first isolate the body of films that are westerns. But they can only be isolated on the basis of the 'principle characteristics' which can only be discovered *from the films themselves* after they have been isolated.⁹

Tudor's solution to this problem of definition is to rely upon what he calls a 'common cultural consensus', that is, to analyse works that almost everyone would agree belong to a particular genre and generalise from there. This method is acceptable, Tudor concludes, because 'genre is what we collectively believe it to be'.¹⁰ This solution offers a pragmatic approach that has been taken up by many genre critics. Following Tudor and others, I begin with the premise that genres are both active processes and stable formations. Although genres are constantly in flux, generic terms are still used for the purposes of marketing, evaluating and discussing films. Regardless of whether viewers can provide a definition of a particular genre, they most likely will be able to recognise a horror or a comedy when they see it.¹¹

It should be noted that my selection of contemporary Malaysian films does not consider the aforementioned top box-office grossers such as *KL Gangster* and *Ombak Rindu*. This is because I centre on films that explicitly utilise and rework

⁹ Andrew Tudor (1973), *Theories of Film*. London: British Film Institute, p. 135

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 139

¹¹ See Jason Mittell (2001), 'A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory', *Cinema Journal*, 40(3), 10-11

generic elements and critically reflects on the process and effects of modernisation in Malaysia.

According to film theorist Rick Altman, examining the construction and development of genres can give us insight into those of communities and nations. He writes, 'The imagining of community, like the genrification process, always operates dialectically, through the transformation of an already existing community/ genre'.¹² Altman further postulates that the processes and social situations designated by Jurgen Habermas as the 'public sphere' and by Benedict Anderson as 'imagined communities' find a parallel and a direct heir in film and other media genres and their 'constellated communities'. According to Altman, the recurrent process of folding the margins into the centre, by which genres and nations alike are established and modified, has the power to continuously imbue affective power to national emblems such as anthems, holidays, flags and other symbols.¹³

Along similar lines, as my analyses will show, through their reworking of traditional and foreign genres, these contemporary Malaysian films show the complex and often quite contradictory ways in which Malaysia continually is being imagined, contested and negotiated as a modern nation. Altman's term, 'genrification' – reflects this ongoing process of nation-building which is particularly fraught, with respect to mixed temporalities and shifting identity categories, in postcolonial nation-states such as Malaysia. I hope to show the ways

¹² Rick Altman (1999). *Film/ Genre*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 203

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 206

in which the collective fantasies projected through and in cinema, help to reflect and shape this process.

As the most iconic art and entertainment form of the 20th century, cinema can be used to understand popular discourses of Malaysian identities and cultures, irrespective of whether it reflects ‘everyday-defined’ or ‘authority-defined’ social reality.¹⁴ The former refers to the reality experienced by ordinary people in their everyday lives while the latter refers to that which is defined by those who are part of the dominant power structure. As Shamsul A. B. notes, these two realities exist side by side at any given time though they are certainly not identical: everyday-defined social reality is experienced whereas authority-defined social reality is primarily observe, interpreted, and possibly imposed.¹⁵

When it comes to cinematic representations, attempts by the new generation of Malaysian filmmakers to depict the wide diversity of the country’s cultural identities reflect ‘everyday-defined’ social reality whereas many mainstream Malaysian films, which portray a more homogenous cultural identity, are more in line with ‘authority-defined’ social reality. In the new millennium, a number of Malaysian films, particularly independent digital films, have attempted to be overtly critical of the nation-state and representations. In these films, the homogeneity of the nation-state and its legitimising meta-narratives are fissured

¹⁴ Shamsul A.B. (1996), ‘Nations-of-Intent in Malaysia,’ in *Asian Forms of the Nation* (eds Stein Tonnesson & Hans Antlov), London: Curzon Press, pp.323-347. Shamsul attributes this concept to Robert I. Rotberg in ‘African Nationalism: Concept or Confusion?’ *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 4 (1), 1966, 33-46

¹⁵ Shamsul A. B. (2001), ‘A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of Malayness in Malaysia Reconsidered,’ *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32(3), 355-366

when directors give expression to the hopes, experiences and life-worlds of the country's ethnic, linguistic and religious minorities.¹⁶

However, in this thesis, I am interested in a group of films that I see as having the potential to blur the lines between mainstream, commercial cinema and independent art-house cinema. I want to demonstrate that these commercially released (and often successful) films also expose alternative voices and render visible emergent and oppositional discourses albeit in less explicitly critical ways. While all of the films initially were intended to address local audiences, most have also reached limited global audiences through international film festivals. In addition three films: *Mukhsin*, *Sell Out!* and *Bunohan* – received limited theatrical releases overseas in France, Canada and the US, respectively. All eight films in this study were commercially released, and some proved to be quite successful at the box-office. At the same time, each film also deliberately plays with dominant structures, genre forms, camera work, sound and music in ways that formally echo the work of independent filmmakers. In this sense, these films straddle two modes of filmmaking usually placed in opposition with respect to production, marketing and exhibition: the popular commercial movie and the independent art film.

It should be noted that cinema in Malaysia much like those of many other Asian countries, is closely allied to the state which exercises a considerable amount of economic and artistic control. In particular, the Censorship Board sees itself as the moral, national guardian of Malaysian society. I am interested in how the filmmakers whose work is examined in this thesis creatively play with genre in order to circumvent censorship and thus reach a larger audience.

¹⁶ I borrow this point from Wimal Dissanayake's (1994) edited book *Colonialism & Nationalism in Asian Cinema*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.

All of these films complicate the dominant notion of gendered subjectivities which is contained within binaries such as traditional and modern, ‘Old Malay’ and ‘New Malay’, Malays and non-Malays, *akal*/rationality and *nafsu*/lust, rural and urban, and professional and working-class, all of which have been spawned by the combined forces of the postcolonial capitalist state and resurgent Islam. Such binaries are often questioned through the films’ reworking of genre and destabilisation of gender roles which, in turn, are mediated primarily through diverse representations of time. In all of the films I examine, narrative or aesthetic forms invoke temporal tropes of longing, loss, transience, nostalgia and haunting which blur the lines between tradition and modernity, past and present. In so doing, they question and rupture the notion of a stable and modern present that conforms to the linear, teleological development of the nation-state. For example, in horror and romance films, local and transnational genres are revisited, reworked and mixed to provide more complex and ambivalent depictions of ambitious, independent ‘modern’ female characters as well as their repressed predecessors in the form of victimised mothers and monsters. In comedy and action films, anxieties are projected on marginalised forms of masculinity (such as working class, rural, ethnic and creative men) who play an updated role of the traditional ‘victim-hero’. I make the case that such transformations of genre and gender in these films critique Malaysian modernity, a form of modernity that has to be understood – according to Anthony Giddens – ‘as a dialectical phenomenon, in which events at one pole of a distanced relation often produce divergent or even contrary occurrences at another’ (I will elaborate this concept further in the

next chapter).¹⁷ Such a strategy fractures the chronology of ‘homogenous empty time’ that underlies the progressivist narrative of nation.

Similar to the ways in which these films bring together different temporalities, they reiterate generic conventions of old media and cinematic forms such as the culturally specific mode of melodrama, and elements of magic and superstition. In doing so, they fall outside the binary between realist and non-realist genres which is assumed in most US film scholarship. Instead, in these films we see distensions of real time, such as uncanny doublings, juxtapositions of seemingly unconnected moments and places, flashbacks, digressions that confuse temporal planes, and disorderly narratives, all of which push what we consider reality into the realm of the fantastic. Within these intervals of suspended chronology, subjective and objective perspectives commingle, and memory competes with history. This erosion of temporal boundaries fractures narratives of selfhood and gesture toward often paradoxical expressions of modernity in Malaysia, including the co-existence of increasing Islamisation, residual traces of colonialism and global capitalist modernity.

By bringing up these questions around gender and genre, temporality and nation, this study lies at the intersections of scholarship on Malaysian cinema, film genre, and Asian gender and cultural studies. It should be noted that it is neither a comprehensive account of contemporary Malaysian cinema nor of Malaysian film genres. Instead it provides close, contextualised readings of representations of gender and temporality in a number of contemporary, post-

¹⁷ Anthony Giddens (1991), *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, p. 22; Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 132

millennial genre films and examines how these representations reflect and critique ongoing processes of modernisation in Malaysia. The focus here is on textual analysis of the films, placed within the contexts of their production and critical reception both within and outside Malaysia.

Chapter Breakdown

Chapter One provides the theoretical framework for the thesis. It relocates the notion of film genre outside the dominant Hollywood model and within the Asian contexts discussed by Lalitha Gopalan, Wimal Dissanayake and Bliss Cua Lim. I suggest that certain conventions common to regional filmmaking such as the cultural mode of melodrama are important to any understanding of Malaysian film genres. I go on to discuss the ways in which genre intersects with gender, looking at seminal works on Hollywood cinema by Christine Gledhill, Linda Williams and Yvonne Tasker, which leads me to address how notions of gender have been constructed in Malaysia. I briefly explore contributions made by anthropologists and sociologists such as Maila Stivens, Aihwa Ong and Wazir Jahan Karim on gender in Malay society before specifically focusing on Khoo Gaik Cheng's work on gender in relation to nation and modernity in Malaysian films. Questions of nation and modernity finally lead this chapter to examine notions of temporality, a key trope in the films I analyse in the following chapters. Invoked narratively and aesthetically, this trope shapes and channels the films' critiques of Malaysian modernity.

Chapter Two lays out the historical background of Malaysian cinema by tracing its genre to older aesthetic and cultural forms, including oral and written

forms of folk literature and performance such as fables, *hikayat* (epics) and *bangsawan* (traditional opera) as well as old Malay cinema. This leads to an examination of the indigenous genre of the *purba* films. I then go on to chart the adaptation and development of four globally-influenced, popular film genres – romance, comedy, horror and action – which were and continue to be important to the evolution of Malaysian cinema. The chapter ends by highlighting more recent generic developments in contemporary Malaysian film in which old artistic forms and genres are being reworked and memorialised and mutating into new cycles and trends.

Chapters Three, Four, Five and Six offer close readings of individual films according to their broad generic categories. Chapter Three focuses on two horror films, *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* ('Pontianak of the Tuber Roses', 2004, Shuhaimi Baba) and *Susuk* ('Charm Needles', 2008, Amir Muhammad/ Naiem Ghalili), both of which attained commercial and critical success in Malaysia. The chapter centres on the films' complex representations of gender which play an important role in reworking the traditional Malaysian horror genre. Specifically, it focuses on the female protagonists as morally ambiguous characters that play both evil aggressors (as supernatural monsters) and poor victims (as aspiring young career women). These contradictions, and the emotional identification they may elicit from viewers, are depicted through innovative formal strategies such as playing with temporal markers, using high tech special effects and editing shots to disorient the viewer so that he or she is uncertain with whom to identify in a particular scene, or whether to identify with anyone at all.

In Chapter Four I perform a close reading of two action films, *Budak Kelantan* ('Kelantanese Bloke', 2008, Wan Azli Wan Jusoh) and *Bunohan* ('Return to Murder', 2012, Dain Said), which centre on the peoples and cultures of the north-eastern Malaysian state of Kelantan. The chapter argues that both *Budak Kelantan* and *Bunohan* consolidate different temporalities such as narrative ruptures and surrealistic images and different genres such as buddy, gangster and kickboxing films to destabilise and complicate masculine subjectivities. This in turn facilitates a critique of Malaysia's conflicting aspects of modernity. Both films invoke Kelantan's traditional art forms to make this critique. *Budak Kelantan* deploys *dikir barat* (a form of solo and group singing) to propel the narrative forward and to evoke a sense of nostalgic melancholy for the traditional rural past within the moral and economic uncertainty of working-class urban life. *Bunohan* weaves such art forms with traditional magic, healing rituals and mystical folklore. These signifiers of the archaic and the non-modern fracture the homogeneous time of the film narrative, reminding viewers of the continuous presence of the past within the present.

Chapter Five examines the parodic and satirical elements of two Malaysian comedies, *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* ('When the Full Moon Rises', 2008, Mamat Khalid) and *Sell Out!* (2008, Yeo Joon Han). This chapter argues that both films employ parody and satire to reiterate, combine and play with a number of genres in order to critique dominant narratives of nation. In *Kala Malam*, I show how director Mamat Khalid parodies both American film noir and old Malay horror and melodrama movies to critique unstable forms of masculinity which project anxieties about modernity onto female characters in the form of the

femme fatale. I then go on to look at how director Yeo in *Sell Out!* spoofs the American musical genre and Malaysian independent cinema to satirise the dehumanising effects of global corporate capitalism in Malaysia – a critique that is mediated through the film’s highlighting of contemporary kitsch, and, in particular, reality TV and karaoke.

Finally, Chapter Six examines two adolescent romantic films directed by the late Yasmin Ahmad: *Sepet* (‘Chinese Eye’, 2005) and *Mukhsin* (2007).¹⁸ This chapter argues that Yasmin’s reworking of the romance and melodrama genres induces a particular form of nostalgia that destabilises temporality along gender, ethnic and class lines, emphasising the ways that identity and subjectivity transform and mutate over time. In my readings, I examine the director’s use of nostalgia in her warm depictions of everyday objects, rituals and places from the interior space of the home to the exterior ones of the *kampong*. I show how this nostalgic affect is deployed to critique contemporary forces of modernisation in Malaysia that preclude cultural exchange between and across different social groups. In this sense the object of nostalgia in these films is the utopic desire for human union and togetherness.

¹⁸ Part of this chapter is published in Norman Yusoff (2011, Fall/Winter), ‘*Sepet*, *Mukhsin*, and *Talentine*: Yasmin Ahmad’s Melodrama of the Melancholic Boy-in-Love’, *Asian Cinema*, 22(2), 20-46

CHAPTER ONE

Genre, Gender and Temporality: Framing Contemporary Malaysian Cinema

Genre is first and foremost a boundary phenomenon.
– Christine Gledhill¹⁹

... in the fin de siècle, we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion.
– Homi Bhabha²⁰

Introduction

In 2011 former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad expressed the view that the proliferation of Malaysian horror films was counter-productive to building a progressive and developed modern society.²¹ Mahathir's claim spawned a flurry of reactions by filmmakers, academics, critics and clerics, some of whom concurred with his view while others refuted it. He maintained that horror films threatened to instil backward modes of thinking and behaviour in Malaysian audiences, who were already entrenched in superstition and the supernatural. In addition, Mahathir advised Malaysians to concentrate on 'adopting more scientific

¹⁹ Christine Gledhill (2000), 'Rethinking Genre', in *Reinventing Film Studies*, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds), London: Arnold, p. 221

²⁰ Homi Bhabha (1994), *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, p. 1

²¹ Satiman Jamin (2011, 02 October), 'Dr M: Ghost films hurt society', *New Straits Times*, <http://www.nst.com/nst/articles/16halo-2/Article/art>

methods in solving problems'.²² The then prime minister's condemnation explains why only a few horror films were made during his leadership.

Mahathir's criticism of Malaysian horror films and their promulgation of society's belief in superstition was related to his modernising project *Vision 2020*, which aimed to see Malaysia achieve fully developed country status by the year 2020.²³ Genres such as horror were seen as having the potential to promote a critical and contesting view of this official discourse of progress and development. The concept of development derives its power not only by positing a particular idea of the future but also by providing a dialogue with an imagined past. Development re-imagines the past to accommodate a teleological vision of the future. The past manifests itself in traditional, ostensibly archaic representations of national culture. By promoting so-called primitive and superstitious thinking, these representations are seen as obstacles to nation-building efforts that strive toward a modern future. Therefore, development legitimises Malaysian political elites such as Mahathir by placing them in the position of mediating the past and the future, as makers of history.²⁴ The idea of development as progressive, following the western mode of capitalism, builds on and reinforces the linear

²² Satiman Jamin, 'Dr M: Ghost films hurt society', <http://www.nst.com/nst/articles/16halo-2/Article/art>

²³ During his 22-year rule as Prime Minister of Malaysia, Mahathir amassed many achievements for Malaysia's economy and infrastructure. Under his leadership, some of the projects constructed included The Penang Bridge, the first national car *Proton Saga*, the Petronas Twin Towers, the Multi-Media Super Corridor, the city of Putrajaya, the Formula One car-racing circuit, Kuala Lumpur International Airport, freeways and commuter railways.

²⁴ I borrow J. Peter Brosius's (2003) idea of development with regard to 'temporality' from his 'The Forest and the Nation: Negotiating Citizenship in Sarawak, East Malaysia', in *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and Belonging in the Hinterlands* (ed. Renato Rosaldo), Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 76-133.

conception of time which has been critiqued by cultural scholars such as Walter Benjamin, Henri Bergson and Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others.

Temporally, Mahathir's assertion implied a tension between the general secular time of history and the spiritual time of gods and spirits. The continued, if somewhat wavering, belief of modern-day viewers in the existence of the supernatural serves as a threat to the apparent coherence of what is now understood as the present. This is particularly relevant to Malaysia's adoption and adaptation of the construction of historicised time, or a universal, rational mode of time-keeping that ensures Malaysia's international recognition as a 'modern' nation state. When Mahathir came to power in the early 1980s, he initiated a standard Malaysian time for Peninsular Malaysia and East Malaysia (Malaysian Borneo comprising Sabah and Sarawak).²⁵ In effect, the previous 'heterogeneous worlds of times'²⁶ were now confined to one time and one space, that is, to the homogeneous and unified nation-state of present day Malaysia. Any attempts to 'de-modernise' society, such as by resorting to ancient, archaic practices and beliefs (often invoked in Malaysian horror films), were seen as a threat to nation building.

In addition, Mahathir voiced his apprehension regarding the backwardness and primitiveness of Malay society in his controversial book, *The Malay Dilemma* (1970). Mahathir claims that ethnic Malays had long been farmers living in small villages with a very limited division of labour. Echoing his criticism of Malaysian

²⁵ Eunice Au (2012, 1 January), 'When Time Was Standardised', *New Straits Times*, <http://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/when-time-was-standardised-1.26231>

²⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty (1996), "Marx After Marxism: History, Subalternity and Difference," in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, ed. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl. London: Routledge, 62

horror films, he painted a more negative image of the Malay *kampong* than did some of his predecessors, describing its inhabitants as superstitious and backward, lazy and uninclined to do hard work, and feudal in outlook, with an excessive tolerance for unemployed relatives.²⁷

In this respect, cinematic genres such as horror, by rendering visible indigenous cultural and spiritual beliefs, might be seen as critiquing this state-endorsed version of modernity. Off-screen, certain social experiences such as cases of spirit possession among young women also have fostered a generic representation of the female as a ghost, evil agent or victim. For instance, Aihwa Ong examined spirit possession episodes in modern multinational factories in Malaysia in the 1970s, following the government's New Economic Policy which intended to restructure the political economy.²⁸ Industrialisation programs induced the large-scale influx of young rural Malay men and women to enter urban manufacturing plants set up by multinational corporations. This wave of industrial employment, which witnessed spirit possession afflicting young single women, can be read as articulating the threat posed by women's economic independence and social mobility to men's traditional economic dominance. Yet Mahathir's vision of a sanitised, modern Malaysia cannot account for such life-worlds of spirit and superstition which cannot be understood or explained adequately through the so-called modern and rational terms of the West.

²⁷ See Mahathir Mohamad (1970), *The Malay Dilemma*. Singapore: Times Books International, p. 107

²⁸ Aihwa Ong (1988, February), 'The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia', *American Ethnologists*, 15(1), 31

Such a critique of modernity is often mediated through representations of gender, alongside those of ethnicity, class and nation, which inform the generic modes of Malaysian cinema. In other words, anxieties related to tradition and modernity often are implicated in events and narratives that foreground gender (as in the aforementioned case of spirit possession) and ethnicity/class (as expressed by the former prime minister). Such anxieties reveal the distinct links and parallels that often are assumed between social otherness and the pre-modern and that are articulated in the films I examine.

In order to examine these relationships, this chapter looks at how the concepts of genre and gender intersect in cinema generally, and also more specifically within Malaysian film.

In the following pages I look at how the frame of reference for examining film genres may be shifted to individual cultural and national contexts. I suggest that one of the ways that this shift can be achieved is by approaching melodrama as a culturally-specific mode. To do this, I will begin with a brief overview of relevant scholarship on genre theory and film genres that lies outside and goes beyond the dominant frameworks of US cinema.

Reworking Genre

The initial idea for this thesis arose out of William van der Heide's book *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*, in which the author rejects the use of genre as critical approach to Malaysian

cinema.²⁹ According to Van der Heide, this approach is limited in its centring of US cinema as explained below:

The term genre is most frequently applied to the American cinema and studies of particular genres are overwhelmingly devoted to American film genres. When the genre is 'non-American,' it is usually given a national label: the Japanese samurai genre, the Chinese kung-fu genre and the Indian stunt film. If a genre does cross national boundaries, this is often presented as a devaluation of the purity of the genre, as was the case with critical responses to the Italian Western.³⁰

Van der Heide's stance on genre as inappropriate for the analysis of Malaysian cinema has to be understood on several levels. On the one hand, his argument may be valid on the grounds that genres are *a priori* categories that classify and structure texts, rather than ones continuously reconstituted through textual performance. Van der Heide's rejection of genre stems from his positioning of such a critical approach within the predominant studies of US film genres. In this respect, he dismisses the notion of genre as a boundary phenomenon; the issue of difference also accentuates the fact that some genres are fluid, i.e., more open-ended in their conventions or more permeable in their boundaries than others. Such definitions emphasise that texts often exhibit the conventions of more than one genre. Janet Staiger, in her essay 'Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History', reinforces the impossibility of static genres, insisting that 'Hollywood films have never been pure instances of genres'.³¹

²⁹ William van der Heide (2002), *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 28

Similarly, Felicia Chan and Angelina Karpovich, in their edited anthology *Genre in Asian Film and Television: New Approaches*, ask: how and why does genre continue to be important in the way we think about film and television? Such an approach, according to them, ‘consciously sidesteps the idealist bent in genre studies and its potential pitfalls [...] to theorise what a “pure” genre might be, frequently to come to the conclusion that pure genres exist only in the realm of fantasy and that all films are hybrid to different degrees’.³²

On the other hand, rejecting the concept of genre in specific national cinemas means disavowing the potential of genres in many non-western cultures to constitute a significant area of creative expression, for they too are products of specific histories and socio-cultural formations. Given that the main thrust of Van der Heide’s thesis is ‘lines of connectedness’, genre could have been used as an important trope in informing this site where borderlines are more porous and amorphous. Both genre and culture are boundary phenomena. Van der Heide recognises the significance of borders regarding them as sites where cultural forces intermingle rather than conceiving of them as rigid lines of separation between cultures. However, he asserts that this fluid model of boundaries runs counter to conventional notions of genre which emphasise national origins or styles. This being the case, Van der Heide does not consider the possibility of drawing on more expansive notions of genre itself as dynamic and flexible in

³¹ Janet Staiger (2003), ‘Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History’. In *Film Genre Reader 3*, Barry Keith Grant (ed). Austin: University of Texas Press, p. 186

³² Felicia Chan, Angelina Karpovich and Xin Zhang (eds)(2011), *Genre in Asian Film and Television: New Approaches*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, p. 1

order to further examine the cultural and aesthetic fluidity of non-American film genres.

Chan and Karpovich suggest that it is time to investigate genres in Asian screen media and that such studies should be conducted from and about various regions of the continent. They state that one may look at how a genre operates in different filmic and televisual texts produced in various historical, political and cultural conditions. Additionally, according to Chan and Karpovich, it is imperative in many Asian countries to engage in debate about the social role of the popular arts as they form a prominent part of national discourses and constitute a considerable amount of cultural output.³³

In line with Chan and Karpovich's suggestions, Adam Knee, in his keynote speech at the 6th Southeast Asian Cinema Conference in July 2010, identified comparable issues and developments in cinemas throughout the region, highlighting the significance of changing moving-image technologies in shifting modes of production, distribution, consumption and aesthetics.³⁴ One of the trends that Knee emphasised was genre, providing an example of horror films which have a strong regional perspective and substantial overlap from country to country. As well, action, comedy and melodrama genres thrive in all Southeast Asian countries. At times horror films, along with other genres like historical

³³ Felicia Chan and Angelina Karpovich, *Genre in Asian Film and Television*, pp. 2-3

³⁴ Adam Knee (2010), 'In (qualified) defence of Southeast Asian Cinema'. Keynote Speech, 6th Southeast Asian Cinema Conference, Ho Chi Minh City, 1-4 July, quoted in Katinka van Heeren (2012), *Contemporary Indonesian Film: Spirits of Reform and Ghosts from the Past*, Leiden: KITLV Press, pp. 15-17

drama, refer to shared political or traumatic events.³⁵ In line with his emphasis on genre, Knee observed that some Southeast Asian films share regionally inflected prevalent themes, which revolve around the local experience of – and response to – modernity and globalism, addressing tensions between urban and rural lifestyles as well as tensions between old and new values.³⁶

Based on Chan, Karpovich and Knee's observations, approaching national cinemas through their aesthetic, cultural and industrial uses of genre seems important at this point in time. Again, in order to do this, we need to go beyond definitions of film genre derived from US cinema that have become universalised. At the same time, certain concepts are relevant to an examination of Asian films generally and Malaysian cinema more specifically. One such concept is that of verisimilitude which film theorist Steve Neale brings up in his discussion of the generic systems of cinema. Neale suggests that the system of expectations utilises various regimes of verisimilitude, 'various systems of plausibility, motivation, justification and belief',³⁷ which entails notions of appropriateness and plausibility. Drawing on Tzvetan Todorov's two types of verisimilitude: generic and socio-cultural,³⁸ Neale attributes the term 'generic verisimilitude' to the codes or rules of a genre that a text has to follow in order to be plausible. 'Socio-cultural verisimilitude' is linked to public opinion, in that it is achieved whenever people believe a text to be true. Todorov emphasised that this does not mean that socio-

³⁵ Adam Knee, 'In (qualified) defence of Southeast Asian Cinema', 8; Katinka van Heeren, *Contemporary Indonesian Film*, p. 16

³⁶ Adam Knee, 'In (qualified) defence of Southeast Asian Cinema', 9; Katinka van Heeren, *Contemporary Indonesian Film*, p. 17

³⁷ Steve Neale (2000), *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge, p. 32

³⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 82-83

cultural verisimilitude is similar to being true or real, but that it corresponds to discourses considered to be true. Neale observes that both regimes of verisimilitude may reside in a film, but there may be tensions between the two.

In certain genres, such as horror and fantasy films, the generic regimes of verisimilitude transgress socio-cultural regimes due to their fantasy elements which are seldom encountered in the real world. This notion of regimes of verisimilitude endows each genre with its own laws, rules and norms, 'its own particular conventions of verisimilitude, over and above those of mainstream narrative fiction as a whole'.³⁹ Some genres, such as melodrama and gangster films, tend to be judged according to strict, conventional canons of realism whereas others, such as horror and fantasy, are recognised as drawing more on the faculty of imagination, as being closer to fantasy than reality.

In undertaking this analysis of Malaysian genre films, I want to show how these films to a certain extent transcend the aforementioned borders or 'regimes of verisimilitude'. Such interruption or crossing-over of generic 'regimes of verisimilitude' was already evident in old Malay films. The incorporation of the less narratively motivated song and dance routines tended to disrupt the 'realistic' imagining of social drama or the specifically generic conventions of horror. In many ways, these contemporary films' blurring of generic boundaries echoes old Malay cinema's hybrid nature, both generically and culturally (see Chapter Two). For example, old Malay films have their roots in Malaysia's traditional theatrical form of *bangsawan* and in Indian cinema through the creative influence of South Indian directors. In addition, the narratives of many old Malay films were adapted

³⁹ Steve Neale (1980), *Genre*. London: British Film Institute, p. 36.

from folk literature, some of which derived from Western, Indian, Parsee, Chinese and Japanese narratives.⁴⁰ For example, the old literary genre of *hikayat* (epic) is itself a hybrid form *par excellence*, wide-ranging and complex in nature, content, form, structure and qualities.⁴¹

The above examples may explain why, in the history and development of Malaysian cinema, one hardly encounters generic terms such as science-fiction, fantasy or ‘magic realism’. This is because most texts of the old, pre-modern folk literary tradition and the *bangsawan*-influenced old Malay films already were imbued with elements of magic and superstition. In the films I examine, I will show that this tendency is envisioned through the directors’ creative reworking and utilisation of existing local and global genres, which, in the main, correspond to their diverse articulations of temporality. Such articulations invoke tropes of longing, loss, transience, nostalgia and haunting that are used to reflect on, and often critique Malaysia’s dialectical modernity. I suggest that the blurring of generic regimes of verisimilitude can trigger the destabilisation of perceived dominant representations of gender, class and ethnicity within the context of a modernising nation.

Recent scholarship on Asian cinema has proposed different ways of looking at film genre. For example, Michael Christopher, writing about questions of genre in Tamil cinema, argues that traditional Euro-American notions of genre

⁴⁰ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 102

⁴¹ Muhammad Haji Salleh (1991), *Yang Empunya Cerita: The Mind of the Malay Author*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p. 99

are not entirely applicable to the films of Tamil Nadu.⁴² Tamil cinema, according to Christopher, simultaneously draws upon the narrative and aesthetic conventions of multiple transnational genres and incorporates other Asian cinematic influences, including those of China and Hong Kong. He offers both an historical and a critical overview of regional cinema in South India, which since the 1930s, has developed distinct styles of its own, separate from the more familiar Hindi-language Bollywood films. In addition, he points to the two blockbuster movies *Thambi* (2006, Seeman) and *Chandramukhi* (2005, Vasu), which support his hypothesis that Western definitions of genre fail in India, especially in Tamil Nadu, because no distinctive catalogue of genre patterns exists in Tamil cinema, with the exception of a few defined genres such as the mythological, neo-nativism and socials. *Thambi* highlights martial arts elements with the strong cultural input of South India whereas *Chandramukhi* incorporates martial arts alongside comedy and spooky elements. Christopher argues that most films are multi-genre and that, it is important for Indian film scholars to generate their own categories of genres rather than merely to copy those of the US.

A more proximate example of the violation of the generic regimes of verisimilitude, to which I have alluded earlier, appears in Lalitha Gopalan's work *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*, which opens up newer frames of thinking about genre in a specific cultural and national

⁴² Michael Christopher (2011), 'Everything Masala? Genres in Tamil Cinema'. In *Genre in Asian Film and Television*, Felicia Chan, Angelina Karpovich & Xin Zhang (eds). London: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 101-114

context.⁴³ Gopalan employs the term ‘interruptions’ to describe the narrative structure of the Indian action film genre. She considers how formal interruptions such as song and dance sequences and the interval, along with the production, reception, consumption and censorship shape the textual composition of these films. Gopalan argues that Indian cinema generally exhibits the trademark of ‘interruptions’ that draw on and play with genre; in particular, she emphasises its propensity for undercutting the hermetic narrative universe of Hollywood films by interrupting it with song and dance sequences, comedy tracks and multi-plot narratives. Gopalan suggests that instead of dismissing these interruptions, or moments that break from the diegetic universe and disrupt the linear trajectory of the narrative, one must come to terms with the fact that they play a crucial role in constituting the primary narratives of Indian popular cinema.

More importantly, Gopalan stresses how identifying these interruptions encourages us to start from a different cultural and aesthetic point of reference. Rather than mulling over how these films are derived from Hollywood genres, her approach allows an exploration of the ways in which they both experiment with and strengthen Indian cinematic conventions. In this respect, Gopalan’s work attempts to challenge certain Euro-American film theories: ‘a film theory that, although generated from engagements exclusively with Euro-American cinemas, assumes a trans-regional durability’.⁴⁴ Here, Gopalan attempts to develop her own strategies of engagement, not by introducing a separate theoretical paradigm for

⁴³ Lalitha Gopalan (2002), *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*. London: British Film Institute.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 9

Indian popular cinema but by ‘rupturing the provincialism surrounding film theory and in the process rejuvenating it’.⁴⁵ She points out that US-centric theory has missed not only the differences – but also the connections to be made – between and with other national cinemas and the so-called ‘New Hollywood’.

Finally, Gopalan’s approach leads her to formulate the phrase ‘constellation of interruptions’ to account for a nuanced range of disruptions that texture the transference between spectator, screen and cinematic viewing duration. This includes interruptive forces such as irony, flashbacks and auteur signatures. The films I analyse in this thesis also constitute forms of ‘interruption’ due to the filmmakers’ reworking of genre which reconfigures normative temporality and critiques dominant notions of identity. In the context of Malaysian cinema, one of the ways in which the above mode of ‘interruption’ or ‘non-verisimilitude’ is mobilised is through the cultural mode of melodrama, a pervasive element that underpins most films irrespective of genre.

Melodrama as Primary Mode

In her theorisation of Asian cinema, Anne T. Ciecko refers to genre, stars, auteurs, fans, and cinematic spectacle as ways of comparing and contrasting different Asian cinemas and moving toward a more unified vision of ‘Asian film’.⁴⁶ In particular, Ciecko mentions melodrama as a mode or sensibility that persists

⁴⁵ Lalitha Gopalan, *Cinema of Interruption*, p. 24

⁴⁶ Anne T. Ciecko (ed.) (2006), *Contemporary Asian Cinema*. Oxford: Berg.

‘across genres of Asian cinema and other cultural forms’.⁴⁷ She notes that melodrama is popular not only in Asian cinema, but also Asian television (soap operas) and music (sentimental pop). She suggests that we think of melodrama in Asian cinema not so much as a genre, but following Raymond Williams, as a ‘structure of feelings’ that ‘permeates film narratives, impacts representational strategies, and regulates and unleashes displays of affect’.⁴⁸ For Ciecko, melodrama can be used as a dialogue that corresponds to ‘history and memory, and traditional values and gendered roles (especially the institution of the family and its surrogates), in a time of social, economic, and political change’.⁴⁹ I extend this point to my reading of Malaysian films to demonstrate how the melodramatic mode across genres articulates culturally specific attributes. In particular, I look at melodrama as an everyday mode and integral part of the national psyche.

Along similar lines, Wimal Dissanayake conceives of melodrama both as a genre and a mode in the specific context of Asian cultures.⁵⁰ He emphasises the importance of melodrama for the ways in which it ‘illuminate[s] the deeper psychic structures of various cultures’.⁵¹ In this respect, Dissanayake notes that:

... Melodramas exemplify in concrete ways the diverse casts of mind, shapes of emotions, vocabularies of expression, imaginative logics, and priorities of valuation of different cultures. Art in any society cannot be understood in aesthetic terms alone but needs to be related to other domains of social activity; concomitantly, melodramas gain in depth and

⁴⁷ Anne T. Ciecko, *Contemporary Asian Cinema*, p. 26

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁵⁰ Wimal Dissanayake (ed.)(1993), *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 2

definition when examined in relation to the fabric of life and cultural contours of the society from which they emerge.⁵²

In particular, I draw on Dissanayake's explication of melodrama in the Asian context when I discuss the concepts of suffering and the ensuing pathos associated with the 'victim hero', a (usually male) figure that cuts across genres, in many of the films that I examine. According to Dissanayake, most Asian cultures valorise human suffering as a pervasive fact of life due in the main to the myriad religious cultures and beliefs on the continent, which conceive of pain and suffering as one's fate.⁵³ Salvation is a liberating experience 'emanating from insights into the nature and ineluctability of human suffering', which metaphysically 'becomes the condition of possibility for participating in the meaning of life'.⁵⁴ Dissanayake also highlights Asian melodrama as providing a space for the confluence of tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western sensibilities, and the past and present, all of which contribute to its tensions and hybridity.⁵⁵

Dissanayake's notion of suffering can be compared to Muhammad Haji Salleh's discussion of literary concepts related to specific emotive modes and nuances such as *nestapa* (grief) and *dukalara* (sadness).⁵⁶ These concepts are

⁵² Wimal Dissanayake, *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*, p. 3

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 4

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 5

⁵⁶ Muhammad Haji Salleh (2008), *The Poetics of Malay Literature*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

useful for exploring the traces and repetition of melodramatic modes across genres in Malaysian cinema. While the popular tales recognise *nestapa* as one of the most important human emotions, *dukalara*, in its complex presence, challenges us to sketch the many shades of our emotions, from the tragic sorrow of a mother who has lost her children to the unbearable longing of a lover waiting for the return of his beloved.⁵⁷ In the wider cosmology of belief, a greater meaning of human life on this planet is also implied. As adherents to Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam, the Malays were and continue to be loyal and sensitive inhabitants of nature: their beliefs are coloured by life at the edge of the forest, by the river or sea.⁵⁸ As Muhammad further points out: ‘The temporal nature of their short lives, especially in the tropics in the last hundred years, may be described as fragile, and troubled by diseases, pain and suffering’.⁵⁹ In contemporary Malaysian films, I demonstrate that this culturally specific melodramatic mode not only foregrounds the suffering triggered by metaphysical fate, but also highlights the tension brought about by modernity along gender, class, racial and national lines.

Following Ciecko and Dissanayake, I will highlight the melodramatic proclivity of contemporary Malaysian films to foreground the conflict between individual needs and collectivist values which is inherent in the tension between tradition and modernity. The idea of melodrama as an everyday mode dates back to old literary works and classical cinematic melodrama, in which the milieu

⁵⁷ Muhammad Haji Salleh, *The Poetics of Malay Literature*, p. 186

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 188

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 188

portrayed is saturated with *nestapa*. The collectivist social value system is often portrayed as taking precedence over that of the individual, irrespective of whether the film is set in the rural *kampong* or the bustling urban city, pre-independent Malaya or post-colonial contemporary Malaysia. Regardless of whether the genre is comedy, horror, romance or action, most of the films articulate the notion of one's identity as Malay or Malaysian – as invariably representative of his or her entire social system. What is perceived, valued and judged by other members of society shapes one's moral conduct or standard of behaviour.⁶⁰

Another culture-bound form of emotion that characterises the Malaysian films that I examine in this thesis is *rajuk*, a form of sulking that can be seen as a melodramatic emotional expression. Traditionally, it is quite acceptable for a person to feel hurt by the tiniest slight, real or imagined, effected by someone close. The physical response of the wounded party is to look mortally wounded and withdraw from the person who has erred. This person will then show due remorse and proceed to *pujuk* (coax) the *rajuk* person to forgive and forget.⁶¹ This emotive mode, which is often found in old Malay literary genres, for example in poems (*pantun*) and epics (*hikayat*), is also evident in old Malay films.⁶²

According to Anuar Nor Arai, *rajuk* is an important phenomenon in the socio-

⁶⁰ Anuar Nor Arai (2002), 'Rajuk, Pujuk, Kasih, Kempunan, Resah Gelisah dan Air Mata: Mengenai Intelligensi Budaya dalam Filem Melayu' ("Sulking, Coaxing, Loving, Yearning, Anxiety and Tears: On Cultural Intelligence in Malay Film"), *Jurnal Pengajian Melayu* (Malay Studies Journal), 12, 152

⁶¹ Adibah Amin (2008), *Glimpses: Cameos of Malaysian Life*. Petaling Jaya: MPH Publishing, p. 105; Muhammad Haji Salleh (2011, December). 'In Search of Literary Love in Malay Literature: The Early Stages of Relationship'. *Asiatic*, 5(2), 37

⁶² Anuar Nor Arai, 'Rajuk, Pujuk, Kasih, Kempunan, Resah Gelisah dan Air Mata: Mengenai Intelligensi Budaya dalam Filem Melayu' ("Sulking, Coaxing, Loving, Yearning, Anxiety and Tears: On Cultural Intelligence in Malay Film"), 145-181

political lives of Malays, both male and female. Culturally speaking, this disposition is often regarded as feminine, but, in reality, both men and women may express *rajuk*.

Muhammad Haji Salleh traces this *rajuk* in romantic *pantun* (Malay poetic form) as an emotion expressed by a girl towards a boy she loves. In old Malay films, according to Anuar Nor Arai, a servant (traditional warrior) expressed *rajuk* towards his master (Sultan) when the former must confront the injustice of feudalism, as depicted in *Hang Jebat* (see Chapter Two). This being the case, *rajuk* can be attributed to socially marginalised or oppressed individuals who experience suppression and repression. For Anuar, many old Malay melodramatic films foregrounded *rajuk* in their depictions of ‘the fictitious adventures of human relationships’ to reflect a culturally familiar form of behaviour and also to generate ‘drama’ in Malay films.⁶³

Hanita Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie’s recent work on Malaysian cinema focuses on the melodramatic mode in relation to gender.⁶⁴ Hanita argues that melodrama defined the representation of Malay women as female protagonists in Malaysian films from the early 1990s to 2009. Hanita supports Christine Gledhill’s notion that gender representation and specifically that of women, is at the core of cultural negotiation in melodrama. For Hanita, what is central to this negotiation is the figure of woman who has long functioned as a powerful and ambivalent

⁶³ Anuar Nor Arai, ‘Rajuk, Pujuk, Kasih, Kempunan, Resah Gelisah dan Air Mata’ (‘Sulking, Coaxing, Loving, Yearning, Anxiety and Tears’), 150-151

⁶⁴ Hanita Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie (2011), ‘Negotiating Melodrama and the Malay Woman: Female Representation and the Melodramatic Mode in Malaysian-Malay Films from the early 1990s-2009’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow.

expression of the male psyche. Thematically, the Malay films of the 1990s and the first decade of the new millennium that focus on female protagonists, largely depict women as independent entities negotiating patriarchal rules in pursuit of vocational, romantic and sexual emancipation. Hanita combines Western with Malaysian concepts of melodrama to show the more complex representations of the female protagonist that inform and constitute the dimension of social change and define the new role of women in Malaysia's market economy.

Hanita's work generally revolves around traditionally female-oriented genres such as melodrama, romance and romantic comedy. My thesis extends her work by engaging with other genres such as horror, parody and action, in addition to taking into account some of the culturally-specific emotions mentioned earlier. While Hanita appears more interested in looking at how melodrama, as a mode, helps constitute different types of Malay women such as the urban, romantic and sexual woman – I am more inclined to demonstrate how the melodramatic mode defines various Malaysian film genres by complicating reified gender binaries more generally.

How Did Gender Get Into Genre?

As Barry Keith Grant notes, genre movies feature standard ways of representing gender, class, race and ethnicity. Generally, Hollywood action genres such as adventure, war, gangster, detective, science fiction and the western historically targeted a male audience, while musicals and romantic melodramas (also known as 'weepies') were marketed as 'women's films'. For Grant, this distinction bespeaks wider patriarchal assumptions about gender difference in the real

world.⁶⁵ According to Grant, by the 1990s, many Hollywood genre movies had attempted to open up genres to more progressive representations of gender, further pushing the boundaries of traditional generic conventions.

In addressing how Malaysian filmmakers destabilise traditional gender binaries by reworking genres, I want to revisit a question raised by Christine Gledhill: namely, does thinking about the constructedness and performativity of gender and sexual identities enable us to approach the production of film genres and the cultural-textual work of generic convention differently?⁶⁶ According to Gledhill, genre and gender – which derive from similar etymological roots and refer to ‘kinds’ or ‘types’ – have been identified in terms of discreet bodies of conventions, and governed by rules of inclusion and exclusion. In many ways this thesis attempts to respond to Gledhill’s observation that: ‘while Western film studies has theorised genre largely in terms of Hollywood, media globalisation and postcolonial thinking raise questions about the transmigration of genres between national cultures and the intersections of gender with race, nationality and class’. This is because such intersections challenge the limitations of genre theory regarding Hollywood and of gender as a totalising identity. In this respect, I would like to think that, in specific cases of genres such as Asian ghost-horror films, it is through depictions of gender that this particular genre is culturally defined. For example, in many Asian horror films, pervasive notions of femininity

⁶⁵ Barry Keith Grant (2007), *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*. London: Wallflower, p. 80

⁶⁶ Christine Gledhill (ed.) (2012), *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press.

often take precedence over elements of monstrosity, further complicating representations of women as evil or victim.

Linda Williams, in her seminal article, 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', further explores the relations between genre and gender.⁶⁷ Williams utilises the identification theories of Christian Metz and Jean-Louis Badry along with genre theory to consider what she refers to as 'body genres': horror, melodrama and pornography. She describes these genres as generating excessive and overwhelming feelings that produce reactive bodily sensations in the viewers. This effect is achieved visually and aurally in spasms and tears induced by the overwhelming sadness of melodrama, screams and gasps from the terror of horror and moans from the sexual pleasure of pornography. What is crucial in Williams' discussion is the idea that the popularity of these genres hinges upon the rapid changes taking place in definitions of gender roles, identities and relations, that is, what it means to be a man or a woman.

Given that these body genres centre on embodied modes of film viewing that do not privilege sight over affective intensities, I take Williams' argument one step further to show that some genres such as horror, action and comedy produce embodied affective experiences by putting the viewers in contact with different temporalities. This strategy, I suggest, may produce new forms of thought that challenge binaristic and hierarchical logic, particularly concerning gender. Teresa Rizzo suggests that film analysis and viewing may be understood as an assemblage between the film and the viewer. A cinematic assemblage can be

⁶⁷ Linda Williams (1991, Summer), 'Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess', *Film Quarterly*, 44(4), 2-13

either geared towards the molar plane, which is dominated by a system of representation that produces binaries and categories that encourage fixed subjects and identities or the molecular plane, which favours becoming or bodies, subjectivities and identities in a process of transformation.⁶⁸ According to Russell West-Pavlov, gender, as the epitome of engenderment or embodied creation, ‘has been contained by being split into two putatively constituent elements – masculinity and femininity’.⁶⁹ This splitting assigns different forms of becoming, that is, ‘existing in a dynamic and constantly changing manner, to different sorts of human beings ...’⁷⁰

The notion of ‘body genre’ also underpins Yvonne Tasker’s work on masculinity and the American action cinema.⁷¹ Tasker argues that we need to account for the pleasures and political significance of popular action films beyond looking at how they reflect cultural discourses of race, class and sexuality. According to Tasker, the complex ways in which film genre affirms gendered identities, while mobilising identifications and desires, undermine the stability of such categories. The meaning of the body on the screen is not secure; it is shifting, inscribed with meaning in different ways at different points.⁷² In particular, Tasker’s assertion that the representation of masculinity in the action genre cannot be understood within a simple gendered binary that contrasts female/feminine

⁶⁸ See Teresa Rizzo (2012), *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction*, London: Continuum.

⁶⁹ Russell West-Pavlov (2013), *Temporalities*. London: Routledge, p. 100

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 100-101

⁷¹ Yvonne Tasker (1993), *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. London: Routledge.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p. 165

with male/masculine accords with my interrogation of gender in Malaysian genre films. Tasker's work on masculinity in relation to action genres prompts me to explore gender in contemporary Malaysian discourse and its association with traditional customs (*adat*), Islam and modernity. Before doing this, though, let me first provide a brief political history of Malaysia, centring on the events that furnish a salient background to the issues of identity dealt with in this thesis.

From History to Identity Politics: The Fractured Narratives of Malaysia

Before colonialism, west or peninsular Malaysia lay in the path of a trade route between China and India; in addition, for centuries it had been home to a variety of different ethnic, cultural and religious communities. Within the Malay archipelago itself, the movement of peoples – and the languages, cultures, modes of dress, behaviour and livings they brought with them – had occurred for more than two thousand years.⁷³ In the 1400s, a small settlement of Sumatran refugees established the trading centre for the region. Malacca, as it became known, was soon host to Malays, Arabs, Indians, Javanese, Sumatrans, Bugis, Borneons, Filipinos, Persians and Chinese. In 1511, Malacca fell to the Portuguese; in 1641, the Dutch took over Malacca, which in turn was later taken over by the British in the 1800s, along with the remainder of peninsular Malaysia.⁷⁴

⁷³ Farish A. Noor (2004, December), 'Modernity, Islam and Tradition: The Struggle for the Heart and Soul of Art and Culture in Malaysia', http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2004/modernity_islam_and_tradition

⁷⁴ Julian C. H. Lee (2010), *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 36-37

Malaysia achieved independence in 1957 by means of negotiations that had been reached between the British and the Western-educated leaders of the major ethnicities of west Malaysia (the Alliance) in the early 1950s. The stability of the new nation-state was grounded primarily in a delicate ‘ethnic bargain’ between non-Malays and indigenous Malays. Certain privileges were constitutionally provided for the latter in exchange for the former’s rights to citizenship and economic wealth. In 1963, with the entry of Sabah and Sarawak into Malaysia, the ‘bargain’ was extended further to give similar provision to the Sarawak and Sabah indigenous peoples, who, together with the Malays, shared ‘*bumiputera*’ (‘sons of the soil’) status. This differentiated them from the non-*bumiputeras*. These new dichotomies subsequently became the new bases for defining and contesting identities among citizens in the Malaysian nation-state.⁷⁵ Malaysia came into being in 1963 when Singapore, Sabah and Sarawak were included in the formation of the Federation of Malaya. Singapore was expelled from the Federation in 1965 after, Lee Kuan Yew, the leader of Singapore’s ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), campaigned for ethnic equality and for a ‘Malaysian Malaysia’ rather than one in which Malays were accorded a special position.⁷⁶

While not devoid of tensions during British rule, inter-ethnic competition and occasional violent outbreaks were an aspect of the decolonisation and nation-building of independent Malaysia. The 1960s saw Malaysian democracy in an infancy marked by a number of political parties engaged in vigorous criticism of

⁷⁵ Zawawi Ibrahim (2003), ‘The Search for a “New Cinema” in Post-Colonial Malaysia: The Films of U-Wei Haji Saari as Counter-Narrations of National Identity’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 145-154

⁷⁶ Julian C. H. Lee, *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*, p. 40

the Alliance, which had come to power since independence. Political passions ran high during the general election campaign of May 1969, the outcome of which diminished the absolute control over government which the Alliance had previously enjoyed. In Kuala Lumpur, violent clashes erupted between concerned Malays and celebratory Chinese. The riots, which lasted for four days, resulted in several hundred deaths and widespread destruction of property.⁷⁷

These race riots, which stand out as a landmark in the peoples' collective memory, played a significant role in shaping the history and nationhood of postcolonial Malaysia. Following the riots, the project of nation-building took a pro-Malay (*Bumiputera*) turn, which prompted the state to introduce the National Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971. The initial aim was to narrow the economic disparity between the Malays and non-Malays (Chinese, in particular) so that the indigenous groups would have a better chance of 'catching up' with the Chinese, who controlled the economic and business sectors.⁷⁸ The NEP extended further privileges and rights to the Malays, ensuring that they gained better positions in business, academia and politics. It was within the 20-year time span of the NEP that the socio-economic and educational empowerment of the Malays took place on an unprecedented scale.⁷⁹ In 1990, NEP was succeeded by the National Development Plan, which continued to be conceived along the same lines as the

⁷⁷ Syed Husin Ali (2008), 'Authoritarian State, Ethnic Violence and Our Tasks.' In *Out of the Tempurung: Critical Essays on Malaysian Society*, Fong Chin Wei & Yin Ee Kiong (eds). Sydney: East-West, pp. 62-95

⁷⁸ Dicky Sofjan (2007/2008), 'The Malaysian Dilemma: Race, Religion and the Quest for National Unity', *Asian Alternatives for a Sustainable World: Transborder Engagements in Knowledge Formation*, The Work of the 2007/2008 API Fellows, 180

⁷⁹ Julian C. H. Lee, *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*, p. 42

NEP. Due to the contradictory perceptions of its role, and regardless of what its original motivations were, the NEP and post-NEP eras witnessed a rise in ethnic tensions and suspicions.

The colonial era left behind lasting traces of a new public mentality that was essentially modern. Notions of the nation-state, territorial borders, national sovereignty and racialised identities were introduced to a world that had previously been devoid of them. The evolution of modern Malaysian politics reflected these concerns, with notions of ‘Malayness’ becoming racialised, with fixed, absolute and exclusive boundaries. The postcolonial Malaysian state and its elites were less inclined to accept or celebrate the more fluid multicultural past of the country, owing to the nature of these new identity politics in Malaysia.

According to political scientist Farish A. Noor, from the late 1970s onward, Malaysia was swept by a wave of new currents of political Islam let loose by the Iranian revolution of 1979 and Pakistan’s re-invention of itself as an Islamic state in the same year. The rise of political Islam in Malaysia further contributed to the narrowing of Malaysian identity along religio-cultural lines. This rise of religious communitarianism called for ‘the further inculcation of Islamic values in the mainstream social and political life of the country. The calls are often couched in universalist terms but their application has often had the opposite effect’.⁸⁰

In 1981, the country’s third Prime Minister, Hussein Onn, stepped down and was succeeded by Mahathir Mohamad, who would become Malaysia’s

⁸⁰ Farish A. Noor (2008), ‘In Search of a Malaysian Identity’. In *Out of the Tempurung: Critical Essays on Malaysian Society*, Fong Chin Wei & Yin Eee Kiong (eds). Sydney: East-West Publishing, p. 21

longest serving Prime Minister as well as its most visionary and outspoken. The economic bases for Malaysian nation-building became most clearly articulated under Mahathir, whose ambitious goals were ungirded by increased authoritarianism.⁸¹ As mentioned earlier, they included seeing Malaysia become a Newly Industrialising Country, a precursor to later attaining Developed Nation (or 'First World') status by 2020.

Underpinning *Vision 2020* is Mahathir's coinage of the term *Bangsa Malaysia* ('Malaysian nation'), which serves to consolidate the logical discourse of the nation's progression. Apart from its emphasis on economic development, the vision also promotes 'a united Malaysia which is ethnically integrated and harmonious, a liberal and tolerant society, in which Malaysians respect each other's creeds and customs'.⁸² Mahathir argued that the first challenge to being a highly industrialised nation was 'to establish a united Malaysian nation, with a sense of common and shared destiny. This must be a nation at peace with itself, territorially and ethnically integrated, living in harmony and full and fair partnership, made of one *Bangsa Malaysia* with political loyalty and dedication to the nation'.⁸³ However, after more than five decades of independence, national integration of the various ethnic groups that constitute modern Malaysia has not been realised. Similarly, there seems to be a growing fear among non-Muslims of the aforementioned Islamisation of Malaysia, irrespective of whether it has affected them directly.

⁸¹ Julian C. H. Lee, *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*, p. 43

⁸² William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 101

⁸³ Mahathir Mohamad (1991), 'Malaysia: The Way Forward'. Paper presented at the Inaugural Meeting of the Malaysian Business Council, Kuala Lumpur, 28 February

Abdullah Badawi, who succeeded Mahathir as Prime Minister, was viewed as weak and indecisive by the electorate, by his own party and even by Mahathir himself, who later proclaimed he regretted anointing Abdullah as his heir. The 2008 general election, in which Abdullah led UMNO, was victorious, but it lost its two thirds majority. The election was a major blow to the ruling Barisan Nasional coalition, given that it yielded one of the worst results in the coalition's history.⁸⁴ Support for the opposition swelled to unprecedented levels: Anwar Ibrahim re-entered parliament late in 2008 as a powerful voice against the government. Abdullah accepted responsibility for the ruling coalition's poor performance; and, in mid-2008, he agreed to step aside in March 2009 in favour of his deputy Najib Razak, the son of Malaysia's second Prime Minister who has been in parliament since his early twenties.

The financial crisis which began in 1997 and the tumultuous political atmosphere brought on by the abrupt arrest and trial of political figure Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, had significant repercussions for Malaysia's socio-political landscape. As a result, 'political awareness arose and manifested itself in various suggestions, prescriptions and activities.'⁸⁵ Such crises, among other things, afforded new opportunities for women to be actively involved in the public sphere. For example, Anwar Ibrahim's wife Wan Azizah was appointed as

⁸⁴ Opposition parties won 82 seats (out of 222 seats in parliament) or 36.9% of parliamentary seats, while the ruling coalition Barisan Nasional only managed to secure the remaining 140 seats or 63.1%. It marked also the first time since the 1969 election that the coalition did not win the two-thirds supermajority in the Malaysian parliament required to pass amendments to the Malaysian constitution. In addition, 5 of 13 state legislatures were won by the opposition, compared with only one in the last election.

⁸⁵ Claudia Derich (2002), 'A Step Forward: Malaysian Ideas for Political Change,' *Journal of Asian and African Studies*, 37, 43

president of the National Justice Party (KeAdilan) by the political forces that initiated the *reformasi* (reform) movement and she led the party in the national elections. The rise in public awareness about the mass movement of *reformasi* showed that UMNO's (the United Malays National Organisation) conservative politics were beginning to be challenged. UMNO used this challenge to divert the disaffection among the public by promising more gender rights.⁸⁶ These rights necessarily intersect with those of race, religion and class in the construction of Malaysia as a modern nation.

Constructing Gender in Contemporary Malaysia: *Adat*, Islam and Modernity

According to Maila Stivens, the surveillance of women has become a popular topic and charged ideological battlefield through which the Malaysian government champions and orchestrates a vision of alternative modernity different from its western counterpart, with Islamic values, Malay roots and Asian orientation. In effect, Malay women are frequently deployed as metaphors for the conflicting aspects of modernity.⁸⁷ According to Stivens, the family is positioned as the central institution of the enlightened Islamic state, with the mother as the symbolic and moral anchor. In order to reinforce family values, local authorities promoted several public campaigns such as *Keluarga Bahagia* ('Happy Family'), *Rumahku Syurgaku* ('My Home My Heaven') and *Utamakan Keluarga – Semakin Hari Semakin Sayang* ('Family First – Bring Your Heart Home') to inculcate both

⁸⁶ Maznah Mohamad (2002), 'From Nationalism to Post-Developmentalism: The Intersection of Gender, Race and Religion in Malaysia', *Macalester International*, 1, 95-96

⁸⁷ Maila Stivens (1998), 'Sex, Gender and the Making of the New Malay Middle Classes'. In *Gender and Power Affluent Asia*, Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens (eds). London: Routledge, p. 93

modern and traditional values in Malay-Muslim women. These campaigns espouse socio-cultural norms about the importance of family and home for women.

Some critics have pointed out that such campaigns are a form of underlying propaganda to encourage women to stay at home.⁸⁸ This leads to the reification of a certain gendered identity because, in order to be the ideal modern Malay women in contemporary Malaysia, Malay women are required to adopt what is considered ‘proper’ behaviour. As Lucy Healey observes, ‘what is deemed suitable and appropriate for a contemporary Malay woman is to be “domestic” and therefore “feminine”’.⁸⁹ Any Malay woman who remains unmarried, performs masculine work, or even adopts a masculinised look is stigmatised socially as improper and unfeminine.

In line with the country’s increasing Islamisation, there has been the bid for greater Islamic moral authority, evident in the two major Malay political parties – UMNO and the Malaysian Pan-Islamic Party (PAS) – imposing of particular gender norms. Maznah Mohamad argues that certain tensions are generated by the struggle for democratisation which involve invoking women and Islam. Gender, in this struggle, has become a terrain that both government and opposition are keen to lay claim to.⁹⁰ The tendency has been to see women

⁸⁸ Maila Stivens, ‘Sex, Gender and the Making of the New Malay Middle Classes’, p. 60

⁸⁹ Lucy Healey (1994), ‘Modernity, Identity and Construction of Malay Womanhood’. In *Modernity and Identity: Asian Illustrations*, Albert Gomez (ed.). Bundoora, Victoria: La Trobe University Press, p. 111

⁹⁰ Maznah Mohamad (2001), ‘Women in the UMNO and PAS Labyrinth’. In *Risking Malaysia: Culture, Politics and Identity*, Maznah Mohamad and Wong Soak Koon (eds). Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, pp. 112-138

wedged between two hegemonic forces, the ostensibly Islamic, but liberal modern state, and its fundamentalist-Islamic political nemesis in the form of the PAS.

In some cases, such disputes have proven particularly intense for Malay women, who have had to negotiate a politicised Islam within the continual Islamisation of Malaysian society, the impact of which has been less for women of other ethnicities. In similar vein, Joseph N. Goh argues that the adamant insistence on specific performances of masculinity and sexuality to the extent of persecuting non-heteronormative Malay-Muslim men by Islamic and civil authorities serves to simultaneously maintain the monolithic image of Malay-Muslim and political power. Through the manipulation of Islamic discourses and mechanisms within the Islamisation race between UMNO and PAS, Goh asserts that heteronormative forms of masculinity and sexuality, which claim the endorsement of institutional Islam, are further reinforced by intersectional categories of ethnicity, patriarchy and ethno-nationalism.⁹¹

In addition, there are the competing categories of Malay masculinity based on the binary categories of Old and New Malay. These categories can be viewed from their relative superiority or inferiority, and ‘the question of which model of masculinity the modern, moral (hence superior) Malay man should ideally shape and measure himself against’.⁹² The New Malay Man is a creation of the government’s New Economic Policy, a racial-affirmative policy set to change poor, rural Malays into modern, urbanised Malay professionals. The New Malay

⁹¹ Joseph N. Goh (2013), ‘Malaysian Masculine Exposé: Queering the Politics of Non-Heteronormative Malay-Muslim Men’, Australia: Queer Sexualities Conference, Sydney, 11-13 February

⁹² David C. L. Lim (2006), ‘Cruising Mat Motor: Malay Biker Masculinity and Queer Desire in/through *KL Menjerit*’, *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 68

Man is ‘conceptualised by several generations of state-aligned ideologues as the very antithesis of the “old” Malay Man’, the one ‘imagined as a backward native from the rural village who, even after migrating to the city, tends to cling to pathological *kampong* habits, traits and mindsets ...’⁹³ In contrast to his predecessor, the New Malay Man is a glocal articulation of the emergent global hegemonic masculinity. He is a ‘towering’ Malay, whose capitalist masculinity is defined by his urbanity, professional success and social respectability.⁹⁴

Michael Peletz, Aihwa Ong and Wazir Jahan Karim, in their studies of gender in Malay-Muslim society, reveal the complications surrounding *adat* (traditional customs) and Islam. There is a general tendency to perceive *adat* and Islam as binary and often complementary forces in some situations which is reinforced by the fact that Islam has become an integral part of Malay *adat* and vice-versa.⁹⁵ As Wazir Jahan Karim maintains, up until the time when resurgent Islam transformed the socio-political landscape of Malaysia, ‘women were not completely subsumed by Islam except in matters of marriage and divorce, and *adat* held a close rein on all, ensuring equitable distribution of inheritance, property, and status between men and women’.⁹⁶ This view finds further

⁹³ David C. L. Lim, ‘Cruising Mat Motor’, 69

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 69

⁹⁵ Michael G. Peletz (2007), *Gender, Sexuality, and Body Politics in Modern Asia*. Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, Inc.; Aihwa Ong (1995), ‘State Versus Islam: Malay Families, Women’s Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia’. In *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz (eds). Berkeley: University of California Press; Wazir Jahan Karim (1990), ‘Introduction: Emotions in Perspective’. In *Emotions of Culture: A Malay Perspective*, Wazir Jahan Karim (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press; Wazir Jahan Karim (1992). *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam*. Boulder, CO: Westview

⁹⁶ Wazir Jahan Karim (1990). ‘Introduction: Emotions in Perspective’. In *Emotions of Culture: A Malay Perspective*, Wazir Jahan Karim (ed.). Oxford: Oxford University Press, p. 14

resonance in Aihwa Ong's analysis of the construction of Malay women in an historical context. Ong traces the historical links between the postcolonial state and British colonialism in the construction of the Malay family, gender relations and finally Malay ethnic identity itself. In the uncertainties and ambivalence spawned by modernisation and the competing versions of the nationalist project, Malay women came to bear special moral burdens for realising the image of a modern Malay society.⁹⁷ Ong argues to the effect that 'although men traditionally enjoyed prerogatives in religion and property, women were neither confined to the household nor totally dependent on men for economic survival. Malay society is often cited as an example of a Muslim society that permitted relatively egalitarian relations between the sexes'.⁹⁸

Adat, in this sense, produces a more balanced worldview with respect to gender. One of the integral forms that *adat* takes is the dichotomy between *akal* (rationality) and *nafsu* (passion), which promotes bilateral gender relations, openness about sexuality, and a non-Western understanding of power, all of which exists in both men and women in Malay *adat*.⁹⁹ However, drawing from this dichotomy, resurgent Islam transforms the power structure inherent in *adat*. Women are now invested with more *nafsu*, which increasingly connotes lust; this for some 'explains' their penchant for gossiping, material accumulation and straying libido. Lacking in reason (or *akal*, which is now the prerogative of

⁹⁷ Aihwa Ong, 'State Versus Islam', p. 172

⁹⁸ Ibid., p. 163

⁹⁹ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 137

Muslim men), ‘they have to be saved from evil temptation’.¹⁰⁰ Because women are more susceptible to sexual temptation, female pleasure – which *adat* recognises and even celebrates – is now regarded with suspicion.

In the Malaysian films I examine in the following chapters, I will show how both the invocation and reworking of genres may reverse or blur the binary of *akal*/ male and *nafsu*/ female, along with other binaries such as ‘old Malay’/ ‘new Malay’, Malay/ non-Malay, urban/ rural, professional/ working class, moral/ immoral and traditional/ modern. For example, using parody and satire, comedy plays with gender and sexual transgression while action films about migration and mobility among male youth renders their masculine identities fragile and complex.

In an important work that addresses representations of both femininity and masculinity in Malaysian film and literature, Khoo Gaik Cheng argues that the 1990s Malay filmmakers, in the wake of modernisation and globalisation, attempted to reflect a sense of conscious and unconscious recuperation in their works by reclaiming *adat*, for example, by focusing on sexuality, magic and traditional healing. This was because middle-class Malay cultural producers struggled to reconcile their *adat*¹⁰¹ with resurgent forms of Islam and to enunciate their place and identity in global modernity, whether in literature or cinema. Khoo further notes: ‘This reclamation of *adat* is simultaneously a postcolonial or anti-

¹⁰⁰ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 137

¹⁰¹ According to Judith Nagata, *adat*, of Arabic etymology, is used to describe the local customs or customary laws that existed before the advent of Islam. It acts like the ‘residue’ of all customs that are considered Malay but not Islamic (p. 42). See Nagata (1986), ‘The Impact of the Islamic revival (dakwah) on the religious culture of Malaysia’. In Bruce Matthews & Judith Nagata (eds.), *Religion, Values and Development in Southeast Asia*, pp. 37-50. Singapore: ISEAS.

imperialist strategy and a subversion of more restrictive notions of Islamic discourse that emerged since the 1980s'.¹⁰² Central to my analyses of Malaysian films is the notion of 'modernity' that Khoo also employs: that is, something beyond modernisation, implying the more dynamic and positive aspects of inhabiting the contemporary global world. Definitions of modernity range from that which 'is current or new to an equation with Westernisation, reason, industrial development, rapid urbanisation, the rise of individualism or individual freedoms, the idea of civil society, materialism and consumer culture, and the latest manifestation of modernity – the development of information technology (IT)'.¹⁰³

To a certain extent, my work will overlap with Khoo's regarding the ways in which Malaysian films articulate their ideological critique of gender. Whereas Khoo looks at gender and sexuality in Malaysian films of the 1990s through the prism of the post-New Economic Policy era which was impacted by the nation's modernising project, my focus is on films of the new millennium. I look at how questions of gender are refigured through the reworking of specific genres, and in the process, reflect and critique the dialectical modernity of contemporary Malaysia.

Following Giddens' suggestion that modernity has to be understood as a dialectical phenomenon, Khoo's referencing of Wazir Jahan Karim's work is useful in understanding the concept of dialectical modernity. As Wazir contends,

¹⁰² Nagata (1986), 'The Impact of the Islamic revival (dakwah) on the religious culture of Malaysia', p. 4

¹⁰³ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 11

‘Social trends in religious revivalism, or alternatively, modernity and Westernization reflect the convergence of two trends of thought in contemporary life. The presence of two sets of ideological and social intrusions reflects the dialectical relationship between Westernization and fundamentalism’.¹⁰⁴ However, as Khoo notes, Wazir’s argument differs from hers in the sense that she sees Western modernity as a means of reclaiming *adat* for Malaysian filmmakers, whereas Wazir’s sees *adat* as playing a mediating role between Westernisation and fundamentalism by ‘providing an intimate and intuitive mechanism for reordering relationships according to the requirements of culture’.¹⁰⁵ Furthermore, Stiven’s observation of how modernity is defined and understood in popular discourse in Malaysia (quoted in Khoo) is relevant here: such alternative Malaysian modernity is positively regarded as ‘synonymous with “progress”, with economic development, and negatively with encroaching, colonising “Westernisation” or “Westoxification”’.¹⁰⁶ For Khoo, these are outcomes of modernity’s reflexivity rather than signifiers of an alternative (non-Western) modernity. ‘This reaction against modernity does not appear outside of modernity, but should be conceived as part of modernity’s dialectic’.¹⁰⁷

In addition, Khoo aligns modernity with the concept of nation, both of which are inextricably entwined with each other, particularly in the context of a

¹⁰⁴ Wazir Jahan Karim (1992), *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam*. Boulder, CO: Westview, p. 24; Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 132

¹⁰⁵ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 132

¹⁰⁶ Maila Stivens (1994), ‘Gender and Modernity in Malaysia’. In *Modernity and Identity: Asian Illustrations*, Albert Gomez (ed.). Bundoora, Victoria: La Trobe University Press, pp. 80-81; Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 130

¹⁰⁷ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 133

rapidly developing state. She invokes, among other things, the aforementioned *Vision 2020*, a grand narrative that gestures towards a teleological history of progress. It is towards this question of temporality that I turn in the final section of this chapter: in what ways does temporality share an affinity with cinema and genre?

What Time Is It There?¹⁰⁸

A number of philosophers have described the emergence of cinema as a modern art form used to critique homogenous notions of time and by extension, a particular developmental notion of modernity. Cinema is representative of modernity in the sense that the birth of the medium paralleled those of the mechanical clock, wireless telegraph and railroad.¹⁰⁹ The history of industrial capitalism in the last third trisection of the 18th century witnessed the invention of the locomotive engine, urging Wolfgang Schivelbusch to regard the early 19th century perception of the speed of railroad travel as ‘the annihilation of space and time.’¹¹⁰ Here, the speed of the locomotive made travel time so much shorter that it felt as if space itself had been diminished, a phenomenological experience equivalent to cinema.

¹⁰⁸ The heading is taken from the title of Taiwanese film *What Time is it There?* (2001) directed by Tsai Ming-liang.

¹⁰⁹ Bliss Cua Lim (2009), *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique*, London: Duke University Press, p. 43

¹¹⁰ Wolfgang Schivelbusch (1977), *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*. Trans. Anselm Hollo. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, pp. 12-13; Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time*, pp. 74-75

Widely considered a time-based medium, cinema (celluloid film) has often been compared to a clock; operated in a particular way, it produces movement that is often regarded as illusion. Sixteen or 24 still frames are projected per second at a speed capable of manipulating the viewer's eye and mind into seeing 'moving' pictures. Projecting still frames at regular clock-time intervals renders the accumulation of static images on celluloid illusory, seemingly moving once projected. As Mary Ann Doane notes, 'The cinema presents us with a simulacrum of time. Nevertheless, knowledge of the indexicality of the cinematic image sustains a belief that something of time, something of movement or its imprint, or, at the very least, its adequate representation, is there'.¹¹¹ Thus, cinematic forms such as the horror genre hold in tension heterogeneous notions of time (or mythic time) and industrialised, modern time, as expressed in former Prime Minister Mahathir's concern. This tension is often played out, for example, by parallel editing, which presumes a single chronological present in which simultaneous events are staged. However, in a horror film, when there is a cross-cut between the natural (human being) and the supernatural (ghost), the times evoked transcend rational, chronological time.

French philosopher Henri Bergson claimed that clock-time presented a false image of time.¹¹² So, he suggested, did cinema, as it complied with this type of time. Bergson postulated a 'corrective' theory of time, one that disrupts our habit of thinking of time in spatial, numerical terms. The scientific and

¹¹¹ Mary Ann Doane (2002), *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, The Archive*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, p. 172

¹¹² Henri Bergson (1911), *Matter and Memory*. Trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George Allen and Unwin.

mathematical view of homogeneous time that Bergson disputed was the legacy of Isaac Newton's clockwork universe that declared time to be absolute, uniform and mechanical. General audiences' cinematic viewing experience, too, is predicated upon time (as in standard cinema) derived from movement, as are their everyday perceptions, which are in line with a particular form of Western thought that has tended to think of a fixed and actual world functioning within time and movement. In this respect, Bergson argued, there is no 'real time' or 'pure time' in cinema because time is broken down or fractured. What cinema renders to we viewers is a form of clock-like spatialised time – a form of time imbued with characteristics of space.

Heavily informed by the work of Bergson, Gilles Deleuze theorises time through the medium of cinema, distinguishing two forms of time in cinema: 'movement-image' and 'time-image'. While Bergson argued against cinema, purporting that it discouraged the viewer from living life to the full, Deleuze posits that this new medium offers the potential to see the world in both creative and challenging ways. In *Cinema I* which deals with 'movement image', Deleuze takes up Bergson's position on cinema as operating on the basis of the spatialisation of time. Bergson argued that the eye sees movement and time become conjoined when we watch movies. Deleuze, however, argues that how the viewer actually perceives the cinematic image on screen is not a melding together of a series of static moments but an image 'directly and immediately in motion, a moving picture or movement-image'.¹¹³ The term 'movement-image' generally refers to modes of filmmaking that were dominant before the Second World War,

¹¹³ R. Bogue (2003), *Deleuze on Cinema*. New York: Routledge, p. 22

films in which time was subordinated to movement. For films of the movement-image, time is measurable and clearly separated into past, present and future. In *Cinema 2*, emphasis shifts to the ‘time-image’ or *duree* images, as opposed to mobile cuts of *duree* in the movement-image. Here ‘every moment forms a crystal as it perpetually splits into a virtual past and an actual present’.¹¹⁴ ‘Time-image’, which refers to some forms of filmmaking that emerged after the Second World War, describes films that are capable of producing an image of pure time, liberated from movement, i.e., a direct image of time. This term normally encompasses films in which the passing of time cannot be accurately measured and in which images of the past – especially in the form of memories – are not clearly distinguishable from images of the present or of the future.

Relevant to the topic of this thesis is Deleuze’s discussion of Italian neo-realism in the first chapter of *Cinema 2*, which inflects the relationship of history and cinema in several ways.¹¹⁵ More importantly, according to Deleuze’s argument, neo-realism corresponds to a disturbance of perception, knowledge and representation to which cinema responds by offering images of a new mental reality. Jean Ma, who writes of questions of temporality in Chinese cinema, asserts that the connections made by Deleuze between cinematic time and historical rupture usher in significant questions pertaining to the link between ideology, aesthetics and cinema.¹¹⁶ While Deleuze’s examples focus upon the

¹¹⁴ R. Bogue, *Deleuze on Cinema*, p. 28

¹¹⁵ Gilles Deleuze (1989), *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Roberta Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

¹¹⁶ Jean Ma (2010). *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, p. 6

milieu of post-war geopolitics, commodity capitalism and revolutionary yearnings, ‘this challenge becomes all the more pressing in an age wherein the industrialising, urbanising and mediating forces of global capitalism have spread well beyond the parameters of the West and Japan. Indeed, the very naming of such serial mutations underlines the failure of linear, teleological models of time and history, motivating the search for alternative models of temporality grounded in the materialities of cinema’.¹¹⁷

The capability of cinema to channel its critique of teleological models of time and history finds further resonance in Bliss Cua Lim’s work *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique*, which emphasises genre in relation to temporality.¹¹⁸ Lim argues that fantasy film’s depiction of the coexistence of alternative modes of being alongside and within the modern present, which disclose multiple ‘immiscible temporalities’, strains against the modern concept of homogeneous time. This is because, according to Lim, ghosts and the supernatural can hardly be visible in this modern world (I discuss this further in Chapter Three), as they ‘fail to coincide with the measured, uniform intervals quantified by clock and calendar’.¹¹⁹

In support of her argument that cinema is the beneficiary of modern time, Lim draws on Bergson’s philosophy of time and postcolonial historiography, as well as works by Dipesh Chakrabarty and Johannes Fabian.¹²⁰ Central to my

¹¹⁷ Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, p. 6

¹¹⁸ Bliss Cua Lim (2009), *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique*, London: Duke University Press.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 2

examination of genres in Malaysian cinema is Lim's suggestion that this 'non-sociological' mode of narrating supernaturalism or anachronism lends itself more easily to fiction. Mahathir's apprehension regarding Malaysian society's preoccupation with the horror genre can be discerned through Chakrabarty's notion of 'anachronistic exclusion', or the ways in which subaltern peoples are placed outside of modern time, being perceived as primitives preceding modernity. For Chakrabarty, secular historiography claims to translate supernatural or ghostly accounts, but ghosts and gods cannot be seen within a horizon of sameness when they belong to a field of differences. For Lim, the fantastic genre has the potential to perform this impossible act of translation because it accentuates the process through which the heterogeneous times of the 'supernatural, folkloric, [and] popular' appeared – represented by ghosts and monsters – within the modern homogenous time of the cinematic apparatus.¹²¹ As Chakrabarty, Fabian and Lim note, the non-realist or magic-realist genres, in particular, retain an uncanny quality of 'contained alterity,' transcending the confines of modern homogeneous time. In this thesis, I extend this possibility to selected contemporary Malaysian films across genres, illustrating that all of them retain 'an uncanny quality of contained alterity' through the filmmakers' reworking and hybridising of genres.

Finally, in bringing together notions of genre, gender and temporality, I specifically want to highlight Lim's citation of Anne McClintock's argument that

¹²⁰ Dipesh Chakrabarty (1997). 'The Time of History and the Time of Gods'. In *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (eds.), Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, pp. 35-60; Johannes Fabian (1983). *The Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.

¹²¹ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time*, p. 31

‘the gendering of national time’ is an attempt to resolve the temporal contradiction posed by the claim that the nation is both recently invented and eternal.¹²² Such contradictions of national time are dissembled through representations of gender identity and relationships. The gendering of national-historical time does several things at once: it naturalises social hierarchy under a heteronormative division of labour and familial asymmetries of power; metaphorises teleological development under the ‘evolutionary family of man’; and, finally, it genders archaic, traditional aspects of the nation as feminised, while its progressive tendencies remain masculinised.¹²³ This is in tandem with many masculine-oriented projects of nation-state and nationalism that imagine women as cultural bearers, preservers of tradition. McClintock writes: ‘Nationalism’s anomalous relation to time is thus managed as a natural relation to gender’.¹²⁴ In light of McClintock’s argument, I will demonstrate that most of the films I examine in this thesis tend to complicate heterogeneous time by blurring such a temporal binaristic logic of gender. One of the ways in which this strategy can be realised is through notions of ‘body’ functioning whether perceptually, affectively or corporeally, e.g., adolescent girl in the teen romance or female evil agent in the horror. Through this, a non-binary model of gender difference can be explored because when a body is constantly changing, it cannot be fixed into a relationship of opposition. In this respect, body, identity and subjectivity can be seen as endowed with temporality.

¹²² Anne McClintock (1997). ‘No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race, and Nationalism’. In *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat (eds), Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 183-209

¹²³ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time*, p. 182

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 182

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the ways in which theoretical frameworks concerning genre, gender and temporality are charted and mapped. I began this chapter by highlighting the need to employ the concept of genre to examine Malaysian cinema and suggesting that genres in Malaysian cinema can be understood beyond certain genre theorisation that emphasises questions of generic regimes of verisimilitude; that is, there has been a tension between *generic regimes* and *socio-cultural regimes* in discerning American film genres. This is not quite the case for Malaysian cinema where notions of verisimilitude are more fluid, as evident in the indigenous forms and media which constituted old Malay cinema. In tracing more distinct characteristics and conventions of Malaysian genres, I have proposed that melodrama be conceived of as a primary mode that deals with everyday lived reality. To be more culturally specific, I have drawn on particular affective modes discussed in local literary and cinematic works. My concern with the melodramatic mode led to the exploration of the relations between genre and gender.

I then underscored the discourses surrounding gender construction in Malaysia and the factors that have contributed to the reification of categories and binaries, i.e., discourses that intersect with the state/ politics, Islam and traditional customs (*adat*) while at the same time being situated within discourses on modernity and the nation. In the final section of this chapter, I argued that the narratives and ethos of modernity and nation are invariably anchored in the larger question of temporality. I have specifically shown how the medium of cinema serves as a signifier of modernity, that is, through the creation of modern

homogenous time. To this end, I have brought together notions of genre, gender and temporality by focusing on the fantasy genre, given that – in many cases – its uncanny quality of contained alterity may simultaneously transcend and gender linear, chronological time.

In the next chapter, I will show how this uncanny quality permeated early forms of most narratives – whether oral or written folk literature, proto-cinematic forms of shadow play and traditional musical theatre or old Malay films made in the 1950s and 1960s – as I trace Malaysian cinematic genres’ ‘pre-histories’ and their roots in other forms and media.

CHAPTER TWO

Temporalising Genre: The History and Development of Malaysian Cinema

... the different genres arise at particular stages of historical development, they change their character radically [...], sometimes they disappear completely, and sometimes in the course of history they rise to the surface again with modifications.

– Georg Lukacs¹²⁵

Introduction

This chapter seeks to trace notions of genre in old Malay cinema through the history and development of Malaysian cinema. It aims to highlight several key genres by looking at their ‘pre-histories’ and roots in other forms and media such as folk literature, performance and theatre. In addition, this chapter provides evidence of the occasions in which generic categories have been employed in the production marketing strategies of films (e.g., posters, flyers and magazine-newspaper advertisements) as well as their critical reception.

During the Malay cinema’s golden age in the 1950s and 1960s, two studios, Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris vertically integrated the whole industry, from production to distribution and then to exhibition.¹²⁶ In the process of dominating film production, distribution and exhibition, both studios emphasised product differentiation to attract audiences. Similar to Hollywood and other film industries, this type of strategy often took the forms of star, director (auteur)

¹²⁵ Georg Lukacs (1969), *Probleme der Aesthetik, Werke*, 10, Neuwied: Luchterhand, cited in – and translated by – John Frow (2006). *Genre*. London: Routledge, p. 135

¹²⁶ Raphael Millet (2006), *Singapore Cinema*, Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, p. 36

and/or genre.¹²⁷ The star system, which was utilised more as a tool for popular market segmentation, ensured that the public flocked to the local cinemas to see newly released films featuring their favourite film personalities.

Although few of the films were formulated within a Hollywood-style generic framework, some nonetheless entailed genre elements whereas others were unarguably genre films. Even the first commercial film produced in Malaya's Singapore, *Leila Majnun* (1933/34, directed by B. S. Rajhans), was promoted as a romance genre film. The newspaper publicity for its Singapore premiere read: '... The first spectacular colossal Malay talkie. [...] A soul-stirring spectacular portrayal of true love. The world famous Arabian immortal love tragedy of 1000 years ago ...'.¹²⁸ Traditional storytelling (local myth, folklore and historico-legends) and theatrical content, on which many old Malay films were based, were generic in nature; they include humorous tales, folk romances, ghost stories, animal fables and historico-legendary epics. In addition, the Hong Kong genre films which were popular in Malaya (Shaw Brothers was a major source of supply to the Southeast Asian market) helped influence and affect the genres and content of Malay films.¹²⁹

It should be noted that in the 1950s and 1960, the use of genre categories was hardly consistent. Even today, this tendency toward mixed-genre descriptions marks the uniqueness of Malay cinema as generically hybrid. Indirect references

¹²⁷ Timothy R. White (May 2002), 'Exactly the Same but Completely Different: Product Differentiation in the Singaporean Films of Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions and Cathay-Keris', Unpublished Conference Paper, Conference on the Shaw Brothers on the International Movie Stage, Hong Kong, 2.

¹²⁸ Raphael Millet, *Singapore Cinema*, p. 21

¹²⁹ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 142

to genre were employed, albeit not regularly. They often evoked multiple genres, a strategy similar to the publicity of early Hollywood cinema.¹³⁰ For marketing purposes, this strategy accentuated the commercial viability of specific films. For example, the Malay-language poster for P. Ramlee's *Penarek Becha* ('*The Trishaw Peddler*', 1955) stated: '*Persembahan pujaan ... Cherita idaman ... Action! Roman! Drama dan Hiboran!*' (lit. 'Adorable performances ... Favourite story ... Action! Romance! Drama and Entertainment!').¹³¹

In this chapter, my purpose for discussing this unique use of 'genre' in old Malay cinema is twofold. First, I suggest that genres of Malay films had their own conventions due to their borrowings from – and adaptations of – other local, regional and transnational media and cultural forms. In some instances of marketing strategies and critical reception, more globally popular cultural labels and neologisms, e.g., terms such as horror and comedy, were employed. Second, I demonstrate that the hybrid genres one find in classical and contemporary Malay cinema reflect their cyclical temporality and emphasise decline and re-emergence, keying us to 'persistence, return, reinvention and movement rather than stagnancy'.¹³² For example, the horror subgenre of the *Pontianak* films has re-appeared in contemporary cinema but not in the same guise as before.

I begin by identifying oral and written forms of folk literature, the structures, forms and genres of which many Malay films borrowed and adapted, tracing proto-cinematic forms that shaped old Malay cinema back to the

¹³⁰ Rick Altman, *Film/Genre*, p. 54

¹³¹ William Van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 171

¹³² Christine Gledhill (2000), 'Rethinking Genre'. In *Reinventing Film Studies*, Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams (eds). London: Arnold, pp. 226-227

indigenous genre of Malay cinema, the *purba* films or period films set in ancient times. I then chart the historical trajectories of four major, globally-influenced generic categories – romance, comedy, horror and action – which were important to the development of Malaysian cinema. Finally, I highlight the ways in which these old forms and genres are being reworked and memorialised by contemporary filmmakers and have mutated into new cycles and trends. Before providing an account of the early genres of Malay cinema, let me offer a brief overview of the forms of storytelling that informed these genres.

Early Forms of Storytelling

Film historian and writer Hassan Abdul Muthalib notes that because the Malays were originally sea-farers, who came to inhabit the peninsula from the surrounding islands of Borneo, Celebes, Sulu, Java and Sumatra, the spirit of adventure was already coursing in their veins. Their exploits would have been told and retold to their children and grandchildren in many gatherings around the fire.¹³³ The earliest entertainer was the storyteller (*penglipur lara* lit. ‘soother of woes’), who moved from village to village, regaling both young and old with tales of valour, adventure and romance, interlaced with wit and humour and occasionally accompanied by music. The storyteller served an important socio-cultural role, keeping the numerous stories of the nation alive by handing them down through word of mouth.¹³⁴

¹³³ Hassan Abdul Muthalib (2010), *From Shadow Play to the Silver Screen: Wayang Kulit and Bangsawan as Precursors of Early Malay Cinema*, Unpublished Paper, p. 2

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 3

Orally passed down through generations, these tales became known as Malay folktales or Malay folk literature and consist of overlapping categories such as *cerita lipurlara* (bardic tales), animal fables, *kisah teladan* (exemplary stories), humorous stories, myths and legends.¹³⁵ *Lipurlara* stories, often about a princess and her prince, abound with magical elements, e.g., *Hikayat Malim Deman* and *Hikayat Awang Sulung Merah Muda*. Animal fables portray animals that can think and speak like human beings, e.g., *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (*'Mousedeer Tale'*). Exemplary stories, which often target children, contain a didactic message and offer spiritual and cultural lessons. The stories' most important lesson appears in the form of poetic justice espousing notions of 'good deeds begetting goodness' and of 'evil actions begetting evil'.¹³⁶ Examples of such tales are *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* (*'The Two Beauties'*), *Si Tenggang* (*'Tenggang, The Ungrateful Son'*) and *Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup* (*'The Secret Stone'*), all of which were adapted to the silver screen in the 1950s and 1960s. Likewise humorous tales such as *Pak Pandir*, *Pak Belalang*, *Si Luncai*, *Mat Jenin* and *Musang Berjanggut* convey moral lessons but through satire. All of these humorous tales ridicule not only the common *kampong* peoples, but also traditionally revered people such as kings, ministers and religious officials.¹³⁷ For example, in the hit movie by P. Ramlee, *Nujum Pak Belalang* (*'Pak Belalang, The*

¹³⁵ Chew Fong Peng & Zahari Ishak (2009), 'Malay Folk Literature in Early Childhood Education Among Malaysians', *EDUCARE, International Journal for Educational Studies*, 2(1), 70

¹³⁶ Harun Mat Piah (2006), *Kesusasteraan Melayu Tradisional* (*'Traditional Malay Literature'*), Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p. 104

¹³⁷ Chew Fong Peng & Zahari Ishak, 'Malay Folk Literature in Early Childhood Education Among Malaysians', 71

Fortune Teller', 1959), which was loosely adapted from the aforementioned tale *Pak Belalang*, the eponymous character is the fake seer and diviner, who makes fools of the king and his entire court.

Myths are stories held to be true and sacred by the people who tell them, be they a nation, a tribe or a religious community¹³⁸. They are meant to fulfil human beings' need to understand and explain matters outside the limit of the human mind and experience. Apart from this, myths help to orientate the basis of cosmology, or the traditional beliefs of the Malays towards what is powerful in nature. After the arrival of Hinduism, Buddhism and Islam in the Malay archipelago, myths became stories that accounted for the origin of the natural world. Legends were considered to be true and thus constituted a form of collective history. They narrated the lives of saints and other heroes, emphasising their extraordinary exploits.¹³⁹ Examples include *Raja Bersiong* ('The Fanged King'), *Singapura Dilanggar Todak* ('When Garfish Attacked Singapore') and *Puteri Gunung Ledang* ('Princess of Mount Ledang'), which have been adapted into literary, theatrical and cinematic forms.

One particularly important form of prose narrative that often highlighted myths and legends was the *hikayat* (epic), written between the 14th and 17th centuries. *Hikayat* generally means narrative prose and story, and more specifically, a narrative genre of the Islamic period with Arabic and Persian influences. However, the term has been understood more broadly; for instance,

¹³⁸ Jan Knappert (1980), *Malay Myths and Legends*, Asia: Heinemann Educational Books, p. 25

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 25

even geography books were called *hikayat*.¹⁴⁰ Emanating from court culture, *hikayats* reflected the splendour of the Malayan past.¹⁴¹ As literary scholar Muhammad Haji Salleh observes, the genre is extremely wide in its coverage of forms, ages, structures and elements, in addition to being temporally and culturally hybrid.¹⁴² For example, *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* ('The Kedah Annals') recounts the deeds of Merong Mahawangsa, a renowned naval captain and traveller who founded the Malaysian state of Kedah. It is a highly complex tale imbued with different cultural influences, which include the presence of Hinduism, Buddhism, paganism and Islam, further asserting the text's ambiguity at many levels. This represents the ambiguity of the people's times, living not in a world with fixed and impenetrable borders, but rather one where identities remained shifting, open and fluid.¹⁴³

Another example is the most important historical literary text *Hikayat Hang Tuah* ('The Epic of Hang Tuah'), which highlighted the character of Hang Tuah who became an important official at the Malaccan court. Epitomising all of the qualities of the traditional Malay hero, the text's central part is the conflict between Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat in the context of their relationship with the

¹⁴⁰ Muhammad Haji Salleh (1991), *Yang Empunya Cerita: The Mind of the Malay Author*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p. 99

¹⁴¹ Farish A. Noor (2002), 'How the Penghulu Shaitan brought Islam to the Malay World: The Miraculous Coming of Islam to the Malay World According to the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*', *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History*, Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, p. 204

¹⁴² Muhammad Haji Salleh (2008), *The Poetics of Malay Literature*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p. 72

¹⁴³ Farish A. Noor, 'How the Penghulu Shaitan brought Islam to the Malay World: The Miraculous Coming of Islam to the Malay World According to the *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa*', p. 208

Sultan of Malacca.¹⁴⁴ A complex hybrid narrative that is part-fiction and part-fact, the text cannot be read as an accurate account of the history of Malacca *per se* due to the fact that there are simply too many elements of the fantasy and the paranormal that interrupt the flow of the narrative.¹⁴⁵ In the overlapping of themes and tropes, one may recognise the thematic similarities between the narratives of the *Mahabharata* and the Hellenic legends of ancient Greece and Egypt.¹⁴⁶ Furthermore, contemporary writers and scholars' readings of Hang Jebat as the modern Malay hero and of Hang Tuah as the traditional, feudal hero gesture toward opposing modes of Malay masculinity which remain relevant in modern-day Malaysia: one is rebellious against oppression and injustice while the other is obedient and loyal to the state or system.¹⁴⁷

Originally the *hikayats* and other folk narratives were recited and performed in open public spaces and street corners. Eventually these venues were replaced by the fixed stage as the genre splintered into two forms of drama: the Puppet Show and the *wayang kulit* (shadow play). These dramatic modes of performing *hikayats* were followed many centuries later by the *bangsawan* (opera-like Malayan theatre) and *sandiwara* (modern Malay theatre), an offshoot

¹⁴⁴ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 73

¹⁴⁵ According to Farish A. Noor, the narrative of *Hikayat Hang Tuah* does not pretend to be a history, and it is consciously labelled a *Hikayat* (tale, epic) and not a *tawarikh* (history). See Farish's essay, 'Hang Tuah the Pacifist: Deconstructing Our National Hero', *What Your Teacher Didn't Tell You: The Annexe Lectures (Vol. 1)*, Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Matahari Books, pp. 233-277

¹⁴⁶ Farish A. Noor, 'Hang Tuah the Pacifist: Deconstructing Our National Hero', p. 269

¹⁴⁷ For further discussion on Hang Tuah/ Hang Jebat debate, See Khoo Gaik Cheng's chapter, "Malay Myth and Changing Attitudes Towards Nationalism: The Hang Tuah/ Hang Jebat Debate", *Reclaiming Adat*, pp. 22-82

of *bangsawan*. These forms, discussed in the next section, can be considered the earliest forms of Malay cinema.

Precursors of Early Malay Cinema

The first exhibit at the now defunct British Museum of the Moving Image in London was that of two characters from the shadow puppet theatre known as *wayang kulit*, which the Museum rightly recognised as the precursor of cinema.¹⁴⁸ *Wayang kulit* is believed to have come to the Malay Peninsula from Hinduist Java – during or soon after the Majapahit period – rather than directly from India or Thailand as is generally believed. It loosely draws on the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics, and Islamic prayers, showcasing a mixture of Malay animism, Hindu-style narrative and heroic characters.¹⁴⁹ The word *wayang*, the Javanese word for shadow, is a variant of *bayang*, the Malay word for ‘shadow’. *Wayang kulit* (*wayang* – theatre; *kulit* – leather puppets) utilises a white screen propped up on a stage approximately three feet above the ground. In appearance, it is not unlike an outdoor film screening.

The word ‘*wayang*’ was adapted to describe cinema given that it entails all of the elements found in the *wayang kulit* performance. However, because there was no equivalent word for ‘film’ in the Malay language at the time, film was initially called *wayang gambar hidup*, meaning ‘live shadow pictures’. By the 1920s, the term *wayang gelap*, which means ‘dark theatre’, temporarily came to

¹⁴⁸ Hassan Abdul Muthalib, *From Shadow Play to the Silver Screen*, p. 4

¹⁴⁹ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 76

be in vogue before it finally evolved to become *wayang gambar* ('shadow pictures').¹⁵⁰

The puppet master (*dalang*) of the *wayang kulit*, as the controller of the narrative and the arrangement of events, was an always present, invisible narrator. The *dalang*'s oral, visual and musical control over the performance resembled that of the film director.¹⁵¹ The *wayang* typically opened in the palace or court, moved to the natural environment (forest, mountain, sea), and finally returned to the court. Coincidence, which is one of the *wayang*'s primary narrative devices, is a motivational characteristic of melodrama later found in old Malay films.¹⁵² The element of coincidence, or the striking conjunction of incidents, links the range of times and spaces that often appear in *wayang* narratives.

Whereas *wayang kulit* performances are grounded in dialogue and supported by music, *bangsawan* (Malay opera) and *sandiwara* (modern Malay theatre) would feature actors suddenly bursting into song while they were occasionally accompanied by a group of dancers. As a new cultural form, *bangsawan* emerged in response to the rapid social, economic and political changes caused by British colonial expansion into the Malay Peninsula in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Meaning 'of aristocratic class', the term *bangsawan* also refers to plays about royalty and the nobility (not necessarily Malay), which constitute the mainstay of the form. Unlike traditional Malay theatre such as *mak yong* and *wayang kulit*, *bangsawan* was entertainment-oriented and highly

¹⁵⁰ Hassan Abdul Muthalib, *From Shadow Play to the Silver Screen*, p. 4

¹⁵¹ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 76

¹⁵² It should be noted that coincidence is also a narrative trope in Victorian and Shakespearean plays.

commercial. The basic musical expression of *bangsawan* incorporated a blend of Malay and Western elements, but also included Chinese, Indian, Middle-Eastern, Javanese and other foreign elements. Initially, the song and dance elements served practically as a transition mechanism for set and prop changes in the following scene (called the ‘extra turn’).¹⁵³ The same elements later became an integral feature of the first feature films in which the hero and heroine would burst into song, seemingly without any proper motivation.

The golden age of *bangsawan* theatre spanned the years from 1902 to 1935 when *bangsawan* troupes mushroomed in Malaysia. The hardships of World War II and the post-war years contributed to its decline until the late 1960s and the early 1970s. This decline was expedited by the development of a local film industry in the 1950s. However, *bangsawan* did not totally disappear as it was altered, and replaced, by Malaysian cinema.¹⁵⁴ *Bangsawan* was revived by the government in the 1970s, in line with the introduction of the National Cultural Policy, which sought to imbue the *bangsawan* with a more monolithic and essentialist sense of Malayness, thereby erasing elements of cultural syncretism.¹⁵⁵ In the 1960s *bangsawan*’s role as popular entertainment was

¹⁵³ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 84

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 85

¹⁵⁵ Tan Sooi Beng (1993). *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, p. 193; However, Van der Heide notes that early indications of the rejection of *bangsawan*’s multi-culturalism occurred in the 1930s under the influence of Malay nationalism. See Van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, pp. 84-85

usurped by television and other new dramatic forms, including *sandiwara*, or modern Malay theatre.¹⁵⁶

Sandiwara plays initially were developed and produced alongside *bangsawan*. The form of *bangsawan* was significantly altered when its troupes toured Indonesia, soon becoming known as *stambul* or *komedie stamboel*, a theatrical form that originated in Surabaya, Indonesia.¹⁵⁷ Between 1891 and 1906 the *stambul* theatre was similar to the *bangsawan*; however, between 1906 and 1926, the former developed along more realistic lines due in part to western influences on Indonesian plays. After 1926, the trend towards realism in Indonesian theatre continued, and the *stambul* came to be called *sandiwara* and was introduced to Malaysian audiences by Indonesian troupes.¹⁵⁸

These productions influenced the development of local *sandiwara* plays which entered Malayan popular culture after World War II. According to Solehah Ishak, *sandiwara* plays can be divided into three types. The first, known as history plays, retold stories of Malay warriors, kings or princesses from Malay classical history. The second type, known as *purbawara*, was purely creative, imaginative pieces penned by various writers. The third type were pre-realistic plays

¹⁵⁶ Solehah Ishak (2008), 'Malay Theatre: An Exegesis of Plot and Narrative', *Tirai Panggung*, 8, 58

¹⁵⁷ Originating in 1891 in the port city of Surabaya, the *Komedie Stamboel*, or Istanbul-style theatre, toured colonial Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia by rail and steamship. The company performed musical versions of the Arabian Nights and European fairy tales and operas such as *Sleeping Beauty* and *Aida*, as well as Indian and Persian romances, Southeast Asian chronicles, true crime stories, and political allegories. The actors were primarily Eurasians, the original backers were Chinese, and audiences were made up of all races and classes. For further reading, see Matthew Isaac Cohen (2006), *The Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theatre in Colonial Indonesia, 1891-1903*, Ohio: Ohio University Press.

¹⁵⁸ Solehah Ishak, 'Malay Theatre: An Exegesis of Plot and Narrative', 58

introduced from Indonesia. The popularity of *sandiwara* during this time was seen as a reaction to the outmoded *bangsawan* form.¹⁵⁹

Sandiwara resembles cinema in the sense that actors are required to memorise dialogues from a written script. The play is not interrupted by interludes, known as extra-turns in the *bangsawan*, which tend to intrude on the plot and mood of the play. Similar to what was depicted in many old Malay films, songs and dances were incorporated into the play, with audible voiceovers and appropriate music. Key elements of the *sandiwara*, *bangsawan* and *wayang kulit* became incorporated into early Malay films. For example, the first Malay feature film *Leila Majnun* was shot more as a stage play in the manner of a *bangsawan*, while at the same time employing popular *bangsawan* actors such as M. Suki.¹⁶⁰ The actors delivered their lines in ‘stentorian tones’ and made minimal movements due to the claustrophobic nature of the stage. In addition, the film appeared theatrical because of its stationary camera work.¹⁶¹ I now turn to the history of such films.

A Brief History of Malay Cinema

Leila Majnun was produced by S. M. Chisty of the Motilal Chemical Co. Of Bombay, which originally supplied carbon lamps for cinema projectors in the region. Released in Singapore in 1934, the film was based on a popular Sindhi

¹⁵⁹ Solehah Ishak, ‘Malay Theatre: An Exegesis of Plot and Narrative’, 61-62

¹⁶⁰ Aimi Jarr & Mohd Zambery Malek (2009), *Malaysian Films: The Beginning*, Selangor: FINAS, p. 77

¹⁶¹ Baharudin A. Latif (2001), ‘A Brief History of Malaysian Film’. In David Hanan (ed.), *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region*. Hanoi: SEAPAVAA, p. 166

folktale about two tragic lovers.¹⁶² Featuring songs, dances and melodramatic elements typical of coeval Indian films, it was an instant success when it screened at the Alhambra theatre in Singapore during the Muslim festival of *Eid-ul-Adha* in 1934.¹⁶³

Following the success of *Leila Majnun*, two brothers from Shanghai, Run Run and Runme Shaw, who established a cinema empire based on movie distribution and exhibition, began film production in Singapore in 1937.¹⁶⁴ At least eight feature films, made between 1938 and 1941, employed *bangsawan* actors. These early Shaw Malay language films, which had love, adventure and horror themes, were directed by Hou Yao and Wan Hoi Ling from mainland China.¹⁶⁵ All of these films, adapted from works in Hong Kong, were commercial failures. According to Raphael Millet, ‘Malay viewers rejected what was presented as ostensibly Malay, but which was clearly adapted from earlier Chinese films, with many element foreign to Malay art and culture’.¹⁶⁶ The Shaw brothers stopped producing films when World War II spread across the globe with the Japanese invading Southeast Asia, including Singapore.

They returned to business in 1947 and established the first post-war film studio, Malay Film Production Ltd, producing its first film, *Singapura di Waktu*

¹⁶² According to Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng, *Leila Majnun* is often cited as a 1933 film, but the actual timeline of its production and release is less clear. This indicates that the film was fully completed and commercially released in 1934, not in 1933 as commonly thought. See Uhde and Ng (2010), *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*, Singapore: Ridge Books, NUS Press, p. 17

¹⁶³ Uhde & Ng, *Latent Images*, p. 17

¹⁶⁴ Baharudin A. Latif, ‘A Brief History of Malaysian Film’, 168

¹⁶⁵ Raphael Millet, *Singapore Cinema*, p. 24

¹⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 24

Malam ('*Singapore by Night*'), directed by *Leila Majnun*'s B. S. Rajhans.¹⁶⁷ The studio continued to produce films directed by South Indian and Filipino directors. From the mid-1950s, the studio's chief asset was the legendary P. Ramlee, who, as almost a one-man production crew, wrote scripts, songs, performed in movies, and directed. His films, particularly his comedies, proved very popular among Malaysians of all ethnic groups. P. Ramlee made his films at Malay Film Productions studio in Singapore before moving to Kuala Lumpur in 1963 to make films at Merdeka Film Productions, a fledgling studio run by businessman H. M. Shah and Ho Ah Loke, that had begun operation three years earlier.

The popularity of P. Ramlee's films began to wane when he moved to Kuala Lumpur. The Merdeka Studio was not as well-equipped and well-managed as Shaw Malay Film Productions in Singapore. Film historians have suggested that the commercial and artistic debacles surrounding most of the films he directed in Kuala Lumpur were possibly attributable to the vagaries of audience taste. This was a time when local moviegoers (particularly Malay moviegoers) started to prefer the Hindi-language (Indian) and Indonesian films, which were then flooding the local cinemas.¹⁶⁸

Cathay-Keris, Malay Film Production's rival, lacked a star of the magnitude of P. Ramlee but could boast at least one outstanding film director, Hussain Haniff, who focused on historical stories, giving social commentaries and criticisms through Malaya's feudal past. Critics and scholars have hailed Haniff as a master of *mise-en-scène* – particularly scenery, acting and lighting – as opposed

¹⁶⁷ Timothy R White, 'Exactly the Same but Completely Different', pp. 3-4

¹⁶⁸ Baharudin A. Latif, 'A Brief History of Malaysian Film', pp. 175-176

to Ramlee, whose emphasis was on cinematography and ‘the emotional expression of the human face and voice’.¹⁶⁹ Cathay-Keris also produced horror and comedy films which were popular in the 1950s and 1960s as I will discuss in subsequent sections. Cathay, which had been in financial trouble since the death of its founder Loke Wan Tho in 1964 continued to struggle, and closed down production in 1972 after twenty years in business. Therefore, cinema had to rigorously compete with television, which was increasingly popular.¹⁷⁰

Similar factors led to the demise of the Singapore studio of Malay Film Productions in 1967. However, the Shaw Brothers continued to make films at Merdeka Studio, which they bought in 1964 and took over in 1966. The Shaws attempted to rejuvenate the Merdeka Studio by sending a technical group from their Hong Kong studio to assist the local artists and technical crews with colour filming and used scripts already filmed by their Hong Kong studio. However, after its last film, *Adik Manja* (‘Pampered Baby’, 1979, Othman Hafsham), a huge box-office success, Shaw finally ceased to produce Malay films. This may have been due, among other factors, to the emergence of the VHS format in the early 1980s, together with its imminent piracy problems.¹⁷¹

Meanwhile, more independent production houses started to emerge after 1975. For example, businessman Deddy M. Borhan set up his company Sabah Film Productions which produced the comedy *Keluarga Comat* (‘*Comat’s Family*’, 1975, Aziz Satar). This film not only attained enormous commercial

¹⁶⁹ Timothy R. White, ‘Exactly the Same but Completely Different,’ p. 8

¹⁷⁰ Baharudin A. Latif, ‘A Brief History of Malaysian Film,’ pp. 174-175

¹⁷¹ Ibid., p. 179

success, but paved the way for a second revival of the industry. Following the success of *Keluarga Comat*, several other companies owned by ethnic Malays (*bumiputera*) – in line with the government’s New Economic Policy – appeared, such as Sari Artis, Syed Kechik Film Productions, Fleet Communications, Perfima, Indera Film and Amir Communications.¹⁷² During the early phase of this independent era (from 1975 to the end of the 1980s), the melodramatic tradition in Malay films, which was influenced by Indian cinema and *bangsawan*, remained prevalent. Because this was a period in which key film genres developed, it is important to look at melodrama in more detail as a predominant mode of past and contemporary Malay cinema.

From Indian Cinema to *Bangsawan*: Melodramatic Tradition in Malay Cinema

This section traces the notion of melodrama as a predominant narrative and cultural mode in many Malay films, irrespective of genre. This tendency was already evident in early pre-war films such as *Hancur Hati* (*‘A Crushed Heart’*, 1941) advertised as ‘[a] tearjerker interspersed with melancholy and heart-rending songs’.¹⁷³ The tradition of melodrama in Malay cinema was attributable to the inseparable influences of both Indian cinema and the theatrical form of *bangsawan*.¹⁷⁴ In many ways, Indian cinema embodies the literal meaning of the

¹⁷² Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri and Raja Ahmad Alauddin (1995, Winter), ‘The Search for a Malaysian Cinema: Between U-Wei, Shuhaimi, Yusof and LPFM’, *Asian Cinema*, 7(2), 60

¹⁷³ Aimi Jarr & Mohd Zamberi Malek, *Malaysian Films: The Beginning*, p. 95

¹⁷⁴ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*; Hanita Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie (2011), ‘Negotiating Melodrama and the Malay Woman: Female Representation and the Melodramatic

term ‘melodrama’ (music-drama) more than other cinematic traditions. An amalgam of traditional Indian performance styles employing music and dance, together with European theatrical forms, formed the basis for Parsee theatre, and subsequently for Indian films. The plays performed in the Parsee theatre reflected multiple cultural influences from Arab and Persian romantic melodrama and Indian epics, to adaptations of Shakespearean and Victorian melodrama, with new material created from Persian and Urdu sources.¹⁷⁵ The most significant contribution to this theatrical form was the inclusion of music and dance in the performance.¹⁷⁶ All of the plays adapted to the Parsee theatre tradition drew on the melodramatic mode, which was articulated through heightened emotion, stock characters, and the combination of music and dance ‘to form “music drama”’.¹⁷⁷ In Indian cinema, music does not necessarily function as a component of narrative drive in contrast to Hollywood musicals.¹⁷⁸ This legacy is further illustrated in the Indian melodramatic mode of address in the form of ‘loosely structured, digressive narratives, where cause/effect, realism and psychological motivation are of minimal concern, while music and dance as spectacle and the emotional involvement of the audience are of paramount importance’.¹⁷⁹

Mode in Malaysian-Malay Films from the early 1990s-2009’, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow.

¹⁷⁵ Ashish Rajadhyaksha and Paul Willemen (1999), *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*, London: British Film Institute, p. 172

¹⁷⁶ Girish Karnad (1989), ‘Theatre in India’, *Daedalus*, 118, 4, p. 336

¹⁷⁷ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 82

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 82

¹⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 163

Old Malay films resembled – to a great extent – the manipulation of the binaries that structure the moral universe of the Indian melodrama. The Indian melodramatic plot centres on a good versus evil dichotomy, which requires a conclusion of moral ordering rather than narrative resolution. The archetypal figure of the mother in Indian films, paralleling that of the aforementioned mother-figure archetype in Malay folktales, is typically associated with tradition, goodness and family obligations. These qualities are epitomised in the mother-son relationship which overshadows all other family links. Evil is personified by the villain, who, usually a polar opposite of the mother figure, typically disregards family relations and indulges in various forms of moral decadence. This melodramatic pattern operates in a number of Indian film genres such as those about mythology and historical and social events.

Apart from Indian cinema, it should be noted that Chinese films, in particular melodramas, also helped to shape the melodramatic tradition in old Malay cinema. It is reported that the Southeast Asian market, especially Singapore and Malaya was crucial to the Hong Kong film industry. This market also determined the types of genres that were being produced; for example, romantic melodramas were preferred in Malaysia and Indonesia. There were also films specifically produced by Shaw Brothers for the ‘*Nanyang*’ – the Chinese term for the Southeast Asian region. *Nanyang* films such as *Song of Malaya* (1954), *Love in Penang* (1954) and *Blood Stains the Valley of Love* (1959), were family melodramas, ‘foregrounding the self-sacrificing woman, the weak man and, in the case of the last film, a love affair between a Chinese man and a Malay

woman'.¹⁸⁰ All of these themes also characterised Malay films of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁸¹

As well, Hong Kong-made Cantonese melodramas, which were shaped by post-May Fourth Chinese literature and Hollywood melodrama, drew some parallel with many themes of Malay films in the 1950s and 1960s. These include: '... visual tropes such as thunder and lightning to signify danger and threat; ineffectual men, often artists and teachers; and, the mother/son/wife triangle, in which the two women become rivals over the man'.¹⁸² In addition, these Cantonese melodramas 'incorporated songs minimally related to the story, rather abruptly inserted into the film, and performed in a declamatory way'.¹⁸³ These songs also appear in Malay films of the 1950s and 1960s.¹⁸⁴

Another important influence on the melodramatic mode of Malay cinema derived from the aforementioned *bangsawan*. Based upon Persian plays that incorporated songs and music, the *bangsawan*'s importance lies in its direct influence on Malay cinema, particularly the multiplicity of its social and cultural connections. As mentioned earlier, most 1950s films featured Indian-influenced cinematic elements: melodramatic, episodic and contained digressive narratives that focused on family and genealogy and continuously integrated songs and dances.¹⁸⁵ These elements were also part of the *bangsawan* tradition, which

¹⁸⁰ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 142

¹⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 142

¹⁸² *Ibid.*, p. 143

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 143

¹⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 143

contributed to the popularity of Malay films and ‘continued its influence through the presence of actors, technicians, musicians, performers and stories in the films of the 1950s’.¹⁸⁶ As in the *bangsawan*, the songs and dances in Malay films were derived from a ‘wide range of traditions, but their staging was often determined or altered by the Indian directors’.¹⁸⁷

According to Malaysian academic Tan Sooi Beng, *bangsawan* had to adapt to the changing popular tastes of the urban population. In the 1920s and 1930s, *bangsawan* inevitably exposed elements of a society, economy and culture which were undergoing change and subject to foreign influences.¹⁸⁸ This theatrical form actively utilised new elements, specifically in its stage setting, plot structure, and character types while retaining elements familiar to audience and performers. The settings, plot structures and character types significantly influenced early Malay films and played a major role in the melodramatic tradition of Malay cinema. The *bangsawan* play was characterised by one main plot and a number of subplots, linear development and occasional climax. In general, however, the plots remained less important than the spectacle of beautiful settings, songs, dances and chorus girls. A *bangsawan* play also featured exaggerated displays of feeling, a melodramatic quality adapted from Western theatre and film. For example, in moments of emotional crisis, the heroic characters sobbed, sang or fainted whereas the villains would beat their chests and

¹⁸⁵ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 136

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 136

¹⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 136

¹⁸⁸ Tan Sooi Beng (1993), *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera*. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

tear their clothes in an emotional crisis.¹⁸⁹ Similar melodramatic elements characterised the *sandiwara* plays that replaced the *bangsawan* ones. As main forms of mass entertainment, both types of theatre helped to shape the structure and sensibility of many Malay films during the 1940s, 1950s and 1960s, particularly films of the indigenous genre, *purbawara*.

***Purba* Films as Indigenous Genre**

The indigenous genre of old Malay cinema was reflected in *purba* films or *purbawara*, epic films based on the *hikayat* described earlier and set in the pre-colonial era, almost always in a *kampong* which nostalgically harks back to and glorifies the pre-colonial Malay world. Like the Cantonese opera film of the 1950s, it disappeared due to the migration of personnel (actors, directors, musicians, technicians), plots and stylistic elements from theatre to film.¹⁹⁰ The term '*purba*', which literally means 'ancient time', has been loosely used in popular discourse to refer to a form of period or costume drama that had its roots in the *bangsawan* and *sandiwara*. Due to the preference for global generic labels, the term *purba* or *purbawara* was rarely employed by Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris. However, a few films including *Amok Tok Nading* (1968, S. Kadarisman) produced by Kuala Lumpur's Merdeka Film Productions employed it in their

¹⁸⁹ Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan*, p. 124

¹⁹⁰ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 143

posters: ‘*Purbawara yang kenchang-ligat dengan pertarongan!!!*’ (lit.

‘*Purbawara that is smashing, rife with fights!*’).¹⁹¹

The most well-known *purba* films such as *Hang Tuah*, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and *Raja Bersiong* appeared in the form of mytho-historical films (all imbued with melodramatic overtones) adapted from the aforementioned myths, legends or folktales. The protagonists of these films, whether they are legendary heroines or heroes, royal figures or working class characters are bent upon maintaining the Malay feudal order. Many films of this genre often accentuate the theme of conflict between individual desires and collectivist values which continue to be explored in the tension between tradition and modernity in modern-day, non-*purba* films.

One famous example of this indigenous film genre is the legend of warriors Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat, which has its roots in the aforesaid *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and has been retold in various forms and media. Set in the fifteenth century during the reign of Sultan Mansur Shah of Malacca, childhood friends Tuah and Jebat learn martial arts and eventually become guards of the Sultan, with Tuah as the chief guard. Tuah is accused of treason by the old guard of the sultanate, and ordered to be executed by the Sultan. Feeling betrayed by the supposed death of his friend (who is still secretly alive because the order is not carried out), Jebat takes over the palace after receiving Tuah’s magic *keris* (Malay dagger).

In 1956 Shaw’s Malay Film Productions turned this tale into a motion picture titled *Hang Tuah*, directed by Phani Majumdar from India. The film was

¹⁹¹ Aimi Jarr & Mohd Zamberi Malek, *Malaysian Films: The Beginning*, p. 72

made in colour, marking it as an adventure epic. This generic distinction was also emphasised in its promotion, with the poster of the film reading: ‘The adventures of the immortal Malay warrior of Malacca brought to the screen for the first time! ... in Shawscope and Eastmancolor’. Adapted from British writer M. C. Sheppard’s *The Adventures of Hang Tuah*, Majumdar’s screenplay for the film was also loosely based on the *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and on the Malay Annals (*Sejarah Melayu*). Acknowledging that ‘many details [were] imaginary’, Sheppard confined his narrative to some of Hang Tuah’s major adventures, using the story’s characters from the *bangsawan* version while focusing on event and action.¹⁹² The film remained faithful to the original text, valorising Hang Tuah as a hero due to his undivided loyalty to the Sultan.

Director Hussain Haniff’s debut film *Hang Jebat* (1961), which highlights Hang Jebat as an (anti)hero due to his rebellious and anti-feudal disposition, deconstructs the classical representation of Malay masculinity. The film was based on Ali Aziz’s 1959 play, *Hang Jebat Menderhaka* (‘Hang Jebat Commits Treason’), which was itself part of a broader re-interpretation of the Tuah/Jebat relationship that took place in Malay society in the 20th century.¹⁹³ The revised story begins with the Sultan sentencing Tuah to death. Feeling outraged, Jebat runs amok and kills several people in the village while seeking revenge on the Sultan. Unlike Majumdar’s *Hang Tuah*, *Hang Jebat* appeared somewhat darker due to its emphasis upon fighting and violence and its downplaying of music and

¹⁹² William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 177

¹⁹³ Besides *Hang Tuah* and *Hang Jebat*, other films that drew on – and were partly inspired by – *Hikayat Hang Tuah* included both versions of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (1961, S. Roomai Noor/2005, Saw Tiong Hin) and *Tun Tjiah* (1960, L. Krishnan).

romance. Exploring male friendship, the film accentuates psychological realism and individual characterisation. It portrays the most explosive form of *rajuk* which cannot be alleviated or reconciled and which leads Jebat to run amok and commit violence.¹⁹⁴

Such serious forms of *rajuk* can also be seen in a number of family-oriented *purba* melodramas, which were loosely adapted from didactic folktales. For example, *Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup* (1959, Jamil Sulong) revolves around a single mother's craving for fish roe left unfulfilled when the roe is finished off by her hungry son. Feeling hurt, she expresses *rajuk* running off into the deep jungle towards a man-eating boulder. *Si Tanggang* and *Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah*, together with *Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup* foregrounded the mother-figure archetype in the manner of Indian films, representing fertility embodied in the primordial image of 'earth mother'. The *Cinderella*-like *Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah* (1959, S. Romainoor) depicted the binary of this archetype. One is the good mother, who, imbued with *semangat* (spirit or vital force) after she dies, is magically transformed into a fish then a tree. Her *semangat* guides her daughter Merah, who encounters a prince who offers to marry her. The other maternal figure is Merah's evil stepmother who abuses her without her father's knowledge.

Purba films evolved over time and became modifiers for broader genres. As I will show later in this chapter, *purba* films re-emerged as fully-fledged action martial-arts films in the late 1960s and throughout the 1970s. In addition, there

¹⁹⁴ Anuar Nor Arai (2002), 'Rajuk, Pujuk, Kasih, Kempunan, Resah Gelisah dan Air Mata: Mengenai Intelligensi Budaya dalam Filem Melayu', *Jurnal Pengajian Melayu* (Malay Studies Journal), 12, 158-159

were *purba* horror, *purba* comedy and *purba* romance films. I now turn to the romance, one of the oldest genres as highlighted in the first Malay feature film, *Leila Majnun*.

The Romance

As exemplified by *Leila Majnun*, romance can be considered the earliest globally-influenced cinematic genre in Malay cinema that remains popular today. While specific generic terms such as ‘romance’ and ‘melodrama’ were rarely used in the production’s marketing strategies, labels such as ‘drama’ and ‘love story’ promised the same generic formulas. Most of the romance films during the golden age were melodramas. The most popular ones such as *Penarek Becha* (‘The Trishaw Peddler’, 1955, P. Ramlee), *Antara Dua Darjat* (‘Between Two Classes’, 1960, P. Ramlee) and *Sri Mersing* (1961, Salleh Ghani) featured the male protagonist as a suffering ‘victim-hero’ frustrated by a class-impeded romance. All of these films shared the following key characteristics: ‘opposition from a feudal-conscious family to an unsanctioned match, the self-sacrifice of woman, and the weakness of man’.¹⁹⁵ Interestingly, the suffering male protagonists in these films evince the culture-bound disposition of *rajuk* due to their social marginalisation and vilification.

P. Ramlee’s *Antara Dua Darjat*, which creatively blends melodrama, film noir and musical, is about a romance between Ghazali, a musician, and Zaleha, an upper class woman. Zaleha’s father attempts to separate her from Ghazali by sending her back to Singapore to marry an aristocratic man. With his scathing

¹⁹⁵ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 199

treatment of the corrupt and hypocritical Malay aristocratic characters, P. Ramlee critiques the class hierarchies of Malay feudal class system. The film portrays a suffering victim-hero, who happily gets the girl in the end.

Unlike *Antara Dua Darjat*, Salleh Ghani's *purba* romance *Sri Mersing*, which features a suffering victim-hero, does not end happily. Dealing with class and regional-territorial prejudice and discrimination, the film focuses on Damak and his family who migrate to the coastal fishing village of Mersing. Damak's love affair with the village beauty Sri is thwarted when the son of the village headman slanders Damak, forcing him and his family to leave the village. Both Ghazali in *Antara Dua Darjat* and Damak express *rajuk* which further complicates their masculinity. Damak is even overwhelmed by his prolonged *rajuk*: when his virtues are eventually recognised, Sri and her father wholeheartedly persuade Damak not to leave Mersing, but he is adamant to return to his hometown. According to Amir Muhammad, *Sri Mersing* offers an intelligent critique of gender disparity in its depiction of strong-willed women.¹⁹⁶ The female protagonist Sri is punished for her audacity to make her own choice by disappearing on her wedding day when she is forced to marry the village headman's son.

The figure of the male victim-hero continued to appear in films about interracial romance produced by Merdeka Film Productions in the late 1960s. *Sesudah Subuh* ('After the Dawn', 1967) and *Gerimis* ('Drizzle', 1968) directed by P. Ramlee were important precursors to contemporary interracial romance films such as Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* which is discussed in the final chapter. In

¹⁹⁶ Amir Muhammad (2010), *120 Malay Movies*. Petaling Jaya: Matahari, p. 20

Sesudah Subuh, the middle-class male protagonist experiences loneliness and depression due to his busy wife and unruly adolescent children. The man falls in love with an ethnic Chinese woman and clearly articulates his sense of *rajuk* when he decides to leave his family to marry the Chinese woman.

Romance films continued to be popular from the 1970s to the 1990s. Films such as *Azura* (1984, Deddy M. Borhan), *Sembilu* ('Thorns of Love', 1994, Yusof Haslam) and *Sembilu 2* ('Thorns of Love 2', 1995, Yusof Haslam) were all enormous box-office successes. After the new millennium, the genre entered into a period of decline and regained its popularity in 2011 with the release of *Ombak Rindu* ('Pining Wave', Osman Ali). All of these films conformed to the formulaic conventions of the 1950s and 1960s romantic melodramas. *Azura*, a teen romance, focuses on a class-impeded relationship between Zek, the spoiled biker son of a wealthy businessman, and Azura, a high school student who lives with her working-class aunt. The success of *Azura* led to the proliferation of teen-oriented romantic comedies in the 1980s such as *Ali Setan* ('The Mischievous Ali', 1985, Jins Shamsuddin) and *Gila-Gila Remaja* ('Teenage Pranksters', 1985, Hussein Abu Hassan), which paved the way for now familiar stereotypes and tropes of Malay teen films: high school-campus life and romance, motorcycle racing and gang culture.¹⁹⁷

The popularity of this genre continued into the 1990s with the box-office hit *Sembilu*, which explores the tempestuous relationship between Awie, a rock

¹⁹⁷ Within the same decade, an alternative approach to the romance genre emerged in Rosnani Jamil's *Mawar Merah* ('Red Rose', 1987). *Mawar Merah* departs from many romantic melodramas of the time dealing with a 'taboo' issue, namely the forbidden love between a high school teenage girl Kartika and her bachelor uncle Sofian.

singer, and Wati, the daughter of a middle-class family. Like many old Malay melodramas, the male protagonist is trapped between two women, one demure and submissive, the other aggressive and assertive.¹⁹⁸ The same formulaic romantic plot led to the huge commercial success of the more recent romance *Ombak Rindu*. Yet this is an exception as the popularity of the romance genre has declined considerably in the new millennium. In its stead, the ever-popular genre of comedy has continued to go strong.

The Comedy

As early as 1951, the term ‘comedy’ appeared as the most conspicuous generic label in the marketing of Malay movies. A poster advertising one of the earliest Malay comedies titled *Bapa Saya* (‘My Father’, 1951, B.S. Rajhans) read: ‘BIG NEW COMEDY SMASH’ and a review in Singapore’s English daily *The Straits Times* described it as: ‘The latest Malay comedy hit ... the film tells the story of a happy-go-lucky middle class Malay family’.¹⁹⁹

No account of comedy in the 1950s and 1960s would be satisfactory without mention of P. Ramlee’s comedies, which made him popular with Malaysian audiences of all ages and ethnicities. The majority accentuated class issues often criticising the Malay feudal system. Two of Ramlee’s *purba* comedies, *Musang Berjanggut* (‘The Bearded Fox’, 1959) and *Nujum Pak Belalang* (‘Pak Belalang, The Fortune-Teller’, 1959), were loosely adapted from

¹⁹⁸ William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 235

¹⁹⁹ Mustafar A. R. (2011, October 20), ‘A. R. Tompel: Lawaknya Mencuit dan Menggelikan Hati’, *Filem Klasik Malaysia*, <http://filemklasikmalaysia.blogspot.com.au/2011/10/ar-tompel-lawaknya-mencuit-dan.html>

humorous folktales poking fun at the fallibility of the Malay sultans.²⁰⁰ Ramlee often deployed satire in his comedies such as in *Madu Tiga* ('*Three Wives*', 1964), modern-day, polygamy-themed comedy. The film critiques the practice of polygamy by middle-class Malay-Muslim men, a theme that remains popular today on the big screen.

Ramlee's first comedy *Bujang Lapok* (1957) depicted the struggles of three *kampong* working class men in their economic and romantic pursuits.²⁰¹ *Bujang Lapok* begins with the character played by Ramlee unsuccessfully trying to sell bottles of perfumed oil. His friend Aziz suffers the abuse of his boss due to his tardiness and general incompetence regarding his business affairs. Lack of money, lack of financial success and a general failure to fit into the world of capitalism form the background of the film. As Timothy White observes, P. Ramlee's trio comedies, such as the *Bujang Lapok* series, were influenced by popular Japanese genre comedies in the 1930s): *shomin-geki* (comedies about the lower-middle class) and *nansensu-mono* ('nonsense comedy'), which were shown in Malayan theatres during World War II. Both genres featured a group of young men seeking to meet women and make money with the minimum amount of effort. As White further points out, the influence of 1930s Hollywood comedies,

²⁰⁰ Amir Muhammad, *120 Malay Movies*, p. 21

²⁰¹ The success of *Bujang Lapok* spawned three other films: *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* ('The Bachelor Warrior', 1959), *Seniman Bujang Lapok* ('The Nitwit Movie Stars', 1961) and *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* ('Ali Baba, Confirmed Bachelor', 1961), all of which achieved tremendous commercial success.

particularly the *Three Stooges* series, constituted yet another significant influence on P. Ramlee's comedies.²⁰²

While many of P. Ramlee's successful Shaw-produced comedies could be regarded as satires, the Cathay-Keris studio also came up with a number of social satires directed by Hussain Haniff (*Masuk Angin Keluar Asap*) and M. Amin (*Dua Kali Lima*). *Dua Kali Lima* ('The Pot Calling the Kettle Black', 1966), for example, was a light-hearted social satire that ridiculed entrepreneurship, materialism and intergenerational conflict in its depiction of two tailors, who try to outdo each other in Singapore's emerging capitalist economy.

In addition, Cathay-Keris was well-known for the slapstick 'Mat' film series by comedian Mat Sentul made in the manner of spoof, which has influenced contemporary parodies such as those directed by Mamat Khalid (e.g., *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*). Sentul's most popular work from this particular cycle was *Mat Bond* (1967, co-directed by M. Amin), a hilarious parody of James Bond (and on James Bond rip-off, Jefri Zain). *Mat Bond*, a loser who fantasises about being a secret agent becomes embroiled in a series of capers. The film emphasises physical action and gags reinforced by Mat Sentul's ingenious animation and special effects: a suitcase falling into the wrong hands, a flying umbrella, and an elixir that makes him invisible.

During the independent era, the first film to be released was *Keluarga Comat* (1975), a commercially successful comedy produced by Sabah Film

²⁰² Timothy R. White (1996, Fall), 'Historical Poetics, Malaysian Cinema, and the Japanese Occupation,' *KINEMA*, <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/white962.htm>

Production. Veteran directors such as M. Amin and Omar Rojik, along with veteran comedian/actor Aziz Satar, were hired to direct comedies featuring popular comedians of the time R. Jaafar and A. R. Badul. A noted director of this genre who emerged at this time was Othman Hafsham, who made two critically and commercially successful comedies: *Adik Manja* (1979) and *Mekanik* ('Mechanic', 1983).

Mekanik was hailed as the epitome of a 'Malaysian' film due to its depiction of Malaysia's multiculturalism. The posters, lobby cards and advertisements for the film announced it as: '*Filem Malaysia*' ('Malaysian Film').²⁰³ The story revolves around Syamil, a mechanic who stumbles upon a gunny-sack full of dollar notes stashed in a taxi by some bank robbers. Complications arise when Syamil plans to keep the money, as he has to hide from both the police and gangsters associated with the robbery. Evinced elements of generic self-reflexivity such as parody, irony and satire, *Mekanik* pokes fun at all things Malaysian, including lampooning Malaysians' fondness for Hindi cinema through the Bollywood convention of musical scenes. As well, the film satirises the everyday lived reality in Malaysia, including the issue of police corruption.²⁰⁴

In the mid-1980s, new directors such as A.R. Badul and Z. Lokman specialised in comedy that championed the poor and working classes while criticising the corruption of the wealthy.²⁰⁵ The popularity of these comedies was

²⁰³ The film is fondly-remembered for its immortal one-liner delivered by a Eurasian character (played by Susan Lankester) in thickly English-accented Malay: '*Orang putih ke, orang hitam ke, orang biru ke, orang coklat ke ... kita kan orang Malaysia?*' (lit 'Regardless of whether we're white, black, blue or chocolate, we're all Malaysians, right?').

²⁰⁴ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 111

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 111

due to the fact that their audiences were mostly working-class Malays. The 1990s was a decade synonymous with romantic comedies, represented by films such *Harry Boy* (1993, A. R. Badul), *Kad Cinta* ('Love Card', 1995, Julie Dahlan) and *Puteri Impian* ('Dream Princess', 1998, Aziz M. Osman), among others. The resurgence of Malaysian romantic comedies is believed to have echoed the proliferation of the genre in Hollywood in the 1990s. From the new millennium onwards, many comedies were made in the form of spoofs, particularly in the form of horror-comedies, a trend spawned by the resurgence of both global and Malaysian horror cinemas.

The Horror

Horror became popular following the enormous commercial success of the *Pontianak* films, particularly B. N. Rao's first two *Pontianak* films in 1957: *Pontianak* and *Dendam Pontianak* ('Revenge of the Pontianak'), for which the original prints have been lost.²⁰⁶ These films, which were produced by Cathay-Keris Film, not only launched the genre and made actress Maria Menado an overnight success, but also unprecedentedly managed to attract non-Malay audiences.²⁰⁷ According to screenwriter A. Razak the script was adapted from a

²⁰⁶ As reported in the media, 'for years, rumors circulated that the prints of all the *Pontianak* films produced by Cathay Keris were thrown into the Gombak river after owners Ho Ah Loke and Loke Wan Tho had an argument. All anyone knew for sure was that the prints of the first *Pontianak* movie ever made in Malaysia had been lost forever'" See Allan Koay (2005, August 5), 'Famed foe, the pontianak', *The Star*, <http://ecentral.my/news/story.asp?file=/2005/8/5/movies/11062763&sec=movies>

²⁰⁷ According to film writer and critic Hamzah Hussin, the initial audience for the first *Pontianak* film was made up of 60 per cent Malays, 30 per cent Chinese and 10 per cent Indians. See Hamzah Hussin (1998), *Memoir Hamzah Hussin: Dari Cathay Keris ke Studio Merdeka*, Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, p. 41

highly successful *sandiwara* play.²⁰⁸ Although Cathay-Keris was well-known for its *Pontianak* films, Shaw Brothers also cashed in on the success of the sub-genre with films such as *Anak Pontianak* ('Son of the Pontianak', 1958, Ramon Estella). One English-language newspaper advertisement for the first *Pontianak* film claimed: 'The famous Malayan "chiller" brought to the screen for the first time!' while the English daily *The Straits Times*, after reviewing the film stated: 'Based on ancient belief in vampires, it inevitably has a "horror" theme, but the more blood-curdling scenes are relieved by gentle humour'.²⁰⁹

Seven *Pontianak* films were made during the golden era, most of which represented the *pontianak* as a vengeful spirit. Most entailed some reworking and reinvention of the common narrative folklore of the un-dead spirit of a woman who had died in childbirth and returns from her grave to avenge her death. Andrew Ng notes that what are considered to be the characteristics of the *pontianak* are actually the results of contamination by the Western vampire; in effect, the on-screen *pontianak* is a construct of Eastern and Western supernaturalism. As Ng further states, most of her tricks-of-the-trade, such as rising from the grave, fangs and blood-sucking, are derived from Western vampire films, not local folklore.²¹⁰

One particular characteristic that defines most of these *Pontianak* films is the depiction of the ghost as having deep maternal affection, a portrayal in line

²⁰⁸ Mustafar A. R. & Zaini Yusop (2012, October 9), "Pontianak" (1957): Mencapai Kejayaan Box-Office Luar Jangkaan', *Filem Klasik Malaysia*, <http://filemklasikmalaysia.blogspot.com.au/2012/10/pontianak-1957-mencapai-kejayaan-box.html>

²⁰⁹ Ibid., <http://filemklasikmalaysia.blogspot.com.au/2012/10/pontianak-1957-mencapai-kejayaan-box.html>.

²¹⁰ Andrew Ng, 'A Cultural History of the Pontianak Films', p. 217

with other folktale-based melodramas that highlight the mother-figure archetype. For example, the first *Pontianak* film centres on a young female hunchback, who, after being magically transformed into a beautiful woman, becomes the vampiric *pontianak* immediately after sucking snake venom from a bite received by her husband. The *pontianak* attempts to transform her daughter into one of the undead and perishes when a nail is inserted into her skull. In this respect, the *pontianak* figure tends to blur the good/sacrificial and evil/selfish mother-figure qualities.

According to Ng, the aforementioned *Anak Pontianak* paved the way for the theme of the clash between tradition and modernity in subsequent horror films. This theme is addressed through the figure of an old and westernised man of science who attempts ‘to “contaminate” the purity of the Malay belief system (dabbling in science to infiltrate the secrets of Malay magic) and familial boundaries (bringing his foreign ways into a Malay household)’.²¹¹ This particular theme also informed other subsequent horror films such as the Frankenstein-inspired *Gergasi* (‘Giant’, 1958, Diresh Ghosh) and *Si Tora Harimau Jadian* (‘Si Tora The Were-Tiger’, 1964), P. Ramlee’s first film made in Kuala Lumpur of which the print regrettably has been lost.

Hong Kong horror and vampire films, which were popular in Malaya during the 1950s, triggered local production of similar films. However, P. Ramlee’s *purba* horror *Sumpah Orang Minyak* (‘Curse of the Oily Man’, 1958), produced by Shaw Brothers, transposed Faustian-themed horror elements onto a

²¹¹ Andrew Ng, ‘A Cultural History of the Pontianak Films’, p. 222

local fable and a typical melodrama of lost love.²¹² *Sumpah Orang Minyak*'s storyline centres on a disfigured hunchback whose love relationship with the village chief's daughter is strongly opposed by fellow villagers. Planning to transform into a handsome man, he accepts the offer of a magic ring from Satan. However, he is first transformed into a supernatural, oil-covered monster and required to rape twenty-one virgins. In the same year, Cathay-Keris also produced films featuring the oily man set in the modern day (*Orang Minyak* ['The Oily Man'] and *Serangan Orang Minyak* ['Attack of the Oily Man'], both of which were directed by L. Krishnan).

The Faustian theme continued to appear in the horror films of the 1980s including *Perjanjian Syaitan* ('Pact with the Devil,' 1981, S. Sudarmaji), *Toyol* ('Goblin,' 1981, Malik Selamat) and *Dendam Dari Pusara* ('Revenge from the Grave,' 1983, Ahmad Mahmood), as well as in more contemporary films such as *Susuk* discussed in Chapter Three. An interesting exception to this formula is the critically-acclaimed *Rahsia* ('The Secret,' 1987, Othman Hafsham) made along the lines of American 'family horror' with its focus on the 'haunted house' theme popular in the 1970s and 1980s. In the film, a middle-class couple, whose daughter has recently died, moves into an old bungalow where they are haunted by the spirit of a murdered child. We learn that the ghost was the orphan nephew of the bungalow's former owner who swapped his identity with that of his son so that he could inherit the nephew's property.²¹³ Underneath the film's narrative lies

²¹² William van der Heide, *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film*, p. 144

²¹³ Othman Hafsham's *Rahsia* sparked controversy when it received many nominations at the 7th Malaysian Film Festival in 1987. It was accused of 'plagiarizing' the Canadian horror film *The Changeling* (1980, Peter Medak). In *The Changeling*, the protagonist, who has lost his wife and

its strident critique and exposé of the white-collar criminality and capitalist greed that some see as the distinguishing disposition of *nouveau-riche* Muslim-Malays.

The marked decline in the volume of production in the 1990s was attributable to stringent Censorship Board guidelines, a result of Malaysia's increasing Islamisation. In 1991, Aziz M. Osman's *Fantasi* ('Fantasy'), which purportedly dealt with supernatural elements deemed 'unIslamic', was initially banned by the Censorship Board. This was in line with the introduction of the VHS policy in the 1990s which banned violence, horror, sex and counter-culture elements in Malaysian TV and cinema. The ban was lifted only after a reshoot and overhaul, and the film was finally released in 1994. This horror-fantasy focuses on a *purba* girl Dara, who vows to avenge her death after being raped and killed by the bloodsucker Silbi ('Satan'). Dara's dead soul is transformed into a ring that reaches a modern-day journalist, thereby helping her investigation about a specific case of rape among girls. Among other factors, the enquiry centres upon a charged remark made by a female character, who tells her rapist that she will defend her body beyond death. The fractious Censorship Board took issue with notions of the spirited, dead soul in the statement which might contravene the fundamental Islamic faith that emphasises monotheism.²¹⁴

Generally, the horror and comedy-horror films of the 1980s focused on issues of class and rural-urban conflict whereas in the more contemporary films – after the genre's revival in 2003 – emphasis has generally been upon gender and

daughter, moves into a haunted old mansion and attempts to unravel a mystery associated with a disturbed spirit of a murdered child, who was actually killed by his father.

²¹⁴ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 109

particularly women. The highlighting of class issues and rural-urban conflict in many films of the 1970s and 1980s reflected the country's emerging modernisation, a tendency in line with the state's introduction of the New Economic Policy. This trend can also be attributed to the censorship restrictions that prevented horror films from featuring gendered ghosts such as the *pontianak*. However, this period witnessed the enormous popularity of Indonesian horror films among local audiences in Malaysia, with films featuring a variety of gendered ghosts or female as evil agents.²¹⁵ The focus on gender in contemporary horror films is inextricably bound up with another category of films that normally emphasise physical action, rugged masculinity and violence.

Action Films and Other Genres

During the Malay cinema's golden age, another broad category was action cinema, which comprised a variety of films ranging from war movies (*Sergeant Hassan, Matahari*) to youth-oriented gangster films (Ramon Estella's *Samseng* / 'Gangster'). It should be noted here that several films would likely fall into this category, that is, films featuring some physical action and thriller elements made in the form of crime dramas, mostly inspired by Chinese films and Hollywood noir films.²¹⁶ These include films such as *Hantu Rimau* ('Tiger Ghost', 1960,

²¹⁵ Arguably, the small number of Malaysian horror films produced – and their less emphasis on gender – could also be due to the influx of Indonesian horror films in Malaysia in the late 1970s and early 1980s. *Penangkal Ilmu Teluh* ('Black Magic Talisman', 1978, S.A. Karim), *Sundelbolong* (1981, dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra) and *Nyi Blorong* ('The Snake Queen', 1982, dir. Sisworo Gautama Putra), to name but a few, were very popular and engendered a new phenomenon among local moviegoers. Indonesian horror films of the time were regarded as considerably better than their Malaysian counterparts, particularly in terms of visceral emotions of horror they elicited and inventive special effects they incorporated.

²¹⁶ Timothy R. White, 'Exactly the Same but Completely Different,' p. 4

directed by K. Krishnan, B.N. Rao & S. Roomai Noor), *Sumpitan Rachun* ('Poisoned Blowpipe', 1961, L. Krishnan), *Jebak Maut* ('Lethal Snare', 1967, Jamil Sulong) and *Di Belakang Tabir* ('Behind the Scene', 1970, Jins Shamsudin).

Of a more or less similar genre, and worth noting here, is P. Ramlee's underrated work *Dr Rushdi* (1970), which Amir Muhammad in his book *120 Malay Movies* labelled a 'noir thriller' due to its bleak and existential tones.²¹⁷ The film revolves around a husband, who ostensibly avenges his wife's infidelity by faking his own death when in truth he runs off with another woman. Exploring themes of male guilt, paranoia and emasculation, *Dr Rushdi* resembles the American film noir, which features female characters as signifiers of male dilemmas and anxieties. Director Ramlee may have anticipated the impending danger of progress and modernity, a theme revived by contemporary films such as *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, *Susuk*, *Budak Kelantan* and *Bunohan*, all of which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

The more overt form of action cinema is evident in Kuala Lumpur's Merdeka Film Productions' many *purba* films mentioned earlier, which were made in the form of martial arts films. However, films of this genre were criticised for their supposedly slavish copying of Hong Kong imports. As Baharudin A. Latif has noted, these films often featured heroes shamelessly aping Chinese *kung-fu* movements instead of engaging in the native *silat*, evident in

²¹⁷ Amir Muhammad, *120 Malay Movies*, p. 404

films such as *Hutang Darah* ('Blood Debt', 1972).²¹⁸ P. Ramlee's *Enam Jahanam* ('Six Plunderers', 1969), which received the worst review of any P. Ramlee film,²¹⁹ had a poster hinting at its tendency to be a 'buddy movie'. *Enam Jahanam* simultaneously draws on the theme of revenge, the archetypal motivator in the genre of the western and the conventions of *purba* films, highlighting the traditional Malay warrior, the *pendekar*. A *pendekar* named Tantari embarks upon a journey of vengeance on horseback seeking out the bandits who murdered his wife. He meets Damburi, another *pendekar* who becomes his friend and helps him.

Foreign film influences such as the aforementioned elements of Western films continued to pervade a number of male-oriented genre films in Malaysia. However, these action, buddy and martial arts films were invariably unpopular in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s, when Malaysian cinema was dominated by more female-oriented genres such as women's films, family melodramas and romance. With respect to the action genre, local audiences preferred international productions from Indonesia, Hong Kong and US during this period. This trend can be attributed to these films' better production values and advanced techniques. At the same time, most *purba* films emerged as fully-fledged action-martial arts films. For example, *Loceng Maut* ('The Death Knell', 1976, Nas Achnas/ Gui Zi Hang/ Frank Porim Pandey), *Pendekar* ('The Warrior', 1977, M. Amin) and *Anak Sulong Tujuh Keturunan* ('Eldest Son of the Seventh Generation', 1982, Aziz Jaafar) showcased the Malay warrior and martial arts *silat*. All conformed to the

²¹⁸ Baharudin A. Latif, 'A Brief History of Malaysian Film', p. 177

²¹⁹ Amir Muhammad, *120 Malay Movies*, p. 396

look and sensibility of old *purba* films while following the formulaic pattern of Hong Kong martial arts movies particularly the *kung fu* pedagogy films. For example, *Loceng Maut*, a big-budget coproduction between Merdeka Studio and an Indonesian company, was based on the Shaws' Chinese hit film, *The Bells of Death*.²²⁰ All of these films foregrounded their protagonists' goals to seek justice and to restore the social order through their physical, masculine prowess and martial arts skills.

The 1990s witnessed the emergence of more globally-influenced action films, a result of the immense popularity of the Hollywood and Hong Kong action films of the 1980s and 1990s.²²¹ Examples included: *Operasi Cegah Jenayah* ('Anti-Crime Operation', 1991, Eddie Pak), *Kelisa* (1992, Ahmad Ibrahim), *The Dadah Connection* (1990, Toby Russell) and *Ops Belantara* ('Operation Jungle Storm', 1993, Rodzee Razak), all of which oscillated between police-crime stories and martial arts films. However, with the exception of Yusof Haslam's police/crime dramas, *Bayangan Maut* ('Shadow of Death', 1991) and *Pemburu Bayang* ('Shadow Hunter', 1993), most of the aforementioned films of this genre failed commercially. The success of Yusof's films was due to the fact that he combined his police/crime stories with elements of melodrama, romance and music (particularly his use of contemporary pop/rock numbers).

Most of the above 1990s action films could be considered weak in terms of narrative, substance and aesthetics, given that too much emphasis was placed on the action. More recently, Hong Kong-style action films, especially the

²²⁰ Baharudin A. Latif, 'A Brief History of Malaysian Film', p. 179

²²¹ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 166

gangster genre, continue to be made as exemplified by the commercially successful *KL Gangster* (2011, Syamsul Yusof) and *Kongsi* (2011, Farid Kamil).²²² In the process, this particular category of action cinema witnessed the development and birth of new cycles and trends such as youth gang films that depicted the masculinity of working class youth in *rempit* subculture discussed in the introduction.²²³ It is with the particular stages of the development of these new cycles and trends – either in the form of reworking of old genres or of birth of new (sub)genres – in contemporary cinema that I will conclude my overview of Malaysian film genres.

Cycles and Trends in the Post-Golden Era of Malaysian Cinema

As Bliss Cua Lim suggests, genre is ‘a formal, social, and industrial contract to repeat and to return and, as such, is always temporally diverse, involving the unmooring and entanglement of the “old” with the “new” and with versions yet to come’.²²⁴ According to Lim, a hint of genre’s temporal plurality emerges when Christian Gledhill, writing about the cyclical nature of genres, alludes to the continued resonance of old films among the new: ““Old” films circulate among us still, enabling film and critical production to hook back into the past and dust off apparently worn-out formulae for present uses and possible renaming’. For Gledhill, ‘the life of a genre is cyclical, coming around again in corkscrew

²²² Up until this chapter was written, *KL Gangster* broke the record for Malaysian films, grossing the highest box-office figures ever in the history of Malaysian cinema.

²²³ “Rempit ban: Ministry won’t compensate filmmakers’, *The Malaysian Insider*, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/index.php/malaysia/32823-rempit-ban-ministry-w...>

²²⁴ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time*, p. 190

fashion, never quite in the same place. Thus the cultural historian lacks any fixed point from which to survey the generic panorama'.²²⁵

These observations are relevant for an examination of Malaysian film genres due firstly to evidence of the Malaysian genres' cyclical nature during the cinema's golden age and secondly, the referencing and reworking of these genres in contemporary film culture. For example, the 1963 *purba* film *Raja Bersiong* ('The Fanged King', K.M. Basker) spawned an epic-style remake of the same title in 1968. This trend continued during the post-golden era: director M. Amin made *Sumpah Semerah Padi* ('Curse of Semerah Padi', 1981), a sequel to P. Ramlee's *Semerah Padi*, a form of *purba* action film highlighting the martial arts *silat*. Due to changing public preferences and cultural trends, genres that were once well-established such as the *purba* films have declined in popularity to be replaced by others considered better suited to contemporary tastes.²²⁶ For example, in the 1980s, the Hang Tuah-Hang Jebat conflict was given a revisionist interpretation by director Rahim Razali, who incorporated some elements of *purba* films in his modern-setting action-thriller *Matinya Seorang Patriot* ('Death of a Patriot', 1984). Five hyper-masculine brothers, trained by their bourgeois nationalist father to master the martial arts *silat*, avenged their father's death at the hands of his corrupt, scandalous business partners. The film exposes and critiques the modernity of ethnic Malay in the wake of the country's development.

²²⁵ Gledhill, 'Rethinking Genre', pp. 226-227

²²⁶ The last *purba* film made in the 1980s was *Sumpahan Mahsuri* ('Curse of Mahsuri', 1989, Jamil Sulong) made in the form of a historical epic. Throughout the 1990s, there was only one fully-fledged *purba* film made, that is, *Syahadat* (1992, Dzed Dzahidin), a tale of revenge and morality imbued with Islamic themes.

While the *purba* films were almost absent in the 1990s, two films revisited the tale of Hang Tuah and dealt with temporal themes, juxtaposing modern-day scenes and *purba* settings: *Tuah* (1990, Anwardi Jamil) and *XX-Ray II* (1995, Aziz M. Osman). In *Tuah*, Hang Tuah is stranded in contemporary Malaysia and wants to return to 15th century Malacca to stop Hang Jebat's 'frenzied rebellion'. The fantasy-adventure *XX-Ray II* also deals with time travel: a group of young science buffs are accidentally transported back in time by a 'time machine gun' to the Malacca Sultanate, landing smack in the middle of the 15th century Tuah-Jebat battle.

Other *purba*-type films that were remade include *Sumpahan Mahsuri* ('Curse of Mahsuri', 1989, Jamil Sulong) and *Puteri Gunung Ledang* ('Princess of Mount Ledang', 2005, Saw Tiong Hin), both in the form of an epic featuring the country's mytho-legendary figures. The much-hyped blockbuster *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, hailed as the most expensive Malaysian film ever, drew on a wide range of hybrid generic and cultural influences and was promoted as an epic romance: 'A Legendary Love. Malaysia's Must-See Epic'. This film, which draws on an episodic tale of Hang Tuah, centres on the conflict between his feudal loyalty and personal desire when he falls in love with the Javanese Princess of Majapahit. Complications arise when his master, the Sultan, intends to marry the Princess. The film's generic and cultural hybridity echoes global cinematic Asian epic influences, from Thailand's *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2001) to the internationally-successful Chinese-language film *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). In many ways, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* emulates *Crouching*

Tiger's synthesis of art-house and action film conventions even as it resuscitates the old *purba* genre.

Apart from *purba*-style epics, the *Pontianak* film introduced by Singapore's Cathay-Keris continued to have an underground life in Malaysia. However, it was not until 2004 that the horror genre was revived commercially with the release of Shuhaimi Baba's *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, which was the first locally-produced *Pontianak* film to be approved by the Censorship Board. Shuhaimi worked around stringent guidelines and made no less than five trips to the Censorship Board to get its approval on how the film could be made and released. During that time, scenes featuring ghosts rising out of graves or showing excessive amounts of blood were not permitted.²²⁷

Ever since the release of *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, horror has emerged as the most popular film genre in Malaysian cinema. According to a media report, the Malaysian film industry has seen a revival in recent years, with a number of films, especially horror films, emerging as box-office hits. In 2007, *Jangan Pandang Belakang* ('Don't Look Back', Ahmad Idham) was the highest grosser of the year, a record previously held by the 1995 romance *Sembilu 2*.²²⁸ This engendered a resurgence in the Malaysian film industry that prompted production houses to produce either horror or horror-comedy films. After the success of *Pontianak HSM*, director Shuhaimi went on to direct its sequel *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam 2* (2005), which also did well commercially. In

²²⁷ Faridul Anwar Farinordin (2004, May 1), 'Pontianak returns with a vengeance', *New Straits Times*, 3

²²⁸ Zulkiple Ibrahim (2011, July 18), 'Horror Movies Highest Grosser in Malay Film Industry', *Bernama.com*, <http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v5/newsfeatures.php?id=602124>

the same year, director Yusof Kelana made a horror-comedy titled *Pontianak Menjerit* ('Screaming Pontianak'), which set a trend in *Pontianak* films made as a spoof, namely *Tolong, Awek Aku Pontianak* ('Help! My Girlfriend is a Pontianak', 2011, James Lee) and *Pontianak vs Orang Minyak* ('Pontianak vs Oily Man', 2012, Afdlin Shauki).

The *orang minyak* character featured in old films was reprised by Shaw Brothers' 1976 Hong Kong horror-thriller, *Oily Maniac* (directed by Ho Meng Hua) and *Orang Minyak* (2007, Jamal Maarif and C. K. Karan), a commercial fiasco. The monstrous goblin *toyol* portrayed in the 1981 film also has reappeared in two contemporary comedies *Alamak Toyol* (2011, Ismail Bob Hasim) and *Toyol Nakal* ('The Cheeky Toyol', 2011, Z. Lokman), joining the recent proliferation of horror comedies spawned by the enormous popularity of films such as *Hantu Bonceng* ('Pillion Ghost', 2011, Ahmad Idham) and *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah* ('Limah's Ghost Returns Home', 2010, Mamat Khalid). This trend of employing parody in horror most likely is due to the challenges of making 'straight' horror films. As a form of popular culture that evinces an ostensibly archaic belief in spectral manifestations, horror is officially considered subversive and unIslamic and continues to be the target of religious and government censorship. Parody often is used to mock the horror genre and issues related to it even as it subversively renders these issues visible (see Chapter Five).

Even as horror has developed and transformed itself into new cycles of spoof and horror-comedy, the musical elements that constituted many old Malay films have mutated into a number of fully-fledged contemporary musical films. During the cinema's golden age, the only film that could be considered musical

was *A Go Go 67* (1967, Omar Rojik), which depicted teenagers as agents of modernity through the phenomenal ‘fever’ of Western-style pop music. However, the first film to emulate a Hollywood-style, Broadway-type musical was Jamil Sulong’s *Cinta & Lagu* (‘Love & Song’, 1976), a localised version of *West Side Story* set in a fishing village and a failure at the box-office. After a long hiatus, Ahmad Fauzee and Erma Fatima reworked the musical genre directing *Kolej 56* (‘College 56’, 1988) and *Jimi Asmara* (1995) respectively. Both films were made as nostalgic memory films that paid homage to – and were modelled after – classical Malay romantic melodramas.²²⁹ In particular, *Jimi Asmara*, which revolves around a popular pop singer who forms a relationship with an aristocratic woman, induces nostalgia by citing P. Ramlee’s romantic melodramas (e.g., *Antara Dua Darjat*, *Penarek Becha* and *Ibu Mertuaku*).

In contemporary cinema, a number of films such as *Magika* (2010, Edry Abdul Halim) and *Hoore! Hoore!* (2011, Saw Tiong Hin) have been promoted specifically as fully-fledged musicals. The storyline of the commercially-successful star-studded *Magika* revolved around the adventures of two adolescent siblings, who journey to a surreal, mythical world. Made in the style of US children’s fantasy films such as *Alice in Wonderland*, *The Wizard of Oz* and *The Chronicles of Narnia*, the film is imbued with local and traditional sensibilities. For example, it amalgamates present and past, reality and fantasy, through the protagonists’ encounters with *purba* characters from Malay folktales, myths and

²²⁹ During the long hiatus (from the failure of *Cinta & Lagu* up to the release of *Kolej 56*), some directors came up with musically-themed films made in the manner of America’s *Saturday Night Fever* and *Flashdance*, e.g., *Kisah Seorang Biduan*, *Hapuslah Air Matamu* and *Sumber Ilhamku*, all of which focused on protagonist-as-singer/entertainer and employed songs rather diegetically.

legends. *Magika* imparts a moral message with regard to the importance of family ties and values, similar to old folktale-based melodramas such as *Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup* and *Si Tanggang*.

As is the case with the abovementioned films, most of the films I have chosen to examine in this thesis also draw on the generic legacy of proto-cinematic forms and classical Malay cinema, affirming explications of genre as a form of ‘cyclic’, ‘ritual’ and ‘cinematic repetition and return’.²³⁰ More importantly, genres are processes not only dominated by repetition, but also ‘marked fundamentally by difference, variation and change’.²³¹ *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, for example, is not a particular remake of any old *Pontianak* film, but an attempt to reprise the role of the popular mythical ghost on the contemporary screen through today’s state-of-the-art technology. Dain Said’s *Bunohan*, which resembles the themes and sensibilities of some global genres from Thai kickboxing films to Shakespearean tragedy, draws on local cultural and aesthetic elements such as myths, magic and the invocation of the archetypal mother-figure. Mamat Khalid’s comedy *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* performs fusion of cinematic time and space that displays the director’s cinephile engagement with the history of local film. For example, Mamat shoots the movie in black and white, resurrects the character of the were-tiger from the lost film *Si*

²³⁰ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time*, p. 41

²³¹ Steve Neale, ‘Question of Genre’, p. 56

Tora Harimau Jadian,²³² and constantly references other old Malay films, thus memorialising them.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have traced the use of genre as a mode of categorisation in the production and promotion of old Malay cinema which derived from folk literature and proto-cinematic forms such as the shadow play and *bangsawan*. Generic hybridity characterised these forms of entertainment due to the cultural and artistic influences of multiple cultures that arrived in Malaysia through migration, colonialism and religion.

After discussing the importance of melodrama across genres, this chapter identified the indigenous genre of *purba* and the four key genres of old Malay films: romance, comedy, horror and action. This trajectory of genres is useful for my project because it introduces tropes and themes that recur in the contemporary films I analyse. Some examples include the mother-figure archetype, the melodramatic emotional expression of *rajuk*, the portrayal of male victim-hero, elements of magic and superstition, questions of class and feudalism and conflict between tradition and modernity. In the following chapters, I will show how contemporary filmmakers reiterate and rework these tropes and themes.

Finally, I have charted the ways in which older genres are currently being transformed in contemporary Malaysian cinema. While some directors have

²³² Regarding Mamat Khalid's resurrection of the character Si Tora in *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*, it should be noted that Amir Muhammad, the author of the book *120 Malay Movies* (2010) and co-director of the Malaysian horror *Susuk*, has republished the novelisation of P. Ramlee's 'lost' film *Si Tora Harimau Jadian* (*Si Tora the Were-tiger*, 1964).

resuscitated old genres and forms and drawn on global cinematic genres, others have resurrected old cinematic genres in a more nostalgic manner.

In the next chapter, I explore two contemporary horror films, *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* and *Susuk*, both of which continue the legacy of old Malay horror films of the 1950s and 1960s. With *Pontianak*, director Shuhaimi Baba resuscitates the old subgenre of the *Pontianak* films to accommodate contemporary audience taste whereas *Susuk* explores the familiar Faustian theme that traditionally characterised old Malay horror films.

CHAPTER THREE

Reclaiming the Past; or, Haunting the Present? *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* and *Susuk*

When the sound combines, you are mine...
– Meriam (*Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*)

Ponder the butterfly. The caterpillar dies to let the butterfly live. They're different yet the same. – Dukun Dewangga (*Susuk*)

Introduction

The previous chapter briefly noted the ways in which the *Pontianak* films in the 1950s and 1960s helped to define the contours of the Malaysian horror genre. This chapter examines representations of gender in two contemporary horror films, *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* ('Pontianak of the Tuber Roses', 2004, dir. Shuhaimi Baba) and *Susuk* ('Charm Needles', 2008, dir. Amir Muhammad/Naiem Ghalili), both of which attained commercial success in Malaysia and prominently feature women as evil spirits or agents and victims.

As I will discuss in more detail in this chapter, the narrative and visual strategies of these films complicate viewers' perspectives, precluding them from identifying completely with the characters whose subjectivities are also rendered more ambivalent than in the traditional Malaysian horror genre. The majority of contemporary Malaysian horror films are more cautious in their representations of gender and Islamic affiliations. However, a small number of the films, such as *Histeria* ('Hysteria', 2008, James Lee), *Puaka Tebing Biru* ('The Ghoul of Blue

Ridge', 2004, Osman Ali), *Chermin* ('The Mirror', 2007, Zarina Abdullah) and *Janin* ('Foetus', 2010, M. Hitler Zami), together with *Pontianak* and *Susuk*, push the boundaries of gender representation by exploring issues of sexuality and critiquing hegemonic gender roles. These films accentuate women's bodies as gendered ghosts which serve as a site for the projection of anxieties related to modernity and tradition and their control by political and religious authorities.

Pontianak reprises the iconic role of the *pontianak*, or the undead spirit of a woman who has been raped and dies during childbirth. In contrast to classic depictions of this ghost, however, the female protagonist here is rendered more complex, oscillating between being an object of sympathy as a victim and one of fear and disgust as a monster. Like *Pontianak*, *Susuk* also plays with and subverts the binary of woman as victim or aggressor in its narrative of the downfall of a young woman who, pursuing her ambition as a singer-performer, experiments with *susuk*, a taboo form of the black arts in which mystical charm needles are implanted into the skin. The film offers a scathing gendered critique of the local entertainment industry through satirical humour and aesthetic strategies such as the use of certain framings and editing techniques, which as with *Pontianak*, keeps viewers at a distance even as it pulls them in at certain moments.

In this chapter I argue that both films subtly question or fissure Western-style, linear homogeneous forms of time mediated not only through monstrosity and superstition dealing with bodily transformation, mutation and hybridity, but also through their narrative threads that play with temporality. In *Pontianak*, the titular protagonist is a supernatural entity from the past that inhabits the body of Maria, a woman in the present. I will suggest that the trope of haunting in

Pontianak disrupts the country's hegemonic gender construction of the 'new Malay man', as epitomised by the male protagonist Marsani, a wealthy entrepreneur. *Susuk* subverts this gendered pattern insofar as the 'new Malay' assumes the role of a woman, who embodies developmentalism and materialism. To better understand the culture-bound elements of the supernatural and superstition in both films, the next section provides a brief overview of Malaysian superstitious beliefs and traditions that help constitute certain characteristics of Malaysian horror.

Characterising Malaysian Horror: Shamanism, Ghosts and the *Semangat*

In this section, I suggest that the Malaysian horror film be examined on its own terms as its concepts and characters are drawn largely from Malaysian superstitious beliefs and traditions. In the Malay archipelago, belief in ghosts and the supernatural derived from the shamanism and animism that existed long before the widespread influence of Hinduism in the 14th century, followed by Islam in the 15th century. The indigenous peoples of the Malay archipelago were animists: they believed that the universe was populated by spirits (jinns, dead souls, ghosts) and that all animate and inanimate objects were permeated with *semangat*, a form of vital energy or spiritual essence. The *semangat* pulses through animate and inanimate objects according to the fundamental principles of indigenous animism.²³³ Later, when Hinduism and Buddhism came to the region,

²³³ Mohd Taib Osman (1989), *Malay Folk Beliefs: An Integration of Disparate Elements*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, pp. 78-79

they were adapted to fit with the extant system of beliefs.²³⁴ For centuries, Malaysia has revelled in legends, myths and folklore drawn from the country's culturally multifaceted and hybridised past. Even today, shamanism is practised throughout Malaysia, particularly among some Malays and other indigenous peoples. The individual who practises shamanism, that is, who can perform spiritual rituals and traditional healing, is often referred to as a *bomoh*, a traditional healer; at times, she or he is also known as a *dukun* or *pawang*. There are generally two types of *bomoh*: one who is much sought after for healing illnesses according to Islamic tenets (in Indonesia, he is called *kyai*) and another who resorts to black arts, witchcraft and superstition.²³⁵ These practices are invariably foregrounded in contemporary Malaysian horror films. Their major appeal lies in the films' moral narratives, which simultaneously endorse the existence of supernatural evil and the social significance of religion in Malaysia.

In addition to various forms of spirit beings, there are many kinds of *hantu* (ghosts) in the realm of Malay folk beliefs. One of the most popular ghostly icons in the country's imagination of popular culture is the *pontianak*, which is part of a wider pantheon of female ghosts in myths and legends across Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. In certain areas of the Malay Peninsula, she has been characterised

²³⁴ Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006), *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*. Toronto/Vancouver: UBC Press, p. 6

²³⁵ In Peninsular Malaysia, the supernatural belief system varies according to the historical and local interactions between folk beliefs and Islamic teachings. Through the centuries, the office of the *bomoh* has been the major means by which these old traditions of causation, illness and health have been transmitted. In fulfilling the pragmatic and immediate needs of everyday life, the beliefs and practices are often recast in 'Islamic' terms. See Mohd Taib Osman (1972), 'Patterns of Supernatural Premises Underlying the Institution of the Bomoh in Malay Culture', *Bijdragen tot de Taal-Land-en Volkekunde*, 128, 221-222; See also Aihwa Ong (1988, February), 'The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia', *American Ethnologist*, 15(1), 30

as the ghost of a woman who died in childbirth.²³⁶ The origins of these ghosts are diverse and, at times, contradictory because the myths that feature them were culled from a rich oral tradition that spanned many different regions within the Malay archipelago (Malaysia and Indonesia). As such, they are subject to a plethora of re-castings and re-imaginings. The *pontianak*'s impurity is attributed to the fact that she cannot be categorised as either alive or dead and her ability to transform into another spirit called the *langsuyar*, which appears as a beautiful young woman wearing a long dress. This transformation explains the *pontianak*'s genealogy, which intermingles with that of the *langsuyar* and the *penanggalan*. As a *langsuyar*, her long hair, which sometimes reaches her ankles, conceals a hole in the back of her neck through which she sucks the blood of children.²³⁷

Among the shamanistic beliefs and traditions of the Malay archipelago since the 14th century, a *bomoh*, who resorts to black arts, may create ghosts and bring them under his control to do his bidding. Among the ghosts that serve as mediators of the *bomoh* are the *hantu raya* (the supreme ghost) and the *toyol* and *orang minyak* mentioned in earlier chapters. While spirits can include nonhuman entities such as nature spirits and guardian spirits of familiar places, ghosts are souls of the dead such as the *pontianaks*, which have human origins.²³⁸ A ghost can be malevolent or benevolent depending on the manner of its death and the power of its *semangat*. Intrinsic to all objects, animals and people, the *semangat*

²³⁶ Mohd Taib Osman (1989), *Malay Folk Beliefs: An Integration of Disparate Elements*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p. 86

²³⁷ Walter Skeat and Charles Blagden (1965), *Malay Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsular*. London: Routledge, pp. 325-326

²³⁸ Mohd Taib Osman, *Malay Folk Beliefs*, pp. 81-89

does not disappear upon death; rather, it manifests from a different source. When the *semangat* leaves the body, it assumes the form of a homunculus, and, in this form, can feed on the souls of others. At death, the soul either returns to the creator or passes, directly or indirectly, into another person, animal or plant. The spirit or ghost continues to linger and may be harmful to its survivors.²³⁹ All objects and living beings may gain and lose a certain measure of their *semangat*.

If a woman is transformed into a *pontianak* (as in *Pontianak*) or into another person (as in *Susuk*), her *semangat* will be particularly vigorous due to the intense wave of negative energy emanating out of her violent death. In practices of the *bomoh* or *dukun* such as *susuk*, iron and other types of metal are believed to have been infused with *semangat*.²⁴⁰

As mentioned in Chapter One, since women in Malay-Muslim society are perceived as overly influenced by *hawa nafsu* (human lust), they appear spiritually weaker than men. According to Aihwa Ong, Malay spirit beliefs explain the tendency (in folklore or myth) for women more than men to become possessed by spirits as their spiritual frailty, polluting bodies and erotic disposition make them especially likely to transgress moral space, and therefore permeable by spirits.²⁴¹ This gender factor constitutes not only Malaysian horror films, but also many Southeast Asian horror films. In particular, these regional horror films centre on the bodies of women upon which certain collective cultural anxieties regarding tradition and modernity are projected. To provide context for

²³⁹ James Hasting (2003), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Kessinger Publishing, p. 345

²⁴⁰ Mohd Taib Osman, *Malay Folk Beliefs*, p. 79

²⁴¹ Aihwa Ong, 'The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia', 31

my reading of how such projections work in *Pontianak* and *Susuk*, I will start with an overview of critical works that have focused on the cinematic representation of gendered ghosts in Southeast Asia, particularly in the Philippines, Thailand, Indonesia and Malaysia.

Gender, Region and Cinematic Representation of *Hantus*

A number of scholarly writings of Southeast Asian horror films employ different approaches to national allegories, gender and temporality. Katinka van Heeren examines the industrial and social practices of Indonesian horror film.²⁴² Van Heeren regards the Indonesian horror genre as a forum for the representation of national identity, showing how it has imagined specific audiences and communities. For example, she points out that during Suharto's New Order regime, horror films largely attracted the lower classes and rural communities because they were screened mostly in rural or lower-class cinemas. Van Heeren contends that during this period, the genre accorded the status quo of state ideology to Indonesian viewers, in line with Islam, the country's main religion. For example, every horror film had to depict the presence of a *kyai* (a religio-Islamist figure) in the form of *deus ex machina*, a figure who would intervene in any horror film's finale to destroy the evil power and to restore social order.²⁴³ In

²⁴² Katinka van Heeren (2012), *Contemporary Indonesian Film: Spirits of Reform and Ghosts from the Past*. Leiden: KITLV Press.

²⁴³ Katinka van Heeren, *Contemporary Indonesian Film*, pp. 138-139. Interestingly, van Heeren also points out that there is at least one instance in which a Roman Catholic Priest is the religious protagonist; he conquers a Dutch ghost which is haunting an old colonial home in the film *Ranjang Setan (Satan's Bed)*, 1996, Tjut Djalil). In the 1981 film *Mistik (Mystic in Bali)*, Tjut Djalil), the hero is a Hindu priest who defeats evil.

her work, Van Heeren demonstrates that contemporary Indonesian horror during the post-Suharto era exhibits 'a new freedom of expression' among filmmakers, with the changes in many cases due to the absence of the *kyai* (religious figure) in the films' denouement.²⁴⁴

Van Heeren's discussion of Indonesian horror films as national allegory resonates with Sophie Siddique's analysis of the female ghost *sundelbolong* that simultaneously reifies and destabilises the New Order ideology under former President Suharto. However, Siddique's examination directly focuses upon the representation of the female whereas Van Heeren's work primarily serves as an industrial analysis in keeping with the country's politics.²⁴⁵ Siddique looks at how the female ghost disrupts essentialist notions of femininity in the Indonesian New Order that structure women primarily as wives and mothers. She argues for the viability of Indonesian horror as a genre that may critique the former regime of President Suharto who ruled the country in the period when the film was made. Drawing on Julia Kristeva's definition of abject as something that 'disturbs identity, system, order' and 'does not respect borders, positions, rules', Siddique argues that Indonesian horror is infused with the rich potential to be transgressive and subversive and is thus a fertile genre for cultural analysis.

In a similar vein, Andrew Ng examines Malaysia's 'monstrous feminine', the *pontianak*, as an iconic figure in Malay popular culture. Ng points out that various films made during the cinema's golden age in the 1950s and 1960s helped

²⁴⁴ Katinka van Heeren, *Contemporary Indonesian Film*, p. 155

²⁴⁵ Sophia Siddique (Fall 2002), 'Haunting Visions of the Sundelbolong: Vampire Ghosts and the Indonesian National Imaginary,' *Spectator*, 22(2), 24-33

to popularise the *pontianak* ‘as a hybrid creature that blends Eastern and Western vampiric characteristics’.²⁴⁶ Ng argues that the *pontianak* in *Pontianak* blurs the binary patterns of good woman/ bad woman. According to Ng, this blurring reflects inconsistencies and contradictions in the evolving Malay social system, one that is predominantly patriarchal with women occupying a subordinate position. Due to the portrayal of the female protagonist in *Pontianak* as a dancer-performer, he notes the *pontianak*’s ambiguous configuration by highlighting her body as a site of transgression. Specifically, he correlates the bodies of the dancer and the *Pontianak* as interstitial spaces through which ‘the repressed body can find potent articulations of power and subjectivity’.²⁴⁷ For Ng, dancing allows the female character to cross boundaries; ‘[on] stage [...] which is a liminal space itself, straddling between reality and fantasy – the female body is able to achieve configurations from which she is otherwise barred’.²⁴⁸

Focusing on gender and temporality, Adam Knee examines the form of ‘feminine disruption of the present and reassertion of the past’ in contemporary Thai horror films.²⁴⁹ Discussing seminal Thai horror films such as *Nang Nak* (1999, Nonzee Nimibutr), Knee accentuates the horror films’ significance in utilising Thai traditions and history while arguing that Thai horror films are

²⁴⁶ Andrew Ng (2009), ‘Death and the Maiden: The *Pontianak* as Excess in Malay Popular Culture’, in *Draculas, Vampires, and Other Undead Forms* (John Edgar Browning & Caroline Joan ‘Kay’ Picart, eds). Maryland: Scarecrow Press, pp. 167-186

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 180

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 179

²⁴⁹ Adam Knee (2005), ‘Thailand Haunted: The Power of the Past in the Contemporary Thai Horror Film’. In *Horror International*, Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams (eds). Detroit: Wayne State University Press, pp. 141-159

preoccupied ‘with the embattled status of women in Thai society’. He further notes that the hidden pasts that haunt these cinematic texts revolve around the physical, social and emotional oppression of women, further figuring both the past and the feminine as sources of anxiety linked to the supernatural. Knee reads the contemporary Thai horror film as political and historical allegory due to its consistent theme of needing to discover and resolve secrets based on key events in late-twentieth-century Thai history.

Along similar lines, Bliss Cua Lim reads Hong Kong and Philippine horror films as cinematic haunting and historical allegory. Lim argues that Asian horror films depict the coexistence of different temporal modes within the modern present: these multiple ‘immiscible temporalities’ strain against – in the celebrated formulation of Walter Benjamin – the ‘empty’ and ‘homogeneous’ time of the West.²⁵⁰ According to her, this is because ghosts can hardly coexist in this modern world, as they ‘fail to coincide with the measured, uniform intervals quantified by clock and calendar’.²⁵¹ Immiscible temporalities, for Lim, undermine the fantasy of a singular national meanwhile and emphasise multiple temporalities of reception. She notes that the *aswang*, a vampire-like creature in Philippine myth embodies a ‘congeries of beliefs’ – ‘a wavering between rational scepticism and credulity toward the supernatural’.²⁵² As Lim points out, despite persistent assumptions that *aswang* stories and beliefs belong to a fixed nexus in time, place

²⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin (1999), *Illuminations*. Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn, trans. London: Pimlico, p. 252

²⁵¹ Bliss Cua Lim (2009), *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique*. Durham: Duke University Press, p. 2

²⁵² *Ibid.*, p. 100

and class – the pre-modern world of the rural peasant – the *aswang* insistently demonstrates the permeability of disparate worlds.²⁵³ For her, this contrasts the structuralist theorist Todorov’s reduction of the fantastic to a question of belief and disbelief in the supernatural which, as a ‘false problem’, fails to take temporal heterogeneity into question.

Drawing on Van Heeren’s work, this chapter considers some aspects of Malaysian horror as forms of social practice such as Malaysians’ generally deep-rooted belief in the supernatural and superstition. However, my primary intention is to situate Malaysian horror film texts within a larger discourse and themes of temporality that appertain to the nation’s progress, development and modernity, as invoked in Chapter One in my reading of the former Prime Minister’s claim that horror films serve as counter-productive to building a progressive society.

Siddique, Ng and Knee’s highlighting of issues of embattled status of women in Southeast Asian horror films provides a useful frame of reference for my discussion of Malaysian horror’s portrayal of women within the patriarchal system. In particular, I extend Ng’s idea to my analysis of *Susuk*, ascribing a parallel with the practice of *susuk*, vampirism and performance-singing (due to the portrayal of the female protagonist as a singer/performer), all of which entail notions of bodily transformation. This tendency challenges the state’s prescriptions of gender which are reflected in the contemporary moral policing that emphasises dress code and represses women’s bodies. In line with Ng’s analysis, I extend my reading of the vengeful *pontianak* as de-essentialising the good woman/bad woman logic by considering the director’s stylistic strategy and

²⁵³ Bliss Cua Lim, *Translating Time*, p. 127

reworking of genre, particularly through the incorporation of melodrama. The use of rapid editing, multiple camera angles and sound, together with explosive action, all generate a form of visual, aural and bodily confusion. This stylistic strategy articulates more complex gendered subjectivities by oscillating the viewer's subjective and objective perspectives. This embodied spectatorial mode allows viewers to inhabit different modes of viewing gender identities and differences.²⁵⁴

To further explore how these films suggest alternative ways of embodying and viewing genders, I will draw on Knee and Lim's explorations of mixed temporality in Southeast Asian horror films. In particular, I aim to examine the ways in which similar approaches to the representation of time and nation articulate the complexities of modern femininity in Malaysia. In *Pontianak*, the past surfaces in a *pontianak* who sporadically 'enters' another woman's body in the present. In *Susuk*, it appears in the psychic and physical transformations of the protagonist due to her occult practices. Both portrayals of the past in the present allow horror, as a cinematic genre, to manifest multiple temporalities which implicitly critique modern historical chronology. In the next section, I will show how *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* mobilises this strategy.

Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam: A Gendered Ghost Story?

Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam begins in the late 1940s in the small town of Paku Laris. Meriam, a beautiful young woman, is a famous gamelan dancer. Her beauty attracts many men in the town, including the wealthy and influential

²⁵⁴ Teresa Rizzo (2012), *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction*. New York: Continuum, p. 54

Marsani. However, Meriam decides to marry his best friend Danial, who saved her from an attempted rape by Marsani's henchmen. Overcome with jealousy, Marsani pursues Meriam while her husband is away and attempts to seduce her. During a struggle, one of Marsani's henchmen accidentally plunges a knife into her pregnant body which induces the premature delivery of her baby and her death. Meanwhile Marsani and his henchmen plunder Meriam's home, taking with them her valuable dance accessories. Meriam's friend Laila escapes with the baby; another friend, Sitam, is killed by Marsani's henchmen and her husband also is killed at sea. Marsani, meanwhile, goes unpunished. Suddenly, Paku Laris is terrorised by a series of eerie occurrences, and the townspeople spread rumours that Meriam has returned as a *pontianak* to avenge her death. Marsani is tormented continuously by Meriam's apparition and leaves town.

The story shifts fifty four years later to the present. Marsani is now an affluent entrepreneur in the modern, well-developed town of Paku Laris living with his adopted sons, Asmadi and Norman. The town again is haunted by a series of spooky incidents, including the death of an engineer at Marsani's company at a construction site. Complications arise when Maria, a beautiful dancer from Indonesia who strikingly resembles Meriam, comes to work for Norman's wife, Anna. From time to time, Maria seems to assume someone else's identity, and we quickly learn that Meriam, transformed into a *pontianak*, occasionally inhabits Maria's body to taunt and frighten Marsani. A brief flashback underscores that Maria is Meriam's daughter, the baby taken to Indonesia by Laila after her death. Maria as Meriam also attempts to seduce Norman to disrupt the harmony of Marsani's family. During a final confrontation, she vehemently demands an

apology from Marsani then strangles his daughter-in-law, Anna. Marsani tries to escape the *pontianak* and is injured in an accident. He eventually confesses his wrongdoing before Meriam and his entire family and dies following this confrontation.

Pontianak opens up Malaysian horror cinema to more complex representations of both women and men by stretching the boundaries of traditional generic conventions. Critical response to these new representations has been ambivalent. For example, reviews of the film highlight director Shuhaimi Baba's trenchant perspective on gender and her aestheticisation of visuals and regional cultures made possible by new technologies. Writer/director Zan Azlee, noting the representation of a somewhat more sympathetic *pontianak*, wrote: 'Although *Pontianaks* are legendary for the brutal killing of their male victims, Shuhaimi decides that all her *Pontianak* really wants is an apology ... it can be said that *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* is more than a horror flick. It is a portrayal of the kind of injustice inflicted on women that men think they can get away with'.²⁵⁵ A. Wahab Hamzah, a critic employed by the Malay-language daily *Utusan Malaysia*, asserted that the strength of *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* lies in its visual images, which are enhanced by modern technology.²⁵⁶ English-language critic Zeta Lu, despite her unfavourable appraisal of the film, stated: 'The visual sheen that characterises the picture meanwhile can be arresting, and

²⁵⁵ Zan Azlee (May 2004), 'Devil in *Kebaya*: U-Wei's *Buai Laju-Laju* and Shuhaimi Baba's *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* show us the darker side of Malaysian women', *Kakiseni.com*, <http://www.kakiseni.com>

²⁵⁶ A. Wahab Hamzah (2004, 1 June), 'Kejayaan – *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*' ['A Success – *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*'], *Utusan Malaysia*, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2004&dt=0601&pub=utusan_malaysia

the penchant to imbue ordinary objects with symbolic meaning is to be lauded'.²⁵⁷ From these reviews, I will take into account the critics' general assertion of the progressive representation of the *pontianak* as a female monster and director Shuhaimi's visual aesthetics. I argue that the film offers an innovative mutation of the Malaysian horror genre by complicating feminine subjectivities and, in the process, symptomatically exposing the country's ambivalence toward different aspects of modernity.

Representing the Female Ghost: Avenging or Forgiving Spirits?

Traditionally – as evident in old Malay horror films (see Chapter Two) – the construction of a female character as a monstrous creature such as the *pontianak* often perpetuated the tendency to demonise socially marginal women and uncontained female sexuality. What makes Shuhaimi's *Pontianak* different from other *Pontianak* films is her new interpretation of the monstrous creature that transcends the strict binary of gender paradigm predicated upon notions of Malay-Muslim femininity. The film's refusal to demonise Meriam, the *pontianak*, is primarily attributable to the numerous instances where she acquires a certain pathos: viewers are encouraged to sympathise with her. In this respect, Shuhaimi reworks the narrative of the *pontianak* by drawing upon the melodramatic mode to designate the character of Meriam as a helpless and suffering female 'victim hero'.

²⁵⁷ Zeta Lu (2004, 14 June), 'Smell like mean spirit', *The Star*, http://ecentral.my/services/printerfriendly.asp?file=archives/movie_reviews/2004/6/14

From the beginning, viewers learn that Meriam is actually an innocent character trapped in an unlikely predicament. Her transformation into a *pontianak* is something beyond her control. The viewer may assess the character moralistically due to the film's insinuation that when a woman fights back against violence and abuse, her vengeful actions are reasonable and warranted. Meriam's revenge derives from her sense of *rajuk*. Several scenes accentuate Meriam as a *pontianak* experiencing emotional suffering, her eyes brimming with tears.

The viewers' identification with Meriam impels them also to sympathise with Maria (Meriam's daughter, double and host). Like Meriam, Maria is also an innocent trapped in a difficult situation when Meriam's spirit occupies her body from time to time. One night when she is sleeping, she dreams of a beautiful woman who is Meriam dancing the gamelan. When she awakes from the dream, there is a brief flashback in black-and-white that shows Laila teaching the young Maria the traditional dance in Indonesia. This flashback reveals to the viewer that Laila took Meriam's baby to Indonesia and Maria is actually Meriam's daughter. In the aforementioned dream, Meriam says to Maria: '*Bila bunyi bersatu, kau milikku*' ('When the sound combines, you are mine') indicating her maternal love and relation.

While the director's stylistic approach persuades the viewer to identify with the *pontianak*, depictions of her appearing in the present also complicate this identification strategy by rendering her monstrous in the traditional sense, and thus generating suspense and dread in the viewer. For example, in one short night sequence, Anna stops her car to offer a mysterious veiled girl a lift. When the girl does not respond, Anna continues driving. At this moment, the scene cuts

alternately between medium shots of Anna's profile while driving the car and close-up shots of the girl with half of her face covered by a scarf. The rest of the scene shows Anna's reaction as she detects something chilling; the viewer sees her reaction upon discovering tuberoses suddenly appearing in the backseat of the car (Tuberoses traditionally are associated with both the beautiful and dangerous sight of the *Pontianak*). A close-up of Anna's staring eyes reflected in the mirror is framed by her car's rear-view mirror.

This stylistic approach enhances the suspense by limiting the viewer's access to the scene and thereby holding terror in abeyance. Initially, the scene may closely align the viewer with either the *pontianak* or Anna (as a potential victim) due to subjective point-of-view shots. However, from the moment Anna starts driving again, subjective and objective images lose their distinction – and their ability to elicit viewer identification – because shots of her reaction oscillate between the *pontianak*'s point-of-view and more objective 'all-seeing' shots. In other words, the objectification of the visuals in this scene renders a shift in terms of identification: the viewers' empathy shifts alternately between the victim and the villain. This scene establishes the connection between Meriam, the aggressor, and Anna, Marsani's daughter-in-law, the victim. It is through Anna that Meriam continues to haunt Marsani and his family because Anna is close to her staff, Maria whose body is occasionally possessed by Meriam's spirits.

In another scene in which Shuhaimi eschews subjective point-of-view shots, Anna is scrutinising the accessories that belong to Meriam in her bedroom. The scene is ruptured in the beginning with a couple of 'shock cuts' when Shuhaimi inserts a recurring, extreme close-up shot of the *pontianak*'s eyes,

which conveys a startled effect. This particular device produces a visceral effect while generating diverse physical disturbances and agitations.²⁵⁸ Then, the viewers see Anna in the foreground, captured in a medium long shot, with the *pontianak* in the background (seen through portions of the glass bedroom door). Although the *pontianak*'s presence aims to terrorise Anna (and the viewers), at one point there is an identification shift when the scene cuts to a close-up of Meriam, the *pontianak*, weeping bitterly. This temporarily imbues the moment with melodramatic overtones and sets up a particular pattern of subjectivity for the rest of the film.

Shortly after, when Anna detects something horrifying and turns around to look at the glass door, the *pontianak* disappears. Anna cries out to her husband while looking around. A shaky camera representing Anna's point-of-view pans the room before it stops at a bedroom mirror in which she sees a reflection of the *Pontianak*, a strategy that generates impending fear and shock. This entire scene mixes the use of framing and deframing, the more 'all-seeing' objective shots such as long shots and subjective shots such as close-up, further complicating the viewer's perceptual reading of the female characters' subjectivities.

In some ways, the film's blurring of cinema's spatialised time gives rise to the *pontianak*'s more complex gendered subjectivities. For example, the viewer is cued to Maria's body when it is inhabited by Meriam's spirit at times; at others, it appears difficult to demarcate between the two. In one scene Marsani confronts

²⁵⁸ David Scott Diffrient presents an interesting account of the way the shock cut is used in horror cinema to create "a sudden, violent eruption or peak moment in a film narrative" (p. 52). It is thus an editing device designed to emulate the actual, physical experience of a moment of shock. See Diffrient (2004), 'A Film is Being Beaten: Notes on the Shock Cut and the Material Violence of Horror,' in S. Hantke (ed.), *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, Jackson, MI: University of Mississippi Press.

Maria to ascertain whether or not she is Meriam. At one point, she appears to be Maria; at another she insinuates that she is Meriam. Driven by anger and confusion, Marsani proceeds to harass her, insisting that he still loves Meriam. (Earlier, the viewer was informed that Asmadi was inviting Maria to his father's home because the latter wants to see her). While Marsani is speaking to Maria, Asmadi appears at the door and informs his father that Maria has declined to meet him. Suddenly, Marsani realises that the woman he was just talking to was not Maria, but Meriam. He turns to confirm this but the woman has disappeared.

The mutable identities of this gendered ghost can be understood in the context of the film's interplay of beauty and horror. When the story is set in the past, director Shuhaimi establishes Meriam's beauty by invoking her career as a prima donna. In the opening scene, for example, she is portrayed as performing a gamelan dance in the palace; her facial features, traditional dance costume and dainty movements are endowed with exquisite charm and grace. In one scene where she performs her dance in public, Meriam is shown magically levitating into midair, transfixing her audience. This ability insinuates that, as a practitioner of a traditional Malay dance, she also may be versed in mystical practices.

Meriam's almost supernatural beauty is invoked in several following scenes, which showcase images of tuberose. Her beauty becomes a weapon after her death when she appears to Marsani and his sons as an alluring woman through Maria's body. In one scene, she coquettishly flirts with and seduces Norman. Although Norman realises that she is not the real Maria (she growls, becomes aggressive and slaps his face), he finds it impossible to resist sexual temptation when she erotically caresses his face and neck.

Director Shuhaimi depicts the new *pontianak* as asserting control and emancipation within the prevailing patriarchal system by portraying Meriam as a gamelan dancer, a figure of female independence in 1940s Malaya. The story's past deals with the pleasures and perils of a woman's presence and performance in the public sphere. Due to her beauty and profession, she is an easy and acceptable sexual target for the ill-mannered male villagers. Here, it is implied that an autonomous woman who performs for the public is also sexually promiscuous, a theme addressed more explicitly in *Susuk*. According to Andrew Ng, the harassment is 'an unconscious display of disdain by the villagers over her economic and social autonomy. They are 'reminding' her that however successful she may be, she is but a woman, and must submit (sexually) in the end to them'.²⁵⁹ By becoming a dancer, Meriam transgresses traditional gender and class boundaries and thus the domestic division of labour and Malay-Muslim values regarding women and their roles in society.

Meriam's marriage and pregnancy signal her entrance into the symbolic patriarchal order as a dutiful wife and mother. However, her proper womanhood is threatened when her husband is away, leading to her untimely death. Her murderer and others responsible for her death are not brought to justice. The defilement of her body and the premature delivery of her baby suggest yet another form of transgression. As Judith Halberstam explains, 'improperly or inadequately

²⁵⁹ Andrew Ng (2009), 'A Cultural History of the Pontianak Films', p. 238

gendered bodies represent the limits of the human and they present a monstrous arrangement of skin, flesh, social mores, pleasures, dangers and wounds'.²⁶⁰

This film offers a strident critique of traditional patriarchy by depicting the *pontianak* as strong, aggressive and morally correct qualities that shine through in the final confrontation towards the end of the film in which Meriam, occupying Maria's body, goes berserk and threatens Marsani's family. One of the striking differences between this film and many other contemporary horror films is that there is no recourse to a *bomoh* or some other religious or authoritative figure to help annihilate the spirit. According to Ng, to feature a *bomoh* as a mediator would 'directly compromise her agency, because it would imply that it is only through the agency of another man (a *bomoh* is invariably male) that she can attain justice. At the same time, the mediation of the *bomoh* would not have compelled Marsani to exhibit abject remorse and to confess not only his crimes, but the lies he has fed to his family'.²⁶¹ I concur with Ng's reading of the absence of a *bomoh* that would reify 'the male=good versus female=evil binarism' while seen as 'fundamentally in line with the sympathetic representation of the vampire, and a critique of patriarchal hypocrisy'.²⁶² I would add that the eliding of an Islamic *bomoh*'s intervention in *Pontianak* may be read as a subtle commentary on the country's Islamisation through which the religion has been utilised by the authorities to regulate the moral policing of Malay-Muslim women.

²⁶⁰ J. Halberstam (1995), *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, p. 141

²⁶¹ See Ng, 'Death and the Maiden', p. 181

²⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 181.

The final scenes demonstrate the *pontianak*'s ability to summon her virulent *semangat* – to transgress nature's laws with impunity. The invasion of Marsani's house by the *pontianak* symbolically represents notions of border crossing and disruption, not only temporally but also spatially. The *pontianak* generates an explosion which shatters some of the windows of Marsani's house, sending shards of glass hurtling through the air. She leaps onto members of Marsani's family who recoil in panic and rush out into the backyard. This is followed by a lightning strike and a crash of thunder: the lightning destroys a garden trellis and long narrow pieces of flying wood hit Marsani, severely injuring his head. The *pontianak* grabs hold of Anna and strangles her as both levitate into midair. By now, the *pontianak*'s endurance and indestructibility are generating awe and terror in the viewer. Here, the *pontianak* evokes feelings of disgust and threat due to its impurity and to its fusion of hitherto disjointed entities into one spatially and temporally unified character.

Due to the deployment of camera perspectives between objective (long shot) and subjective (close-up) shots, frenetic movement, and dissonant sounds, this explosive CGI-enhanced action sequence encourages a more fluid gendered identification with the *pontianak*. On the one hand, the use of an editing device called 'shock cut' onto the *pontianak*'s gruesome, hideous face, along with close-ups of her freakish red eyes accompanied by shrill growls, further reinforces a shocking and visceral effect and engages the viewer in extreme psychic proximity with the ghost. On the other, the use of long shots and extreme long shots to capture all characters, both aggressor and victims, functions objectively as their points-of-view belong to no specific character. In this respect, the subjective

becomes the objective provisionally and in the process the vision of one perspective is reflected in the other.

At the same time, Meriam demands Marsani to return all of her belongings. There is a moment when viewers see the appearance of dead characters Laila, Sitam and Danial witnessing Marsani's confession, an image that gives rise to the scene's growing sense of uncanniness, instantiating a paradoxical conjuncture between reality and fantasy. In addition, the homogeneous space and time of this visual is fractured by the intimation of multiple worlds intersecting within this scene. The sequence's final moment amplifies the trope of haunting when the ghost of the *pontianak* is abruptly transformed into its real-life doppelgänger Maria. Viewers see Marsani – after admitting his wrongdoing – attempting to strangle Maria, not Meriam who has disappeared.

Patriarchal Power or Male Lust?

The portrayal of Marsani as oscillating between his uncontrollable *nafsu* (lust) and sense of remorse alludes to the film's depiction of more complex male representations, even though Marsani is portrayed in a negative light. Prior to the final confrontation, one scene illustrates his sense of atonement when he brings out Meriam's prima donna's tiara and puts it on his head. By embellishing himself with Meriam's stage accessory and cosmetics such as eyeliner and lipstick, Marsani feminises himself, further toning down the insensitive machismo that has led to his string of misdeeds. The scene shows him consumed by remorse and sobbing when he recalls the suffering that he caused Meriam. At this stage, the

flashback actually reveals to the viewer that Marsani was not directly involved in the stabbing and murder of Meriam: he initially wanted to rape her but did not.

The present scene and the flashback serve as a form of contemplation of one time through another. It can be read as nostalgia infused with the pain of remembering what is gone and irrecoverable. Due to the spectral haunting from the past, this nostalgia constitutes the desire to return to a lost time to rectify mistakes.²⁶³ This attempt to reclaim the past while knowing that it cannot be retrieved, echoes Marsani's unwavering longing for Meriam. From the beginning, *Pontianak* portrays Marsani's obsessive fixation on her: he ubiquitously smells Meriam's cloth and scarf. In the present, Marsani's fetishism remains evident when Marsani still keeps some of her belongings, a nostalgic disposition that represents a desire that cannot be realised.

The positioning of Marsani as a villain is further complicated in a brief, surrealistic scene towards the end that not only culminates in his feminisation but also appears ambiguous. It depicts him and Meriam clad in traditional performance costumes, dancing a gamelan together, a gesture that stands in contrast with his egocentric machismo. Critic A. Wahab Hamzah has questioned whether this brief scene attempts to signal something specific about their relationship, which the film does not unfold.²⁶⁴ Andrew Ng reads it as a signal of 'healing' enabled by traditional Malay dance to 'provide a gateway through which a wrong spirit can return and demand reparation'.²⁶⁵ I extend this reading of

²⁶³ Bliss Cua Lim (2009), *Translating Time*, 159

²⁶⁴ A. Wahab Hamzah (2004, 1 June). "Kejayaan – *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2004&dt=0601&pub=utusan_malaysia

healing to a form of romantic reconciliation possible only in an otherworldly or utopic time, a tendency that complicates Marsani's position as a villain.

On another level, I read the notion of healing in the above scene as a form of feminine domestication of the masculine. This is mediated through a gendered performance of time in the film that asserts the occult disruption of progressive, national time (the linear narrative of Marsani's economic success) by the fantastic time of Meriam's ghostly presence. As many have discussed, the gendering of the nation often positions women as culture bearers, preservers of tradition.²⁶⁶ This can be seen in the portrayal of Meriam, the traditional dancer, who represents Old Malay. As Bliss Cua Lim notes:

The sexualisation of national-historical time does several things at once: naturalises social hierarchy under a heteronormative division of labour and familial asymmetries of power; metaphorizes teleological development under the 'evolutionary family of man; and, finally, sexualise archaic, traditional aspects of the nation as feminine, while its progressive tendencies are masculinised.²⁶⁷

In addition to the *pontianak*, this film represents the nation's traditional, feminine aspects: female characters such as Meriam, Anna and Maria are all associated with traditional art performance. On the one hand, this tendency can be contrasted with the nation's more masculine, progressive tendencies represented by a capitalist-industrialist like Marsani. On the other, such traditional dance can be seen as a form of national branding in international or regional sphere as promoted through Norman's wife Anna's tourism/travel agency which is part of

²⁶⁵ Andrew Ng (2009), 'Death and the Maiden', p. 180

²⁶⁶ Susan Philip (2008, June). 'Dismantling Gendered Nationalism in Kee Thuan Chye's *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch*', *Asiatic*, 2(1), 84

²⁶⁷ Bliss Cua Lim (2009), *Translating Time*, 181

the capitalist economy that Marsani represents. In this respect, *Pontianak* blurs this gendered logic of temporality while implicitly critiquing capitalist modernity.

The portrayal of Marsani as a wealthy capitalist-industrialist who has developed the sleepy Paku Laris qualifies him as the state-created ‘new Malay man’ in contemporary Malaysia. However, this masculine construction appears unstable because director Shuhaimi reverses the gender binary of Malaysia’s increasing Islamisation that tends to perceive women as invested with more *nafsu* (lust or desire). In *Pontianak*, men such as Marsani are depicted in this way, as rapacious, ruthless and filled with libidinous desire. In addition, Meriam, the *pontianak*, reappears in modern-day Paku Laris, not only to avenge her death, but also to reclaim her valuable belongings which were stolen from her.

Pontianak then can be read as a subtle critique of ideas of national progress and development as exemplified by Paku Laris as a modern, developed town of Paku Laris and the figure of Marsani as a wealthy businessman. It is significant here that the *Pontianak*’s first victim in present-day Paku Laris is one of Marsani’s engineers. He hears his name being called at a construction site, and spooked by the eerie sound, slides down a slippery slope into an excavated pit where his body is impaled on iron railings. This scene offers a powerful critique of capitalist greed: the engineer is killed while supervising the excavation of the town cemetery, which literally exhumes and destroys the bodies of the past.

As is clear from the above reading, the *pontianak* in this film is shown as having a more complex subjectivity in the film than in traditional horror films. While on the one hand, she is imbued with heroic masculinity and assertiveness that enable her to be threatening and indestructible, on the other, she still

embodies a feminine, maternal emotionalism and sensibility that imbue her with a generous and forgiving nature. In addition, *Pontianak* draws on classical Malay melodrama in its construction of classes as moral polarities, ‘the villain’ (Marsani, the exploiter, powerful and wealthy) and ‘the victim’ (Meriam, the exploited, powerless and repressed). However, what distinguishes *Pontianak* from its predecessors is that these binaries and others such as male/female, good/evil, Old Malay/New Malay, aggressor/victim and human/non-human are blurred when Meriam is transformed into a *pontianak*. *Pontianak*’s ambivalent representations of gender in relation to class and morality are also at the thematic centre of *Susuk*.

***Susuk*: A Malaysian Vampire Movie or Black Magic Thriller?**

The story of *Susuk* interweaves two temporally different yet connected plotlines. The first focuses on Soraya, a trainee nurse, who has a loyal, working-class boyfriend named Kamal. Soraya is a trainee who aspires to become a singer and enter the glamorous world of entertainment. Backstage after a concert, Soraya manages to meet and talk with her favourite singers Mona and Rozana and learns that they used *susuk* (mystical implants) on their necks to advance their singing careers. Her ambition fuelled further, she starts to experiment in the black arts. She obtains amulets which give her confidence when she performs at a local nightclub and strength to stand up to her brother-in-law Farish, who mercilessly abuses her sister. During an altercation with Farish one night, Soraya encounters a mysterious man named Dukun Dewangga (‘the Mystic Medium’), who appears out of thin air to rescue her from her brother-in-law’s assaults. Dewangga eventually murders Farish.

The second plotline centres on Suzana, a popular singer whose life is enshrouded in mystery due to her being a *susuk keramat* practitioner, a more dangerous form of *susuk* used in the past by royalty to attain godlike status. Suzana is always accompanied by the invisible Dukun Dewangga, who advises her on the taboos of *susuk* practice. Every time she violates a taboo, a human life is sacrificed; first, in the form of the accidental deaths of family members, then in her outright murder and cannibalism of various victims when she assumes the form of a vampire. Her fame and her supernatural status take an emotional toll on Suzana, and she hires a personal assistant named Mastura, whose youth and beauty remind her of her halcyon days.

What seems to link the two plotlines is a series of grisly murders that involve celebrities who use *susuk*. Most of them are stalked, slashed and killed by a black-clad killer. The story unfolds as the two plots converge towards the end. A scene in which Soraya arrives at an abandoned factory warehouse is intercut with one of Suzana arriving at the same location with her assistant Mastura. Soraya is shown undergoing a sadistic ritual of *susuk keramat* performed by Dukun Dewangga in which her face is ripped off and replaced by another woman's face. She tries to flee the warehouse, looking horrible, vomiting blood and eventually collapsing. Soraya then gradually assumes the appearance of someone else, finally becoming Suzana. We realise that the two women are the same, and that we have been watching the narrative of their development in two time periods – the past (Soraya) and the present (Suzana). Suzana returns to the warehouse to reminisce about her past as the aspiring ingénue, Soraya. We then see her driving through the city of Putrajaya with Mastura. After crossing a bridge – thus breaking a *susuk*

taboo – she suddenly stops her car, faces Mastura (a double and housemate of her younger self), reveals her fangs and strikes her.

The critical reception of *Susuk* centred on the film's satirical reinvention of the horror genre and intricate narrative threads. Critic Benjamin McKay stated, 'The movie twisted and turned and eventually concluded with a strangely fulfilling sense of tawdry closure and along the way we watched the entire horror genre turned neatly upside down as our directors, Amir Muhammad and Naiem Ghalili, explored the camp sordidness of the local entertainment industry. I tend to see this film as sitting somewhere on the borders between homage and pastiche, as if the genre itself was being interrogated from within'.²⁶⁸ In similar vein, Michael Guillen, in his review of the film observed: 'Less horror than effective satire of the shameful pitfalls of ambition and fame, *Susuk* achieves a weird temporal alterity with its examination of this haraam practice of charm needles'.²⁶⁹ This reference to the film's 'weird temporal alterity' is further explored in my reading of the film.

Meanwhile Malay-language critics A. Wahab Hamzah and Ku Seman Ku Hussain (2008) praised *Susuk* as a unique Malaysian horror due to its intricate narrative structure, offering two different plots with different timelines.²⁷⁰ For this

²⁶⁸ Benjamin McKay (2008, October), 'Biting Cinema: Viewing the Country's Liminal Zone', *Off the Edge*, 18

²⁶⁹ Michael Guillen (2008, 17 July), Review of *Susuk*, <http://twitchfilm.com/reviews/2008/07/review-of-susuk.php>

²⁷⁰ A Wahab Hamzah (2008, 12 August), 'Seram dalam jalur naratif yang mencabar' ('Horror in virtue of intricate narrative'), *Utusan Malaysia*, http://www.sinemamalaysia.com.my/main/clippingnews/Seram_dalam_jalur_naratif_yang_mencabar; Ku Seman Ku Hussain (2008, 17 August), "Benarkah *Susuk* Menyesatkan?" ('Can *Susuk* be deviant?')", *Utusan Malaysia*,

reason alone, they claimed, the film transcended the cliché territory of many Malaysian horror films, given the fact that Malaysian audiences are generally exposed to straightforward types of narratives. Critic Allan Koay, in his review of the film asserted: ‘The real horror of *Susuk* is ... the campy, self-serving, real-life Malaysian entertainment industry magnified a hundred times to focus on its more sceptic aspects – the miasma of one-upmanship, vanity, pretentiousness, ego, greed and lust’.²⁷¹ In terms of genre, the film has been labelled by the local press as: a ‘supernatural thriller’ and a ‘black magic thriller’. This yoking of horror and thriller genres provides the starting point for an exploration of the ways in which generic reworking informs the representations of gender, and particularly of women, in *Susuk*.

In this section I want to examine the trope of transgression in *Susuk* with respects to its themes and aesthetic styles, temporal play and representation of sexuality. The focus on transgression primarily concerns the practice of *susuk*, which entails the implantation of foreign objects such as needles under one’s skin. The aim is to bestow the wearer with various blessings such as making him or her alluring. As mentioned, in the *Nusantara* (Malaysian-Indonesian) people’s ancient animistic belief, all objects – irrespective of whether they are animate or inanimate – possess *semangat*, a form of vital force capable of rendering one extraordinarily powerful. Therefore, the foreign objects inserted into one’s body

http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2008&dt=0817&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Hiburan&pg=hi_37.htm

²⁷¹ Allan Koay (2008), ‘Not that magical’, *The Star*, http://star-ecentral.com/services/printerfriendly.asp?file=archives/movie_reviews/2008/...

in the form of amulets or talismans are saturated with *semangat*.²⁷² *Susuk* is a form of transgression insofar as boundaries between the natural body and the supernatural world are crossed so that the self becomes a non-self. According to experts, several forms of *susuk* such as those involving gold will not decompose once implanted.²⁷³ The practice also involves some taboos that cannot be violated, depending on the *bomoh* one visits. For instance, some must refrain from eating bamboo shoots and passing under a clothesline for 1 month and 10 days whereas others need to avoid eating chicken for 44 days after the *susuk* is implanted.²⁷⁴

In light of the above, the film explores the extent of risk that one might take to attain beauty, fame and success. Some critics regarded *Susuk* as a satire lampooning the local entertainment industry. Others pointed out the film's 'moral message', particularly its portrayal of *susuk*, to the detriment of some individual celebrities, who, it is rumoured, have resorted to this practice to advance their careers. And yet others discussed how *Susuk* exposes and critiques women's *nafsu*, specifically their material greed and carnal desires.

However, I would argue that the film's representation of women is more complex and ambivalent. When Soraya quits her job as a nurse to become a singer, she may be seen as transgressing the socially-sanctioned paradigm of Malay-Muslim femininity. For example, when she confides in her conservative mother about her aspirations, her mother insists that she should continue her nursing career for its security and the pension she will receive. When her initial

²⁷² Mohd Taib Osman (1989), *Malay Folk Beliefs*, p. 79

²⁷³ Rose Yasmin Karim (2007, 10 February), 'Needles & Thread', *The Star*, <http://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2007/2/10/lifefocus/16802277>

²⁷⁴ Ibid., <http://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2007/2/10/lifefocus/16802277>

attempts to become a singer fail, she remains adamant about experimenting with *susuk*, showing little concern for its deadly repercussions. Soraya's transgression in terms of profession shares an affinity with her counterpart Meriam in *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*. Both *susuk* and singing/performing are arenas through which the repressed body may unleash expressions of anger, desire and power.

License to Transgression

Soraya is portrayed as independent and autonomous. When her boss scolds her at work for not performing efficiently, she immediately quits her job. In her relationship with boyfriend, she clearly has the upper hand. And despite her aspirations to become a singer, she does not yield to the unwelcome sexual advances of the director of a recording company. In this respect, Soraya stands in stark contrast to her sister, who as a housewife, is confined to the domestic sphere and as a victim of domestic abuse, is depicted as dependent, submissive and subservient to her violent husband. As with *Pontianak*, the film portrays men as weak, violent and immoral, but with some ambivalence. Here Kamal, Soraya's boyfriend, is depicted with more depth than the other male characters. Beneath his occasional bouts of loutishness is an angst-ridden, sensitive and desperately needy young man, so smitten by love that he wants to take care of Soraya even after their break-up.

When Soraya becomes Suzana, her independence and assertiveness are taken to extremes when she transgresses social, cultural and ethical boundaries. For example, in one scene Suzana violates the *susuk* taboo by crossing a river to attend a family funeral in her *kampong*. The camera shows her car passing over

the bridge then pulling to the side of the road. A curious *kampong* man riding a bike approaches the car. Peering through the driver's window, he ascertains that there is nothing inside. This particular moment is chilling due to the use of the standard shot-reaction-shot pattern as well as the silence that pervades the soundtrack. Suddenly, from inside the car, a ghoulish woman leaps out of nowhere; emitting a loud screech, she shrieks and writhes uncontrollably, making the whole car shake. Due to the visceral impact of this horrific moment, the boundaries between the screen and the viewers are redrawn momentarily as in similar moments in horror where viewers might look away, severing their identification with the image of the monster. As the terrified man rushes back to his bike, the viewers see the exhausted Soraya inside the car rather than the ghoulish woman. This particular scene – while effectively generating a sense of suspense and dread – piques the viewers' initial interest in the disclosure of Soraya's transgression, both her taboo-breaking and transformation into a monster.

Meanwhile, tropes of transgression, as I will show in several important scenes, not only inform the themes and narrative structure of *Susuk*, but also evoke highly affective states of horror, fear and anxiety. The first is the murder scene, which features Marcella, the winner of a talent show, taking a shower. The beginning of the scene generates a sense of dread and unease when the viewers share the voyeuristic point-of-view of the killer. The camera slowly tracks the living room of Marcella's apartment as a jazzy pop song plays in her apartment's interior space. It then slowly zooms into the shower box and pauses, allowing the viewers to see the silhouette of Marcella taking a shower. The shot cuts to a

medium close-up shot of Marcella lathering soap on her neck and shoulders as she becomes aware that the music has suddenly stopped. Wrapping herself in a bathrobe, she steps out of the shower and wanders into the living room to discover that the disc tray of her player is open.

Soon after, she sees a chicken feather floating down from the top of her TV shelf. A shot/reverse shot pattern shows her confused reaction, generating suspense which intensifies when, out of nowhere, a chicken plops onto the top of the shelf, followed by more chickens plopping onto a table, their movement accompanied by a great flurry of descending feathers. A black-clad figure suddenly appears and grabs Marcella's neck, raising her up in the air and strangling her. The figure plunges a knife into Marcella's body and slashes her several times. Blood splatters onto the wall and against the window. Then, the killer brutally hurls her against the wall, drags her mutilated body along the floor, lifts her up again and starts to pull out her intestines. A great quantity of blood seeps from Marcella's dead body as it lies on the floor.

During the assault, the stylistic emphasis shifts when the film speeds up the scene's tempo through rapid cutting: shots of Marcella being slashed are juxtaposed with shots of chickens briefly flapping their wings. This juxtaposition connects the gruesome attack with the sinister presence of the chickens. At this stage, due to the frenetic movement, claustrophobic framing and multiple camera angles, the viewers' perspectives penetrate seamlessly against the victim's reaction and the camera's point-of-view (which reflects that of the killer), blurring their perspectives. At this point, all of the shots are objective as their point-of-view belongs to no specific character. This stylistic strategy helps the viewer to

experience the killer's ruthlessness and aggression in the face of the victim's helplessness, further cutting through the barriers of space and time.

In addition, the dissonant sounds of the chickens flapping and clucking, the victim's screaming and the haunting soundtrack, all serve to create sensations of tension, alarm and anxiety, further disorienting the viewers' perceptions while at the same time undermining the more 'objective' representational quality of the image based on the documentary-style camera movements. The explosive action produces a visceral form of transgression in the viewer. This parallels the themes and leitmotifs of transgression that constitute the scene. The modern space of the victim's apartment is invaded by chickens, which are associated with the pastoral *kampong*. Symptomatically, Marcella embodies the notion of moral and cultural transgression, arising from her involvement in the entertainment industry as a female pop idol, her class snobbery and filial impiety. Finally, the shower scene itself clearly alludes to the famous scene in Hitchcock's *Psycho*, functioning as a cultural signifier for Western modernity.

In another sequence, the diva singer Mona, who is in the back stage studio alone, hears the sound of a chicken clucking. At the same time, she catches a glimpse of mysterious gliding shadows reflected on the white curtains that thwart her view. Captured in a high angle shot, the viewers see Mona engulfed by the waving curtains and surrounded by more chickens as they infiltrate the quiet, professional space. She confronts a shawled, motionless figure that looks like a mannequin and removes the shawl to discover a vampire-like creature. The creature, Suzana as a vampire baring her fangs, leaps out at the viewer in startling close-up. When the terror-stricken Mona attempts to run away, several chickens

glide high overhead, assaulting her from every direction. Meanwhile, the growling vampire floats upside down in the air, drifting back and forth past her. The fast editing heightens feelings of fear, entrapment and doom; shots of Mona being assaulted by the vampire are juxtaposed against shots of flying chickens, which are further amplified by a sonic amalgam of the vampire's growling and the chickens' cackling.

This stylistic concoction transgresses the viewers' transcendental 'all-knowing' gaze, rendering their subjective-objective perspectives provisional. This is when the viewers' identification with images of horror is temporarily ruptured due to the oscillation between the two perspectives producing a sense of 'being-with' a character, further pointing to a subjectivity that is always in motion, 'always becoming and always differing from itself.'²⁷⁵ Drawing on Gilles Deleuze, I suggest that this strategy opens up a way of thinking about subjectivity as occurring 'with others' rather than 'against another', complicating the tendency to see female characters as aggressors or victims.²⁷⁶ Towards the end of the above scene, the vampire finally scratches Mona several times until she collapses on the floor. As the vampire waves her claw-like talons over her face, metallic needles magically sprout from her facial skin. Using her talons, Suzana gouges a wound in Mona's uterus and disembowels her and devours her liver. This scene is gradually

²⁷⁵ Deleuze accentuates how free indirect images overcome any clear distinction between subjects in favour of a dynamic of exchange, a co-existence of perspectives and an assemblage of enunciation. Subjectivity decomposes and recomposes according to the different perspectives that co-mingle because "the camera does not simply give us the vision of the character and of his world; it imposes another vision in which the first is transformed and reflected". See Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, p. 74

²⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 74

succeeded by a shot of some chickens surrounding Soraya and her mother, who are deep in conversation in their *kampong* home.

Between Cannibalism and Sexuality: A Matter of Appetite

The appearance of the chickens in all of the grisly murder scenes is significant on several levels. As co-director Amir Muhammad observed in an interview, their appearance signifies the practice of black arts.²⁷⁷ In the scenes just described, their appearance, while contributing to sense of foreboding and unease, constitutes a form of spatial transgression when they appear out of nowhere, particularly in the urban interior spaces of a recording studio and an apartment. The chickens are linked to the film's depiction of the idyllic *kampong* setting, representing Suzana's/Soraya's innocent, halcyon days. In the scene where she is having dinner with Dukun Dewangga, he asks her: 'Some meat does taste best rare. Chicken?' Suzana replies: 'I don't like chicken. I feel like throwing up', signalling her refusal to be associated with her past and the traditional, rural womanhood embodied by her mother.

At this stage, Suzana is a vampire preying on human victims, straddling the boundaries of the human and the inhuman. Suzana's transgression against proper womanhood turns her into a savage cannibalistic vampire who literally consumes others to satisfy her hunger for power and control. It is here that her hunger can be linked to her virulent *semangat*, to which the notion of *kempunan* is tied. *Kempunan*, observed as a common Malay belief, is a type of craving for a

²⁷⁷ Fadli Al Akiti (2008, 1 August), Interview with Amir Muhammad: *Tawakal-Allah Amir Buat Susuk*, <http://tontonfilem.blogspot.com.au/2008/08/tawakal-allah-amir-buat-susuk.html>

certain food that, when not fulfilled, will see one encounter a mishap. It is said that the ill luck occurs because the *semangat* of the person is less strong due to his or her unsatisfied craving.²⁷⁸ Suzana's 'hunger' is showcased in several scenes, among them, one that depicts her as a voracious eater savouring her steak with unseemly relish.

To a certain extent, Suzana's hunger for human flesh echoes the emotional and sexual vacuum in her life as a powerful single female celebrity. This sense of lack also destabilises her gender and sexual identity. One scene that signals Suzana's ambiguous sexuality occurs when she hires her former roommate Mastura to be her personal assistant. Mastura feels uncomfortable when Suzana sits intimately next to her, leaning against her shoulder while touching her hands and lap. After Mastura leaves, Dewangga appears and asks Suzana: 'I see you have taken a pet. You hunger for her? Suzana replies: 'It's nothing like that. You won't understand. She reminds me of my happier times'.

When she replies that 'it's nothing like that,' Suzana refers to her queer desire for Mastura even as she denies it by identifying her past self with Mastura. Dewangga's question suggests that Suzana has 'hungered' for and sexually consumed other women in the past. The scene renders her sexuality socially and culturally transgressive in its ambiguity. In addition, without the identity marker of family, Suzana's single state and queer desire threaten the image of the happy suburban middle-class Malay-Muslim wife and mother often promoted in official rhetoric where Islam and rapid development are seen as complementary rather than conflicting.

²⁷⁸ Mohd Taib Osman (1989), *Malay Folks Beliefs*, p. 79

This sexual disposition can be traced in several other scenes that portray her past as Soraya. The depiction of her relationship with her roommate Mastura blurs the lines between female bonding and homoeroticism: a scene depicts them engaged in peculiarly intimate contact as they playfully tussle with pillows sending a great flurry of feathers flying all over the room. In another scene at Rozana's house, Soraya's response to Rozana further places her sexuality in doubt. When Rozana emerges from the pool in her tight, sexy swimsuit, revealing her lithe, curvaceous body, Soraya gazes at her enigmatically. As she dons her bathrobe, Rozana exposes her full-frontal body to Soraya to show evidence of the effectiveness of the *susuk* that the former is practising.

Apart from her sexuality, Suzana's emotional vacuum and bodily transformation introduce us to issues of temporality. Focus on the body inevitably brings into play questions to do with cinema's temporal aspects and, by extension, its relationship to difference. This serves as a means of exploring a non-binary model of sexual difference because when a body is constantly changing, it cannot be fixed in a relationship of opposition. In this respect, it is useful to refer to Henri Bergson's way of understanding reality as an undivided continuity, where no clear separation exists between external and internal, subject and object, which implies a type of subject that is not fixed or stable, but rather temporal.²⁷⁹

Along these lines, Bliss Cua Lim refers to Todorov's suggestion that the 'social function of the supernatural' consists of a 'license to transgression': 'the fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it'. Todorov adds that the fantastic offers a way of breaching

²⁷⁹ Henri Bergson (1978), *Matter and Memory*. Trans, N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. London: Allen and Unwin, p. 239

taboos, particularly in relation to sexuality: ‘the function of the supernatural is to exempt the text from the action of the law, and thereby to transgress that law’.²⁸⁰ Responding to Todorov’s assertion of the fantastic genre as a license to transgress, Lim suggests there is always the tension between containment (license, permission) and unruly difference (transgression), that is, ‘one catches sight of the genre’s character as translation, of writing otherness back to acceptable forms’.²⁸¹ In her work, Lim extends the possibility of Todorov’s notion of the law that the fantastic pushes to its limit, which is not only sexual, but also temporal. The sanction that ‘the fantastic is licensed to transgress is frequently the rule of modern, secular, homogeneous time’.²⁸²

In *Susuk*, the two different narratives initially appear as though they share similar timelines; in other words, the film contains no flashbacks in the literal sense. This form of temporal fracture disrupts linear chronology as does Suzana’s vampirism, which renders her immortal and timeless. In one scene, Dukun Dewangga says to her: ‘Every time you consume human flesh, your power will increase. You will be an eternally youthful butterfly’. In another scene, Dewangga again mentions ‘butterfly’ to Suzana: ‘Ponder the butterfly. The caterpillar dies to let the butterfly live. They’re different yet the same’, signifying the sacrifice Suzana has to make for her metamorphosis, a notion that informs the film’s themes of hybridity, mutation and transformation. This transformation is finally actualised in the ritual described earlier, in which Soraya ‘becomes’ Suzana.

²⁸⁰ Bliss Cua Lim (2009), *Translating Time*, p. 112

²⁸¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112

²⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 112-113

The transformation of Soraya into Suzana creates a particularly powerful *semangat* due to the intense stream of negative energy emerging not only from the violent death of another woman as her body is burnt, but also from the agonising changes to Soraya/Suzana's body. However, she not only has to endure this physical pain but also, later, emotional pain as she loses her family, community and humanity, and as ennui follows despair. As a successful singer-diva, Suzana's life validates the cliché that 'it's lonely at the top'. She has to bury her past in order to succeed as a celebrity. This idea of a 'buried past' is literally visualised in the scene featuring the funerals of her family members. When she hears of their demise, she expresses her regret that they have met their deaths due to her practice of *susuk keramat*. Suzana's nostalgia for her past reflects the ambivalences of human longing and belonging, which are bound up with the contradictions of modernity. It also helps to bridge the two storylines that thematise temporality: the past signifies retrogression, family and community whereas the present is associated with notions of progress, individual success and power. Suzana yearns for the state of innocence and stability that she traded for her worldly fame.

Vampires and *susuk keramat* practitioners like Suzana exist outside of time and defy modernity's attempt to rationalise and synchronise it. Figures such as these that resort to 'pre-modern' black arts are seen as performing a social and cultural transgression, particularly in the wake of resurgent Islamisation and Mahathir-ist modernity. In this context, the final scene's aerial shots 'looking down' on the new city of Putrajaya, which is closely associated with the teleological developmentalist state, appear to invoke the theme of transgression on several levels. This reading can be placed within the filmmakers' intention to

assign political connotations to this image and another of the city invoked at the film's beginning. Putrajaya, a planned city that serves as the federal administrative centre of Malaysia, was the brainchild of former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad. This project has been criticised by scholars and the media for its financial wastage and erasure of Malaysian identity. Malaysian academic Maznah Mohamad called the city 'a megalopolis' noting: 'Had it not been for the precipitation of the Asian financial crisis, few would have realised the lavishness of the project. The administrative capital costing RM22 billion is built on oil revenues and under terms of borrowings to which we are not privy'.²⁸³ Co-director Amir Muhammad noted in an interview that he and Naiem Ghalili highlighted Putrajaya to draw a parallel between Soraya/Suzana's transformation and the new, planned city in terms of 'development'. Amir equated Soraya with '*bangkai bernyawa*' ('alive carcass'), which also applied to the city as a '*pembangunan sia-sia*' (futile or hollow development) due to the unnecessary lavishness of the project.²⁸⁴

It is in this city that Suzana once again breaks her *susuk* taboo when her car crosses a bridge in Putrajaya: she transmogrifies herself, turns into a fanged vampire and strikes Mastura. This depiction of women experiencing a different subjectivity subverts and complicates the binary position of them being aggressors or victims. On another level – as in the case of *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* – *Susuk* does not feature in the form of a *deus ex machina* any *bomoh*, who would

²⁸³ See Maznah Mohamad's article, 'A Tale of Two Cities: Monuments to Misplaced Pride', *Aliran.com*, <http://aliran.com/archives/high9912e.htm>

²⁸⁴ Fadli Al Akiti, Interview with Amir Muhammad, <http://tontonfilem.blogspot.com.au/2008/08/tawakal-allah-amir-buat-susuk.html>.

intervene to annihilate the evil power and to restore the natural order. Suzana, who is the embodiment of evil and monstrosity, goes ‘unpunished’, as no definitive resolution is ever provided. This particular denouement challenges Malaysian horror’s recurrent pattern of maintaining and reinforcing the status quo, a strategy employed by the makers of many contemporary horror films to represent a sense of conviction in dominant religious institutions. I read this absence of religious intervention in keeping with the film’s illumination of the contradictions of Malaysian modernity and its critique of the values of resurgent Islamisation.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown that the appeal of contemporary Malaysian horror films lies not only in the appearance of evil spirits or monsters such as the *pontianak* and the vampire, but also in the event-based, moral narratives depicting human encounters with evil – whether the goal is to understand and defeat evil, as is the case with *Pontianak*, or to succumb to its power and temptations, as in *Susuk*.

Regarding *Pontianak*, I have argued that the transformation of the female protagonist Meriam from a *kampung* dancer into a *pontianak* complicates binaristic images of the female as aggressor or victim. This reading can be discerned through director Shuhaimi Baba’s construction of equally complex male characters, particularly Marsani; as well, it is evident in her drawing on melodramatic mode, and in the inconsistency of her camerawork, all of which contribute to the construction of fluid perspectives and identifications. The female

protagonist's identity and subjectivity are articulated not only through her transformation into the mythic ghost, but also through the portrayal of her profession as a dancer/performer, a sphere in which a certain kind of erotic power and control can be exerted. Shuhaimi Baba's narrative presentation, with its interspersing of past and present, contributes to the commingling of hybrid temporalities that inform the film's temporal thematic through which it critiques Malaysia's dialectical modernity. This is envisioned through the capitalist-oriented masculinity of the 'new Malay man' embodied by Marsani, as well as through the transformation of Paku Laris, a once sleepy village in the 1940s which was modernised in the first decade of the 2000s.

The complications of development also appear in *Susuk*. The two different temporalities in the narrative are initially suppressed to present what appears to be a contemporaneous story of two protagonists. This problematises the binary of the good or evil female that characterises classical horror cinema. The film deals to a great extent with ideas of bodily transformation and mutation, particularly through the practice of the ancient black arts of *susuk* and vampirism which give rise to issues of temporality, identity and subjectivity. The protagonist's bodily transgression as a *susuk* practitioner and a cannibalistic vampire parallels her transgressive gender and sexuality. The film's stylistic approach accentuates the complex subjectivities generated by these transgressions; for example, through the combination of diverse camera angles, rapid editing and dissonant sound, which contributes not only to the viewers' provisional perspectives, but also to their affective and emotional states.

Through their foregrounding of morally complex female protagonists and their fluid representations of gender and sexuality, these horror films invoke a sense of female agency and independence that many women in Malaysia may find difficult to exert. Through their designations as evil spirits and agents, women continue to serve as the site of anxieties related to modernity that need to be controlled by patriarchal state and religious institutions. In *Pontianak*, the female protagonist must negotiate her independence to adhere to the Malay social system that associates women with domesticity and motherhood whereas *Susuk* radically represents its female protagonist(s) as eschewing this definition of an ideal Malay femininity through her pursuit of fame, ambition and materialism.

Both *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* and *Susuk* centre on women who risk their identities and lives by pushing the limits of traditional gender boundaries to pursue careers and embody the ideal of modern femininity. The next chapter, which examines two Malaysian action films, shifts focus to look at the effects of modernity on marginal forms of masculinity.

CHAPTER FOUR

Moral Tale or *Fin-de-Siècle* Tragedy? *Budak Kelantan* and *Bunohan*

Severity and gentleness were married, and a world of good and evil was born from the two.

In the view of intellect, heaven is the man and earth the woman. Whatever the one throws down, the other nurtures.
– Jalaluddin Rumi²⁸⁵

Introduction

This chapter examines representations of masculinity in two contemporary action films *Budak Kelantan* ('Kelantanese Bloke', 2008, Wan Azli Wan Jusoh) and *Bunohan* ('Return to Murder', 2012, Dain Said), which centre upon the peoples and cultures of the north-eastern Malaysian state of Kelantan. *Budak Kelantan* is about the reunion of two childhood friends in Kuala Lumpur who have taken different paths in life. One is highly moralistic while the other has strayed from the right path, and much of the action of the film revolves around the former trying to help the latter regain his integrity. In this respect, the film is a unique buddy movie insofar as its melodramatic masculine sensibility is closer to that of the classical narrative of mytho-historical warriors Hang Tuah-Hang Jebat than to that of quintessential US buddy films such as *Midnight Cowboy* (1969) or *Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid* (1969). It is also the directorial debut of theatre

²⁸⁵ Chittick, W. C. (1983), *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teaching of Rumi*. Albany: SUNY Press, p. 101

director and actor Wan Azli Wan Jusoh who is himself originally from Kelantan.²⁸⁶

Dain Said, the director of *Bunohan*, studied film and photography in England before embarking upon broadcasting, advertising and filmmaking. His debut film, a horror-thriller titled *Dukun* ('Shaman', made in 2007), which to date remains unreleased, was inspired by a sensational murder case of a female shaman who brutally murdered a politician. *Bunohan*, which draws on elements from kickboxing-fight films, gangster and fantastic films and family melodramas, depicts the homecoming of three estranged brothers who inevitably become trapped in a tangled web of greed, vengeance and violence. Generally marketed and promoted as an action film, *Bunohan* was bought by LA-based company Traction Media (with rights pre-sold to Universal Pictures) in 2011. Prior to this, the film was screened in a number of international film festivals from Toronto to Rotterdam.²⁸⁷

In this chapter, I argue that both films draw on hybrid genres and temporalities to destabilise and complicate representations of masculinity, a strategy employed to facilitate their critique of Malaysia's dialectical forms of modernity. In *Budak Kelantan*, director Wan Azli references and reworks particular conventions of the buddy/gangster action genre to expose and blur gender lines around issues of religion and morality. I argue that the film's depiction of religious morality is predicated on Sufi-influenced Islam which is

²⁸⁶ At the time of writing, Wan Azli Wan Jusoh is filming his second feature titled *Geng Pisang* (lit. 'The Gang of Banana'), an action film focusing on youth and gangsterism.

²⁸⁷ "Bunohan picks up Netpac Award" (2011, 24 November), *The Star Online*, <http://ecentral.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/11/24/movies/20111124205223&sec=movies>

more humanist and inclusive.²⁸⁸ I further argue that these religious and moral themes are reinforced formally through the use of a mobile, handheld camera and scenes in which *dikir barat*, a traditional musical form consisting of group singing is featured both as background music and diegetic performance.

In my reading of *Bunohan*, I examine how Dain Said's utilisation of hybrid genres unravels the film's complex articulation of masculinity and morality. In particular, the director's incorporation of generic elements from kickboxing, gangster and fantasy films is intricately threaded with traditional art forms from Kelantan such as *wayang kulit* (shadow play), *mak yong* (court dance drama) and *main peteri* (dance-ritual). This particular strategy, as I will show, underpins the film's dense expression of temporality. More specifically, it ruptures the linear narratives that characterise much of mainstream Malaysian action cinema and in the process, makes a statement about the mixed temporality of modern Malaysia.

I will further demonstrate that both films' presentation of unstable masculine subjectivities is informed by the cultural mode of melodrama. This specific mode, as I suggested in Chapter One, dates back to the old literary tradition of texts that often featured a world or milieu saturated with melancholy and sorrow. In order to gain a general picture of Kelantan and its peoples, and to understand both films better, I will now provide a brief description of this state,

²⁸⁸ Although 'Sufi'-Islam is the earliest version of Islam that arrived in the Malay Archipelago in the 14/15th century, this representation of Islam may now be seen as contesting the dominant version of Islam practised by the Malaysian state, i.e., a form of 'legalist Islam' promoted through scripturalist orthodoxy. Sufi Islam tends to be censured by the Islamic bureaucracy in contemporary Malaysia. For further discussion of this, see Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid's (2011) discussion, 'Malay Racialism and the Sufi Alternative', in *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied (eds), Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 68-100

looking particularly its demographics, traditional arts and cinematic representations.

‘Corridor of Mecca’ v. ‘Cradle of Malay Culture’

Specifically focusing on Kelantanese youth, *Budak Kelantan* is set in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur whereas *Bunohan* is set in one of Kelantan’s remote, small towns (named ‘Bunohan’, literally meaning ‘murder’) located along the Thai-Malaysia border. Although both films deal with regional culture and identity, they depict Kelantan and the Kelantanese in a somewhat different light. For example, Kelantan in *Bunohan* is not the regional state – governed by the opposition party PAS (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party) since 1990 – with which many Malaysians are familiar. This is the state that the government and political demagogues promote as the *Serambi Mekah* (‘Corridor of Mecca’), identifying it as a centre for Islamic learning and scholarship. Although its population is predominantly Malay and Muslim, Kelantan is also known for pockets of Thai settlements in rural areas, particularly in districts located close to the Thai-Malaysia border. These settlements have developed because the state is located in the north-east of Peninsular Malaysia which is bordered by Narathiwat Province of Thailand to the north.²⁸⁹

From the early 1970s on, many Kelantanese youths have migrated out of the state for economic and educational reasons. Some have settled in other states and bigger cities such as Kuala Lumpur; others have moved to neighbouring

²⁸⁹ Kelantan’s Siamese (mostly Buddhists) constitute one per cent of the state’s population. As oral traditions indicate, many of the Thai settlements are over one hundred years old. In fact, in some places, Siamese villagers are known to predate their Malay neighbours.

countries such as Singapore and Brunei.²⁹⁰ As Kelantan remains the poorest and least developed state in the country, PAS has been criticised (particularly by the ruling federal government) for the state's failed economic development. PAS's image has thus become tarnished, and the party is largely seen as outdated and unable to govern.²⁹¹ In a recent press report, Deputy International Trade and Industry Minister Mukhriz Mahathir refuted PAS president Abdul Hadi Awang's claim that UMNO (the ruling party) had been campaigning to discourage foreign investors from investing in PAS-ruled Kelantan due to the latter's intention to implement *hudud*.²⁹² Mukhriz responded by saying that Kelantan's failure to attract foreign investors was mainly due to the state's lack of good infrastructure.²⁹³

The abovementioned discourse of development is clearly temporalised, equating the rural sector with poverty and retrogression, a common official statement that invokes the state's status of being 'behind' other states even as its 'potential' is reiterated. Notions of development legitimise the political elites and

²⁹⁰ Ishak Shari (1994), 'Rural Development and Rural Poverty in Malaysia: The Experience during the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) Period', in *Poverty Amidst Plenty: Research Findings in the Gender Dimensions in Malaysia*, Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications; see also Swee-Hock Saw (2007). *The Population of Peninsular Malaysia*, Singapore: ISEAS Publishing.

²⁹¹ See Farish A. Noor (2007), 'Malaysia', *Islamist Opposition Parties and the Potential for EU Engagement* (Toby Archer & Heidi Huuhtanen, eds), Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 60-61

²⁹² One of the biggest and longest-running controversies that PAS has been involved in is the question of *Shariah* law and the party's stated aim of implementing *Hudud* punishments should it ever come to power in the country. PAS's critics and opponents claimed that the form and content of PAS's *Hudud* laws were problematic and questionable to say the least, and that the *Hudud* punishments (which include cutting off hands, whipping and stoning to death) were barbaric and cruel and went against the fundamental principle of justice within Islam.

²⁹³ 'Poor infrastructure in Kelantan puts off investors' (2012, 28 August), *New Straits Times*, <http://www.nst.com.my/nation/general/poor-infrastructure-in-kelantan-puts-off-investors-1.130145#ixzz27lrP8eg8>

may impel one to think about political legitimacy in this country, and those of Southeast Asia in general, in terms of the centre/ periphery dichotomy.²⁹⁴

While generally associated with ‘underdevelopment’, Kelantan – known as the most rustic of the east coast regions of Malaysia – also has been heralded as the bastion of Malay culture. This regional state has been blessed with indigenous art forms that exemplify its cultural richness and hybridity, including *dikir barat*, *wayang kulit*, *mak yong*, *menora* and *main peteri*, some of which have been promoted at the national level as part of Malaysia’s cultural heritage. In 2004, UNESCO declared the *mak yong*, a court dance drama, a ‘masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity’. However, since PAS came to power in 1990, there has been a sustained campaign to ban all forms of art, culture and entertainment deemed ‘un-Islamic’ and ‘immoral’. This ban has been imposed not only on modern forms of popular culture like Western pop music, but also on traditional arts that hark back to the pre-Islamic era. In effect, traditional cultural practices such as *wayang kulit*, the *mak yong* and *menora* dances have been restricted, if not curtailed altogether, due to the fact that many of these art forms entail mystical spiritualism that evinces strong animistic, Hindu and Buddhist influences.²⁹⁵

Consider, for example, the *mak yong* which originated from Pattani (southern Thailand). Performed mainly by women’s troupes and accompanied by

²⁹⁴ I borrow J. Peter Brosius’s (2003) idea of development with regard to ‘temporality’ from his chapter “The Forest and the Nation: Negotiating Citizenship in Sarawak, East Malaysia,” in *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and Belonging in the Hinterlands* (ed. Renato Rosaldo), Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 76-133

²⁹⁵ Farish A. Noor (2004), ‘Modernity, Islam and Tradition: The Struggle for the Heart and Soul of Art and Culture in Malaysia’, *Zentrum Moderner Orient*, <http://www.zmo.de/pressekit/material/Modernity,Islam%20and%20Tradition,%20engl.9.12.04.pdf>

all male musicians, the court dance drama is often enacted during occasions of thanksgiving such as after a paddy harvest to placate spirits, and to celebrate important days such as the Sultan's birthday.²⁹⁶ Incorporating shamanism, spirit-feasting and theatrical performances, the dance drama serves as a conduit to the spiritual world.²⁹⁷ Another art form, *main peteri*, is a traditional dance performed to invoke healing. The patient is actively cajoled into taking part in the dance, guided by the *Tok Peteri* (spiritual teacher), so that he is engaged in his own healing and reintegration into society.²⁹⁸ During the performance, its practitioners usually fall into a trance or perform a séance.²⁹⁹ The more well-known *wayang kulit*, a traditional shadow play, is believed to have come to the Malay Peninsula from Hinduist Java during or soon after the Majapahit period. The *dalang* or puppet master enthral his audience with the larger-than-life stories of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharatha*, the ancient texts of the Hindu world.³⁰⁰

The form that has appealed most to the masses is *dikir barat*, which entails solo and group singing, hand-clapping, and synchronised body and hand movements accompanied by percussion instruments. This is due to the ability of

²⁹⁶ Mohd Ghouse Nasuruddin (1995), *Malay Dance*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p. 15

²⁹⁷ See Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (2004), 'Mak Yong as ritual', *Performing Arts: The Encyclopedia of Malaysia*, Singapore: Archipelago Press.

²⁹⁸ Barbara S. Wright (1980), 'Dance is the Cure: The Arts as Metaphor for Healing in Kelantanese Malay Spirit Exorcism', *Dance Research Journal*, 12(2), 8

²⁹⁹ See Mohd Taib Osman (1989), *Malay Folk Beliefs: An Integration of Disparate Elements*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, p. 63

³⁰⁰ *Wayang Kulit* has strong Hindu influences. It is not performed unless the *dalang* "claims to be an incarnation of Vishnu and makes offerings to Siva the Supreme Teacher and King of Actors and to all the demigods of the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*". For further discussion, see R.O. Winstedt (1951), *Malaya and Its History*, London: Hutchinson House, p. 28

the lyrics to dwell on trivial subject matter or mundane objects in a witty and humorous way.³⁰¹ From its humble origins in the *kampongs* of Kelantan, the form has been pushed into the limelight and become popularised nationwide. In Kelantan, this art form has been reshaped under the present PAS administration in its efforts to promote an all-encompassing Islamic cultural identity. Since stage shows are rare due to the strict entertainment rulings imposed by the state government, *dikir barat* provides an alternative for Muslim youth looking for entertainment and social gatherings and an avenue through which they can express themselves in a creative way. It remains one of the few legal forms of live entertainment left for the general public to enjoy in the state of Kelantan.³⁰² In an article in *New Straits Times*, the Chief Minister of Kelantan, Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat said that ‘*dikir barat* should not only be regarded as a form of entertainment, but also [as] a means to disseminate information’.³⁰³ Although subject to temporary proscription in May 1998 on the grounds that organisers turned concerts into ‘a form of entertainment incorporating immoral elements like indecently dressed female performers and free mixing of both sexes’, *dikir barat* was allowed to be performed provided that certain guidelines were met.³⁰⁴

In an interview with *The Economist* in 1995, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, Kelantan’s prince and major political figure, claimed that ‘in Malaysia’s quest for

³⁰¹ Zaharan Razak (2008), “The Many-Splendored Appeal of *Dikir Barat*”, <http://zveloyak.blogspot.com/2008/12/many-splendored-appeal-of-dikir-barat.html>

³⁰² See Farish A. Noor, “Modernity, Islam and Tradition,” <http://www.zmo.de/pressekit/material/Modernity,Islam%20and%20Trdition,%20engl.9.12.04.pdf>

³⁰³ ‘Traditional plays must abide by Islam’ (1996, 7 March), *New Straits Times*, 6

³⁰⁴ C. Brennan (2001), ‘Religion, Cultural Identity, and Kelantan’s *Dikir Barat*’, *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 12(3), 308

industrialisation, those in power accept any development, whatever the cost to the environment. In Kelantan we resist'.³⁰⁵ This form of resistance has become evident in some Malaysian filmmakers' thematic preoccupation with the Kelantan region and people. In these films, the theme of resistance is mediated through the creative incorporation of the aforementioned traditional art forms. For example, in Malaysian academic and writer Hatta Azad Khan's *Wayang* ('Shadows', 2008), which is set in Kelantan, *wayang kulit* becomes the subject. The film centres upon the clash of idealism between a puppet master and his blind apprentice when the latter attempts to innovate and modernise some aspects of the *wayang kulit*. This film served as a pretext for director Hatta to promote the country's fading traditional arts. This pretext also informs one of *Bunohan's* central themes, namely, mourning the loss of the traditional to critique the negative aspects of modernity.

Internationally acclaimed director U-Wei Haji Saari's *Jogho* ('The Champion', 1999), set in a Kelantanese-Malay community in southern Thailand, tells of bullfighter Mamat's attempt to avenge the death of his elder brother, who was killed by a bullfighting rival. Adhering to blood feud traditions, Mamat and his young kinsmen feel compelled to preserve the honour of the village. With the help of his friend in Kelantan, Mamat embarks upon his vengeful journey to find and kill the perpetrators. *Jogho* depicts the trans-cultural border of the old Malay world which in pre-colonial times, had no political boundaries but mediated cultural and political exchanges between the traditional Malay and Siamese

³⁰⁵ Fauwaz Abdul Aziz (1995, 7 January), 'Thank God it's Friday', *Economist*, 336(7921), 28-30

states.³⁰⁶ Dain Said revisits this concern of border in *Bunohan*, which is set in the small town of Bunohan along the Malaysia-Thai border.

Significantly, all of these films about Kelantan and the Kelantanese feature rich and complex representations of masculinity; for example, *Wayang* critiques traditional patriarchy while dealing with the issue of polygamy and of maintaining patriliney. The portrayal of rural *kampong* masculinity in *Jogho* gives rise to questions of morality and notions of violence. Following the diverse and hybrid cultural traditions of the state, representations and performances of masculinity are fluid and complicated. Images of Kelantanese masculinity associated with pastoral *kampong* traits, habits and mindsets contest the category of the 'new Malay man'. Such cinematic depictions of Kelantanese men also do not conform to the Islamist ethos espoused by the PAS-led state government.

In the next section, I provide an summary of scholarship on masculinity in Malaysian films to frame my analysis of masculinity *vis-a-vis* modernity in *Budak Kelantan* and *Bunohan*. Through my readings of these films, I will argue that depictions of instabilities of masculine subjectivity resonate with their critique of Malaysia's dialectical modernity.

Will Men Always be Men?

In *Reclaiming Adat*, Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006) argues that male violence or hyper-masculinity derives from the discursive authentic male's inability to cope with

³⁰⁶ Zawawi Ibrahim (2003), 'The search for a 'new cinema' in post-colonial Malaysia: the films of U-Wei bin Haji Saari as counter-narrations of national identity', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 4(1), 151

modern changes to gender roles and relationships.³⁰⁷ Khoo defines ‘authentic Malay masculinity’ as a notion defined by martial arts *silat* practices and by male protagonists having traditional warrior qualities. They express their ‘authenticity by practising, upholding, and preserving adat through *silat* or more extremely, by running amok’.³⁰⁸ For Khoo, this definition also entails certain traits from ideal colonial masculinity such as British administration, education and the Boy Scout movement.³⁰⁹ Drawing on Judith Butler’s concept of gender as performance (1990), Khoo notes that this highly performative masculinity is a result of ‘gender panic’, i.e., the erosion of traditional roles of power by forces of modernity sometimes conceived of as Western – such as female emancipation and feminism.

In effect, the authentic male lashes out in physical violence in a gesture of hyper-masculinity in a bid to reassert his masculinity when faced with his inability to control the all-consuming woman. The association of women with consumption is conventionally viewed as a modern feminine preoccupation, encouraged, as Aihwa Ong notes, not only by increasing affluence among the broad-ranging Malaysian middle class but also because women are now often financially independent.³¹⁰ In addition, as mentioned in Chapter One, contemporary Islamic discourse in Malaysia ascribes *nafsu* to women, perpetuating the idea that they

³⁰⁷ Khoo Gaik Cheng (2006), *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*, Toronto: UCB Press. See chapter 6, ‘What is it to be a Man? Violence in the Time of Modernity’, pp. 158-206

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 165

³⁰⁹ Ibid., pp. 160-166

³¹⁰ Aihwa Ong (1995), ‘State versus Islam: Malay families, women’s bodies, and the body politic in Malaysia’, pp. 171-172, cited in Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 161

embody dangerously uncontrollable emotional and sexual desires.³¹¹ According to Khoo, the violence often associated with hyper-masculinity is the highly dramatic performance of authentic masculinity in crisis. Therefore, its performance is invariably a disguise, a disavowal of sexual and economic inadequacy, which is seen as emasculating and effeminate.³¹²

Focusing on this authentic masculinity, Khoo delineates other physical types of masculinity on Malaysian screen: the teen heartthrob, the pop singer and the hard body. Although she does not specifically focus on genre, her classification gestures toward performances of masculinity in specific genres: the putative authentic masculinity and the hard body are two forms of masculinity that appear in films accentuating physical action and violence in contrast to the teen heartthrob and pop singer which appear in romantic comedies and melodramas. In American and Hong Kong action films the 'hard body' is often associated with the visual spectacle of violence. This tendency has become salient in Malay cinema due to the success of foreign action films featuring Jean Claude van Damme, Jet Li and Jackie Chan, which has spurred local filmmakers to imitate these models of cinematic masculinity.

However, the hard body in Malay films, as Khoo has noted, does not convey the same political and military aggression that has characterised American films and society. Hard bodies often play secondary characters and are brought in literally as action fillers in the narrative gaps of the romance or love story, which

³¹¹ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 161

³¹² *Ibid.*, p. 162

continues to be the most popular genre of Malay film.³¹³ Providing examples of Yusof Haslam's films such as *Pemburu Bayang* ('Shadow Hunter', 1993), Khoo claims that the formula of his financial success stems from the combination of a love story with an action-filled subplot. In the film, actor Shaharuddin Thamby's supporting character provides most of the film's action.³¹⁴

As I attempt to show in this chapter, both *Budak Kelantan* and *Bunohan* complicate clear-cut categories of physical masculinity by offering more complex representations of male subjectivity with women depicted in minor, peripheral roles. I extend Khoo's discussion of masculinity by locating both films' depiction of hyper-masculinity in crisis within wider concerns of modernity, including questions of morality, cultural anxiety and spatio-temporality alongside questions of genre. The films I am exploring here do not specifically represent what Khoo refers to as 'authentic Malay masculinity'. That is, masculine characters in the two films do not resort to these authentic hyper-masculine practices (in the form of traditional martial arts *silat*) to stave off the perceived corrupting influences of modernity embodied by the female, as in the Malay films of the 1990s that Khoo examines.³¹⁵

The aforementioned trope of masculinity in-crisis also underpins David C. L. Lim's discussion of the representation of urban, working-class male youth in the film *KL Menjerit* ('Kuala Lumpur Screams', 2002, Badarudin Haji Azmi), which inspired other films of the same genre, all focusing on urban youth and

³¹³ See Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, pp. 166-172

³¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 166-168

³¹⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 170-172

masculinity.³¹⁶ In his article, Lim examines the construction of working class *Mat Motor* (Malay biker) masculinity and queer desire in *KL Menjerit*, looking at how the film resonates in ways that are not necessarily obvious to the disinterested heterosexual public eye. His discussion takes into account both cinematic elements and the sexual geography of Kuala Lumpur, wherein shifting biker spaces sometimes intersect with homosexual cruising sites. Lim argues that the film's representation of the *Mat Motor* protagonist as unbendingly straight and heterosexually masculine – while imaginably gratifying to the core audience of *Mat Motors* – actually belies the opposite reality of Kuala Lumpur's forgotten underside, where gender and sexuality are much more fluid and malleable than is sanctioned by society and the state.

Lim's analysis of Malay masculinity points to the rural/urban divide defined through class terms. His reading of the film's particular subplot, supported by some empirical data, reinforces his argument about the blurring of urban masculinity by way of unearthing the film's queer subtexts. Lim's discussion provides insight into the portrayal of urban youth in *Budak Kelantan*, who represent urban underclass youth, the majority of whom are low-income, migrants from the countryside. The major difference is that the protagonist in *KL Menjerit* is still endowed with moral rectitude and *kampong* naiveté whereas in *Budak Kelantan* the character Jaha is depicted as becoming ensnared in Kuala Lumpur's underside, its web of illicit drugs, gang-beatings and predatory sex. It is to this film that I now turn.

³¹⁶ David C. L. Lim (2006), 'Cruising Mat Motor: Malay biker masculinity and queer desire in/through *KL Menjerit*', *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 62-80

Budak Kelantan: A Melancholy Buddy Film? A Male Melodrama?

Budak Kelantan revolves around two childhood friends from Kelantan, Jaha and Buchek, who cross paths in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur after many years of separation. Jaha is a deviant, young man involved in crime and violence in contrast to Buchek who is a pious, unemployed university graduate. Jaha lives in a low-cost flat with a group of Kelantanese friends. Buchek helps a friend run a roadside burger stall while looking for a professional job. Following their accidental reunion, Buchek becomes drawn into Jaha's violent, explosive lifestyle which includes gang beatings, drug use and kidnapping. Jaha targets a runaway teenage girl to rape, with the assistance of his housemates and sell into prostitution. Buchek incurs Jaha's wrath when he rescues one of his potential rape victims, a girl of Chinese descent named Lee Chen Chen with whom he becomes close.

Jaha attempts to woo a *hijab*-clad girl named Che Noor only to discover that she is actually Buchek's girlfriend. Jaha's encounter with Che Noor prompts him to contemplate a new lifestyle and try to extricate himself from the vicious world in which he has become ensnared. Unable to confront Buchek directly, Jaha writes him a letter telling him how he feels about Che Noor and, determined to help Jaha change, Buchek makes a personal sacrifice by persuading his girlfriend to reciprocate Jaha's feelings. The girl refuses, devastated and baffled by her boyfriend's proposition. Che Noor's refusal to accept him fills Jaha with melancholic sadness and longing (*duka-nestapa*), culminating in a violent fight wherein he stabs a stranger. The next day, while attempting to escape the police, Jaha dies in a tragic road accident.

Although a low-budget effort and the director's feature debut, *Budak Kelantan* generally received positive reviews in Malaysia. Critics praised the film for its bold and refreshing take on the crises facing urban youth. They pointed to the film's raw and realist aesthetics (its 'grainy' picture quality) and its theme of immorality among urban Kelantanese youth. Wahiduzzaman described it as "a gritty urban action-drama ... the movie depicts the paths taken by Kelantanese youngsters in Kuala Lumpur – one of righteousness and one of decadence ... [the director] manages to bring out realism with raw touches to the story."³¹⁷ Praising Wan Azli for successfully getting his message across, *New Straits Times* reviewer Radin Sri Ghazali wrote: "[The director] is also sensitive to the culture and the lifestyle of Kelantanese youth in Kuala Lumpur ... *Budak Kelantan* proves to be raw and honest."³¹⁸

Malay-language critic A. Wahab Hamzah, who reviewed the film from the perspective of cinematic representation of 'teens' or youth, wrote that *Budak Kelantan* was about the struggle and survival of adolescents in the big city.³¹⁹ Fadli Al-Akiti observed that on the surface, the film was reminiscent of an old Hindi melodrama highlighting Manichean morality or, of a religious-themed film known for its tendency to preach about and 'proselytise' morality. But, according

³¹⁷ Wahiduzzaman (2008, 1 November), "Made in Kelantan", *Cinema.com*, http://www.cinema.com.my/news/news.aspx?search=2008.made_in_kelantan_2984

³¹⁸ Radin Sri Ghazali (2008, 30 October), "A Study in Contrasts," *New Straits Times*, http://www.sinemamalaysia.com.my/main/clippingnews/A_study_in_contrasts_1554

³¹⁹ A. Wahab Hamzah (2008, 2 November), "Sisi Gelap Kuala Lumpur" ('Dark Side of Kuala Lumpur'), *Utusan Malaysia*, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2008&dt=1102&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=Hiburan&pg=hi_29.htm

to Fadli, in the hands of director Wan Azli, such subjects are executed in a more engaging and realistic manner.³²⁰

In my reading of this film I will consider how these critics' assertions regarding its realist representations of troubled youth link to the film's generic hybridity. *Budak Kelantan* blends together elements of gangster, crime, youth, social problem and teen romantic films, most of which deal with social reality. This strategy also informs many US buddy movies which have invariably been hybridised with other genres, such as road movies, Westerns, comedies and action films featuring cops.³²¹ I will further show how this strategy informs the film's blurring of masculinity and morality. For example, in dealing with morality, *Budak Kelantan* reworks US and Hong Kong gangster genre that depict religious motifs by foregrounding Sufi Islam as mediated through the character Buchek.

To Be or Not To Be (Moral)

One of the conventions of buddy films is to highlight two male characters with different personalities.³²² Usually their friendship is challenged by events in the film. The opening sequence of *Budak Kelantan* illustrates this pattern: Wan Azli's mobile hand-held camera floats wildly through the untidy interior space of Jaha's

³²⁰ Fadli Al Akiti (2008, 6 November), "Budak Kelantan (2008) – Realisme Getir" (*Budak Kelantan – Gritty Realism*), *Tontonfilem*, <http://tontonfilem.blogspot.com.au/2008/11/budak-kelantan2008-realisme-getir.html>

³²¹ Bret E. Carroll (ed.) (2003). *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*, SAGE Publications, p. 73

³²² Ibid., 73-75; see also Patrick Goldstein's article (2001, 9 October), "It's Still a Guy Thing: The Evolution of Buddy Movies", *Los Angeles Times*, <http://articles.latimes.com/2001/oct/09/entertainment/ca-54963/2>

low-cost *rumah bujang* (bachelor pad). Accompanied by boisterous sound emanating from a wrestling show on TV, it captures Jaha and his housemates playing cards. The shaky camera moves closer, highlighting the wrestling show and revealing Jaha's two shirtless housemates, who are mimicking some of the wrestling moves, a tendency that prefigures Jaha's and his housemates' aggressive masculinity and proclivity for violence. This scene is juxtaposed with a back shot of Buchek performing his *solat* (ritual prayer) in the dark, quiet stillness of the night, as his voice-over proclaims the idea that life is a test and that every human being is born pure, clean and free from contamination by sin. These introductory shots featuring Buchek configure him as the locus of positive, moral rectitude, with his masculinity defined by the traditional virtues of decency, innocence, modesty and fear of God. The stylistic approach of the sequence, with its grainy and restrained aesthetics, conveys an impression of things and people in a drab and unobtrusive manner, similar to the banal, fragmented nature of the youths' lives.

Wan Azli draws on some general conventions of the gangster genre when – as the film unfolds – the abovementioned Manichean moral structure is complicated.³²³ Although implicated in a wide range of deviant behaviour and sexual depravity, Jaha is depicted as morally ambiguous. In one particular scene, Buchek pleads with Jaha and Libokbong to drop him at the nearest mosque because he wants to perform his *solat Asar* (evening prayer). When Libokbong who is driving seems reluctant to oblige, Jaha bursts into a paroxysm of anger,

³²³ Thomas Leitch (2002), *Crime Films*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

and reminds him that although they are personally committing some bad deeds, they should not dissuade others from doing good. Immediately after Buchek leaves them and heads for the mosque, Libokbong tells Jaha that he is perplexed by his inclination to befriend someone pious like Buchek.

Jaha's housemates are also portrayed as morally ambiguous; for example, although they help him to rape the teenaged girl mentioned earlier, most of them reject his invitation to rape her after he has finished with her. One of them even cynically admits that he is willing to commit other forms of sin but not rape, implying that rape is just the most vicious form of sin and crime. This ambiguity is also enunciated visually; immediately after Jaha rapes the girl, Wan Azli's camera reveals some holy scriptures pasted on the walls of the room, reinforced by the handheld camera's restless mobility. Wan Azli's camera does not show the girl when she is being raped, but focuses instead on the physiognomy and gestures of Jaha and his housemates.

By not employing the shot-reaction shot pattern, the scene eschews certain the gendered spectatorial divide between male/aggressor/active (holder of the gaze) and female/victim/passive (the object of male desire). However, the scene elicits a sense of unease and disorientation, reinforced as it is by diegetic sounds of the girl in agony, juxtaposed against the non-diegetic, jarring sound of the traditional musical instrument, the *rebab*. In another scene – after the kidnapping incident – although Jaha questions Buchek's rationale for rescuing Lee Chen Chen when she was left in his trust, his moral stance wavers when he finally agrees that what Buchek has done is actually right. He tells Libokbong that

Buchek was not supposed to be with them in the first place (implying that his moral standards are different from theirs).

It is interesting to note that critic Fadli Al-Akiti claimed that Buchek epitomises a more outrageous form of chauvinism than his friend due to his willingness to ‘trade’ his girlfriend.³²⁴ According to this reading, Buchek’s seemingly unalloyed morality is based on the same patriarchal assumptions that inform Jaha’s rape and sexual trafficking of women. On the other hand, Buchek’s earnest intention to see his friend turn over a new leaf leads him to sacrifice the woman he loves. In this sense, his noble gesture is comparable to Prophet Abraham’s willingness to sacrifice his son, the Prophet Ishmael in order to obey God’s command, as narrated in his voice-over earlier. In one scene, Buchek confides in his housemate that although he loves Che Noor, ‘we have to love God more than we love a person, right?’ This being the case, *Budak Kelantan* offers a Sufi version of Islam that accommodates ‘Others’ in its vision of love for humanity.³²⁵ The opening of *Budak Kelantan* implies this tendency when Buchek’s voice-over mentions that the ideal human being is the one who is most useful and helpful to others. However, as I will indicate in the final section of the film’s analysis, Wan Azli does not provide a clear-cut resolution pertaining to

³²⁴ Fadli Al-Akiti’s claim that Kelantanese men are sexist or chauvinist appears to have been based upon popular everyday discourse in Malaysia. To date, I have not been able to locate any research or studies conducted on this particular topic.

³²⁵ The term ‘Sufism’ denotes a branch of Islam associated with spirituality and mysticism and the expression of Islam’s inner essence and esoteric aspects as distinguished from its external and exoteric aspects, as manifest in absolute love of the Divine. For a detailed explanation of ‘Sufism,’ see Tanvir Anjum (2006), “Sufism in History and its Relationship with Power,” *Islamic Studies*, 45(2), 222-231

Buchek and Che Noor's relationship, as Buchek makes sacrifices at the expense of Che Noor.

The film's portrayal of Buchek as a virtuous and wise young man challenges the Muslim identity proffered by the state or the PAS in legislating and enforcing the morality of the nation: in his attempt to guide Jaha back onto the right path, he never appears holier-than-thou, nor does he preach that people like Jaha should be tormented and condemned to *neraka* (hell).³²⁶ The film's emphasis upon religion parallels many American and Hong Kong gangster films such as *The Godfather* series and John Woo's films, which tend to present several religious leitmotifs and iconographies pertaining to Catholicism.³²⁷ However, in *Budak Kelantan*, Wan Azli extends the representation of religion beyond symbolic *mise-en-scène*, in offering Islam as a route to redemption for men who have strayed into the criminal world. The director-screenwriter portrays one of the male protagonists as someone explicitly pious who spiritually saves his best friend while entering into a deeper personal intimacy with his Creator, a point I will discuss further towards the end of this section.

³²⁶ Malaysia's Islamisation race (which concerns two political parties UMNO and PAS) has led to the development of a vast array of laws and institutions set up with the aim of 'caring' for the welfare of society, resulting in the nation having manifested itself with more and more holier-than-thou moral policing of the lives of citizens.

³²⁷ Geoff Fordham (2004), 'A Study in Ambiguity: The Godfather and the American Gangster Movie Tradition', *CrimeCulture*, <http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/Articles-Spring05/Godfather.html>; Tony Williams (1995, February), "To Live and Die in Hong Kong: The Crisis Cinema of John Woo", *Cineaction*, 36, 42-52

Between Modern and Tradition, Urban and Rural

The film's representations of the morality and masculinity of Kelantanese youth allude to tensions between the centre (Kuala Lumpur, urban) and the regional (Kelantan, rural) brought about by migration from the country to the city. Like hundreds of thousands of youth from distant *kampongs*, Jaha and Buchok are drawn to Kuala Lumpur, captivated by the allure and promise of this capital city of 3 million inhabitants. As a graduate from the Henry Gurney prisoner school, Jaha represents the city's 'underclass' youth. He is depicted as lacking the education and skills valued by the country's capitalist economy. However, when it comes to specific modes of youth lifestyles, he is inclined to adopt anything modern which is equated with Western consumer products, styles and images. In many scenes, the film portrays Jaha's housemate Libokbong, who lampoons his friend by using the phrase "*Tak Amerika-lah*" (lit. "un-American, eh?"). In one scene, Libokbong sarcastically comments that Jaha is somewhat 'Americanised', saying: "...You're different. You're an American gangster. His clothes ... *Nike* ... his pants are *Levis* from a bundle sale ... it doesn't matter that it's second hand ... as long as it's made in America. And that's not enough... smoking *Marlboro*, drinking *Coca-Cola* and watching MTV. You're definitely an American". In many ways, his references to certain consumer products such as jeans and cigarettes define Jaha's masculinity.

Modernity is critiqued explicitly here as a form of Westernisation that is consumed superficially through fashion, food and styles. A deeper and more nuanced critique occurs in the depiction of Buchek as a struggling university graduate whose higher degree amounts to little more than working at a burger

stall. The ambivalence toward capitalism is a common theme in many American gangster films, which explore the tensions between the economic disadvantage of a marginal group and their desire for the illusory promises of the ‘American Dream’. This ambivalence is transposed here to Kuala Lumpur in which the fantasy of the American Dream is even less accessible, let alone attainable.

Although depicted as embracing the American consumer culture and the city’s modern cosmopolitanism, Kelantanese youth are portrayed as still entrenched in their cultural roots. In the opening scene, Libokbong urges one of the housemates to switch off the TV and to play *dikir barat* music instead. In this respect, the film further highlights the country’s contradictory notions of modernity through the director’s incorporation of the regional performing art form. Employed both as musical background and diegetic performance, *dikir barat* functions as a cultural signifier and recurrent motif. With its use of the Kelantanese dialect in its lyrics, this particular cultural artifact serves as ‘a central component in the ethno-linguistic formation for the people of Kelantan in the process of ... maintaining membership of being Kelantanese’.³²⁸

In one particular scene wherein Jaha and Libokbong are taking Buchek on an excursion, viewers share the characters’ points-of-view, observing images of everyday Kuala Lumpur rendered in pseudo-documentary mode; the strains of the *dikir barat* infuse the scene with a sense of melancholy as Fadli Al-Akiti has noted. The resonance of well-known *dikir barat* figure-performer Halim Yazid’s ‘monumental’ vocals, according to Fadli, works effectively as a strategy that may

³²⁸ Zuraidah Mohd Don (2003), ‘Kelantanese in a New Ethnolinguistic Environment’, *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 161, 55

remind the Kelantanese migrants of ‘home’ (i.e., their origins and identity) and – in the course of the film’s portrayal of Kelantanese youth – of what they may have lost as a result of migration.³²⁹

The above examples imply that *dikir barat* is an anachronism, ‘a thing belonging or appropriate to a period other than that in which it exists, especially a thing that is conspicuously old-fashioned’.³³⁰ In addition to the consistent aural presence of the *dikir barat*, the film’s chronological inconsistency is also anachronistic. The film’s organisation of time disrupts the chronology of events; for example, shots of the present are ruptured by a succession of flashback shots, future shots and imagined, atemporal shots. In the early scenes that depict the two friends’ accidental reunion, Wan Azli not only incorporates some brief flashbacks, but also inserts a future shot featuring Buchek who is reading Jaha’s letter, which, chronologically, is a final event that appears again at the end. In the meantime, while viewers are following the narrative, they are also provided with atemporal shots of Buchek performing his prayer, occasionally juxtaposed against his voiceover.

This sense of anachronism in Wan Azli’s presentation of his narrative structure registers a certain cognitive and epistemic shift. Viewers are led to understand the world not only through direct sensory-motor movements, but also through temporally-mediated events. This narrative anachronism defies the linear chronology we expect in much the same way that the incongruity of the displaced

³²⁹ Fadli Al Akiti, ‘Budak Kelantan (2008) – Realisme Getir’, <http://tontonfilem.blogspot.com.au/2008/11/budak-kelantan2008-realisme-getir.html>

³³⁰ *OxfordDictionaries.Com*, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/anachronism>

protagonists critiques the sped-up time of rapid development that characterises cities like Kuala Lumpur.

These forms of aural, narrative and embodied anachronism contribute to the sense of melancholy that permeates the entire film. *Budak Kelantan* intensifies this melancholy, in a nostalgic register, during the earlier scene in which the two friends are reunited in the city and reminisce over their halcyon days in their *kampong* hometown. In this conversation, director Wan Azli periodically inserts a series of brief flashbacks, juxtaposing their present, late adolescent selves against their childhood ones. The first shot, set against the present shot of Jaha recognising Buchek, shows one of them inside a car gazing out at the other (who is walking) as the car passes him. Subsequent shots are juxtaposed against the present shots of Jaha and Buchek moving to a food court to have drinks: the second shot shows one of them jumping down from a tree to pursue the other; the third shows them attending a *Qur'an* reading lesson, with one of them attempting to escape; and, the final shot shows one of them hiding behind some shrubs before confronting the other, leading them to wrestle.

These brief flashback shots, which are accompanied by mellow, sentimental music, not only augment the sense of distance that accompanies the childhood memories of these two friends, but also articulates their transition from the traditional, rural past to the modern, urban present. The whole sequence implies an imagined past characterised by communal values and cohesive ties which sharply contrasts with the individualistic and materialistic values of the present. Wan Azli's invocation of *dikir barat*, and his inclusion of the flashbacks give rise to a feeling of nostalgic melancholy that seeps through the film's

narrative of the protagonists' 'lost innocence' as they are corrupted by the materialistic influences of the city. All of this may be read as a form of Kelantanese collective cultural anxiety, subtly expressed in the lyrics of the slow-tempo *dikir barat* song which urges its audiences (the Kelantanese?) to stand united and to uphold their traditions.

The Taming of the Masculine

The melodramatic mode of the film complicates and destabilises traditional notions of masculinity. This is evident, for instance, in the film's extolling of the virtues of male comradeship while relegating male-female relationships to a subsidiary position. Jaha's letter-writing to express his innermost feelings conforms to dominant social conventions in which men are not supposed to express their emotions openly with each other. This expression is only realised through the pursuit of women, a tendency referred to as 'homosocial desire' by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, i.e., a form of male bonding that relies on gender triangulation in which women are used to affirm the ostensible heterosexuality of the men.³³¹ Through letter-writing, Jaha, who plays a more dominant, masculinised role in his friendship with Buchek, switches to a feminised role when he expresses his intention to change his lifestyle in his pursuit of Che Noor. In this respect, Buchek manages to domesticate not only Jaha's aggressive masculinity but also his depraved behaviour.

Jaha's encounter with Che Noor triggers moments of soul-searching, as his melancholic sadness undermines his sense of rugged physicality, sexual virility

³³¹ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (1985), *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, p. 1

and brutal masculinity. Expressing a desire to atone for his misdeeds, in his letter he bemoans his evil, destructive self while at the same time admitting that he has never experienced love in his life before. In this respect, the viewers' disapprobation of Jaha's deviance may not simply impel them to regard his tragic death as the morally correct outcome. The character's suffering further puts his sense of manhood to the test. Che Noor's rejection of Jaha depreciates the egocentric machismo that he customarily uses to attract girls and woman and that underlies his explicitly violent and heartless misogyny.

Jaha's melancholic sadness and longing fuel his violent hyper-masculinity, as is evident in a scene towards the end when he runs amok and commits violence. While having a drink with his friends in a food court, he notices a man from a different gang staring at him. Fuelled by his failed attempts to win Che Noor, an exasperated Jaha stands up and starts yelling at him. When the latter retaliates, Jaha hits him and after chasing him down with his friends, plunges a knife into his stomach.

The sequence is reinforced by Wan Azli's shaky camera's oblique 'Dutch tilts' shots which generate a sense of irresolution – a visual anxiety that reflects Jaha's sense of unease and emasculation. The camera goes berserk and becomes more restless when it follows the chasing and stabbing incident, completely tipping the viewers off-balance. This particular effect is amplified by the jarring and discordant shrieking of the traditional *rebab* that similarly reverberates in the earlier raping scene. Jaha's hyper-masculinity may be attributed to the sense of lack or loss he is both recuperating and concealing, and that stems from his feeling of being emasculated by a woman. In this context, masculine subjects

complicate the binary positions of victims and victimisers, further reflecting what R. W. Connell has termed as ‘plural masculinities’.³³²

Jaha’s sense of emasculation can be attributed to the underlying domestication of his masculinity by the feminine and traditional elements of Buchek and Che Noor, which informs the notion of cyclicity that Buchek mentions in his voice-over narration, and that shapes an individual, explaining why some human beings act badly or destructively. Somewhat significantly, when Buchek mentions ‘Jamal, Kamal, Yin and Yang’, he may conceive of things in the Universe as a reflection of these divine names and attributes. The Taoist principles of *Yin* and *Yang*, which can be envisaged – in Islam – as Jalal and Jamal (the Majesty and Beauty of God) and Kamal (the perfection or non-duality of this pair), all allude to a human being’s *fitrah* (primordial perfection) when she or he reflects both masculine and feminine qualities or majesty, beauty, rigor and mercy.³³³ This can be discerned not only in the narrative’s pairing of Jaha (‘masculine’, rigor) and Buchek (‘feminine’, mercy), paralleling the complementary dichotomy of Yin-Yang, but also in Jaha’s eventual encounter with Che Noor. Wan Azli’s representation of Islam imbued with Sufi undertones transcends and blurs the divisions between physical and spiritual love, the sacred and the profane (Buchek and Jaha), and Muslim and non-Muslim (Buchek and Lee Chen Chen).³³⁴

³³² As Raewyn Connell has stated, the term ‘masculinity’ is used more in its plural form ‘masculinities’ because the inference is that there is not one but many socially constructed definitions of being a man. See R. W. Connell (2005), *Masculinities*, California: University of California Press.

³³³ Sachiko Murata (1990), ‘The Tao of Islam’, *Sufi*, 5, http://sufism.ru/eng/txts/a_tao_of_islam.htm

The subplot featuring Lee Chen Chen, which is reminiscent of Yasmin Ahmad's films, contributes significantly to the film's undercurrent of Sufi Islam. Consider the quiet, dream sequence in which Chen Chen is practising ballet in a dark hall and falls suddenly to the floor. Soon after, Buchek, wearing a traditional Malay costume, appears to lend her a helping hand; here we see Chen Chen transformed into a girl wearing a Chinese-opera-like costume. When they meet later in a department store, Chen Chen tells Buchek that she experienced something like a dream in which she was kidnapped then saved by a prince, implying that he is a source of salvation and redemption; this is later reflected in his attempt to save Jaha spiritually.

In the final scene, in which Buchek is reading Jaha's letter Chen Chen again approaches him. Buchek gets up, faces her, and together they walk slowly out of the film's frame. This final image appears somewhat ambiguous and may be read on several levels. Is this scene in fact part of a fantasy, i.e., the dream-like incident that Chen Chen told Buchek about, which, according to her, was like a fairy tale that repeats itself, a conjuring up of something that never happened? Or, can it be read as Buchek leaving Che Noor to enter into a relationship with Chen Chen? Do the portrayals of the strained relationship between Buchek and Che Noor, or of Jaha-Buchek's friendship hint at the film's critique of the Kelantanese people, who are well-known for their strong sense of statehood? If Buchek reconciles with Chen Chen, can the film be read as an attempt to situate the Kelantanese within a wider, national imaginary, in the form of an 'other' time, an

³³⁴ I borrow Khoo Gaik Cheng's idea when she discusses Yasmin Ahmad's *Gubra* in relation to Sufi philosophy. See Khoo's article (2007), 'The Politics of Love: Malaysia's Yasmin Ahmad', *Metro Magazine*, 155, 56

otherworldly existence? Does it allude to the possibility of national integration? Such evocative questions are raised in this fantastic, liminal scene in which Buchek romantically unites with someone who is not only from a different regional state, but also a different ethno-cultural group and background. In the department store scene, Chen Chen tells Buchek that ‘we have lived together for quite a long time, but it feels like we don’t know each other’, hinting at the reality of ethnic division in contemporary Malaysia.

Whether it is Buchek’s relationship with Chen Chen or with Che Nor, *Budak Kelantan* positions women at the periphery, a typical case of buddy films or gangster films that offer relationships with women as a secondary narrative layer or as a subplot. Such representations resonate with Dain Said’s *Bunohan* – a film I discuss in the next section – which likewise foregrounds men.

***Bunohan*: An Action Film? A Family Melodrama?**

The storyline of *Bunohan* revolves around three brothers: Ilham (a hired killer), Adil (a Tomoi kickboxer), and Bakar (a school teacher), and their ailing father, Pok Eng, a shadow play puppeteer. The three siblings, who had earlier parted ways, return home to the *kampong* of Bunohan only to be caught in a tangled web of greed, vengeance and violence upon discovering certain family secrets and mysteries. Encumbered with debt, and after nearly losing his life at the hands of a cheating opponent in Thailand, Adil comes home with the help of his childhood friend Muski and attempts to find out more about his family while being supported by his kickboxing mentor Pok Wah. His merciless and lonely older brother arrives on assignment and faces the most difficult ordeal of his life when

he learns that his next victim is to be Adil. Bakar, the only educated son and a teacher-turned-businessman, is home from the city, ostensibly to look after his ill father. However, Bakar has nefarious intentions: he plans to deceive his father into selling their ancestral land to property developers for a huge sum of money.

While they are in Bunohan, Adil and Ilham experience a dream or hallucination wherein the latter's mother, Mek Yah, is seen prowling through the palm forests as a were-crocodile. Ilham neglects his assignment as he attempts to find his mother's grave. Together with a horde of Thai gangsters, who have been sent to finish Ilham's job, Adil hides out with Pok Wah and gets embroiled in efforts to save his mentor's old kickboxing club. Pok Eng, a patriarch now in his twilight years, is steeped in regret over the polygamous arrangement that has torn the whole family apart. However, he is determined to keep his promise to Adil's mother to give his property to Adil one day. This worries Bakar, who is under financial pressure due to a questionable deal he has made with some businessmen in the city.

When Adil finds out about his father's pledge regarding him, Bakar insinuates that they are hardly brothers, leading Adil to discover eventually that he and Ilham are Pok Eng's sons from a different mother, that is, from Mek Yah and not from Bakar's mother, Mek Ani. Ilham's search for Mek Yah's missing grave – supposedly located in burial grounds within the coveted 30 acres of land – leads him to discover that the graves have been surreptitiously relocated by Bakar to make way for his planned project. When Ilham fails to fulfil his original task, the Thais send a new assassin named Deng, who murders Ilham. Adil collapses after he defeats his rival in a final fight to save his mentor's fight club. Through a

shadow play screen, viewers see Pok Eng being assaulted by Bakar in the form of silhouettes.

Generally promoted as an action film, through the plot summary one may discern the film's incorporation of elements from gangster and kickboxing-fight films, thrillers, melodramas and fantasy films. Malaysian critic Jon Chew stated that the film's trailer also 'slightly misleads you to think we're seeing *Ong Bak* in a Malaysian *kampong* setting. Instead, *Bunohan* is, at its heart, a family drama that intertwines competing principles and philosophies about life'.³³⁵ Malaysian columnist/ writer Karim Raslan, stated that: '... *Bunohan* is stunningly fast-paced (with a brutal murder every few minutes or so) – and action-packed – balletic fight scenes that make you wince with every blow'.³³⁶

The film's international critical reception affirmed its successful integration of various genres. Dutch critic Gertjan Zuilhof labelled *Bunohan*: '[a] Malaysian kickboxing and gangster film with the flair of a Sergio Leone Western'.³³⁷ John Anderson of *Variety* observed: '... *Bunohan* serves up a feast of archetypes and violence amid a story that twines like a basketful of cobras to deliver a movie that's ripe as a mango ... it's a fight film with echoes of *King Lear*, and a ghost story about living people who occupy the edge of existence'.³³⁸

³³⁵ Jon Chew (2012, March 7), 'Bunohan: The Review', *Esquire Malaysia*, <http://www.esquire.my/Entertainment/Film/article/Bunohan-the-review>

³³⁶ Karim Raslan (2012, July 24), 'Bunohan Makes a Killing', *The Star*, <http://thestar.com.my/columnists/story.asp?file=/2012/7/24/columnists/ceritalah/11716397&sec=cerialh>

³³⁷ Gertjan Zuilhof (2011), *Bunohan*, <http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/films/bunohan/>

³³⁸ John Anderson (2011, 11 September), 'Bunohan', *Variety*, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117946050/>

In taking into account the hybrid genres and cultures that this film offers, as noted by the critics, I would add that *Bunohan* also presents hybrid dimensionalities of temporality, which help illuminate the contradictions in Malaysia's dialectical modernity.

Mixing Temporalities, Contesting Morality

The opening sequence of the film hints at the coexistence of different temporalities. In a dark night in Kelantan, two elderly characters discuss the funerary ritual they will have to perform the following day on their way to a rustic *kampong* cafe. Viewers also see some TV correspondents arrive from the city to film the ritual. When the two characters enter the cafe, Dain Said's camera gazes voyeuristically into the interior space of the cafe, moving closer to a TV set which is broadcasting an interview with the leading characters of the film, *Bunohan*.

The image on the TV screen cuts to an extreme long shot of bright blue sky above a beach, as the camera slowly tilts downward to reveal the coexistence of different temporalities. Two elderly persons focus on their traditional arts rites in the background. Two urban-looking corporate figures walk along the beach approaching Bakar in the middleground. A small boy, coming from behind, rushes into the scene and, moving towards the camera (in the foreground), falls suddenly to the ground, leaping out of frame for a minute. When the child gets up and jumps back, we see his chest soaked with blood. Leaving the scene in a hurry, the camera slowly pans right to capture a shadow play screen marred by a small tear through which the child runs as he exits the scene.

The scene – which is actually a flash-forward to the story’s end – is repeated at the film’s ending from different points of view. The fracture of cinema’s spatialised time is evident in the film’s opening and ending with the appearance of the shadow play screen and the small TV screen through which viewers see some of the film’s characters. For example, the silhouettes of Pok Eng and Bakar cast on the shadow play screen towards the film’s ending appear somewhat surrealistic as they are obviously larger than the actual image size that fits the screen. Such images heighten the viewers’ perceptions, hinting at the notion that the actual world is a contraction of the virtual. This form of image – or what Deleuze refers to as time-image – is a transcendental analysis of the real as it explores all those virtual planes and differences from which actual worlds are possible.³³⁹ In fact, the natural and supernatural commingle in many scenes in the film as do images from the past and future which disrupt the reality of the present. Examples include the reincarnation of Pok Eng’s dead first wife Mek Yah in the form of a were-crocodile; the talking bird that communicates with Ilham; and, the mysterious little boy who, at times, speaks in Pok Eng’s voice, suggesting to the viewers that he may have died some years earlier and been reincarnated. The coexistence of different temporalities works in tandem with the film’s ambiguous moral stance, a common feature of gangster and crime action films. For Deleuze, this time-image presents a direct image of time which normally aims to depict characters as unable to act in ways that might lead to a result. In other words, good and evil are no longer clear-cut. Therefore, characters no longer

³³⁹ Gilles Deleuze (1989), *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, H. Tomlinson and R. Galeta, trans., London: Athlone, p. 275

know how to act in ways that might lead to a triumph of the good.³⁴⁰ This may explain the director's construction of a seemingly impenetrable world, a milieu which can no longer be judged in terms of the good or evil it holds for the finite self, or – in the words of Malaysian critic Dennis Chua – ‘a no-nonsense tale of good-in-evil and evil-in-good’.³⁴¹ Responding to this representation, Malaysian academic Ana Balqis has questioned the absence of any ‘positive’ religious message in the film in that there is no foregrounding of Islam in its denouement.³⁴²

Ana's commentary, I will suggest, did not take into account the film's configuration of different temporalities. According to Deleuze, this time-image inflicts change upon characters, as it does not feature characters acting to cause change.³⁴³ This means that characters do not act or react immediately to circumstances in which Deleuze regards as the breakdown of the sensory-motor system, as a result of the depiction of ‘out-of-joint’ cinematic time. Having said this, I read this representation and the absence of Islam as being in tandem with the film's critique of Malaysia's contradictory aspects of modernity, including

³⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, pp. 68-97

³⁴¹ Dennis Chua (2012, 18 March), ‘Compelling drama’, *New Straits Times*, <http://www.nst.com.my/compelling-drama-1.62002#>

³⁴² When interviewed by a local daily, Ana Balqis and her colleague Abu Hassan Hasbullah (both academics from the University of Malaya) responded to the film by making some unsound commentaries. They questioned the film as “puzzling, confusing and torturous” to viewers. Ana further commented upon the film's inaccurate depiction of the socio-cultural reality of Kelantan, which seemed in contrast with her own experience and worldview (as a Kelantanese). Wahiduzzaman (2012, March 16), “*Bunohan* Ketepikan Sosio-Budaya dan ‘Berpecah-Belah’ (lit “*Bunohan* Disregards Socio-Culture and is ‘Messy’”), *MStar Online*, http://mstar.com.my/hiburan/cerita.asp?file=%2F2012%2F3%2F16%2Fmstar_hiburan%2F20120315193643&sec=mstar_hiburan.

³⁴³ Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time Image*, pp. 68-97

Islamisation that can be regarded as a new, modern phenomenon. This alludes to the film's foregrounding of more archaic and pre-modern modes of traditional arts that entail spiritual mysticism, magic and traditional healing mostly considered by some today as 'un-Islamic'.

The film reverses moral expectations of the viewers: a schoolteacher like Bakar is no longer considered noble while a hitman like Ilham is no longer considered vicious. This type of film with such cinematic time normally explores, to a great extent, characters' subjective depictions of themselves as caught up in circumstances not only beyond their control, but also devoid of hope.

Much like the humanised gangsters who rise and fall in US action movies, Ilham longs profoundly for acceptance in the straight, official world of his family and *kampong* community even as his work keeps him outside that world. Ilham attempts to act in the name of good when he searches for his mother's missing grave and refuses to kill his brother Adil. Yet, ironically, his turning over a new leaf results in the loss of his ability to act and ultimately in his death at the hands of another assassin. He discovers that the good is not always what he thinks it is, and as a result of this revelation, loses his ability to act. Towards the end, he is murdered by another assassin named Deng from southern Thailand. This blurring helps to provide the film's moral underpinning of the 'rise and fall' narrative characteristic of a gangster film.

The film opens with cross-cut shots of Adil and Ilham in typical masculine activities. Adil is fighting in a boxing match in Thailand; Ilham is receiving an 'inner spirit' massage to revitalise male virility and stamina. Both activities are immediately followed by violence: a group of men invades the boxing ring,

violently disrupting the match, and Ilham proceeds to murder a target after the massage. The male characters' struggle for power and their powerlessness within the larger economic and social forces of their occupations are manifest through the physical display of the male body in both activities. Drawing on the central themes of the boxing narrative, this struggle is representative of enclosed arenas of masculine performance as well as of enactment and reclamation of a ritualistic and idealised form of masculine potency.³⁴⁴ Such themes of struggles and desires can be discerned when Adil succumbs to his own position of powerlessness when he has to flee Thailand. This tendency may be read as 'a resistance to exploitation, a desire for freedom', as envisioned through kick-boxing, massaging or brutal murder.³⁴⁵ It represents part of the film's working through 'the loss of male power' elucidated by images of 'the powerful male body as an object of desire and identification'.³⁴⁶

In the boxing scene, this struggle for power by powerless men is reinforced by the disorienting movement of the camera and editing style that continually cuts movement and impedes continuity. In this respect, the camerawork robs the viewer of a stable point of view: as in the horror films discussed in the previous chapter, it invites her/him to adopt a camera consciousness that is both subjective and objective. By undermining a stable human subjectivity in favour of a decentred cinematic perception, the aesthetic

³⁴⁴ I borrow the point regarding boxing from Frank Krutnik's discussion of the Hollywood film *Raging Bull*. See Frank Krutnik (1991), *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*, London: Routledge, p. 90

³⁴⁵ Pam Cook (2005), 'Masculinity in Crisis? Tragedy and Identification in *Raging Bull*', *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, London: Routledge, p. 176

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 177

style connects with an understanding of life and individuality as a series of connections and relative speeds. Such an aesthetic approach resonates with Deleuze's notion of 'perception-image', which is antithetical to an ego-centred identity because it engenders a camera consciousness that accommodates multiple perspectives at the same time, similar to the murder scenes in *Susuk* (analysed in the previous chapter).³⁴⁷ This disposition, which is non-judgemental and exists beyond good and evil, helps to convey the notion of the masculine character Adil's simultaneous struggle for power and powerlessness.

In the film, masculine authority is performed not only through physical display and force as exemplified by Adil and Ilham, but also through less overt desires to play the 'father figure' as exemplified by Bakar who embodies the state-created 'new Malay man'. Possessing the capitalist markers of manhood such as wealth, greed, power and status, he is always depicted as an Americanised, clean-cut 'yuppie', or, in the words of *Variety* critic John Anderson: "...[He] constantly has ... a polo shirt tucked into his Dockers". Bakar's desire for patriarchal power can be discerned when he tries to overrule his ailing father's decision regarding the selling of their ancestral land. His power in the family is based on the performance of the role of a dutiful son who returns home to take care of his ailing father. Bakar's enactment of this 'father figure' role foreshadows his gradual replacement of his ill father Pok Eng.

³⁴⁷ The cinematic consciousness that emerges from this dynamic is very different from the transcendental subject of the cinematic apparatus, which is always the same and is predicated on one type of perception. In this respect, a cinematic consciousness that accommodates multiple perspectives at the same time challenges binary thinking. See Gilles Deleuze (1986), *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, p. 76

Metaphorically, Bakar is replacing his own father – a fact noted by several critics including Karim Raslan – as a *dalang*, a manipulator of the puppets, usurping his father’s authority as he designates events and initiates tragedy in his rapacious quest to seize their ancestral land.³⁴⁸ All this being the case, the film’s depiction of Bakar offers a critique of the aforementioned ‘New Malay man’ in the sense that the ideal image of this category also considers, in line with the country’s Islamisation, an individual’s moral dimensions.

Where Do Broken Hearts Go?

The film’s destabilisation of masculinity is also conveyed through its mediation of the female as a peripheral figure. In this respect, the film incorporates the mother character, reminiscent of Malay folktales that foreground the mother-figure archetype in the form of a dead mother who returns as a guardian spirit. In Malay folk belief, ‘were-crocodiles’ like Mek Yah are seen as a form of *penunggu* or *keramat* (guardian spirits) steeped in animism and religious mysticism.³⁴⁹

There is a scene immediately after Ilham is brutally murdered in which the supernatural Mek Yah appears to meet Pok Eng, who we believe is already dead and has been reincarnated as a little boy. Infused with *semangat* (spirit or vital energy), Mek Yah urges Pok Eng to follow her and regales him with tales of her indestructible endurance and immortality. She plaintively tells him of her intention to help heal this catastrophic land, saying: ‘... Healing needs time. And

³⁴⁸ Karim Raslan, ‘*Bunohan* Makes a Killing’, <http://thestar.com.my/columnists/story.asp?file=/2012/7/24/columnists/ceritalah/11716397&sec=ceritalah>

³⁴⁹ For further discussion about *penunggu* and *keramat* as forms of guardian spirits, see Mohd Taib Osman (1989), *Malay Folk Beliefs*, pp. 116-151

time needs healing, too ...' Her lines gesture toward a need to relive the past by returning to spiritual, mythic heterogeneous time (perhaps of ancient matriarchy?), given that the notion of modern homogeneous time – and its particular articulations of patriarchy – has only precipitated chaos and destruction. Mek Yah's return pulls away from the notion of chronologically ordered, separate times and tends towards a plural understanding of temporal cohabitation and implication.³⁵⁰ I read Mek Yah's ghostly return as a form of reconciliation, a restoring of equilibrium and order to the universe. We deduce from the lines she delivers to her husband that the destructive power of the masculine is in dire need of being tamed and domesticated by the feminine.³⁵¹

The film's concern with hybrid temporalities and cultures echoes its depiction of society living in and at the crossroads of time and place – both the geographical border of Malaysia and Thailand and the temporal border of tradition and modern. Dain Said, in his directorial statement, wrote: 'The modern Malaysian state has long tried to define this place by its borders. But how the communities there see themselves – borders don't mean anything. This swathe of land from the northern fringes of Terengganu, through Kelantan, and across the border to Pattani in southern Thailand is the Malay heartland that defies sovereign boundaries'.³⁵² In a scene shot in the *kampong* cafe, Bakar's helper Jolok says to Deng (from Southern Thailand): 'We're practically brothers. We speak the same

³⁵⁰ Bliss Cua Lim (2009), *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique*, London: Duke University Press, p. 159

³⁵¹ This was implied by director Dain Said in the video, *The Making of Bunohan*, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbIBYOojWyM>

³⁵² Dain Said (2011), 'Director's Statement', <http://www.silversaltpr.com/news-pics/BunohanPresskit.pdf>

language. Only our dialect is slightly different. Today, you are here on this side of the border. Tomorrow, my people will be over there, on your side’.

Symptomatically, these boundary-related notions of space, time and place are also linked with the film’s invocation of Kelantan’s traditional performing arts all of which serve as signifiers of cultural hybridity (some of which were derived from Thailand, Indonesia and India), further contesting the notion of Kelantanese-ness/ Malayness/ Malaysian-ness as fixed, absolute and exclusive boundaries.

As with *Budak Kelantan*, *Bunohan*’s representation of unstable forms of masculinity is also underpinned by the Malaysian cultural mode of melodrama. Critic Daniel Walber noted the film’s melodramatic elements, which, according to him, ‘come through gradually, as these men pick up unexpected information about their family’s past. Their relationships complicate and their memories seem to intertwine, bringing us the occasional dreamlike flashback of Ilham’s mother, now having moved on into a spiritual afterlife.’³⁵³ When Mek Yah confronts Pok Eng, raising the issue of polygamy, one can detect an undercurrent of *rajuk*, the form of sulking that characterises so many female characters in Malay cinema and culture. Here, *rajuk* does not simply mean sullen or sulky, but connotes a more serious disposition: ‘to grieve in silence’.³⁵⁴ Mek Yah returns to redress a past grievance attributable to her husband’s infidelity. She admits that she left Pok Eng when he married another woman, Mek Ani, because she could predict the fate that was to befall her family. It is here that *Bunohan* draws on melodrama.

³⁵³ Daniel Walber (2011), *Bunohan* Balances Mystical Spirituality and Gritty Violence in an Enigmatic Borderland’, http://www.blogs.indiewire.com/spout/bunohan_review

³⁵⁴ Muhammad Haji Salleh (2011, December), ‘In Search of Literary Love in Malay Literature: The Early Stages of Relationship’, *Asiatic*, 5(2), 37

The film oscillates between scenes of melancholic sadness and longing and those scenes of physical action and violence. Its male characters, including Adil and Ilham, are depicted as physical and emotional victims due to being deprived of familial, and especially, paternal love. Take, for example, Adil's fragile feelings which stand in direct contrast to his rugged physicality and machismo penchant for kickboxing. The display of graphic violence and physical action may be read as 'a special form of displaced, external expression of inner suffering'.³⁵⁵ Dain Said's construction of masculinity is to a certain extent similar to that of *Budak Kelantan* in the sense that external violence and inner feeling do not represent an antithesis, but are always implicated with each other. The film's melodramatic mode corresponds to its temporal expression, evident in Adil's *rajuk*, which helps destabilise his masculine subjectivity. This is evident in the scene wherein Adil refuses his father's offer to talk to him because his father and his stepmother Mek Ani have neglected him since he was small. He says to his father: 'I know all about time. Whether I live or die it's decided in 3 minutes ... Nobody can force 23 years into 3 minutes'.

The characters' melancholic longing and grief are expressed through formal elements such as the *mise-en-scène*. In one scene, after Pok Wah reveals to Adil that his biological mother is Mek Yah, not Mek Ani, Adil is captured in a medium close-up shot, moaning and weeping bitterly. He is seated in a moving boat that rocks gently against a backdrop of a moody, cloudy sky. The scene cuts to an extreme long shot that shows his boat floundering in the middle of the river

³⁵⁵ Lisa Coulthard (1999), 'The Open Wound and the World's End in John Woo's *Face/Off*'. In Murray Pomerance and John Sakeris (eds), *Bang, Bang, Shoot, Shoot: Essays on Guns and Popular Culture*. Needham Heights, MA: Simon and Schuster, p. 17

against a similar backdrop of sky. Recurring shots of dusky, muddy mangrove swamps, and seemingly barren, deserted beaches scattered with leafless trees and gravestones, further endow the film with elegiac yet haunting tones.

At the same time, the film is steeped in a wider cosmology of belief, affirming most of the characters as loyal and sensitive inhabitants of nature.³⁵⁶ In the scene wherein Adil's friend Muski expresses his curiosity over Adil's quick recovery from physical pain, Pok Wah tells him that he resorts to traditional healing and medicine. He further asserts: 'It's not easy to find these things anymore because mankind is bent on destroying nature'. This resonates with the film's foregrounding of the issue of land ownership or preservation as crucial to defining the essence of 'Malayness'. The film depicts the land, along with the *kampong*, as a purportedly nostalgic and virtuous space in which the country's traditions remain. It is here that the film asserts its strident critique of Malaysia's modernity as leading to the loss of the traditional. This echoes the film's final image featuring a notice board that reads: 'Proposed Development for Marina and Resort Complex of 200 Chalets and Golf Course'.

³⁵⁶ This tendency parallels those of many Malay literary texts and genres in which elements of *duka-nestapa* seem to be omnipresent in the jungles, villages and also in the palaces. The emphasis on healing (particularly towards the end) is reminiscent of the literary texts, which hardly evoke, according to Muhammad Haji Salleh, "a Greek catharsis but a deep *nestapa* that brings along an insight into human existence. As conclusions end with positive episodes, the dark tales are enlightened with therapy and consolation" (p. 198). For further discussion, see Muhammad Haji Salleh (2008), *The Poetics of Malay Literature*, Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

Conclusion

As I hope the above analyses have shown, *Budak Kelantan* and *Bunohan* destabilise dominant notions of masculinity through rich and ambivalent representations of men in the contemporary action genre.

In *Budak Kelantan*, director Wan Azli offers the seemingly binary forms of morality in exposing two differing types of masculinity: one endowed with religio-moral rectitude and the other shaped by the corrupting and brutal urban milieu. Among other strategies, the film's deployment of the cultural mode of melodrama reveals the masculine figure in crisis and reverses the binary pattern of 'male as aggressor' and 'female as victim'. As well, the film's representation of religion through its foregrounding of a more humanist and inclusive form of Islam, contributes to the instabilities of masculine subjectivities, particularly those bound up with questions of morality.

In *Bunohan*, director Dain Said inventively utilises an amalgam of genres from fight-kickboxing films to fantastic films in order to complicate reified categories of masculinity such as 'Old Malay man' (traditional patriarchy, *kampong*, physical performativity) and 'New Malay man' (urban capitalism). In the process, the director employs the cultural mode of melodrama when drawing some parallelism between physical pain (through violence) and emotional suffering (through familial disintegration).

In their critique of modernity and representation of marginalised working-class youth masculinities, both films utilise and invoke Kelantan's traditional art forms. *Budak Kelantan* deploys *dikir barat* as a stylistic element to accentuate moments of masculine emotional anxiety and nostalgic desire for traditional

kampong life. *Bunohan* intricately interweaves Kelantan's traditional art forms with traditional magic and healing and mystical folklore, resulting in the film's fracturing of the normalised cinematic timeline. In this respect, both films induce a nostalgia longing for a place that has been lost due to migration from the country to the city.

From these analyses, I have demonstrated the ways in which genres affirm gendered identities, at the same time mobilising identifications and desires that undermine the stability of such categories. In response to anxieties assailed by modernity, such masculine instabilities are mediated through the peripheral female characters. In *Bunohan*, the peripheral female attempts to recuperate troubled masculinity through magic and healing. In *Budak Kelantan*, the feminised male character attempts to recover destructive forms of masculinity through religious modes that emphasise love, humanity and sacrifice. Ultimately, both films, through their representations of troubled and anxious masculinities (and the women onto which they are projected or who are forced to mediate them) reflect on and critique the reified gender binaries born of Malaysia's Islamisation, Western modernity and linear, homogeneous time.

CHAPTER FIVE

Homage to the Old or Lamprooning the Contemporary? *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* and *Sell Out!*

Nonsense! There can't be any demons in this era of radio.
– Saleh Mat Piah (*Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*)

That's the beauty of reality shows. It's hard to tell where the reality ends and the fiction begins.
– Rafflesia Pong (*Sell Out!*)

Introduction

Following the focus on masculinities, this chapter continues to look at representations of men in two comedies, *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* ('When the Full Moon Rises', 2008, Mamat Khalid) and *Sell Out!* (2008, Yeo Joon Han). In the action films of the previous chapter, female and feminised figures who signify virtue and tradition recuperate 'authentic masculinities' while in these films, women who signify modernity and upward mobility destabilise softer masculinities.

The director of *Kala Malam*, Mamat Khalid, is a well-known Malaysian filmmaker who specialises in comedy, particularly parody satires. His previous films, *Zombie Kampung Pisang* ('Zombie from Banana Village', 2007) and *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah* ('Kak Limah's Ghost Returns Home', 2010), which achieved enormous commercial success, poke fun at Malaysian society's entrenched beliefs in superstition and the supernatural. *Kala Malam* is a black-and-white comedic parody set in 1956 British Malaya at the eve of the country's

independence. Made in the formulaic style of American film noir, it pays homage to old Malay cinematic genres, particularly horror and melodrama. A disillusioned journalist, who has recently lost his job, has a minor accident and becomes stranded in a small town where he encounters a series of mysterious events and fascinating individuals. The journalist also hears a spate of rumours about the disappearance of men and mythical ghosts terrorising the town every full moon. *Kala Malam* won Mamat the Best Director and Best Film awards at the 2008 Malaysian Film Festival and to date remains his most acclaimed work. The same year, the film was invited to the Udine Far East Film Festival in Italy, putting the director on the international map. Since then, *Kala Malam* has been screened at a host of small-scale film festivals from New York to South Korea.

Also in 2008, *Sell Out!*, an English-language musical-comedy, won the ‘Young Cinema Award for Alternative Vision’ at the Venice International Film Festival and the NETPAC Award at the Taipei Golden Horse Film Festival. It had limited commercial release in Canada in 2010 and has been screened at more than twenty film festivals around the world. *Sell Out!* depicts a disillusioned executive whose creative, dreamer self is exorcised at the order of his corporate bosses – and comes to coexist uncannily with – his pragmatic self. His crush object, a TV hostess who works at the same company, hosts a new reality program that interviews individuals on their deathbeds. *Sell Out!* mocks conventions of the American musical genre while satirising aspects of Malaysia’s capitalist modernity, exemplified by corporate and media greed, crass commercialism and reality TV. *Sell Out!* is Yeo Joon Han’s feature debut. Prior to this, Yeo directed a

short film titled *Adults Only* (2006), which won a prize at the coveted Venice Film Festival.

In this chapter, I argue that both films employ parody and satire to reiterate, ridicule and hybridise a number of genres and to articulate ideological critiques of gender, ethnicity, class and nation. In particular, the films foreground representations of middle-class, professional masculinity that reflect cultural anxieties toward independent, modern women. I will position these representations within the larger trope of temporality in these films. I will show how director Mamat Khalid parodies American and Malay genres in *Kala Malam* to critique normative notions of gender, ethnicity and class. Mamat reflects and critiques the present through the lens of the nation's past in his nostalgic spoof of transnational film noir. This approach resuscitates the trope of anxiety characteristic of noir to address multiple contemporary cultural anxieties, ranging from the repression of superstitious beliefs to concerns about the national language.

In the case of *Sell Out!*, I consider the ways in which director Yeo spoofs the American musical genre and Malaysian independent cinema to satirise contemporary Malaysian society. I suggest that the director's playfully parodic tactic and bitingly satiric approach are mediated through the film's highlighting of kitsch as exemplified in reality TV and karaoke. I finally read this strategy of blurring the boundaries of reality and fantasy as a strident critique of the progressivist ethos of the materialist nation-state. In the next section, I lay the groundwork for my readings by looking at how the comedy genre can perform ideological critique.

Screening the Nation through Parody and Satire

As a number of theorists and scholars have noted, the notions of parody and satire often are used loosely, as if they were interchangeable, a tendency that can engender some confusion. The conventional distinction between parody and satire is that parody is a formalist spoof of textual rules whereas satire is a politically-directed critique of social conventions. However, in keeping with my examination of genre in contemporary Malaysian films, I would like to show that parody and satire are not always separate: a genre's formal-aesthetic elements can and often does correspond with the the ideological critiques it articulates.

Both Geoff King and Dan Harries claim that film parody is a specific type of comedy – a humorous take off of a more serious film or genre, poking fun at its stylistic conventions, narrative formulas or recurring motifs.³⁵⁷ Meanwhile, satire, as Steve Neale and Andrew S. Horton have noted, is central to any discussion of comedy's socio-cultural significance as it debunks prevailing social norms, institutions and mores.³⁵⁸ Neale adds that comedy is often viewed as either actually or potentially subversive, or at least as an inherently positive force for social renewal and social change. By formally mocking specific genres, parody debunks and undermines familiar generic conventions in a manner that could have potential socio-political implications.

In reading cinematic texts through generic tactics of both parody and satire that challenge the wider social project of temporal rationalisation (in particular,

³⁵⁷ Geoff King (2002), *Film Comedy*. London: Wallflower; Dan Harries (2000). *Film Parody*. London: British Film Institute.

³⁵⁸ Steve Neale (2000), *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge; Andrew S. Horton (1991). *Comedy/ Cinema/ Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

the ‘developmentalist’ model of modernisation in Malaysia), I would like to draw attention to Homi Bhabha’s notion of double temporality, which exists within the discursive space of the nation. Bhabha extends Benedict Anderson’s formulation of ‘nation time’ by drawing attention to a continuing negotiation between the ‘pedagogical’ call to ‘the people’ or ‘the nation’ and the ‘performative’ that obtains in cultural and literary narratives where more slippery or even shadowy figures of ‘the nation’ and ‘the people’ emerge.³⁵⁹ In conceptualising this tension, Bhabha writes: ‘In the production of the nation as narration there is a split between the continuist, accumulative temporality of the pedagogical, and the repetitious, recursive strategy of the performative. It is through this process of splitting that the conceptual ambivalence of modern society becomes the site of *writing the nation*.’³⁶⁰

We can think of the pedagogical as the seamless abstract form of the national subject and the performative as representing his or her discrete and concrete parts. As Khoo Gaik Cheng puts it, ‘[t]he pedagogical can never reflect the entirety of the subject as s/he is, but can only ever be a misrecognition of the self as whole or complete’.³⁶¹ In other words, the pedagogical stands for the ideological meaning of nation whereas the performative refers to the practical

³⁵⁹ In Benedict Anderson’s work *Imagined Communities* he suggests that national consciousness is predicated on the affinity people feel imaginatively as they read simultaneously print sources like the newspaper. Thus, a sense of community is engendered within the time-space framing of ‘calendrical time and a familiar landscape’. See Anderson (1991), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, London: Verso, p. 32

³⁶⁰ Homi Bhabha (1994), ‘DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, pp. 145-146

³⁶¹ Khoo Gaik Cheng, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 57

‘perplexity of living’.³⁶² This pedagogical/ performative conceptualisation bears a certain resemblance with notions of authority-defined social reality and everyday-defined social reality that I invoked in the Introduction.

In the context of contemporary Malaysian cinema, splits between the performative and the pedagogical have emerged in independent digital films, which are considered to be more critical of the nation-state and its dominant ideologies than mainstream or popular media. This is due to the fact that the pedagogical – in Bhabha’s terms – holds sway in many mainstream films, i.e., commercially-viable, genre films. However, in this chapter, I want to demonstrate that both *Kala Malam* and *Sell Out!* complicate the dichotomy of art-house cinema as inherently critical of dominant culture and popular cinema as always maintaining the status-quo. In the words of Bhabha, both films open up ‘supplementary space of cultural signification that ... holds together the performative and the pedagogical’.³⁶³

Of all the genres comedy best captures the ‘conceptual ambivalence of modern society’ due to its fluid, ‘cunning’ and transgressive play with elements which violates conventional notions of realism. Some instances of the comic, as Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik put it, ‘are founded on the transgression of decorum and verisimilitude: on deviations from any social or aesthetic rule, norm, model, convention or law’.³⁶⁴ Parody’s ‘performative’ function, for example, can

³⁶² Homi Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, p. 307

³⁶³ ³⁶³ Homi Bhabha, ‘DissemiNation: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation’, p. 305

³⁶⁴ Steve Neale and Frank Krutnik (1990), *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. London: Routledge, p. 86

be seen in the context of such transgression. Its meta-commentary on genre through a process of re-contextualisation operates on its similarity and difference from the target text, continually negotiating between the pedagogical and performative registers. This parodic strategy is a form of comedy that widens the scope for social and political criticism. For example, one may ask how a specific form of generic spoofing contributes to the destabilisation of gender subjectivity, which may further reflect unstable notions of nationhood.

In *Kala Malam*, the director draws on the hard-boiled hero of film noir whose masculinity is put in crisis. As a parody, the film mocks his hard-boiled masculinity by feminising him, most comically and horrifically perhaps when he is raped by a woman – a scene I will discuss in more detail later. Since the official discourse of the modernising Malaysian nation-state and history has been gendered primarily as masculine, the film's depiction of the protagonist's troubled masculinity reflects the troubled nation about to be born from pre-independent Malaysia.

Kala Malam's obsession with the past, evident in its homage to old Malay cinema in its period set design, music and other visual and visceral elements, allows us to reflect upon and interrogate the present through the nostalgic filter of the past. As in the case of a number of films made in a highly nostalgic mode, the past represented in the film serves as a site for a complex imaginative encounter, combining fantasy, affect and critical judgement, to which the knowledge that the film can never be retrieved is essential.³⁶⁵ This is because films that focus on

³⁶⁵ I am borrowing this point from Pam Cook (2005), *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, London: Routledge, pp. 11-12

nostalgic memory allow the slippage between past and present to be addressed consciously much like memory itself which reorders the past from the perspective of the present. In the process of reflection, the past is explored, mourned and mocked, enabling characters and viewers to come to terms with the present and look toward the future. Focusing on temporality in a film like *Kala Malam* reveals the narrative richness of comedy for the interrogation of memory and history.

Both *Kala Malam* and *Sell Out!* foreground the male hero's struggle against different forms of authority: in *Kala Malam*, this is the press company which represents colonial power, and in *Sell Out!*, it is a multinational media conglomerate which represents global modernity. In the Malaysian context, these bodies are directly linked to the state, which has actively supported the economic development of the nation for the benefit of its colonisers in the past and the global elite in the present. By defying these forms of official power, the male protagonists also defy the dominant modes of masculinity obedient to the state that they are expected to embody.

In *Kala Malam*, the journalist protagonist is a colonial subject who is required to perform forms of masculinity that emphasise loyalty to the colonial system. Similarly, in *Sell Out!*, the executive protagonist must follow the rules of the capitalist corporation that require him to adhere to certain ethos that emphasise upward mobility, progress and entrepreneurship. However, his mixed-race identity as Eurasian complicates this expectation by embodying the coexistence of the East and the West in Malaysia.

This split racial and cultural identity finds further resonance in the film when Eric literally splits into two personalities: one personality emphasises his practical side, as desired by his employer in the pursuit of profits; the other emphasises his undesired creative, idealistic side. The uncanny commingling of these selves fractures the chronology of the calendrical timeframe of nationalism, which grounds nation-consciousness. This is due to the character's refusal to comply with the multinational media conglomerate for which he works, which aligns with the rise of global finance capitalism as the dominant mode of profit-generation encouraged by the Malaysian state. In its construction of a literally dualistic Eric and its playful reworking of musical film conventions, *Sell Out!* straddles the pedagogical and the performative aspects of the nation.

Horton argues that comedy does not assume the safe transmission of an ideological message, even when it is explicitly articulated: 'A political viewpoint is always ambiguous or double-edged. What seems a radical leftist comedy to one generation may seem conservative and double-edged to another'.³⁶⁶ This applies to the humour of *Kala Malam* and *Sell Out!* which presents the double possibility of the comic as conservative or subversive or even both at once, depending on how the texts are read and interpreted.

***Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* – Noir Parody? Homage to Old Cinema?**

Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang begins with Saleh Mat Piah, a disillusioned journalist in 1956 British Malaya (pre-independent Malaysia) narrating events from his past that led him to make a crucial decision in his life. The story

³⁶⁶ Andrew S. Horton (1991), *Comedy/ Cinema/ Theory*, p. 16

transports viewers back to a time when Saleh, through his voiceover, mentions that he has lost his job due to his desire to maintain his personal integrity. In a minor car accident one of his tyres is punctured by a *keris* (a traditional Malay dagger), which is jutting out of the surface of the road held by a half buried skeleton. After this strange accident, Saleh finds himself stranded in a small town called Senduduk Rimbun, with corrupt and paranoid locals.

He takes the *keris* and ventures into town where he meets a number of mysterious characters. Among them are Jongkidin, the town mechanic, who is supposed to repair his car, and Cik Puteh, Jongkidin's beautiful sister, who Saleh attempts to pursue. He also encounters Doreen Chua, a sassy Chinese woman who owns the night club Jubilee Park; Mahindar Singh, a Sikh secret-agent working for the British government; Miss Rogayah, a sultry night club singer; and Dr Rushdi, a history professor. Everyone advises him to leave because a *jembalang* (demon) is terrorising the town and abducting its men during the full moon. Miss Rogayah attempts to seduce Saleh and almost succeeds, but her plan is thwarted by her domineering parents who appear whenever she and Saleh are together. In the meantime, Saleh pursues Cik Puteh, and they form a relationship.

Everyone Saleh meets is interested in the *keris* he took from the site of the car accident. With the help of the professor, he learns that it belonged to a female shaman who was burnt to death in 1939 by her male rival, who was envious of the *sakti* (occult power) endowed by the *keris*. Before she was burnt, the shaman cursed her rival, who, after plundering the *keris* from her, was swallowed by the earth. The female shaman also placed a curse on the denizens of Senduduk Rimbun, ensuring that they would face vicious consequences every full moon. In

a terrific showdown that forms the climax of the film, Saleh confronts Jongkidin and Cik Puteh as they transform into a were-tiger and a *Pontianak* respectively, while at the same time learning that they are descendents of the female shaman. Jongkidin tries to separate Cik Puteh from her lover Saleh and she proceeds to kill her were-tiger brother. Saleh continues his relationship with Cik Puteh, despite her supernatural status.

The generic hybridity of this film is highlighted humorously in its official poster which declares: '*Komidi!!! Misteri ...?? Cinta. Seram!! Sebuah Filem Mamat Khalid*' (lit. 'Comedy!!! Mystery ...?? Romance. Horror!! A Film by Mamat Khalid'). Critical response to *Kala Malam* also focused on the film's play with genres. In his unfavourable review, critic S.B. Toh refuted the director's own labelling of the film as 'neo-noir': 'While *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* is indeed, as the director says, a tribute to 1950s moviemaking, it is not 'neo-noir', as he would have it.'³⁶⁷ A. Wahab Hamzah of the Malay-language daily *Utusan Malaysia* examined the film's noir elements from the perspective of the basic noir canon, exemplified by the Hollywood noir films of the 1940s and 1950s.³⁶⁸ Wahab highlighted, among other things, the film's designation of several *femme fatale* characters.

Variety critic Derek Elley, who described the film as a "Malaysian spoof noir-cum-horror pic", noted that '... with its moody, black-and-white lensing and

³⁶⁷ S. B. Toh (2008, January 19), 'Noir-stalgia' [Review of the film *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*]. *The Star*, <http://star-central.com/movies/reviews/review.asp?file=archives/moviereviews/2008/1/1>

³⁶⁸ A. Wahab Hamzah (2008, January 15), 'Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang Menggoda dan Berbahaya' (*Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang Seductive and Dangerous*) [Review of the film *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*]. *Utusan Malaysia*, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2008&dt=0115&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec...

natural feel for genre elements, this left-field outing by maverick writer-director Mohamad Mohd Khalid has curio value, coming from a country still best known for over-artsy fest fare'.³⁶⁹ Paolo Bertolin, who reviewed the film when it premiered at the Udine Far East Film Festival in Italy, likewise observed the film's generic hybridity as follows: 'A luxury coherently bestowed [on] an enchanting pastiche of classic film noir with elements from musical, horror and melodrama by means of cinephile finesse and mad weirdness'.³⁷⁰ These comments indicate that local and international critics read *Kala Malam* as a parody that incorporates elements of noir and horror. I will show the ways in which the film in fact functions as a parody of film noir to satirise dominant notions of gender, along ethnic, class and national lines.

Let us first take a look at the most salient aspect of noir that the film exhibits, that is, narrative and formal conventions. The storyline employs flashback and first-person voiceover narration as a structuring device. From the beginning, *Kala Malam* employs the restricted mode of narration that relies upon the protagonist Saleh as a source of knowledge, a character, who, through his inner thought, propels the narrative forward. As in most American film noir classics, the voice-over works as a dominant structuring device, a narrational ploy to pre-empt certain character relationships, keeping the viewer informed – or misinformed – regarding Saleh's actions and reactions, and providing the text with a particular audio-visual rhythm. The film's opening scene features Saleh

³⁶⁹ Derek Elley (2008, August 25), 'When the Full Moon Rises.' *Variety.com*, <http://stage.variety.com/review/VE1117938068.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>

³⁷⁰ Paolo Bertolin (2008), *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*, <http://www.fareastfilm.com/easyne2/LYT.aspx?Code=FEFJ&IDLYT=7505&ST=SQL...>

narrating to the viewer that he has to make a crucial decision in life: he is captured in a ‘Dutch-tilt’ shot that evokes his sense of irresolution and anxiety while the viewer hears someone banging on the locked door in the background. The intense lighting – with its pronounced shadows – partially obscures Saleh’s face, further generating mystery. The viewer is left missing crucial information about the decision and its broader narrative context when the scene cuts to the film’s opening credit titles.

Reclaiming ‘Lost’ Masculinity

In one particularly unusual scene, director Mamat parodically mocks the noir conventions that accentuate low-key lighting while satirising normative sexual dynamics. The scene, which shows Saleh being seduced by an overweight Chinese masseuse in his hotel room, entails elements of exaggeration that engender the scene’s comic frisson. At one point, viewers see only the ‘noir-ish’ silhouetted image of Saleh cast on the hotel room wall: his body is uproariously carried, upraised and turned around several times by the masseuse. This image caricaturises his body and, by extension, his masculinity, which is further diminished through the carnivalesque and grotesque contortion of Saleh’s shadow. When he is about to be ravished by the masseuse, who is a disruptive and comically unruly character, Saleh expresses a more ‘feminine’ demeanour, screaming, contorting his face in terror, and placing his finger tip on his lips. The masseuse throws him onto the bed then brutally plonks herself onto his body, making the wooden bed shake violently. In the context of the putative provenance of noir’s visual style, the intended effect – to cast sharp shadows and darkness to

convey images of the mysterious and the unknown – is extended in this scene to the point of ludicrousness and heightened absurdity.

In the above scene, the conventions of film noir are parodied not only to highlight Saleh's troubled masculinity, but also to reverse the characters' sexual roles, thereby blurring the gender binary oppositions in American film noir. The *femme fatale*, the Chinese masseuse who ostensibly rapes Saleh, is designated as overweight, grotesque and hypersexual whereas Saleh – the 'hero' – is depicted as physically weak and inferior (in the following scene, Saleh confesses – in his voice-over – that he lost his 27-year-old virginity to this brutish and lascivious woman). In this respect, director Mamat ridicules the representation of a masculine, troubled noir hero, who masquerades as tough and hardboiled. However, Mamat's parodic strategy in conjunction with his aesthetic style which is characterised by constantly shifting camera angles and an amalgam of sound effects, allows for a fluid gendered identification on the part of the viewers.

For example, before Saleh is seduced by the masseuse, his contorted body, as it is raised up and swung around, can only be witnessed in the form of silhouetted images cast on the wall. After the woman plonks herself onto his body, Mamat's camera moves aside to capture only Saleh's hand plucking the wooden bedpost of the shaking bed, then hitting her. Immediately afterwards, the scene cuts to a close-up of the cracking of the bed leg which eventually breaks. While all of this is being shown, the viewer hears the cracking and Saleh's frantic scream against the strains of lively jazz music.³⁷¹ Due to the variety of styles

³⁷¹ Jazz is always used in films to signify chaos, moral confusion and narrative uncertainty. For example, *Touch of Evil* (1958) and *The Conversation* (1974). Even old Malay noir-thriller *Dr Rushdi* (1970) employed jazz as its soundtrack. Kathryn Kalinak discusses the association of jazz

adopted, the viewer's identification with Saleh becomes more provisional. Binary oppositions such as masculine/feminine, active/passive, sadistic/masochistic and objective/subjective become blurred and the dominant hierarchy of heterosexual gender roles and sexual relations is lampooned and overturned.

Many scholars and critics see noir as dramatising a particular crisis in male identity, often emphasising the extent to which female characters can be viewed as signifiers of male dilemmas and anxieties.³⁷² Saleh's confrontation with the above parody of a *femme fatale* can be read as a symptom of broad anxieties about Malaysian male sexuality at the middle of the twentieth century. Doreen Chua, another *femme fatale* functions not only as a signifier of dilemmas around Malay masculinity, but also around ethnic differences and tensions. Since the story is set in 1956, a year before the country's independence, the fictional small town of Senduduk Rimbun reflects the ramifications of colonial urban planning, which underpin the country's racial polarisation and ethnic divisions. Such a depiction further perpetuates ethnic stereotypes such as the role of Chinese characters as business owners exemplified by Doreen Chua. In one scene, Doreen tells Saleh that she represents the town's Chinese Businessman's Association. In this sense, *Kala Malam* draws connections between its comic fictional antics and the events

with the depiction of female desire in a phallogentric cinema of Hollywood as illicit and transgressive; whereas jazz critic Gary Giddens notes that jazz originally had meanings that were sexual in character, and, by the late 1950s, jazz clearly came to signify a vague sense of 'sleaziness'. See Kathryn Kalinak (1992), *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*, Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, p. 167; Gary Giddens (1977, 31 October), 'Jazz is back of films too', *Village Voice*, 53

³⁷² Steve Neale (2000), *Genre and Hollywood*, p. 174

of the historical epoch in which it is set: the politically unstable years from 1941 to 1957.³⁷³

Saleh's ethno-cultural anxiety is reflected in several scenes that depict multilingualism. For example, when he converses with Doreen Chua in the nightclub, she alternates between using Malay and Mandarin (particularly when her ethnic Chinese assistant is present, leaving Saleh feeling baffled). In effect, her attitude towards the Malay language is ambiguous; in one scene, she criticises Mahinder Singh's inappropriate usage of a Malay proverb, a satirical tactic that should be read as irony. This being the case, director Mamat pokes fun at certain segments of Malaysia's polyglot society, especially the country's ethnic minorities.

Along with language, visual cues also portray Doreen Chua as a potentially threatening ethnic other. Therefore, in visualising such anxiety, the film's production design accentuates tacit noir-ish elements. Noir iconography invades the *mise-en-scène*: images of cigarette smoke that swirl in – and waft through – the dimly lit nightclub lounge function as ubiquitous markers of anxiety. In many scenes that take place in the lounge, the use of high contrast lighting appears dramatic, richly textured and aggressively theatrical, infusing the interaction among characters (Saleh and Doreen Chua) with a sense of visual tension.

The film's noir tropes of anxiety and paranoia are invoked satirically through the contentious issue of language in the dichotomous context of every

³⁷³ Khoo Kay Kim (2008), 'The Road to Nationhood and Nation Building', *Out of the Tempurung: Critical Essays on Malaysian Society*. Sydney: East West Publishing, pp. 26-61

day-defined versus authority-defined social reality. For example, in one scene, an underground Communist leader delivers a speech and urges that the German language be used to unite or integrate the multiracial groups in the country once they come to power. This may cynically hint at the contentious (seemingly contemporary) language issue, particularly the tension between upholding Malay as a national language and emphasising English as an international language. The Communist leader further insists that the Malay, Chinese and Indian languages will not be used; only German can unite peoples with diverse cultures and backgrounds. The scene satirises certain segments of society – whether authorities, politicians, organisations or individuals in Malaysia – who continually insist on the use of English as a language to unite the diverse groups that constitute Malaysia’s multi-cultural society. The lines subtly critique some Malaysians’ fascination with the English language (once considered a colonial language) at the expense of Malay, the national language. As a parody-satire, the use of German – rather than English – insulates the viewers from having to address directly those contemporary issues around language and power. In other words, any serious implications are substantially reduced by the assurance that, as comedy, the film is ultimately ‘just kidding’, even when it does contain more dramatic undertones.

Saleh’s troubled masculinity is reflected in the cultural anxiety he experiences as someone torn between the old traditions and emerging Western modernity. In one scene, through his voice-over he audibly sniffs at Malays who consume alcohol in the nightclub, seeing it as symptomatic of ‘Western decadence’. He says: ‘*Lihat, orang Melayu kalau minum arak, buruk*

perangainya' (lit. 'Look, Malays behave so ugly when they drink alcohol', author's translation). In another scene, he asks Miss Rogayah: '*Mengarut! Mana ada jembalang di zaman radio ini*' (lit. 'Nonsense! There can't be any demons in this era of radio', author's translation). Saleh's cultural anxieties are mediated through both women: in contrast to Cik Puteh who represents traditionalism, Miss Rogayah embodies emerging colonial-influenced, Western modernity. This is accentuated by her being addressed as 'Miss', not 'Cik'. In one of the scenes in the nightclub, Miss Rogayah is seen sensuously singing a modern, jazzy Malay song, wearing a tight outfit and attempting to grab Saleh's attention. The staging of the scene is reminiscent of some old noir-style Malay films such as *Sumpitan Rachun* and *Dr. Rushdi*, which featured musical sequences in nightclubs that functioned as signifiers of modernity. In line with Hollywood noir classics, the jazz song she performs connotes qualities such as 'sophistication, urban culture, nightlife and decadence'.³⁷⁴ As a *femme fatale*, Miss Rogayah reflects the encroachment of foreign influences in the country, represented by the British colonial power and the underground Communist movement. In other words, she epitomises the country's emerging, ambivalent modernity.

In one scene Saleh attempts to resist Miss Rogayah while they are engaged in an intimate conversation and she begins to arouse him. Saleh almost succumbs to her sexual overtures, and they are on the verge of becoming intimate when the sudden arrival of Miss Rogayah's parents disrupts them. The tension that ensued between traditional and modern mores and behaviours as the country teetered on

³⁷⁴ Claudia Gorbman (1987), *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. London: British Film Institute, p. 86

the verge of independence is filtered here through the ambivalent attitudes of Miss Rogayah's parents. On the one hand, they allow their daughter to be a nightclub singer, but on the other they are desperate to arrange her marriage. Due to the parents' intervention, Saleh returns to Cik Puteh. The storyline suggests that had Saleh married Miss Rogayah, his masculinity would have been further emasculated by his domineering future parents-in-law.

Reflecting or Revisiting the Past?

Cik Puteh, the third *femme fatale*, and the one with whom Saleh is ultimately coupled turns out to be the most dangerous. The film dovetails the noir convention of depicting her as a dangerous woman with old Malay horror icons, that construct her as a *jembalang* (demon). Furthermore, through a flashback, we learn that the owner of the *keris* is Cik Puteh's mother, a female shaman. As mentioned earlier, the shaman's male rival died trying to obtain the *keris*. Before he is swallowed by the earth as a result of the female shaman's curse, he burns her to death uttering the misogynist lines: '*Bakar orang betina ni!*' (lit. 'Burn this bitch to death', author's translation). This flashback implies a transference of power in a supernatural 'battle of the sexes': 'ancient' matriarchy is replaced by a patriarchy that seems to signal a transition from the traditional to the modern. Cik Puteh symbolises not only *adat* (old tradition) that has been gradually eroded, but also 'the ghostly return of the traumatic events' experienced by her mother (the female shaman), a return that 'troubles the boundaries of past, present, and future, and cannot be written back to the complacency of a homogenous, empty time'.³⁷⁵ An

immortal *jembalang* like Cik Puteh cannot be assigned a ‘place in time’ in history, for, as Dipesh Chakrabarty argues, there will, of necessity, be a tension between the ‘general secular time of history and the singular times of gods and spirits’.³⁷⁶

While the film’s narrative form and structure predominantly conform to noir conventions, especially those of the noir crime thriller, director Mamat dovetails them with conventions of old Malay genres such as *purba*, horror, comedy and melodrama. The film’s invocation of the past is conveyed through a historiography of old Malay genre films employing strategies such as homage, citations of scene, self-reflexive parodying and inter-textual references. For example, when the film introduces the *pontianak*-like *jembalang*, there is a scene featuring a character who sells *satay* at night, reminiscent of the old *Pontianak* films wherein such characters provide comic relief. In another scene, when someone tells him about a ‘yellow house’, the character Saleh questions in his voice-over how – in this ‘black-and-white’ era – would one know whether a house is yellow or not? The multi-ethnic characters Saleh encounters are reminiscent of Mat Sentul’s slapstick comedy *Mat Bond* (see Chapter Two). All of these scenes and images may be read as functioning in line with the director’s cinephilic leaning as a form of either homage or memorialisation. This is one of the means through which the film deals with temporality, by rolling up the past and present in a period setting through the re-creation of scenes and images of old Malay genre cinema.

³⁷⁵ Bliss Cua Lim (2001), ‘Spectral Times: The ghost film as historical allegory’, *Position*, 9(2), 287

³⁷⁶ Dipesh Chakrabarty (1997), ‘The Time of History and the Times of the Gods’. In *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd (eds), Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, p. 43

Director Mamat's strategy of homage and memorialisation is further evidenced in the characterisation of the male protagonist. Saleh not only merits the description of noir hero, but also has the characteristics of an old Malay film hero, as well as of the traditional victim-hero. This strategy helps to imbue the character with complex cinematic masculine subjectivities. As a noir hero, Saleh becomes involved in an investigation which requires him to discover the origins of the mysterious *keris* he has in his keeping. The *keris* not only culturally signifies Malayness, but also reminds viewers of the old genre of *purba* films, particularly those that highlighted the battles of traditional warriors. Saleh's mysterious encounter with the *keris*, and its role as a recurring motif that drives the narrative, can be read as loaded with gendered connotations. As an obvious phallic symbol and also associated with men in battle, the *keris* signifies masculine power and pride.³⁷⁷ Critic Fadli Al-Akiti claimed that *Kala Malam* was a journey of one man's search for the reclaiming of his 'lost' masculinity.³⁷⁸ A parallel also may be drawn between Saleh's search for his romantic partner and his struggle to keep the *keris*. The *keris*' association with the phallus is mocked in the form of puns in several scenes wherein the characters are trying to gauge its length: in one scene, Saleh expresses his initial shock when Cik Puteh alludes to

³⁷⁷ According cultural activist Tenas Effendy (from Riau, Indonesia), the *keris* is generally regarded as symbols of luck and dignity. Other symbolic roles associated with the *keris* include masculinity, pride and dignity, adoration and reverence. This point is mentioned by Firdaus Abdullah in his article (2008, 11 December), '*Dimensi Keris Melayu*' (lit. 'Dimension of the Malay Keris'), *Utusan Malaysia*, 11

³⁷⁸ Fadli Al-Akiti (2007), '*Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang: Berahi dan Bagus*' ('Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang: Steamy and Superb'), *Tontonfilem.blogspot.com*, <http://tontonfilem.blogspot.com.au/2007/12/kala-malam-bulan-mengambang-2007-berahi.html>

something being ‘seven-inches-long’; only to discover that she is referring to the *keris*.³⁷⁹

The climactic sequence initially appears in the manner of a typical horror, inspired as it is by the *Pontianak* films and *Si Tora Harimau Jadian* (‘Si Tora the Were-Tiger’). In addition, one may read the reinvocation of these two horror icons as part of the director’s cinephilic practice of homage due to the fact that the copies of the first two *Pontianak* films and *Si Tora* have been lost (see Chapter Two). In this regard, Mamat’s generic homage highlights the cinematic and cultural contributions of these “earlier films which are in danger of being ignored or forgotten”.³⁸⁰

The sequence depicts Saleh watching the physical transformation of both Jongkidin and Cik Puteh into a were-tiger and a *jembalang* respectively. After a while, complications ensue when Cik Puteh admits to Jongkidin that Saleh is her lover, prompting Jongkidin to separate his sister from Saleh. Jongkidin and Saleh fight while viewers witness the over-melodramatic expression of affection between Saleh and Cik Putih. What at first appears to be a situation germane to

³⁷⁹ Farish A. Noor, writing of the politics of the *keris*, notes that one of the esoteric aspects of *keris*-lore was its intimate link to the philosophy and praxis of Tantrism, an ancient pre-Vedantic system of belief and cosmology that predated the Vedantic – Aryan teachings that would later develop and become known as Hinduism. Tantrism, according to Farish, was highly regarded for its view of woman as the centre of creation: ‘... the masculine power of the kris blade is being enveloped and thus contained within the sacred feminine space of the sheath; thereby bringing about equilibrium and order, when the feminine encapsulates, embodies and contains the masculine. Ultimately, therefore, harmony in the universe is achieved when the expansive (and potentially destructive) power of the masculine is domesticated and tamed by the feminine’. See Farish’s essay (2006), ‘Pity the Poor Keris: How a Universal Symbol Became a Tool for Racial Politics,’ *Aliran Monthly*, 26(10), 7-10. For a detailed discussion of the *keris*, see also Farish’s essay (November 2000), ‘From Majapahit to Putrajaya: The Keris as a Symptom of Civilisational Development and Decline,’ *Journal of Southeast Asia Research*, 8(3).

³⁸⁰ Thomas Leitch (1990), ‘The Rhetoric of the Remake’, *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 18(3), 144

horror is disrupted by a romantic-melodramatic mode. Critic Paolo Bertolin regarded this sequence as a truly surprising revelation where the director ‘delivers a heart-wrenching finale with a ghost love story’. S. B. Toh described this sequence as the film’s meandering towards its end, whereby ‘... satire abruptly gives way to heavy melodrama’.

This ‘meandering’, I would suggest, is itself a parodic strategy through which ‘specific elements are evoked, and initially played out in a manner similar to the target text, but then are transformed to deliver an expected turn in the eventual parodic presentation’.³⁸¹ In this sense, Toh, disregarding the self-reflexive presentation of the melodrama, dismisses the point that a film like *Kala Malam* is meant to violate, mock and/or ridicule ‘the rules of genre’. On the other hand, many horror films, particularly the old *Pontianak* films, were characterised by melodrama since this was the predominant mode for most Malay films of the golden age (see Chapter Two).

In one scene, history professor Dr. Rushdi, who helps Saleh with his investigation, expresses his hope that Malaysia’s impending independence will liberate the people from their deeply-rooted beliefs in superstition and the supernatural. Underlying this sentiment is a cultural anxiety toward the traditional as anachronistic and non-modern, a sentiment that permeates this film and others in Mamat’s oeuvre. In particular, it is highlighted in the relationship between Saleh and Cik Puteh, who as a *pontianak*, is part of the supernatural world that threatens the development of Malaysia, a ‘modern’ nation-state during this crucial period. This brings us to the film’s final scene which shows Saleh releasing Cik

³⁸¹ Dan Harries (2000), *Film Parody*. London: British Film Institute, p. 38

Puteh from the locked room while he mentions in voice-over that this is the day when it will be revealed whether the curse inflicted upon her will end. He admits that his love for her remains unshaken even if the curse remains, and by being with her, his own existence will be jeopardised. The final image of Saleh and Cik Puteh embracing each other passionately provides closure on their relationship but the outcome of the curse remains unknown.

Does this reconciliation between natural/human and supernatural/inhuman symbolise the society's entrenched beliefs in the superstition that continues to 'haunt' the future (i.e., contemporary post-colonial Malaysia), as lamented by former Prime Minister mentioned in Chapter One? Can *Kala Malam* – as both parody and satire – be seen as a film that conjures up the past, as something to be both celebrated and mourned? Can the film be read as the director's re-proposal of an imaginary nation – after 50 years of independence – wherein the 'troubled' present needs to be re-assessed through the lens of the past?

While my reading of *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* may imply that the film interrogates the present through its portrayal and re-creation of the past, Yeo Joon Han's *Sell Out!*, which I will discuss next, explores questions of what happens when crass commercialism – as a result of postcolonial modernity and rapid development – reigns supreme and has already invaded every corner of contemporary Malaysian society.

***Sell Out!* – Musical Parody? Dark Social Satire?**

Sell Out! focuses on Rafflesia Pong and Eric Tan, who work for the FONY corporation. Rafflesia is a TV hostess, whose low-ratings talk show about art, *For*

Art's Sake is being cancelled in favour of a more popular and profitable reality show. However, after interviewing her former boyfriend, a terminally ill poet who is about to die on her last show, Rafflesia becomes a TV sensation overnight. Due to the dramatic nature of the event, the headlines provide her with a new idea to invent her own reality TV program titled *Final Say*, a show screening the dying moments of everyday people on their deathbeds. However, the only difficulty is finding subjects who are cooperative enough to die before the camera. The creation of *Final Say* fuels Rafflesia's rivalry with another reality show hostess, Hannah Edwards Leong.

In a separate plotline, another FONY employee, Eric Tan, an idealistic-romantic engineer in charge of the electronics department, finally learns that it does not pay to be creative. He invents a revolutionary cooking machine, the Super Soya Maker, which is rejected by the company's two eccentric CEOs because it is too durable and does not contain the required built-in breakdown mechanism. In line with the company's lucrative pursuits, Eric needs to find a way to make his new device break down immediately after the guarantee expires. Due to Eric's recalcitrance, he is taken by his bosses to a dodgy *bomoh* (shaman) to have his creatively ambitious side exorcised. The *bomoh* expels the innovative 'dreamer' within as planned, but instead of disappearing, it stays around as a separate entity. As a result, Eric splits into two identities that coexist awkwardly: the practical entrepreneur and the principled dreamer. When Eric loses his job, he becomes despondent and attempts suicide, albeit unsuccessfully.

Predictably, Rafflesia and Eric's paths cross: the dreamer Eric falls head-over-heels for Rafflesia and attempts to pursue her. She is not interested in him

until he offers to appear, with his practical self, on her TV program to boost ratings. However, Rafflesia confesses that Eric is hardly her type of man. Finally, Malaysian TV viewers have to vote for who they want to remain alive, the dreamer or the practical Eric. In the end, the viewers vote for the practical Eric. Rafflesia eventually admits that she has a soft spot for the dreamer Eric, but it is too late.

The critical reception of *Sell Out!* in the main revolved around its generic hybridity and satirical elements. Malaysian critic Lim Chang Moh called the film ‘a refreshingly new black comedy’, asserting that ‘the best part of *Sell Out!* is its refreshing new take on local comedy – the absence of stupid slapstick, and a script that does not insult our intelligence’.³⁸² International critics generally noted the film’s satirical strategy and the biting commentaries it posited. Terry Ong of *HK-Asia-City*, for example, praised the film, stating that it was one of the most hilarious satires he had ever seen: ‘... *Sell Out!*’s best-selling point is Yeo’s hilarious script which is part *Saturday Night Live*, part social commentary and part Malaysian sitcom, in a good way’.³⁸³ Canadian critic Joe Gurba of *Vue Weekly*, in his review of the film stated: ‘As a comedy, *Sell Out!* treads a fine line between very base and accessible humour with karaoke songs and the standard give-and-take between boss and employee, balanced with a more subtle insider comedy that targets western influence in eastern countries and the madness of greed ... The real strength of *Sell Out!* is not the painful songs or the ridiculous

³⁸² Lim Chang Moh (2009, April 28), ‘Sell Out: A Refreshingly New Black Comedy,’ <http://limchangmoh.blogspot.com/2009/04/sell-out-refreshingly-new-black-comedy.html>

³⁸³ Terry Ong (2008, August 30), ‘Movie Review: Sell Out!’, <http://hk.asia-city.com/movie-review/sell-out>

humour but rather the commentary'.³⁸⁴ While in general critics highlighted the prospect of *Sell Out!* as a form of satire, most of the reviews failed to point out the ways in which the film strategically parodied Hollywood musicals and Malaysian independent digital films. The following reading examines the relationship between these parodic strategies and the film's satirical critique of consumer capitalism in contemporary Malaysia.

The film opens with a prologue that ridicules Malaysia's 'art-house' independent filmmaking. Somewhat ironically, Yeo pokes fun at these independent films which have been gaining acclaim at international film festivals. In this scene, Rafflesia Pong interviews an award-winning filmmaker named Yeo Joon Han (played by someone else), a self-important art-house film director, winner of the obscure 'Kryzhindabgzhongbus Village Far Eastern Film Festival's Young Overseas Chinese Women's Award in the category of films suitable for audiences aged 70 and above'. During the interview, Rafflesia asks the director: 'Why doesn't anything ever happen in your films?' In response, he rails against audience-friendly popular genre movies such as action, comedy, romance and horror, calling them 'stupid'. Yeo ends by stating: 'Life is boring. Films should be, too' and continues to insist that films should reflect reality. When asked whether he approves of the musical – since he failed to mention this genre in his list – the director responds that those who make nonsensical musicals ought to be 'chopped into 18 pieces' because 'no one ever breaks into song in real life'.

Poking fun at genre films, the prologue employs one of the key techniques of parody by wryly referencing its own position as a film which potentially will be

³⁸⁴ Joe Gurba (2010, December), *Sell Out!* Review. *Vue Weekly*, http://www.vueweekly.com/film/story/sell_out/

categorised and received as Malaysian ‘art-house’. The scene then shifts to Rafflesia introducing Yeo’s short film, *Love is Love is not Something Else* before presenting a scene from the film. This scene functions as a sly parody of Malaysian independent films, particularly those directed by James Lee, Ho Yuhang and Tan Chui Mui. Two unhappy young people are waiting for a broken elevator and captured in a long take at a painfully languid pace, characteristics typical of Malaysian independent cinema. The short film anticipates subsequent scenes at FONY corporation in which time is portrayed very differently – compressed to meet commercial demands and increase human productivity. However, rather than privileging one mode of filmmaking and its representation of time over another, the film critiques both modes of time and cinema through their juxtaposition. This juxtaposition reiterates and mocks the conventions of the classical Hollywood musical even as it renders visible the various effects of global capitalism, technologies and shifting gender roles in Malaysia.³⁸⁵

‘If You’ve Got the Money, Honey, I’ve Got the Time’

As in most Hollywood musicals, *Sell Out!* employs a romantic subplot (involving a developing attraction and comic misunderstanding). Eric falls in love with Rafflesia, but she refuses to reciprocate his feelings due to her career ambitions. Both characters express themselves through singing, an approach that fulfils the musical genre’s purpose in valorising music as a mode for articulating personal emotions. For example, the scene in a clinic features both Eric and Rafflesia singing: he expresses his affection for her and she replies that he is not her type.

³⁸⁵ Richard Dyer (1977, Spring), ‘Entertainment and Utopia’, *Movie*, 24, p. 3

The duet highlights the contrast between the two protagonists: Rafflesia is a strong and independent career woman while Eric is a troubled and weak hero shown visually through his badly injured and bleeding body. The potential for romance between the two is continually thwarted by Rafflesia's ambition and narcissism, the effects of the capitalist ideology promoted by their company.

Throughout, the film depicts Eric and Rafflesia barely exchanging words and communicating with each other. Even corporeal contact becomes obsolete in the urban space of the film, the capital of Kuala Lumpur, which is cinematically imbued with despair and hopelessness. For example, Eric's flat, which appears to be a gloomy setting and ambience, signifies his depressed and dejected soul. Corporate figures such as one of his bosses are shown spending their leisure time in a karaoke lounge while singing spiritlessly or in a deserted shopping mall where department store salesmen refuse to serve customers. When it comes to romance, Eric is seen striving to cope with the rejection and dejection of love. The city only appears as a romantic utopia when the romantic couple overcome their (ideological) differences, as implied in the film's denouement.

In this respect, director Yeo offers a biting critique of Malaysia's economic development through the portrayal of the media industry, which is inextricably tied to broader capitalist transformations often experienced in Malaysia as rapacious, materialistic and devoid of ethical sentiment. This tendency is embodied through the figure of the modern Malaysian woman as exemplified by Rafflesia and Hannah, Rafflesia's rival, echoing the female protagonist in *Susuk* discussed in Chapter Three.

Unlike the American musical, *Sell Out!* deconstructs the myth of the courtship ritual; opposites such as Eric and Rafflesia may eventually attract but may not necessarily be reconcilable. However, the film suggests their reconciliation through the alternative male protagonist (practical Eric). At the end of the film, when the viewers of Rafflesia's reality show vote to kill the dreamer Eric, Rafflesia gives up her romantic longing for career satisfaction by choosing to couple with the practical Eric, who lives and works in accord with her company's ethos. On one level, the aforementioned romantic denouement conforms to the film's reiteration of the ideological strategies of the Hollywood musical, which are often based on pairings of male/female oppositions that are ultimately resolved and signify the coming together of community or nation. On another level, director Yeo blurs the binary oppositions by approaching the theme of doubling (*doppelgänger*), designating Eric's dualistic selves – the practical and the dreamer – with each occupying 'separate worlds'. In this respect, the film, while parodying the Hollywood musical, ambivalently reiterates its ideological strategies of dramatising then resolving the fear of difference. This particular function appears in the film as the director's satirical gambit – the 'other' (the outsider) who threatens the stability of the community (society/ viewers in general) is represented by the dreamer half of Eric Tan, who has to die, as voted by the reality show's viewers. This is the struggle the dreamer Eric has to confront, a conflict between his idealistic aspirations and his corporation's desires, determined by the capitalist ideology.

Between Fantasy and Reality

The film highlights Eric's 'troubled masculinity' by characterising him not only as someone deprived of romantic love, but also as a nerdy and naive man, a type of victim-hero who does not fit a multinational corporation like FONY. Eric's lamentation is enunciated through his singing and the director's staging of musical sequences, which also parody formal elements of the musical. Consider, for example, the scene wherein Eric is lamenting over a torn RM50 note. Earlier on, viewers see a shopkeeper refusing to accept it. Eric bursts into song: 'Money ... why do you like rich people?' Stylistically, the musical sequence resembles an MTV video more than a musical film. Rapid shots of Eric in his neighbourhood, driving a car and singing with a horde of background singers/ characters, all facing the camera, are juxtaposed against a series of tableaux-like shots depicting the poor and working class in the bustling city of Kuala Lumpur. The song and its accompanying visuals mournfully and sardonically gesture toward the idea that in Kuala Lumpur, the rich and affluent are favoured over the poor and the working class, a notion visually affirmed in shots showing the striking contrast between the city's rich and poor.

Shots of Eric driving show that his old Volkswagen can hardly move freely on a road crammed with newer, more expensive cars, signifying his sense of displacement. This particular sequence cynically mocks the ways in which the values of a market-oriented, capitalist economy have been incorporated into the fabric of Malaysian society. Even as the film visually emphasises Eric's victimisation within this society by positioning him within the marginalised poor and working class, his subjectivity is also rendered complex through shaky,

handheld camera shots, static shots, long takes and a dizzying *decoupage* of images, which imply the despondency and confusion felt by Eric. In other words, this sequence through parody undermines and alters the very concept of the Hollywood musical. At the same time, it oscillates the ways in which the viewer identifies with Eric because the above combination of techniques defies a clear demarcation between objective and subjective perspectives in the viewer.

Like this scene, most of the film's musical scenes feature singing and performance as humorous breaks in the film rather than forms of spectacle, an approach that validates the film's status as a parody and satire. For example, musical scenes do not feature dancing and performance that highlight, body movement and sensuality. In addition, the camera-work goes from the fluid to the vertiginous. Ideologically, this approach critiques some escapist elements of popular cinema. The ways in which music-song is incorporated entails a form of inversion due to the modification of style, creating a signifier which ironically suggests an opposite meaning from its usage in the original (musical) genre.

Take the scene in which both CEOs sing when Eric steps out of their office. Aurally the viewer is blocked from the musical sound once the camera pulls away: the viewer only hears the sound very faintly. This approach, in effect, renders the sound diegetically and realistically, further oscillating between a diegetic, realistic verisimilitude realm and a utopian fantasy world. This musical scene is further parodied by the insertion of a brief, surreal scene wherein one of the CEOs imagines himself singing at a karaoke centre. The shot then cuts to the real Karaoke TV (KTV) screen. In another musical sequence, Yeo continues to mock musicals by staging them in the full style of karaoke TV juxtaposed against

visuals of open-air night markets and city roads: it comprises only lip-synching words on-screen with no singing, demanding the viewer to supply the vocals. This particular musical sequence mocks dominant Malaysian philistine attitudes, particularly when it comes to contemporary forms of so-called kitschy entertainment such as reality TV and karaoke. In several brief scenes, karaoke serves as forms of social bonding among corporate men. At the same time, it departs from orthodox musical norms, further confounding the viewers' expectations and the lines between reality and fantasy.

By emphasising Eric's ambivalent, double-sided corporeality, *Sell Out!* depicts the alterity of subjectivities not only in terms of his contested masculinity and class-status (as struggling middle-class), but also of his hybrid ethnicity as Eurasian. People always poke fun at his ethnicity; for example, when Rafflesia tells Eric that he looks pale, he replies: 'I always look pale; I am half English'. This critique of Malaysia's official race categories is also hinted at when Rafflesia laments that her TV station does not favour 'pure race' Asian TV hosts but those of *rojak* hybridity such as Pan Asians, who can pass as Chinese, Indian, Malay or Caucasian, or 'better still, all mixed together', as she puts it.³⁸⁶ On the one hand, this statement critiques the media practice in Malaysia (and Southeast Asia more broadly) which tends to favour Eurasians or Pan-Asians due to their commercial value and viability (Rafflesia's rival TV hostess Hannah, for example, is Eurasian).³⁸⁷ On the other hand, this critique can be read ironically as the scene

³⁸⁶ *Rojak*: Malaysian spicy fruit and vegetable salad. The term is used in local Malaysian parlance as a colloquial expression for an eclectic mix and has become a metaphor for the ethnic hybrid in Malaysia. The term may also mean 'mixed-up' and 'without proper origins.'

comments on Malaysia's official 'pure' race categories, which has been used in public discourse in an unproblematic way, in addition to having tendencies to marginalise more hybrid ethnic groups.

Eric's Eurasian identity as a racial 'other' in Malaysia is foregrounded in the context of his heavily-accented British English which contrasts sharply with the other characters' use of a colloquial form of Pidgin English, which the film lampoons. One of the CEOs is depicted as incapable of using correct English due to his limited vocabulary. At the same time, Eric's thick English accent is mocked: it appears problematic and tiresome to some other characters who can hardly understand him when he speaks. While *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* attempts to address Malaysian society's fixation on colonial language through the inept use of Malay as the national language, *Sell Out!* satirises Malaysia's urban community, who tend to use 'Malaysian English' (a more colloquial, looser form of English), peppered with suffixes such as '*lah.*' In this respect, the film reflects some claims made by concerned Malaysians about the deteriorating standard of English proficiency among contemporary Malaysians in general.³⁸⁸

³⁸⁷ For example, the Malaysian advertising industry has been encouraged to use models that represent different Malaysian ethnic groups as opposed to the 'Pan-Asian look', which does not truly embody any 'recognisable' Malaysian ethnic identities. However, there is no doubt that Pan-Asians remain the preferred choice. See Samsudin A. Rahim and Latiffah Pawanteh (2010), 'The Local Content Industry and Cultural Identity in Malaysia', *Journal of Media and Communication Studies*, 2(10), 215-220

³⁸⁸ The deteriorating standard of English proficiency among Malaysians continues to underpin contentious debate in media and public discourse. While some emphasise the importance of mastering the English language to the extent that they urge the government to bring back English-medium schools which were abolished in 1971 with the introduction of the National Educational Policy (attempting to promote and reinforce Malay as the national language and sole medium of instruction in schools and universities), others prefer English to be used and retained as a second language due to its not being a national language.

While the wide use of the English language reflects Malaysia as a postcolonial and modern nation, *Sell Out!* simultaneously exposes the contradictory disposition of modern Malaysians, who remain entrenched in superstitious beliefs, an issue foregrounded in *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*. This highlighting of superstition also enables the film to complicate the demarcation between reality and fantasy. For example, when Eric's dreamer self refuses to leave, even after he is exorcised by the Chinese *bomoh*, the film implies the simultaneity of multiple temporalities within modern Malaysian society. Both the idealistic and practical selves suggest an inter-subjective relationship between the self and the other, here and there, separation and reconnection. Temporally, the practical Eric represents chronological, capitalist time inhabiting a disenchanted world, whereas the dreamer Eric (who is supposedly dead) represents what Bliss Cua Lim refers to as 'the temporality of haunting' that refuses 'the linear progression of modern time consciousness, flouting the limits of mortality ...'³⁸⁹ The dreamer Eric not only disrupts the formal and measured space that constitutes capitalism, but also critiques the standardisation and quantification of time required by commercial media enterprises (like the FONY Corporation). Such standardisation serves as a temporal demand for 'punctuality, calculability and exactness' in order to organise various activities and relationships into a depersonalised time schedule, further consolidating a market-based economy.³⁹⁰ For example, in an earlier scene, the viewer sees Eric failing to

³⁸⁹ Bliss Cua Lim (2009), *Translating Time*, p. 149

³⁹⁰ I am using Georg Simmel's argument about capitalist modernity. See Simmel (1971), 'The Metropolis and Mental Life' (1903). *On Individuality and Social Forms*, Donald Levine (ed). Chicago: University of Chicago Press, pp. 324-339

convince his employers about the worth of his soya bean machine: they are demanding that it should be less durable in order to generate the ‘half-life’ (turnover time) of the commodity, which becomes obsolescent in a shorter period of time.³⁹¹ Through the uncanny existence of the dreamer Eric, director Yeo creates a figure that challenges the materialist nation-state as it seeks to propel itself into *Vision 2020*.

In such ways, Yeo stridently critiques the linear narrative of national progress through market-based private enterprise that underpins the country’s modernity. Such a critique resonates with the director’s sharply satirical tactics which target and debunk the contemporary state of Malaysian creative and entertainment industries, wherein in many cases, crass commercialism takes precedence over artistic integrity and/or intellectual substance. For example, in the scene which shows the two CEOs interviewing Eric, one of them lambasts him saying: ‘We didn’t hire you to think. We hired you to do.’ In addition, the portrayal of Rafflesia’s new reality show *Final Say*, featuring interviews with ordinary people on their deathbeds offers an acerbic commentary on the nation’s market-oriented cultural and economic practices, transforming practically every aspect of society into commoditised goods and services. In this type of environment, there is hardly room for moral values or ethics to prevail, a fact hinted at in the scene in which Rafflesia attempts to murder a middle-aged woman on her program, because the latter is finding it difficult to die. The exploitation of dying individuals indicates the relentless logic of the commercialisation that has

³⁹¹ David Harvey (2006), *The Limits to Capital*. London: Verso, pp. 61-63

penetrated the world of the living, comprising the dignity of profound human experiences.

In one particular sequence, director Yeo subtly critiques Malaysian media when Rafflesia is interviewing a dying Chinese millionaire, Mr. Ong Eng Tuck. She asks him a question about the powers-that-be: 'Mr. Ong, what do you think of our government?' Yeo's camera reverts to all of the millionaire's family members, who are signalling and gesturing to dissuade him from saying anything negative about the government. This moment implies director Yeo's subtle critique of Malaysia's print and broadcast media, which are employed to skilfully silence and censor opposing viewpoints, albeit couched in some proclamation of free speech and expression.³⁹² In this respect, the film's use of irony and parody to insinuate this critique may be seen as strategies employed to circumvent censorship. In the Malaysian context, satire and parody might be the only way in which internal political criticism could effectively reach a diversity of viewers, insofar as dominant ideologies are cast as untenable or unsustainable without being openly contradicted.

In addition, Yeo's lampooning of corporate figures who are 'modern-looking' but still adhere to superstitious thoughts and practices exposes the country's paradoxical modernity. The sharp juxtaposition of commerce and

³⁹² Existing studies of the media industry in Malaysia have long since concluded that any incipient democratising tendency within the media has long since been subverted by extensive formal and informal control, thus contributing to the political survivalism of the ruling coalition (BN) that has ruled the country since independence. See Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani's article (2007, May), 'Media Freedom in Malaysia', *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 35(3), 341-367; Zaharom Nain (2002), 'The Structure of the Media Industry: Implications for Democracy', in *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*, Francis Loh Kok Wah and Khoo Boon Teik (eds), Richmond, UK: Curzon

spirituality which is most apparent in the collaboration between FONY executives and a *bomoh* undergirds the tension between reality and fantasy found in Malaysia's own cultural accommodations to capitalist modernity, which require certain forms of utopian escapism (such as shopping malls, theme parks and reality shows) to ease the concerns of those who live a stressful life (due to working in a competitive economic environment).

In one scene, TV host Hannah Edwards Leong also comments that fantasy is crucial to a successful reality show: 'Contrary to popular belief, what audiences want from reality shows is not reality. It's fantasy. My show makes fantasy plausible for general population with dreary workaday lives'. Although clearly ambivalent about the artistic merits of reality formats, Rafflesia later concurs: 'That's the beauty of reality shows. It's hard to tell where the reality ends and the fiction begins'. In light of its concern with reality TV, *Sell Out!* can be seen as critiquing forms of commodity production that entail a false consciousness.

As the film parodies Malaysian independent cinema, the highlighting of both reality shows and karaoke informs the interplay of reality and fantasy, further rendering the irony of Malaysian art-house independent films. Most of the independent films depict characters experiencing everyday banality and loneliness in cities like Kuala Lumpur, for example. The unexpected eruptions of musical sequences offer moments of wonder and pleasure. Its musical elements/scenes, together with some giddy effects engendered by Yeo's camerawork and editing, serve as a counterpoint to the depiction of similar characters' conditions as portrayed in many Malaysian independent films. In these films, the aforesaid notions of everyday banality, ennui and loneliness are reinforced through minimal

dialogue, slow-paced scenes, the use of silence and the use of static, extremely long takes. These films specifically focus on the darker side of modernity, implying the marginalisation of ethnic minorities who are deprived of the state's economic policies, opportunities and privileges. In many ways, they question development, insinuating that the drive towards consumption is irrational.³⁹³

The final scene shows one of the two CEOs walking lethargically towards one of two lifts, a scene that attempts to replicate the scene from the award-winning short film presented at the beginning. While waiting for the lift, the viewers see his image reflected in the lift's glass door. The other CEO, who is smoking, enters and stands close to him. Replicating the short film shown earlier, the symmetrically balanced shot composition (featuring the two lifts) and the glass that reflects the two CEOs all accentuate tropes of self-reflexivity with which a parody like *Sell Out!* is putatively associated. Images such as smoking and waiting for the lift, and the CEO's trivial conversations, all gesture towards an impulse to 're-enchant' the everyday banality in today's disenchanted world, rife as it is with multinational corporations and reality TV. In this respect, the scene encapsulates the film's critique of capitalist modernity by visually reiterating the claim made by Hannah Edward Leong earlier when she asserts why fantasy works for the people with 'dreary workaday lives'.

³⁹³ Khoo Gaik Cheng (2008), 'Exploring "Chinese" Art Film Aesthetic Influences on Independent Chinese Malaysian Filmmakers', *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, 5, 50

Conclusion

As I hope the above analyses have shown, both *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* and *Sell Out!* employ parody and satire as mechanisms not only to reiterate, ridicule and hybridise particular film genres and modes, but also to lampoon culture, society and the nation. These strategies are anchored in questions of temporality, questions central to Malaysia's contradictory forms of modernity of which both films offer their critiques.

Kala Malam works more as a parody due to its extensive reaffirmation and deconstruction of the codes and conventions of the targeted genres it is spoofing (i.e., American film noir, Malay horror and melodrama) while at the same time paying homage to the black-and-white Malay genre films of the 1950s and 1960s. Meanwhile the satirical strategy of *Sell Out!* offers a biting critique of a capitalist society built on consumerism and materialism. As well, it asserts that in an environment wherein success is measured by the acquisition of commodities and the maximisation of profit, some forms of human relations, including romance, can hardly be developed and pursued.

In mocking the form and style of 'film noir' as well as old Malay cinematic genres, *Kala Malam* produces some forms of socio-political critique. For example, the film references film noir conventions and tropes of anxiety (from lighting to the appearance of *femme fatales*) in order to disclose the society's cultural anxieties of 1956 British Malaya, the year before Malaysia's independence. Specifically, *Kala Malam* foregrounds its motif of 'troubled masculinity', which is reflected in the hero's anxieties and mediated through

several *femme fatale* characters, signifiers of modernity due to their bold transgressions, both culturally and morally.

Similarly, through the depiction of the dualistic selves of its hero, *Sell Out!* renders Eric's masculine subjectivities more complex, assailed by the character's anxiety regarding a capitalist ideology devoid of hope, ethics and integrity. All this is mediated through the female who embodies capitalist modernity: ambitious, competitive and goal-oriented, and through the literal splitting of 'modern' male character (Eric) who represents his gendered cultural identity crisis. *Sell Out!* also pokes fun at Malaysia's art-house independent cinema, which foregrounds realism. In this respect, the film complicates and blurs the boundaries between 'fantasy' (often valorised by musical) and 'reality' (favoured by art-house, independent cinema) by focusing on the hybrid genre of reality television and karaoke.

Through generic strategies of parody and satire, *Kala Malam* serves as an alternative proposal for an imaginary nation through its re-created images of the past whereas *Sell Out!*, takes delight in its critical voicing of contemporary society and the nation.

The next and final chapter will examine two adolescent romantic films by Yasmin Ahmad which are set in postcolonial contemporary Malaysia. Yet both films invoke multiple temporalities through elements of nostalgia, a strategy that simultaneously critiques the modern present and gestures toward a utopic vision of a more socially and culturally inclusive nation.

CHAPTER SIX

In the Mood for Nostalgia: Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*

It is as near to you as your life, but you can never wholly know it.
– Rabindranath Tagore, quoted in *Sepet*

The minute I heard my first love story, I started looking for you, not knowing how blind I was. Lovers don't finally meet somewhere. They're in each other all along.
– Jalaluddin Rumi, quoted in *Mukhsin*

Introduction

This chapter examines two films directed by the late Yasmin Ahmad: *Sepet* ('Chinese Eye', 2005) and *Mukhsin* (2007), both of which propelled the director to the forefront of contemporary Malaysian cinema.³⁹⁴ Yasmin was part of an alternative, independent wave of Malaysian filmmakers, which is comprised of filmmakers who make low-budget and mostly digital films. However, I do not regard Yasmin as an independent filmmaker because most of her feature films were financed by production houses that produce mainstream films and were released commercially. In addition, Yasmin's films such as *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* appealed to mainstream tastes by drawing on popular film forms such as melodrama and romance.³⁹⁵ She directed six feature films prior to her death in

³⁹⁴ Apart from earning praise and accolades at international film festivals ranging from Tokyo to Berlin, retrospectives of Yasmin's work have been held at the Tokyo, Thessaloniki and Golden Horse International Film Festivals, and at the University of Hawaii.

³⁹⁵ Her fellow independent filmmakers such as James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, Ho Yuhang, Deepak Kumaran Menon and Azharr Rudin, among others, make art-house digital films which have limited release.

2009: her other four films are *Rabun* ('*My Failing Eyesight*', 2003), *Gubra* ('*Anxiety*', 2006), *Muallaf* ('*The Convert*', 2008) and *Talentine* (2009). Before turning to film, Yasmin worked in advertising, first as a copywriter for Ogilvy & Mather then in 1993 for Leo Burnett in Kuala Lumpur, where she became an influential executive creative director. Her commercials, which often emphasised filial piety and multicultural tolerance, won the hearts of many Malaysians.

Yasmin's thematic preoccupation with these issues carried over into some of her key feature films, which centred on inter-ethnic adolescent romances and highlighted the subtleties of insidious inter-ethnic tensions and prejudices in contemporary Malaysia. Several of her films were castigated by critics for attempting to destabilise the cultural status quo. *Sepet* and its semi-sequel *Gubra*, for example, were highly controversial due to their depictions of topics and images that some felt had the potential to challenge a prescribed notion of Malayness closely associated with the mainstream practice of Islam.³⁹⁶ For example, several scenes in *Sepet* became controversial, including those that depict Orked and her mother in traditional-style *kemban* (wearing a *sarong* around midriff), which exposes a woman's *aurah*. An Arabic term meaning shame and humility, *aurah* refers to parts of human body that cannot be seen by others. Here it refers specifically to the practice required of proper Muslim women to cover parts of their body, including the midriff.

³⁹⁶ In Malaysia, the notion of 'race' is inextricably tied with religion. For example, Islam is often misconceived of as a tribal religion due to its close association with ethnic Malay. This is reinforced by the definition of a Malay person enshrined in the Constitution which states that a 'Malay' person is someone who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language and conform to Malay custom (Article 160[2][of the Federal Constitution]).

Conservative Malay Muslims also protested a scene in *Gubra*, in which a muezzin (a man who calls Muslims to prayer) pets a dog and urges it off the road: viewers engaged in petty debates over whether it was forbidden to touch dogs and which part of the dog could be touched.³⁹⁷ Such controversial images and narratives resulted in Yasmin being labelled a ‘corruptor of culture’. On 23 April 2006, Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) broadcast a live forum program which discussed *Sepet* and *Gubra*. The forum was titled *Sepet dan Gubra Pencemar Budaya* (‘*Sepet* and *Gubra* Corruptors of Culture’). Two of the guests on the panel made hostile comments about certain scenes in the films, calling them unrealistic, unnecessary and likely to ‘corrupt’ perceived stable Malay culture. In particular, they focused on the portrayal of an interracial romance between Orked, a pious Muslim girl who falls in love with Jason, an ethnic Chinese youth involved in a gang.

Sepet and *Mukhsin*, together with *Gubra*, constitute a trilogy featuring a coming-of-age or *Bildungsroman* narrative about the evolution of Orked, a Malay-Muslim female protagonist from youthful naive girlhood to mature womanhood. *Sepet*, set in a laid-back small town tells of the inter-ethnic relationship between Orked and Jason, who is of Chinese descent while *Gubra* melds two plotlines of an adult Orked confronting her unfaithful husband and a *kampong* religious couple befriending two prostitutes who live next door. *Mukhsin*, the final instalment and prequel to *Sepet*, focuses on young Orked, who

³⁹⁷ Khoo Gaik Cheng (2007), ‘The Politics of Love: Malaysia’s Yasmin Ahmad’, *Metro Magazine*, 155, 56.

lives with her family in an idyllic *kampong* where she has an ephemeral childhood romance with twelve-year-old Mukhsin during the *kampong* school holidays.

This chapter focuses on the adolescent romance genre and for this reason, does not examine *Gubra*, which I categorise as a post-adolescent melodrama. Catherine Driscoll's invocation of the anthropological concept of rite of passage in her discussion of teen film is useful in understanding stages of adolescence and temporality addressed in both films. According to Driscoll, rite of passage can appear in the form of a ritual marking passage between different social states (e.g., prom, graduation) or of an experience of limit (e.g., first love).³⁹⁸ In this sense both films fit the definition of teen film. *Sepet* centres on high school characters in their year of graduation whereas *Mukhsin* depicts its male protagonist's transition from primary to high school. In addition, because adolescence is a period of transition, mediating past, present and future, the teen romance often corresponds to a sense of nostalgia on the part of both the characters and the viewers. I define nostalgia here as 'a sentimental longing or wistful affection for a period in the past'.³⁹⁹ According to Svetlana Boym, the word 'nostalgia' comes from two Greek roots, *nostos* meaning 'return home' and *algia* 'longing'.⁴⁰⁰

For Boym, the cinematic image of nostalgia is a double exposure, or a superimposition of two images – of past and present, of dream and everyday life⁴⁰¹ - this chapter argues that Yasmin Ahmad's reworking of the romance and

³⁹⁸ Catherine Driscoll (2011), *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Berg, p. 66

³⁹⁹ Oxford Dictionaries, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/nostalgia>

⁴⁰⁰ Svetlana Boym (2007, Summer), 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents'. *Hedgehog Review*, 3(7), 7

⁴⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 7

melodrama genres induces a particular form of nostalgia that similarly destabilises normative temporality, which corresponds to the idea that notions of identity and subjectivity transform and mutate over time. Deleuze insists that all life is a plane of becoming, and that the perception of fixed beings – such as man – is an effect of becoming. For Deleuze, one needs to no longer see life in fixed and immobile terms in order to free thinking itself from the fixed foundations of man as the subject.⁴⁰² Therefore, the process of becoming undoes a binary model of sexual difference because it is not about ordering a species into a genus that then branches out to categories such as sexuality, gender, race and ethnicity. It is not that these categories do not exist, or that the politics associated with them can be solved in a purely conceptual way, but their parameters are not fixed in time. This dynamic process is temporality itself. As Elizabeth Grosz notes: ‘The force of time is not just a contingent characteristic of the living, but is the dynamic impetus that enables life to become, to always be in the process of becoming, something other than what it was’.⁴⁰³

In my readings of these films, I suggest that the director’s cinematic use of nostalgia reflects and critiques the dialectical modernity of Malaysia by combining elements of its colonial past with its Islamicised present. More specifically, I argue that the construction of adolescent romance in both films rework elements of romance and melodrama from classical Malay and Hollywood cinema by depicting complicated interethnic, interclass relationships in a highly

⁴⁰² Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 232-309

⁴⁰³ Elizabeth Grosz (2004), *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, p. 8

nostalgic mode. Because nostalgia tends to conflate past and present, it is rooted in a sense of disavowal or suspension of disbelief on the part of the viewer, which is generally associated with fantasy.⁴⁰⁴ In this respect, I want to show that both films induce nostalgia to fulfil the generic convention of the romance, i.e., to negotiate wish-fulfilment qualities or utopian possibilities, while at the same time implicitly challenging notions of progress, linearity and modernity.

Sepet and *Mukhsin* formulate their love stories by utilising specific kinds of spaces such as fast-food outlets, piers and *kampong* landscapes that serve as markers of time and memory. Key melodramatic strategies employed to elicit nostalgia include: flashbacks to childhood, everyday lived reality in domestic interiors, idyllic *kampong* landscapes and cultural iconography from the past. At the same time, these strategies are combined with the director's trademark realist-aesthetic cinematography, which, as I will show in the readings that follow, blur spatio-temporal, ethnic and gender boundaries, thereby unsettling the clear moral lessons of classical romance-melodrama. For example, in *Sepet* the male protagonist reiterates the role of melodramatic victim-hero in classical Malay film; however, this is complicated by the fact that he is of Chinese descent, an ethnic identity that historically has been associated with female protagonists and characters.⁴⁰⁵

In both films, nostalgia also manifests itself in a yearning for human union and togetherness, as in all of Yasmin Ahmad's films which celebrate the breaking

⁴⁰⁴ Pam Cook (2005), *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*. London: Routledge, p. 3

⁴⁰⁵ It should be noted that prior to *Sepet*, Teck Tan's *Spinning Gasing* (2001) also depicted an interracial romance between a Chinese man and a Malay-Muslim woman, although the film rather fits the buddy-road movie genre.

down of boundaries between romantic partners, family members and people of different ethnic, class and cultural backgrounds. In the next section, I identify the different modes of nostalgia that characterise these films and discuss how they are deployed to perform ideological critiques of contemporary postcolonial Malaysia along the lines of gender, race and class.

Nostalgia, Genre and Yasmin Ahmad's Films

In *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*, Pam Cook explores film culture's obsession with the past.⁴⁰⁶ She examines the use of nostalgia in genre films, from noir-melodrama to masculinist action to consider the role of cinema in mediating history. Cook argues that these films deploy creative strategies of memory to challenge established notions of history by encouraging the viewer to reflect on the complex relationship between past and present, history and memory. For Cook, nostalgia is generally associated with fantasy or suspension of disbelief. It is predicated on a dialectic between longing for something idealised that has been lost and an acknowledgement that this idealised something can never be retrieved in actuality, and can only be accessed through images.⁴⁰⁷

This tendency may bring audiences closer to the past, to produce a form of second-hand testimony that includes the audience as witnesses to reconstructed events. However, because her argument prioritises the role of cinema in representing history, Cook centres on films that explicitly reference the past such as *In the Mood for Love* (2000), *Far From Heaven* (2002) and *Raging Bull* (1980)

⁴⁰⁶ Pam Cook (2005), *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*. London: Routledge.

⁴⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4

rather than those that are set in the contemporary period such as the films discussed in this chapter which do not qualify as nostalgic films in that they are not period pieces that actively attempt to recreate the past.⁴⁰⁸

Rey Chow's work on sentimentality in contemporary Chinese cinema has addressed multiple notions of nostalgia, including those associated with homesickness, which foregrounds the tendency to reminisce about old times.⁴⁰⁹ Chow's discussion of nostalgia in Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* resonates with the use of nostalgia in Yasmin Ahmad's films. While noting that nostalgia in Wong's urban films is traceable to concrete places, times and events, Chow argues that the concretely identifiable markers in his stories also give way to something more intangible and elusive. Citing the director's claim that all of his works tend to 'revolve around one theme: communication among human beings', she surmises that the nostalgia expressed in his films is not simply 'a hankering after a specific historical past. Instead, the object for which his films are nostalgic is what we may call a flawless union among people, a condition of togetherness in multiple senses of the term'. As I have mentioned, this dimension of nostalgia, as a yearning for a condition of togetherness beyond national, cultural and racial boundaries also appears consistently in Yasmin's films. The romantic relationships on which they centre demonstrate the links between individual intercultural and ethnic relations, national integration and universal forms of humanity.

⁴⁰⁸ Pam Cook, *Screening the Past*, p. 11

⁴⁰⁹ Rey Chow (2007), *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*, New York: Columbia University Press.

In addition to depictions of yearning for human union, Yasmin's films often are invested emotionally in the usual sites of nostalgia such as rural *kampong* life and small towns, similar to Chow's examples of the Fifth Generation of Chinese directors' works. For example, the highlighting of tolerant attitudes towards multiculturalism, and of virtues such as love and humanity, takes place in subaltern spaces and milieus such as the small town and the *kampong*. Gerald Sim, who discusses Yasmin's Orked trilogy and notes this proclivity, asserts: '*Sepet* and *Gubra* take place in suburban Malaysia ... away from economic and urban centers where the country is staging its advance into the developed world. *Mukhsin* highlights that removed environment [...] nostalgically recalls the charms of village soccer games, small rustic wooden homes, cycling on an unpaved road.'⁴¹⁰ Sim's observation parallels the consistent cinematic deployment of rural landscapes as subjects of popular nostalgia for the ideal, morally uncorrupted village life.⁴¹¹

It should be noted that Wong Soak Koon in her review of *Sepet* raised this particular concern with nostalgia and the desire for racial and religious harmony thus: 'It is true that there is more than a trace of nostalgia in Yasmin's making the father drive an old car [...] There is, undeniably, something of the Yasmin-type romantic yearning for the past in these details. The parents seem as if they are

⁴¹⁰ Gerald Sim (2009, Spring), 'Yasmin Ahmad's Orked Trilogy'. *Film Quarterly*, 62(3), 48

⁴¹¹ Claudia Bell (1993), *Rural Way of Life in New Zealand: Myths to Live By*. Auckland: University of Auckland.

from an era when the identity markers of race and religion do not have such an intense hold on people ...'.⁴¹²

According to Wong, Yasmin's tendency to romanticise the past reflects a popular desire to return to a more humanitarian practice of multiculturalism, which many have argued has been lost. Echoing Wong's point, I suggest that nostalgia for the past in Yasmin's films could be due to the increased sensitivity in Malaysia regarding racial and religious differences. Writer-columnist Yin Ee Kiong attributes a similar sense of loss in his essay 'Through Race Tinted Glasses': 'The easy mingling of the races, where friendships were based on common interests and values and not on money, skin colour or religion, was the Malaysia many of us grew up in and now lament the passing of'.⁴¹³

One of the factors that has contributed to this sentiment could be the sectarian-communitarian nature of Malaysian politics, which has been incessantly oriented around issues of race and religion. The colonial-influenced concept of race has helped to construct the politico-racial ideology, which continues to haunt contemporary Malaysia today. As Shamsul A.B. notes, the notion of Malay-Malayness has been constructed by colonial historiography and subsequently been adopted uncritically by most historians, Malays or non-Malays, in the postcolonial *Nusantara* (Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia).⁴¹⁴ In Malaysia, ethnicity has been institutionalised in oversimplified and rigid 'race' categories such as Malay,

⁴¹² Wong Soak Koon (2005), 'Discussing "Sepet" over *tau chooi*. *Aliran Monthly*, 25(3), 21

⁴¹³ See Yin Ee Kiong's essay (2008), 'Through Race Tinted Glasses', *Out of the Tempurung: Critical Essays on Malaysian Society* (eds Fong Chin Wei and Yin Ee Kiong), Sydney, Australia: East-West Publishing, p. 285

⁴¹⁴ Shamsul A.B. (2001), 'A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of Malayness in Malaysia Reconsidered', *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*, 32(3), 355

Chinese, Indian and Others. According to Malaysian academic Sumit K. Mandal, this categorisation reduces the diversity and complexity of the country and may be of no particular value except to official party interests. Not only are the complexities of each of the so-called major races eliminated, so too the remarkable diversity of ethnic groups listed under 'Others'.⁴¹⁵ As a result of colonial construct and present Malaysian politics, ethnic identity is relational, with Malays, for example, being defined against their Chinese counterparts in a series of ethnic stereotypes: lazy Malay/ industrious Chinese, rural Malay/ urban Chinese, poor Malay/ wealthy Chinese.⁴¹⁶

A recent empirical study conducted on multicultural relations in Malaysia during 'the good-old-days' indicates that the majority of Malaysians find current multicultural relations more problematic than those in the past. Many of the study's participants cited the emergence of religion, primarily Islam, as an ethno-political category or global Islamisation as a cause for the increasing boundary between ethno-religious groups.⁴¹⁷ In Malaysia, the early 1970s could be seen as the beginning of an Islamisation process through the rise of a *dakwah* (proselytising) movement, which was viewed as a religious ideology, that responded to the triple challenge of Malaysian multiculturalism, Western values

⁴¹⁵ Sumit K. Mandal (2004), 'Transethnic Solidarities, Racialisation and Social Equality'. In *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform*, Edmund Terence Gomez (ed.). London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 59-60

⁴¹⁶ Khoo Gaik Cheng, 'The Politics of Love: Malaysia's Yasmin Ahmad', 55; Judith Nagata, 'Religious Correctness and the Place of Islam in Malaysia's Economic Policies', in Timothy Brook and Hy V Luong (eds), *Culture and Economy: the Shaping of Capitalism in Eastern Asia*, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 1997, pp. 99-100

⁴¹⁷ See Richard Buttny, Azirah Hashim and Kiranjit Kaur (2011), "'The Good-Old Days' and Multicultural Relations in Malaysia: Narratives, Criticism, and Accounts across Ethno-Political Lines", Paper presented at the 13th Conference of the International Association for Dialogue Analysis, Montreal, Canada, April 26-30, 2011

and modernity.⁴¹⁸ However, the Islamisation of Malaysia rigorously began in the 1990s when Anwar Ibrahim entered politics and became Deputy Prime Minister. Prior to this, Anwar had been the leader of the Islamic Youth Movement, intensifying *dakwah* (proselytizing) activities among Islamic youth in the wake of world-wide Islamic revivalism. In addition, under former Prime Minister Mahathir, as Osman Bakar writes, ‘we witnessed the biggest and most significant Islamic transformations of the country’. In rhetoric and practice, Mahathir tried to forge a relationship between Islam and normative notions of modernity and progress.⁴¹⁹ As a result, the last several years have seen increasing encroachment of Islam into the public and private spheres and pronouncements that Malaysia is ‘an Islamic state’ (although it has a secular constitution). Constitutionally, non-Muslim citizens are guaranteed the freedom to practice their religions. However, some non-Muslims have read the growing Islamisation as a gradual erosion of their cultural rights, guaranteed under secular laws. Yasmin’s films emerged at a time when the public sphere was rife with discussion about racialised political issues and Islamisation.⁴²⁰

While Wong Soak Koon’s review considers the ideological function of nostalgia in *Sepet*, Benjamin McKay’s article on the trilogy of which it is a part

⁴¹⁸ Scholars have referred to Islamic resurgences at various times in Malaysia. Judith Nagata, for example, notes that this 1970s resurgence is Malaysia’s second ‘Islamic revival’, with the first having occurred in the 1920s and 1930s. Whereas Shamsul A. B. suggests that ‘Islamic revivalism’ is by no means new due to it having occurred frequently in Malaysian history. See Julian C. H. Lee (2010), *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, pp. 15-16; See also Judith Nagata (1982), ‘Islamic Revival and the Problem of Legitimacy among Rural Religious Elites in Malaysia’, *Man*, 17(1), 42-57, and Shamsul A.B. (1983). ‘A Revival in the Study of Islam’, *Man*, 18(2), 399-404

⁴¹⁹ Osman Bakar (2003), ‘Islam and Political Legitimacy in Malaysia’. In *Islam and Political Legitimacy*, Shahram Akbarzadeh and Abdullah Saeed (eds). London: RoutledgeCurzon, pp. 133-134

⁴²⁰ Khoo Gaik Cheng, ‘The Politics of Love: Malaysia’s Yasmin Ahmad’, 155, 54

questions the relations between nostalgic representation and genre in *Mukhsin* (McKay does not bring up nostalgia in his readings of *Sepet* and *Gubra*).⁴²¹

McKay argues that Yasmin's vision of Malaysian plurality and the liberal humanist tone of her films are consistent characteristics of her work which mark her as an auteur. He further argues that the director conjures up a dreamed image of Malaysia that speaks to a multitude of contested realities such as race and religion while employing a recognisable cinematic style. McKay observes that Yasmin's invocation of an idyllic past resuscitates an old Malay film genre that looks specifically at *kampong* life – 'a distinctly Malay *kampong* genre' – which had its heyday in Malaya's golden age of cinema in the 1950s and 1960s.

According to McKay, the idyllic setting of these films serves as a site for the contestation of values on screen through a generic amalgam of melodrama, romance, music and comedy. He further notes:

Firstly, there is the fact the idyllic halcyon days of late childhood, early adolescent, work well with the resurrected genre format itself. For what is that genre but a reminder for contemporary audiences of the halcyon days of the nation's own early postcolonial existence? Yasmin clearly mutes the nostalgia here, but the references and images are there for all to make sense of.⁴²²

McKay's use of the term 'old Malay *kampong* genre' seems to refer to the old Malay melodramas and romances, many of which were set in the *kampong*. In addition, this particular *kampong* genre has its roots in the indigenous *purba* genre discussed in Chapter Two. I hope to indicate, by way of responding to McKay's

⁴²¹ Benjamin McKay (2010), 'Auteur-ing Malaysia: Yasmin Ahmad and Dreamed Communities'. In S.G. Yeoh & J.C.H. Lee (eds), *Fringe Benefits: Essays and Reflections on Malaysian Arts and Cinema*. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, pp. 115-136

⁴²² *Ibid.*, 131

claim about the ‘resurrection of the old Malay *kampong* genre’, whether – and in what ways – *Mukhsin*, together with *Sepet*, employs melodramatic strategies to induce nostalgia in the viewer.

It is interesting to note that McKay’s and Wong’s readings of Yasmin’s films are based on different definitions of nostalgia. Svetlana Boym identifies two forms of nostalgia.⁴²³ McKay’s reading hints at restorative nostalgia, which, according to Boym, stresses *nostos* (home) and attempts a trans-historical reconstruction of the lost home as a concrete, historical object. However, McKay’s article several times reiterates the question of Yasmin’s nostalgic resuscitation of the older *kampong* genre. Rather than determining whether the figuration of the *kampong* is the director’s attempt to exalt the past, a simultaneous attempt to recover a lost home in the broadest sense of the word and to restore lost traditions. Wong’s reading in contrast is based on reflective nostalgia, which focuses on *algia* or the longing itself rather than a concrete historical object, time or place. This form of nostalgia dwells on the ambivalences of human longing and belonging and often accentuates the contradictions of modernity. In this respect, Wong’s claim about Yasmin’s object of nostalgia, I would suggest, echoes Chow’s points in her discussion of Wong Kar-wai’s film, that is, the object which is not simply a yearning for a specific historical past, but for a condition of human togetherness that may never be achieved fully but is always longed for.

Interestingly, the representation of nostalgia in Yasmin’s films blurs the boundaries between restorative and reflective nostalgia. *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* both

⁴²³ Svetlana Boym, ‘Nostalgia and Its Discontents’, 7-18

evoke elements of nostalgia in multilayered allusions and leitmotifs. In this sense, one may read Yasmin's oblique use of nostalgia functioning as a critique of the present or connoting something wrong with the present because some of her characters (as in *Sepet*) directly yearn for a state of lost innocence while questioning ideas of being modern. Regarding this function of nostalgia, Andrew Higson, in his examination of British heritage films, argues that nostalgia can be 'used to flee from the troubled present into the imaginary stability and grandeur of the past. But it can also be used to comment on the inadequacies of the present from a more radical perspective [...] Nostalgia ... is ... always in effect a critique of the present, which is seen as lacking something desirable situated out of reach in the past'.⁴²⁴ In a similar vein, Chua Beng Huat (1995), who writes of the *kampong* as Singapore's nostalgic site, states that nostalgia is '... an immanent critique of the present; the past as lived experiences are invoked as a mirror of the present'.⁴²⁵ Higson's and Chua's definitions of nostalgia emphasise the ways in which temporality is central to the narrative and ethos of modernity.

Drawing on these ideas, I want to examine how nostalgia offers a critique of modernity, along gender, ethnic and national lines in Yasmin's films. As I will analyse in the following section, nostalgia in *Sepet* negotiates unrealised dreams of the past while presenting alternative visions of the future, all mediated through the romantic trajectory of its main protagonists. Nostalgia in *Mukhsin* is mobilised more explicitly due to its status as a prequel to *Sepet*. In addition to its *kampong*

⁴²⁴ Andrew Higson (1996), 'The Heritage Film and British Cinema'. In A. Higson (ed.), *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*. London: Cassell, p. 238

⁴²⁵ Chua Beng Huat (1995), 'That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for *kampungs*'. In B.S.A. Yeoh & L. Kong (eds), *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity Singapore*. Singapore: Time Editions, pp. 222-241

setting, *Mukhsin* invokes nostalgic desires through a yearning for the time of one's childhood and the slower rhythms of one's dreams.⁴²⁶ In the process, I suggest that both films' treatment of nostalgia produces 'subjective visions of afflicted imagination that tend to colonize the realm of politics, history and everyday perception'.⁴²⁷ Therefore, the romance genre fits to express such 'subjective visions of afflicted imagination' because the romance offers – in the words of literary critic Northrop Frye – 'a wish fulfilment or utopian fantasy'.⁴²⁸

***Sepet* – Inter-Ethnic Teen Romance?**

The inter-ethnic love relationship between a Malay girl and a Chinese boy is central to the plot, marketing and critical reception of *Sepet*. The two characters are introduced as coming from different worlds. Orked comes from the lower middle class and lives with her bohemian parents and Yam, their long-serving housekeeper, who is treated like a member of the family. While Orked is a diligent student, she also has a wild side and is a big fan of Cantonese movies. In contrast, Jason who comes from a dysfunctional working-class family has a strong relationship with his mother who endures a tempestuous relationship with his abusive, once philandering father. He writes poetry and works in an open-air market to supplement the family income. He and his friends at the market are at

⁴²⁶ Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', 8

⁴²⁷ Ibid., 9

⁴²⁸ Northrop Frye (1957), *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, p. 193. Regarding this, Fredric Jameson makes the point that while the romance delivers the reader from reality, it still contains that reality; it is a utopianism that offers a 'secure space' where a utopian state can be perpetually imagined. See Jameson (1975, Autumn), 'Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre', *New Literary History*, 7(1), 135-163

the mercy of gangsters and eventually, Jason enters a gang and becomes romantically involved with Maggie, the sister of its leader, Jimmy. It is Orked's hunt for the VCD of Wong Kar-wai's films at the open-air market that leads to her first encounter with Jason after which they meet regularly in a fast-food outlet.

As the relationship between Jason and Orked grows stronger, Jimmy threatens Jason, urging him to marry Maggie, who is pregnant with Jason's child. When Jason informs Orked about the predicament he is experiencing, she feels that he has betrayed her trust and distances herself from him. He attempts to win her back but she refuses to accept him. Orked, is awarded a scholarship to undertake study in England; on the way to the airport with her parents, Orked – upon her mother's insistence – reads the last letter that Jason sent her. Moved by his words, she tries to call him on her hand phone, but fails to reach him. At the same time, Jason rides his bike to the airport, hoping to get there in time to bid her farewell and meets with a tragic accident. Viewers see him lying unconscious on the road, his head bleeding profusely. Ironically, at this moment, Orked finally reaches Jason on her hand phone and confesses her feelings for him.

Most of the film's reviews highlighted its portrayal of inter-racial romance and Malaysia's multi-cultural reality. Malaysian reviewer Nurliana Kamaruddin noted that *Sepet* reflected a Malaysian reality, 'a teenage love story that doesn't insult your intelligence'.⁴²⁹ Malay-language critic Suraiya Mohd Nor regarded the film as a '*komedi romantis*' (romantic comedy).⁴³⁰ Robert Williamson claimed

⁴²⁹ Nurliana Kamaruddin (2005), Review of *Sepet*. *Cinema Online*, http://www.cinema.com.my/movies/movie_contents.aspx?search=2005.1986.sepet.6820§ion=review

that *Sepet* ‘... breaks new ground with its frank, positive portrayal of an interracial teen romance rising above societal prejudice’.⁴³¹ *Variety* critic Dennis Harvey described *Sepet* as ‘a charming romance that uses understated drama and comedy to address the gaps between Malaysia’s three principal ethnic groups’.⁴³² In my analysis of *Sepet*, I extend these critics’ claims by looking at how the film deploys temporality in ways that distinguish it from other Malaysian teen romances. In particular, I examine the ways in which the director draws on and reworks the generic conventions of romance and melodrama to articulate the film’s themes of love, longing, transience and loss.

Yasmin conforms to some precepts of a teen romance. For example, by portraying the two adolescent characters engaging in mundane every day activities, the film utilises specific settings and rendezvous that appear as markers of time and memory central to one’s adolescent romantic experiences. *Sepet* shows its protagonists meeting in an open-air market, enjoying a date in a fast-food restaurant, sitting at a bus stop (sheltered from a heavy downpour) and sitting at the end of a pier overlooking a lake while engrossed in deep conversation. These familiar places and spaces articulate Yasmin’s themes of temporality, namely change, transition, loss, transience, decline and memory.

Consider a scene at a lake, which appears in the form of a back shot captured in an extreme long shot. The first time it appears, the shot features Jason

⁴³⁰ Suraiya Mohd Nor (2005, 26 February), ‘Aspirasi Sepet’, *Berita Harian*, http://cinemamalaysia.com.my/article/read/Berita-Harian/Aspirasi_Sepet_1340

⁴³¹ Robert Williamson (2005), ‘Tears, sneers and new frontiers: Has *Sepet* turned Malaysian cinema on its head?’, *Firecracker Magazine*, <http://www.firecracker-media.com>

⁴³² Dennis Harvey (2005, May 17), ‘Sepet’, *Variety*, <http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117927159?refcatid=31>

and Orked sitting at the end of a pier overlooking the lake; Jason asks Orked: 'How long did it take you to fall in love with me?' In the film's frame, both characters are positioned in such a way that they constitute the centre of the frame, forming its symmetrical balance. A similar type of shot accompanied by Jason's voice-over briefly reappears towards the end: Jason is seen sitting alone at the end of the pier; without Orked, his sole positioned-figure renders the shot's composition off-balance. Both of these shots signify the sense of transience and loss experienced by the central protagonists, while reinforcing the unchanging nature of the space in the image of the serene, stagnant lake. The first shot signifies the two young people's togetherness in a harmonious relationship whereas the second signifies their separation and forlornness. The relationship between both shots, apart from shaping and guiding the viewers' understanding of the film's narrative development pattern, emphasises the setting (the pier and the lake) and time of meeting, functioning as a more concrete object of nostalgia, that which is remembered and longed for.

Throughout, Yasmin's temporal configurations include the intervention of past images that take the form of a remembered flashback. In one such scene Jason goes to meet Orked in the school compound. An insert shows a young Malay girl stopping and looking at the camera; the shot cuts to a young Chinese boy who stares at her. When the shot cuts back to show the girl, the viewer sees the present Orked. The effect of this insert as a brief rupture in the linear progression of narrative time is justified through the use of sepia-tinted tone. However, such a brief moment breaks down the borders of subjectivity because it does not cue the viewer to whose memory it actually represents. The shot suggests

that a young Jason had seen Orked in primary school and become smitten. Jason only guesses that the young girl might be Orked. In addition, the brief flashback does not explicitly indicate who is doing the remembering, although the viewer may well surmise that it is Jason since he has told her in a previous scene that he had seen her in his younger days.

Towards the end of the film, the viewers again see shots of the young Jason and the girl in a brief flashback after the scene wherein Jason sees Orked for the last time in the fast-food outlet with her other friends. Her male friend rebuffs Jason's attempts to talk to her. The camera focuses on her face gazing at Jason through a car window, a scene captured in slow-motion against sentimental background music. Here, Yasmin inserts a black-and-white flashback evincing similar gestures and expressions, as visual focalisation on both characters. The (imaginary) young Orked reciprocates young Jason's gaze. The flashbacks demonstrate the film's reliance upon the melodramatic conventions of chance and contingency evoked throughout, particularly in depicting its protagonists as victims of fate. Jason tells Orked that the preordained encounter between them as children has prepared him to meet Orked again in the present: they were destined to meet. Such conventions, as I will suggest towards the end of this section, may serve to liberate cinema from the constraints of narrative schema and 'real time' in order to realise the underlying form of heterogeneous temporalities.

Explicitly nostalgic elements appear in cultural references that range from the retro-1980s Canto-pop songs by Sam Hui to iconographic memorabilia and everyday objects and items. For example, Wong Soak Koon's concern with Yasmin's portrayal of Orked's father driving an old car, i.e., a model 'much

outdated and not your *Proton Saga* or *Proton Wira*' leads her to further question whether Orked's parents, with their open and tolerant attitudes towards racial and religious differences, are 'caught in a time-warp'.⁴³³ Wong observes that Yasmin attempts to subvert stereotypes, by hybridising or otherwise refashioning familiar, traditional tropes. For instance, she is shown wearing a *baju kurung*, a loose-fitting full-length traditional female dress consisting of a straight-cut skirt and blouse that is associated with Malay female conformity to traditional cultural values.⁴³⁴ Interestingly, Orked's *baju kurung* is an older type, which is longer and looser, not the modernised, fashionable version. Also, she often wears it with a pair of sneakers, a symbol of American modernity that further complicate her subjectivity as a modern Malay female adolescent.⁴³⁵ While on the one hand, her appearance characterises her 'feminine' demure and traditional self, on the other, it signifies her courage, agility and assertiveness, which can be discerned when her friend Lin's boyfriend (Izwan) humiliates her because she has a Chinese boyfriend. Orked rebuffs his ethnocentric, sexist and patriarcho-arrogant views, saying: 'For generations Malay men have been marrying outside their race. Now a woman wants to do it, everyone's flapping'.

Another form of cultural anachronism evidenced through dress is Orked and her mother's *batik sarong kembangan*, as mentioned earlier. *Kembangan* is

⁴³³ *Proton Saga* and *Proton Wira* are Malaysian-made cars.

⁴³⁴ The verb *kurung* means 'to imprison' or 'to cage'. The *baju kurung* affords more physical movement and inspires less self-consciousness about one's body (Khoo Gaik Cheng, 2006, *Reclaiming Adat*, p. 232).

⁴³⁵ Hanita Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie points out that Orked's donning of *baju kurung* indicates her independence and non-conformity to her immediate social milieu, as her female friends such as Lin are seen wearing more modern, Western-style attire. See Hanita, 'Negotiating Melodrama and the Malay Woman', p. 119

customarily worn with a *sarong* tied around the midriff, exposing the shoulders and arms.⁴³⁶ This image of *kemban* signifies sensual, bucolic images of traditional Malay femininity, images that were considered appropriate prior to the encroachment of Western modernity and Islamic revivalism.⁴³⁷ Thus, Orked's donning of her *baju kurung* and occasional *kemban*, along with her love for fast-food, her proclivity to speak English, her reading of postcolonial thinker Frantz Fanon, and of the *Qur'an* in Arabic, and, her adoration of actor Takeshi Kaneshiro, all complicate and destabilise her identity as a Malay, Muslim and Malaysian teenage girl. In this respect, Orked's sense of cosmopolitanism renders her not only culturally but also temporally hybrid, straddling the lines of past/present and traditional/modern.

Complicating Chinese Masculine Subjectivity

Yasmin's focus on an inter-ethnic romance simultaneously reverses and blurs the usual stereotyped images of Malaysia's ethnic groups which are reproduced in many Malaysian films and television dramas. Because Jason comes from a working-class Chinese family background, he does not fit the stereotypical image of the Chinese in Malaysia as agents of commercial modernity. The director challenges essentialist notions of race by showing the heterogeneity and contradictions of his Chinese identity and by depicting Jason's mother as a *Peranakan* Chinese. *Peranakan* culture combines southern Chinese and Malay

⁴³⁶ *Kemban* are considered 'un-Islamic' in contemporary Malaysia. In fact, these days Malay women, even those living in the *kampong*, are discouraged from wearing *kemban* as freely as they used to.

⁴³⁷ Hanita Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie (2012), 'Negotiating Melodrama and the Malay Woman', p. 119

traditions and is considered unique to the nations of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia. Due to their long process of assimilation into local Malay culture, the *Peranakan* Chinese not only function as signifiers of cultural hybridity, but also as emblems of the country's unique, multicultural past.⁴³⁸ Yet, this ethnic group continues to be regarded as 'Chinese' in Malaysia.

These contradictions are evident in a dinner scene at Jason's house. The family members converse in different languages as they eat: Jason speaks Cantonese, his mother, Chinese-*Peranakan* Malay, and his brother and Singaporean wife, Mandarin. They talk and quarrel in an overlapping manner, which intensifies the tension between them, but the viewer is denied access to what they are really saying. This particular scene reflects the everyday reality of multiculturalism by highlighting the complex subjectivities of Chinese-ness in Malaysia. Yasmin's distant 'objective' camera reinforces these differences by refusing to focus on any specific characters: static, uninterrupted long shots maintain the scene's unity of actual space and time. Gerald Sim ascribes this scene to Yasmin's films' 'restrained quality; feelings slowly emerge from actors' bodies and the still spaces they occupy'.⁴³⁹ This strategy, according to Sim, allows

⁴³⁸ The term '*peranakan*' (meaning 'descendant') refers to populations of Chinese descent in the Malay archipelago that have been settled there for a considerable amount of time, usually for more than five generations. *Peranakan* identity began to emerge in the 17th century and flourished under the British administration of the Straits Settlements and British Malaya in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although the term may also refer to other communities including the *Jawi Peranakans* (descendants of intermarriages between Muslim South Indians - or Arabs - and local women) or the Chitty Melaka (descendants of intermarriages between Hindu South Indians and local women), it is assumed that *Peranakan* generally refers to the substantial *Peranakan* Chinese community, descendants of Chinese traders, who settled in Malacca and the coastal areas of Java and Sumatra as early as the 14th century. Some time during the 19th century, Chinese merchants also began to frequent the increasingly bustling commercial ports of Penang and Singapore and started a *Peranakan* community there.

⁴³⁹ Gerald Sim, 'Yasmin Ahmad's Orked Trilogy', 48

“human emotions and everyday gestures to unfold in their own time”. I would add that it also encourages the viewer to see the big picture rather than identifying or sympathising with one individual or type.

A similar strategy is deployed in the scene where Jason talks on the phone to his friend Keong, revealing his future plans to be with Orked. He mentions that one day he will persuade her to find a part time job, so that her scholarship can be awarded to someone more deserving. On the one hand, this moment may evoke pity and compassion in the viewer due to its romanticisation of Jason as idealistic, innocent and vulnerable character. In this respect, Jason the ‘victim’ is literally exploited in the narrative: not only is he not awarded scholarship due to the racialised policy, but he is also victimised by the notorious gang leader and his sister.⁴⁴⁰ Stylistically, Yasmin’s camera is locked off: it frames Jason in a long shot in the form of a back shot overlooking the area outside of his house. This particular shot, which obstructs the viewer from concentrating on Jason’s facial expression, positions the omniscient and objective camera at a distance, typifying Yasmin’s realist-aesthetic stylistic approach (her static camera and minimal editing).

On one level, the scene of Jason produces a transcendental subject due to Yasmin’s objective camera; on another, it is alternately juxtaposed with the scene of Keong, thereby giving rise to a privileged spectatorial position. This also produces the subject in a constant state of becoming; the depiction of Jason as

⁴⁴⁰ In one scene, the viewer is presented with a candid conversation between Orked’s mother and the maid Yam, as they bring up the issue of scholarship. They point out that Orked was awarded a government scholarship to study abroad with her secondary school exam result of only five ‘A’s, while Jason failed to obtain a scholarship, even though he scored seven ‘A’s. This brief scene implies director Yasmin’s subtle uncovering of discrimination, particularly critiquing the biased way scholarship is given in the country, as a result of racialised policies.

victim-hero is hardly one-dimensional. Their phone conversation revolves around, among other things, the state of being modern, as Keong tells Jason to act 'modern' when he plans to take Orked to be his life partner. Jason responds, 'I don't care about modern' while Keong conceding, 'Yes, modern is stupid. Things in the olden days were better'. Jason's 'I-don't-care-about-modern' appears somewhat incongruous when one considers his personality and general appearance for not only does he speak English and enjoy fast food, but he also – to his conservative mother's chagrin – has spiky dyed hair. On the other hand, Jason is depicted as sensitive, melancholy and close to his mother; he also reads Rabindranath Tagore, writes Mandarin love poems and resorts to love letter-writing. All of these dispositions complicate Jason's identity as a modern, Chinese adolescent male.

Romantic Failure or Temporal Disjuncture?

The last sequence, which I want to read on several levels, is proof of the director's generic and narrational experimentation with temporality through notions of nostalgia, chance and contingency. The scene, which features Orked and her mother Mak Inom in a car on their way to the airport, is fragmented into three long takes. It is juxtaposed against shots of Jason weaving in and out of dangerous traffic on his motorcycle, en route to the airport. Orked and her mother sit in the back of the car; her father, who is driving occupies the off-screen space, so that viewers only have access to what he is saying. The second shot – the longest in the scene – takes the viewer on an emotional ride. The mother persuades Orked to

read Jason's heartfelt letter of remorse aloud: mother and daughter suddenly burst into tears.

At this point, Orked ceases to show the culture-bound symptom of *rajuk*. As noted earlier, Orked begins to display *rajuk* when she discovers Jason has impregnated a girl; this destabilises Orked's prevailing characteristics as independent, courageous and assertive, turning her into an object of vulnerability.⁴⁴¹ The camera movements in the scene reflect her revelation that Jason truly has loved her. Yasmin's long take captures the dramatic unities of space and time that shape the actors' performances and nuanced expressions even as the camera focuses on Orked and her sympathetic mother, giving them a privileged spectatorial position in contrast to the representation of Jason in the parallel scene. In this respect, the camera's presence ascribes a degree of empathy to Orked and the figure of modern Malaysian femininity that she represents, producing not only a transcendental subject that viewers can identify with, but also a subject that is in flux. Through her facial, affective and bodily expressions, Orked displays a mixture of qualities ranging from assertiveness to fragility, as traditionally associated with gender binary.

The poignancy of this final scene rises from the loss of time,⁴⁴² a strategy specific to melodrama known as the 'rhetoric of too late'.⁴⁴³ In the finale

⁴⁴¹ For further exploration of the phenomenon of *rajuk* in relation to Malay films, see Anuar Nor Arai's essay (2002), 'Rajuk, Pujuk, Kasih, Kempunan, Resah Gelisah dan Air Mata: Mengenai Intelligensi Budaya dalam Filem Melayu', *Jurnal Pengajian Melayu* (Malay Studies Journal), 12, 145-181; see also Mohammad Mahdi Abas's article (2010), 'Manusia Terpinggir dalam Filem Melayu: Analisis terhadap Fenomena Rajuk dan Pujuk' (Marginalised Individuals in Malay Film: An Analysis of the Phenomenon of *Rajuk* and *Pujuk*), *Jurnal Pengajian Media Malaysia*, 12(2), 83-95

⁴⁴² Linda Williams (1998), 'Melodrama Revised', in N. Browne (ed.), *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, p. 66

described above, the intercutting makes this mode of narration possible, which is characterised by omniscient access to a cross-section of characters and certain accessibility to narrative information.⁴⁴⁴ This type of parallel editing serves to split the viewers' attention between two events simultaneously, further fuelling the suspense; it creates a discrepancy (i.e., disparity of knowledge) between the viewer, who knows what is happening to Jason and Orked and her parents who do not. This conventional romantic plot offers a denouement that negotiates a possibility of romantic reconciliation between Orked and Jason, a happy wish-fulfilment ending that any viewer would desire. However, the viewers' powerless position to alter the narrative is meant to generate a sense of sadness. Even temporally – prior to the final outcome when viewers see Jason lying unconscious on the road – there is a delay that creates the possibility of failure in terms of a romantic reconciliation between Orked and Jason. Yasmin's visuals anticipate the possibility of such a failure: the crosscut shots of Jason weaving in and out of traffic help to reinforce the viewers' anticipation of an impending bad outcome for Jason.

However, after viewers realise that it is all too late, i.e., when they learn about Jason's death, Yasmin again utilises the notion of chance – an ingredient germane to melodrama – to negotiate the possibility of change. In this respect, the

⁴⁴³ See Steve Neale (1986), 'Melodrama and Tears', *Screen*, 27(6), 6-23

⁴⁴⁴ A melodrama often constructs knowledge hierarchies which bestow epistemic authority upon the viewer. In conventional melodrama, the narration creates a 'disparity of knowledge' so structured as to situate the viewer on the top tier of the epistemic hierarchy. Consequently, the melodrama's narrative is presented with maximum transparency, mobilising mainstays of the genre such as legibility of action and dramatic irony. For further discussion on melodramatic narration, see David Bordwell (1985), *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Routledge, pp. 70-73

director violates melodrama's ordinary standards of realism and instead reverts to the myth of romance. Here, she offers a twist that disrupts the scene's causal, temporal and spatial links, further generating narrative ambiguity. This occurs when, after the viewer observes Jason's tragic accident, the scene cuts to Orked, who eventually manages to talk to Jason and confess her feelings after several failed attempts to reach him. This particular moment disorients – and quite probably distracts – viewers when they hear Jason's voice answering Orked's phone, after learning of Jason's death/ tragic accident. This ending sparked much debate among viewers, particularly among those who were dissatisfied by its implausibility and illogicality. In effect, it engendered many interpretations and arguments, so much so that an on-line forum to discuss this particular scene was set-up.⁴⁴⁵ Benjamin McKay, who reads it as a dream sequence, argues that the ending's ambiguity is neither surreal nor a failure on the part of the director, who allows the interracial love affair to reach its fulfilment.⁴⁴⁶

Taking into consideration the above claims, I would add that the logically convoluted ending rising from Yasmin's multiple configurations of temporality defies the logic of chronological line of time, or 'homogeneous, empty time'.⁴⁴⁷ This suggests an alternate reading of history as future and corresponds to the film's evocation of the melodramatic conventions of chance and contingency.

⁴⁴⁵ Malaysian academic Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan's article attributes these viewers' reactions to their dependence on notions of a clear-cut narrative logic, their failure to discern the intended effect, i.e., to produce a sense of ambiguity. See Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan (2006), 'Sepet: Sisi Semantik, Sisi Sinematik' ('Sepet: Semantic and Cinematic Sides'), *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, 3, 233-246

⁴⁴⁶ Benjamin McKay, 'Auteur-ing Malaysia: Yasmin Ahmad and Dreamed Communities', p. 125

⁴⁴⁷ Walter Benjamin (1999), *Illuminations*, Hannah Arendt (ed.), Harry Zohn, trans. London: Pimlico, p. 254

Before the viewers witness Jason's tragic accident, Yasmin re-conjures a series of brief shots that alternately show either Jason or both of them in different locales, a montage that simultaneously comments upon their chance encounter and their 'togetherness', and presages the fate that is about to befall them. At this point, viewers hear the ring tone of a hand phone. The sound continues to reverberate even as the camera slowly tracks to the left of the frame to show Jason's hand phone on the road before finally revealing part of his injured body. When Jason eventually answers Orked's call in an unusually calm tone, one may infer that the 'contact' is imaginary, a connection that may only exist in the form of another ghostly or otherworldly time.

Symptomatically, this temporally fractured sequence may give rise to the notion that romantic reconciliation – or some possibility of human togetherness – can only be attained in dreams or at an imaginary level. In the meantime, this particular moment may be read as a critique of pertinent 'modern' constructs such as race, nation and modern homogeneous time, constructs that tend to impede love's transcendental power, which is generally believed to exceed all confines, boundaries and systems. Could it be that the boundaries that are transcendental are those which invoke, as Khoo Gaik Cheng has noted, the film's underlying Sufi philosophy, a Divine presence or intervention?⁴⁴⁸ Yasmin ends the scene enigmatically by conjuring up Sufi mystical quotations from Rabindranath Tagore about the relationship between God and humankind: 'It is as near to you as your

⁴⁴⁸ Khoo Gaik Cheng, 'The Politics of Love: Malaysia's Yasmin Ahmad', 155, 56; William C. Chittik (2000). *Sufism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: OneWorld Publications, p. 9

life, but you can never wholly know it'.⁴⁴⁹ I would add that Khoo's reading of the scene's Sufi connotations is prefigured in Jason's words in his final letters to Orked, words that frequently conjure up the Divine presence: e.g., 'God has answered my prayer'; "You're poetry from God, Orked". This is the stage at which the film introduces the most important dimension of nostalgia, no longer an emotion attached to a concretely experienced, chronological past but rather a dreamed state of oneness, that is, a wishful yearning for togetherness – a condition that can never be completely achieved but is always longed for.⁴⁵⁰ In this respect, one can further read this complementary union of the characters' multiple contradictions – based on ethnicity, culture and class – as translating or reordering homogeneous time as ghostly or utopian time.

The above notion of nostalgia, pertaining as it does to a condition of human togetherness, is also invoked in *Sepet*'s prequel, *Mukhsin*, which focuses on the (pre)adolescent romance between ten-year-old Orked and a twelve-year-old boy named Mukhsin.

Mukhsin: A Kampong Puppy Love Story

Considered Yasmin's most acclaimed and commercially successful work, *Mukhsin* – her fourth film, is the final instalment of the director's Orked trilogy. A prequel to *Sepet* and *Gubra*, the film depicts Orked as a tomboyish girl who experiences first love with Mukhsin who arrives in her *kampong* to spend his

⁴⁴⁹ Khoo reads Yasmin's work as challenging the superficial and literal reading of Islam and humanity, while attributing a twisted ending to the film's Islamic-Sufi undertones. According to her, Sufi philosophy where appears earlier in *Sepet*, is subtly mediated through Rabindranath Tagore, who translated *The Songs of Kabir*, a fifteenth-century Sufi literary classic; for example, in the film's opening scene, Jason is heard reading from Tagore.

⁴⁵⁰ Rey Chow, *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films*, pp. 51-53

school holidays with his aunt Senah. Orked and Mukhsin become the best of friends and in time, their relationship blossoms into romance. However, Orked is too naive to reciprocate Mukhsin's affection for her.

One day, when they are playing a game of *galah panjang*⁴⁵¹ with their neighbourhood friends, Mukhsin loses his temper when Orked is physically bullied by another boy. Driven by callow jealousy, Mukhsin yells at her brusquely and pulls her out of the game arena. From then on, Orked distances herself from him, displaying *raju*. The erring Mukhsin shows due remorse and proceeds to coax her. However, he ends up becoming overwhelmed by a sense of *gundah-gulana* (melancholic sadness) due to his inability to win her back. Before he leaves the *kampong*, Mukhsin reminds Orked to read what he has written on the tail of her kite. After reading it, Orked immediately rushes to Senah's house.

As with *Sepet*, the film is demarcated generically as a romance – a 'first love story' according to its poster. Critics and reviewers treated the film as an adolescent romance. For example, Malaysian critic Hari Azizan regarded *Mukhsin* as 'more than puppy love', further observing the film's representation of adolescence: 'While most movies today focus on the loss of innocence in the young, *Mukhsin* stands out for its celebration of the purity of youth'.⁴⁵² In similar vein, A. Wahab Hamzah of *Utusan Malaysia* described the film as a realistic

⁴⁵¹ *Galah Panjang* is a traditional game which requires two separate teams of attackers and defenders. Every player is required to run past all defending lines, from the first line to the last, then run back towards the first line without any physical contact with the opposing team. If any member of the opposing team accidentally touches a player, the player is considered 'dead' and out of the game. This game is played not only by children, but also by adults as it often brings back cheerful nostalgic memories for them.

⁴⁵² Hari Azizan (2007, 9 March), 'More Than Puppy Love', *The Star*, http://ecentral.my/movies/reviews/review.asp?file=archives/movie_reviews/2007/3/9_2_Mukhsin&title=Mukhsin&id=1279&rid=1308&sec=Movies

portrayal of a pure and beautiful adolescent world replete with emotion.⁴⁵³ *New York Times* critic Jeannette Catsoulis noted: ‘... ‘Mukhsin’ paints the turmoil of puppy love on a canvas of family relationships as delightful as it is believable’.⁴⁵⁴

There were also reviews that hinted at the film’s nostalgic tendencies. French critic Xavier Leherpeur of *Telecineobs* wrote: ‘An account of a past that was carefree and of the emergence of a romance, in which the director presents a picture of her country and its contradictions.’⁴⁵⁵ American critic Mary Block observed: ‘Incidental cinematographic elements ... add to the film’s anachronistic quality, further imbuing it with a happy nostalgia that’s not forced or cloying ... *Mukhsin* seems like a delicate homage to a first love’.⁴⁵⁶ Drawing on claims made by the aforementioned critics about the film’s genres of ‘adolescent romance’, ‘love story’ and elements of nostalgia, this section will examine how elements of romance and melodrama articulate the director’s nostalgic depiction of everyday life in the *kampong*. Because the ‘first love’ experience is placed in the past and in an idyllic pastoral setting, *Mukhsin* functions on a more explicitly nostalgic register than *Sepet*.

⁴⁵³ A. Wahab Hamzah (2007, 13 March), ‘Mukhsin Alam Remaja Yang Indah Penuh Emosi’, *Utusan Malaysia*, http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2007&dt=0313&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=hiburan&pg=hi_04.htm&arc=hivearc=hive

⁴⁵⁴ Jeannette Catsoulis (2008, 28 May), ‘A Tomboy in Malaysia Is Introduced to Hormones’, *The New York Times*, <http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/movies/28mukh.html>

⁴⁵⁵ Xavier Leherpeur (2008), *Muksin. Telecineobs*. <http://yasminthestoryteller.blogspot.com.au/2008/02/some-french-pressmagazine-ratings-for.html>

⁴⁵⁶ Mary Block (2008, 21 May), *Mukhsin: Directed by Yasmin Ahmad. The L Magazine*, <http://www.thelmagazine.com/newyork/mukhsin/Content?oid=1140035>

Adolescent Naiveté or Gender Insensitivity?

In many ways, the film shares generic and narrative similarities with *Sepet*. In particular, Mukhsin, like Jason, is painted a victim-hero due to his troubled family background and working class status. In one scene, he borrows his irascible brother's shirt without the latter's permission, to wear on an excursion with Orked and her parents; in another, Orked's family's maid Yam, who teaches Orked and Mukhsin to read the *Qur'an*, offers to repair the torn pocket of his *baju Melayu* (traditional garb). Mukhsin's impoverished condition, along with his innocence and youthful vulnerability, gives rise to a melodramatic mode that evokes pathos and sympathy.

Although the film's central protagonists are from different classes, *Mukhsin* does not foreground the notion of class-impeded romance, common in many old and contemporary Malay romance-melodramas. Rather, the film introduces gender complications that affect the central protagonists' relationship. For instance, the scene that precipitates their separation begins with Mukhsin cursing Orked when they are playing the game of *galah panjang*. This triggers her prolonged *rajuk*. Mukhsin's loss of temper emanates from his jealousy – an emotion based on traditional gender roles in which a woman is seen as belonging to a man. This display of jealousy confirms Mukhsin's attraction to Orked which is signalled earlier when he asks her to maintain her long hair. Throughout, Orked is shown playing the traditional game of *galah panjang* with the boys in her neighbourhood, overplays the role of groom in a game of 'brides and grooms' with the neighbourhood girls, regularly climbs tree with Mukhsin, and confronts bullies at her school. Conversely, Orked's prolonged *rajuk* and over-sensitivity,

resulting from being slighted by Mukhsin's insensitivity, undermine her 'tomboy' qualities. He attempts to *pujuk* (coax) her with tender and sympathetic words, but, it is all to no avail. During his last day in the *kampong*, Mukhsin appears outside Orked's room and she still refuses to acknowledge him. He tries hard not to shed tears while informing her that he will be leaving, a disposition that contrasts to his earlier display of machismo and anger.

The film harnesses the romantic mode to the melodramatic once Orked distances herself from Mukhsin. In a scene after Orked's break up with Mukhsin, Orked and her parents slow-dance in their living room to the strains of the mournful French ballad titled *Ne Me Quitte Pas* ('Don't Leave Me'). The scene cuts to a shot of Mukhsin passing their house. The camera gazes at him from a distance, from inside the house. He stops for a while to watch what to him appears a delightful display of familial love, music and dancing. Meanwhile, he stands alone in the dark, framed by a door in a long shot. This contrasting image is meant to elicit pathos and sympathy from the viewers, emotions that are intensified through the music. The significance of the song lies in its painfully melancholy lyrics, which share affinities with the film's temporal themes: 'Don't leave me; we must just forget; all we can do is forget; all we did till now; let's forget the cost; of the breath we've spent; saying words unmeant; and the time we spent; hours that must destroy; never knowing why everything must die ...' The song and its lyrics reinforce the narrative by reflecting Mukhsin's feelings about being abandoned – here, by Orked but also by his parents earlier.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵⁷ Amir Muhammad, *Yasmin Ahmad's Films*, p. 129

When Mukhsin exits the frame, the viewers' perspectives shift as the camera switches to gaze at Orked and her parents dancing from outside the house, representing the 'omniscient' look of the viewer, who has taken Mukhsin's place. In its ambiguous state, the scene recalls Pier Paolo Pasolini's concept of a 'free indirect point of view', the unique amalgamation of the subjective and objective achieved by the cinema. This concept, which renders viewers' perspectives almost seamlessly, imbues specific characters with complex subjectivities. In other words, the oscillation between points-of-view poses a challenge to the binary logic found in cinematic apparatus as it produces a form of subjectivity that is always differing from itself.⁴⁵⁸

Imagining Everyday Kampong Reality

The story's setting during the school holidays – an idyllic time that will inevitably pass already evokes a sense of nostalgia. *Mukhsin*'s story may not be set in the 'real' past; but, the period depicted is constructed in such a way that the past is memorialised. This tendency is reinforced by the film's cinematographic elements which include grainy picture quality and ambient sound, along with a miscellany of everyday gestures, objects, items and certain memorabilia that are redolent of a pastoral past uncontaminated by today's global consumer capitalism. Images of Orked's father driving an old Volkswagen, their neighbour's antique Vespa, an old record player, children playing *galah-panjang* boisterously, and, Orked and

⁴⁵⁸ According to Pier Paolo Pasolini, free indirect images provoke aesthetic questions to do with a cinema of poetry; but, they also raise political and ethical concerns. The privileging of multiple perspectives over that of the individual gestures towards an immanent ethics that does not recognise moral judgements. See Pasolini (1988), *Heretical Empiricism*. Trans. B. Lawton and L. K. Barnett. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

Mukhsin reading the *Qur'an* break the quiet stillness of the late evening. The film's profundity – particularly its thematic articulation of human togetherness and separation – lies precisely in these images and sounds of the ordinary. More significantly, all of these depictions figure the *kampung* as a nostalgic space of memory, i.e., the re-imagined past marked with idealised forms of happiness and social ties, particularly the fostering and rekindling of neighbourly interaction and the entrenched sense of community.⁴⁵⁹

In one scene that accentuates the quotidian, Yam is preparing chocolate milk ice packs (*aiskrim Malaysia*) in the kitchen while conversing with Mukhsin's aunt Senah, who is crunching some peanuts with relish. The scene commences with Yam stirring chocolate sauce as Senah comments upon its density. Yam explains that she prefers it that way because the mixture of the bitter chocolate and sweet milk, according to her, will make the ice-cream taste better. Yam shows Senah how to make the ice-cream while at the same time hinting at sexual innuendo when she stresses the words 'chocolate' and 'milk': the two laugh saucily. Yam and Senah switch their conversation to other topics, mainly concerning Mukhsin's dysfunctional family and his blossoming relationship with Orked. Then they extend their carping to a modicum of gossip about Orked's parents' passionate intimacy.

⁴⁵⁹ Tim Bunnell (2002), '*Kampung* Rules: Landscape and the Contested Government of Urban(e) Malayness'. *Urban Studies*, 39(9), 1685-1701; Chua Beng Huat (1995), 'That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for *kampungs*'. In B.S.A. Yeoh & L. Kong (eds), *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity Singapore*. Singapore: Time Editions, pp. 222-241

The scene's detail of the everyday is captured in a medium shot using a single take reinforced by Yasmin's stationary, distant camera, which sustains the scene's actual time and space. Here, a certain restraint in Yasmin's presentation gives rise to the scene's naturalistic atmosphere while at the same time complementing the realistic acting by Adibah Noor and Mislina and mimicking everyday conversations and gestures. While this 'ordinary' scene appears significant on many levels, it in fact highlights multiple aspects of the desire for 'human togetherness' that characterises the use of nostalgia in *Sepet*. Writer-director Amir Muhammad notes that the scene is not merely about ice cream: 'We think of a character who isn't even physically in it: Mukhsin's life, from what we have seen, is a mixture of the bitter and the sweet'.⁴⁶⁰ Amir's observation hints at the scene's potential to provoke viewers to become objective and, in turn, to contemplate the subject. I would add that even Yam's reference to the bitter-sweet mixture of the chocolate sauce and milk has rhetorical undertones of nostalgia, as elements of bitterness and sweetness often characterise and define nostalgia.⁴⁶¹

Apart from its highlighting of daily banality, *Mukhsin*'s nostalgic tone can be discerned through certain cues that the film shares with – or is inspired by – old Malay films.⁴⁶² The nostalgic reference to old Malay films is evident in the

⁴⁶⁰ Amir Muhammad, *Yasmin Ahmad's Films*, p. 123

⁴⁶¹ Furthermore, I would suggest that the scene has the potential to mediate or create nostalgic desire among adult Malaysian viewers, who may identify with the home-made ice cream which was generally popular among Malaysian children back then. As adult human beings, we frequently feel nostalgic for the food we ate as children – a form of remembering our roots. In this respect, food may also serve as a metaphor for home. See Gaye Poole (1999), *Reel Meals, Set Meals: Food in Film and Theatre*. Sydney: Currency Press, p. 235

⁴⁶² McKay, Benjamin (2007), 'The Golden Age'. *Kakiseni.com*, <http://www.kakiseni.com/printpage.php?page=articlebody&id=1076>

foregrounding of the *kampong* in which many old Malay films were set and in the use of music to produce the affect of nostalgia. For example, the musical sequence featuring a traditional music genre called *keroncong* is evocative in the sense that it alludes to a ‘lost’ golden age, the glorious era of Malay cinema. The musical scene entails an ensemble performance of the *keroncong* song *Hujan* (‘Rain’) featuring Yam singing, Orked’s father and his friends playing instruments and Orked and his mother dancing in the pouring rain.

It recalls P. Ramlee’s romance, *Antara Dua Darjat* (‘Between Two Classes’, 1960), which was briefly discussed in Chapter Two and which also featured a *kampong* musical scene of a *keroncong* song/ performance rendered against a backdrop of pouring rain. The scene can be considered homage to *Antara Dua Darjat* due to the parallelism both films draw: they feature rain as the moment when the central protagonists see each other for the first time.⁴⁶³ In *Mukhsin*, the melody and lyrics of the *keroncong* song propel the film’s theme and narrative forward. The soothing and cheerful melody contributes to mood-setting and titillation; its lyrics about rain and blessing signal hope and optimism, auguring well for the imminent relationship between the two school children. This feeling undergirds the film’s evocation of melodramatic chance and contingency: a particular moment when Orked first discovers Mukhsin’s presence in the *kampong* before both meet further and become friends. In addition, its lyrics about

⁴⁶³ In *Mukhsin*, Orked, who is dancing with her mother in the rain, manages to catch a glimpse of Mukhsin in a taxi with his hand stretched out of the window making an undulating motion. In *Antara Dua Darjat*, the male protagonist Ghazali and his friends who have to stop their *keroncong* performance to help rescue the rich and pretty Zaleha, whose car gets stuck in the mud during heavy rain.

the rain correspond closely to the mournful French ballad *Ne Me Quitte Pas* discussed earlier.

Mukhsin incorporates typical everyday *kampong* scenes that depict nosy villagers gossiping, a tendency reminiscent of old Malay and Hollywood melodramas.⁴⁶⁴ In the film, gossip sources often emanate from cultural anxieties around the erosion of traditional values or the emergence of Western modernity within the postcolonial state of Malaysia. For example, Orked's neighbour accuses her British-educated mother of middle-class snobbery because she speaks English at home, a symptom of 'showing off' and forgetting her Javanese roots. A neighbour sniffs disapprovingly at Orked and her mother as they jubilantly dance in the rain in the aforementioned musical scene and declares that their Malayness has been diluted. In one scene, a boy informs Orked that Mukhsin's aunt Senah was once a *perempuan ronggeng* (a type of 'cabaret woman'), signifying a transgressive woman. In another scene, Ayu, the girl next door, informs Orked that her mother said that Orked's father ends up doing house chores because he has been 'queen controlled' by Orked's mother. These forms of *kampong* gossip are similar to those depicted in old Malay melodramas, which foreground the conflict between individual desires and collectivist values which play out in and as tensions between tradition and modernity. In this respect, Yasmin does not totally romanticise the *kampong*; rather, she shows that the *kampong* effortlessly

⁴⁶⁴ Similarly, portrayals of gossip have their roots in old American melodramas, e.g., films by Douglas Sirk in which the protagonists must confront opposition from the busybody and judgmental townspeople, who invariably resort to gossip. Barry Keith Grant (2007), *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*. London: Wallflower, pp. 77-78

generates all of the contradictions and paradoxes of the Malay character and psyche.

Belatedness, Memory and Remembrance

In the film, Yasmin includes some direct nostalgic references to concrete places, times and events, which help drive the film's romantic and melodramatic narratives. For example, in one scene Orked and Mukhsin call in at a small tourist site during a cycling tour around the *kampong*. At the site, Orked reads the inscription (in English) of a myth about a pious virgin who disappeared on her wedding day after an arranged marriage.⁴⁶⁵ In a dream, the virgin tells her parents that she has found peace on an island and tells them not to look for her. The parents erect a tomb for her on a tree where she once hung her clothes. Following Orked's reading, the scene shifts to a static long shot of a panoramic view of the *kampong* landscape; a back shot of Mukhsin and Orked that positions them in the foreground at the edge of the right side of the frame. In this shot, the two are guessing the exact location of the virgin's clothes-hanging tree, leading them to pick their tree of choice. The middle-ground and background of the frame, which reveal a stagnant river, shrubs, plants, trees and rustic wooden homes, convey the quiet serenity of typical *kampong* scenery. Elements of nature serve as classic visual metaphors for change, stillness, transience, decline and loss.⁴⁶⁶ These

⁴⁶⁵ This little-known myth is called *Keramat Anak Dara* (The Shrine of a Virgin Girl). The gravesite is located in Kuala Selangor – in the Malaysian state of Selangor where the film was shot.

⁴⁶⁶ I am borrowing this point from Rey Chow's discussion of 'sentimentalism' in relation to the manifestations of nature often invoked in contemporary Chinese cinema. See Chow (2007),

conditions, I will suggest, can be understood in the context not only of the myth, but also of the vulnerability and transience of the Orked-Mukhsin relationship.

This specific landscape – through the invocation of the aforementioned myth – intensifies the feelings of nostalgia, remembrance and loss, which Orked experiences towards the end of the film. At this point, Yasmin – as with *Sepet*'s ending – evokes a sentimentality based on the melodramatic form which complies with the temporality of belatedness. However, in this finale, she plays with suppression and slowness when she opts for a narrational mode that is a little more restricted. In addition, *Mukhsin* draws on melodramatic themes of suppression, repression and renunciation in its foregrounding of the unspoken love of pre-adolescent romance between two children on the verge of becoming adolescents.⁴⁶⁷ Here, the scene constitutes a dangling ellipsis: when Orked finds the kite after being told by Mukhsin to do so, and reads what is written on its tail, viewers are denied access to narrative information, i.e., revelation in the form of what Mukhsin has written on Orked's kite that eventually confirms his virtue. After reading what Mukhsin has written on her kite's tail, Orked immediately rushes to Senah's house to see him before he leaves the *kampong*. But, it is too late – he has gone. He has left a souvenir for her, a shirt hanging on the tree.

Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility, New York: Columbia University Press, p. 19

⁴⁶⁷ Many scenes showcase Mukhsin's budding feelings through gestures, actions and gazes. For example, Mukhsin repeats her name when they are sitting on a tree, as if to express his feelings but lets the moment pass. According to Thomas Elsaesser, the genre's frequently excessive style, particularly in old American melodrama, serves as a stark irony to the themes of repression, suppression and renunciation that revolve around its characters, who metaphorically embody the contradictions of bourgeois ideology. See Elsaesser (2003), 'Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama', in Barry Keith Grant (ed), *Film Genre Reader 3*. Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 363-395

She recalls her time with Mukhsin at the tourist site: viewers hear Mukhsin's voice-over indicating which tree he would prefer to hang his clothes on. Temporally, Mukhsin's departure and Orked's failure to meet and bid farewell to him signify 'the passing of time.' She is left feeling powerless and lost, feelings that may echo those of the girl's parents – as narrated in the myth – when they struggled to ascertain their daughter's whereabouts. This whole sequence is imbued with an understated, subtle sense of sadness, once more partly reinforced by the brief deployment of the French song *Ne Me Quitte Pas* ('Don't Leave Me') for the second time against a series of poetic visuals of Orked running throughout several sites of the *kampong* landscapes, underscoring her thoughts and feeling.

Another significant scene which shows Mukhsin and Orked flying kites in the middle of lush, green paddy fields is ascribed simultaneously with earthly and ethereal qualities. In this scene, the haunting tones of Mozart's opera *Così fan Tutte* reverberate across the wind that ripples the paddy in the fields, the arias accentuating the close affinity between nature and human feeling. The ethereal quality of the scene is due in part to its being set in the 'radiant magic-hour'.⁴⁶⁸ It also connects this scene to the quiet dream sequence in which Mukhsin and Orked sit side by side like a groom and bride on a wedding dais against a paddy field background. When they are separated, Mukhsin has such a dream that indicates their wedding. When he immediately wakes up, one wonders whether this can be read as his nocturnal emission or 'wet dream', a natural rite of passage for an

⁴⁶⁸ Michael Sicinski (2010), 'Mercy and Love: The Populist Optimism and Humanistic Islam of Yasmin Ahmad's Films,' *Moving Image Source: Museum of the Moving Image*, <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/mercy-and-love-20100505>

adolescent male like him.⁴⁶⁹ This scene initially implies their romantic reconciliation which merely happens in a dream. However, after Orked places the *songkok* on Mukhsin and demurely kisses his hand (like a Malay bride would normally do), we see him gradually levitate into mid-air. This scene also reorders and reifies the traditional gender identity: the *songkok* worn by Orked earlier is placed on Mukhsin and Orked, clad in *baju kurung*, appears traditionally feminine in her demure gestures.

In addition, the ethereal kite-flying scene includes two actors who appeared in *Sepet*, Sharifah Amani (the adolescent Orked) and Ng Choo Seong (Jason) as husband and wife, a couple whose house is located in the midst of the paddy fields, and who help Mukhsin and Orked to make the kites. Their appearance may be a reminder of *Mukhsin* being a prequel to *Sepet*, a proclivity to romanticise what happened in the seemingly irretrievable past while at the same time implying that there is always a second chance or hope for romantic failure (as noted by Orked in the voice-over narration towards the end). Both characters (actors) may prefigure as ‘ghosts of the future’. While both seem happy as husband and wife now, they may have served as ‘substitutes’ for the ‘real’ adult Orked and Jason in *Sepet*, who failed to negotiate their romantic reconciliation.

This particular reading indicates nostalgia’s concern with being prospective, not merely retrospective. In the words of Boym: ‘The fantasies of the past, determined by the needs of the present, have a direct impact on the realities

⁴⁶⁹ Amir Muhammad does not think that the scene implies a wet dream. However, Amir mentions: “In the original story outline I read, before the shoot began, he discovers that it was a wet dream. But in the final film, he remains dry”. See Amir, *Yasmin Ahmad’s Films*, p. 131

of the future'.⁴⁷⁰ Thus, the scene's images of passionate togetherness (between Orked-Mukhsin and the adult Orked-Jason) remain ambiguous. Did this actually happen? Or, were they part of a fantasy, an invocation of something that never took place?

This example demonstrates Yasmin's reworking of romance to express an uncanny temporality that exceeds the confines of cinema's spatialised time. This tendency echoes Sufi poet Jalaluddin Rumi's words, heard in Orked's voice-over narration towards the end: 'The minute I heard my first love story, I started looking for you, not knowing how blind I was. Lovers don't finally meet somewhere. They're in each other all along'. Forms of temporal fracture can be discerned not only in *Sepet*, particularly the ambiguous ending as I discussed in previous section, but also in Yasmin's other films; for example, in *Rabun*, Yasmin reunites all of her characters (both alive and dead) in the closing scene. In *Gubra*, after the film's closing credits (ending), Yasmin includes a scene reconciling Orked and Jason as happy spouses. In *Talentine*, the romantic protagonists' date in a park is disrupted by the sudden appearance of a horde of diapered babies (out of nowhere) toddling around with magical bubbles, all tending to break the viewers' logical, sensory-motor schemata, at the same time engendering some unsettling effects.

This form of spatio-temporal warping can be situated within a larger part of Yasmin's attempt to imagine a particular form of the past that critiques the dominant cultural order of the present and gestures toward a utopian future. Her

⁴⁷⁰ Svetlana Boym, 'Nostalgia and Its Discontents', 8

characters, gestures, interiors, objects and cinematic sensibilities seem anachronistic or ‘out of tune’ with contemporary times, implying that had it actually been the director’s specific yearning, it would have been a yearning for something idealised in terms of human relationships and togetherness that can hardly be attained in actuality. As these films tend to imply, this yearning can only be accessed through the aforementioned phantasmagorical images that strain against cinema’s spatialised time.

The film’s spatio-temporal concerns, particularly pertaining to nostalgia, culminate in the final segment of the film, which features a series of shots (in the form of a montage) and employs Orked’s voice-over. These shots signify a transition in Orked’s life in consonance with the vicissitudes surrounding her romantic pursuits. The voice-over comments upon her ephemeral relationship with Mukhsin, implying that she finds love again later in life. The montage is chronologically presented as follows (with the notion of ‘transition’ literally enunciated by this juxtaposition’s development pattern): 1. A shot of a blue sky enshrouded in clouds; 2. A shot of a picturesque tree-lined path (along which Mukhsin used to cycle while carrying Orked) [these first two still-life shots are ‘empty’ – devoid of human figures, signifying the past]; 3. A long shot of several men in front of Orked’s house carrying a brand new sofa from a small pick-up truck into the house (metaphorically implying ‘the arrival of – or replacement with – something new’); 4. A medium close-up shot of Orked sitting on a bus gazing out of the window; 5. A close-up shot of a page of a book featuring a poem handwritten in the Chinese language (these two shots perhaps signify the present); 6. A long shot of Orked walking past a Chinese boy, who appears several times in

Sepet as young Jason. He keeps looking at her in their school compound (prefiguring the arrival of Orked's new lover Jason, and signalling the future). This juxtaposition of shots manifests itself as multi-layered allusions to memory, time and place. The whole segment – with shots rendered in a languid pace against the lilting strains of mellow, sentimental piano music – encapsulates a bitter-sweet affirmation of life's evolving and renewing process.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have argued that director Yasmin Ahmad's various configurations of temporality in *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, through the invocation of nostalgia, arise predominantly out of an elaborate engagement with the romance and melodrama genres. Inevitably, the connections between the two films extend beyond their status as a sequel and a prequel to their generic tactics and gambits, all geared to induce nostalgia in the viewer. In the process, such mobilisation of nostalgia corresponds closely to a problematic of temporal dislocation that complicates other forms of identity politics.

Sepet undertakes to rework certain hallmark principles of romance to depict social spaces synonymous with adolescent romantic experiences that signify their togetherness or separation. As well, it adheres to the melodramatic conventions of chance and contingency to motivate action and drive the love story forward. *Mukhsin*'s narrative of (pre)adolescent love also reworks specific conventions of romance by drawing on melodramatic forms, ranging from the characterisation of a victim hero and the temporality of belatedness to strategies such as suppression and renunciation. I have shown that the director's specific

cinematic strategies help to convey both nostalgia and the film's adolescent love story, ranging from her 'realist' *mise-en-scène* to the creative use of music.

Both films are inclined towards reflective nostalgia concerned with historical and individual time, with their depictions of the irrevocability of the past and human finitude. Their narratives of adolescent romance, meditate on the past and the passage of time. The adolescent protagonists, reinforced by the director's 'objective' camera come to stand for universal and transcendental types of the yearned for, less divided nation envisioned by the director. Depictions of the couples' togetherness, whether in dreams or everyday life, past or present, all contribute to the director's cinematic imaginings of a more ethnically, culturally and class inclusive Malaysia, particularly mediated through the characters' fluid gendered and adolescent subjectivities. In this respect, notions of nostalgia in both *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* appear prospective, not merely retrospective, because the two films draw on the convention of the romance genre to negotiate alternative temporalities in the form of utopic future time. In *Sepet*, this tendency reaches its apogee in the film's finale: it offers forms of causal and spatio-temporal fracture, ambiguously negotiating the romantic reconciliation between the central protagonists. In *Mukhsin*, the director features the appearance of 'adult' versions of Orked and Jason, signifying an alternative form of romantic reconciliation.

Through my readings of these films, I have demonstrated that genres such as romance and melodrama invoke nostalgia to celebrate the past in order to reflect the present; they depict characters trapped in time, unable to affect the course of events, a disposition that implicitly reflects and critiques modernity through the perspective of doomed romance. Both films' allusions to nostalgia

inform the director's underlying yearning for the past (wherein social-cohesive ties were evident), together with her thematic preoccupations dealing with a certain condition of human togetherness, a condition that most of her characters seem to be yearning for but find difficult to fully attain or materialise.

In conclusion, both *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* open up the reworking of genre conventions in romance and melodrama to more complex representations of gender with respect to age, temporality, ethnicity and class. At the same time, they also envision Yasmin Ahmad's cinematically nostalgic disposition as an ideal wonderland of – and the director's ode to – postcolonial Malaysia.

CONCLUSION

Throughout this thesis, I have argued that a number of contemporary Malaysian filmmakers have reworked notions of genre to articulate ideological critiques of modernisation in Malaysia, specifically through their complex representations of gender and time. Westernisation, state capitalist ideology and increasing Islamisation have shaped the collective identity crisis that Malaysia is currently experiencing. This crisis is expressed through the ways in which dominant notions of identity around gender, race, religion and class, are articulated, contested and negotiated in popular discourse and culture. While notions of gender seem to have become more progressive, conservative attitudes toward race, class and religion have remained intact and in some cases, even intensified.

These patterns are reflected in the films that have been examined. I have argued that the filmmakers' deliberate engagement with genres and temporalities both questions and destabilises essentialist identity categories. They do so through innovative aesthetic strategies that evoke affective and visceral responses in viewers along the lines of genre convention. For example, romance and melodrama invoke feelings of nostalgia, chance and contingency while horror becomes synonymous with the trope of haunting which blurs the temporal boundaries of past and present. In most of the films, female characters play mediating roles for men. When women are portrayed as single, independent and ambitious as in the horror and romance films discussed here, they are gendered ambivalently at best (as with Orked in *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*) and literally monstrous at worst (as with Meriam in *Pontianak* and Suzana in *Susuk*). In comedy films,

men project their anxieties regarding modernity, tradition and their tense co-existence onto independent, modern women (as in *Sell Out!* and *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*). In action films, forms of unstable masculinity are mediated and recuperated by more traditional and virtuous peripheral female characters.

By pointing out these generic patterns and their cultural implications in Malaysian cinema, this thesis contributes to a growing body of scholarship on film genre outside the US and Western contexts. In my readings, I have proposed that genres in Malaysian cinema can and need to be understood outside the dominant theoretical framework of US film theory that emphasises generic regimes of verisimilitude, that is, the notion of division and tension between ‘generic regimes’ and ‘socio-cultural regimes’. Drawing on Lalitha Gopalan’s work on Indian cinema, I proposed that these gaps appear less apparent in some non-American cinema. Gopalan, who reads Indian action cinema as a ‘cinema of interruptions’, suggests that this particular genre not only is structured around spatial and temporal discontinuities, but also celebrates these discontinuities. Along similar lines, all of the films discussed in this thesis exemplify the dominant pattern in contemporary Malaysian cinema of mixing, combining and playing with various genres, demonstrating the fluidity and flexibility of genre categories and boundaries. In short, these genre films blur realist/non-realist generic regimes, in the process destabilising cultural and social categories such as feminine/masculine and traditional/modern.

On one level, I treated genre as a stable category, as evident in my broad categorisations of main genres such as romance, horror, comedy and action and in some generic conventions they reiterate. On another, I examined their porous and

intersecting nature. Such fluidity and flexibility not only reflect generic hybridity, but also entail fractures that disrupt established generic conventions and cinematic temporal and spatial continuity. As I suggested in Chapters One and Two, such fractures are distinguished by two generic hallmarks. First, all of the films contain – to different degrees – non-realistic, magical, supernatural and/or surrealistic modes drawn not only from old forms, media and old Malay cinema, but also from global film genres and trends. Second, almost all of the films are characterised by melodramatic modes that correspond to everyday life. Examples include suffering, melancholic characters as victims-heroes and culturally emotive modes such as *duka-nestapa* and *rajuk*, which derive from classical Malay literary, theatrical and cinematic forms.

In the main, such fractures inform the films' narrative structure and aesthetic style, as they blur temporal planes, thereby invoking mixed temporalities. In *Susuk*, for example, the filmmakers construct disorderly narratives which interweave past and present. In *Bunohan*, hybrid generic and cultural forms evoke diverse strands of temporality, e.g., dreamy images, flashbacks and digression that confuse temporal boundaries. In *Sell Out!*, the director stages musical sequences in the form of faux-Karaoke TV to conjure up surrealistic elements and push realism into the realm of the fantastic, a strategy that echoes the 'supernatural' splitting of its male protagonist. Yasmin Ahmad's adolescent romantic films obliquely manipulate temporality through the melodramatic conventions of chance, contingency and fate, which, while inscribed with her unique authorial stamp, complicate the materiality – or the visuality – of time.

All of these examples gesture toward fractures within the social and cinematic construction of Malaysian modernity that become most visible at the site of gender identity, difference and performance. While the films can be seen to be interpellating individuals as normative social subjects, they do not necessarily reflect the cultural and political processes in line with the constitution of the feminine and masculine identity in Malaysia. In *Bunohan* and *Pontianak*, characters such as Bakar and Marsani who closely merit the ‘new Malay man’ category are not endowed with the moral rectitude promoted by increasing Islamisation. In *Sepet* and *Mukhsin*, *kampong* or small-town adolescent girls like Orked (*Sepet* and *Mukhsin*) defy notions of traditional Malay-Muslim femininity.

I began the thesis by tracing four key genres of romance, comedy, horror and action in the golden age of Malaysian cinema. I discussed their aesthetic and narrative prototypes in the arts and folk culture as well as prevailing tropes, conventions and themes most of which revolved around the tension between tradition and modernity. This moved to an examination of how these genres and forms were transformed in the post-golden age era which witnessed the reiteration of genres and the birth of new sub-genres.

This historical overview was followed by case studies of various genre films that were released after 2000. Chapter Three focused on horror films, *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* and *Susuk*. It explored how filmmakers utilise culturally specific horror conventions – such as gendered ghosts and black arts practices – to critique contradictory forms of modernity in Malaysia, particularly those that affect the lives of women caught between competing state and Islamic resurgent discourses. In *Pontianak*, the female protagonist’s identity and

subjectivity are articulated not only through her transformation into the mythic ghost, but also through the portrayal of her profession as a dancer, a sphere in which certain erotic power can be exerted. This criticism is also addressed through the film's portrayal of its male villain, who merits the state-created New Malay Man as a successful and wealthy entrepreneur. If *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* reverses the perceived gender binary by imbuing men with *nafsu* (lust), *Susuk* critiques women who are driven by their *nafsu*. However, I argued that *Susuk* represents women in a more complex fashion due to its two narrative timelines which connect the two female protagonists, who embody transformation and developmentalism. This chapter highlighted the film's invocation of tropes of transgression. For example, the protagonist's bodily transgression as both a *susuk* practitioner and a cannibalistic vampire parallels her seemingly transgressive sexuality.

Chapter Four shifted to highlight the various strands of masculinity in the two action films *Budak Kelantan* and *Bunohan*, which critique Malaysia's modernity through their depictions of the peoples and cultures of the regional state of Kelantan. *Budak Kelantan* draws upon multiple genres from gangster films to melodramas, to complicate male youth morality by exposing two differing types of masculinity, one endowed with religious rectitude and the other shaped by the corrupting and brutal urban milieu. The film's deployment of the cultural mode of melodrama towards the end, which locates the masculine figure in crisis, reflects plural masculinities. *Bunohan* utilises an amalgam of genres from fight-kickboxing films to fantastic films to transcend dividing categories of masculinity. Similar to *Budak Kelantan*, the director draws on melodrama to conflate physical

pain with emotional suffering while highlighting the disintegration of the family unit (due to the absence of the female) in an isolated *kampung* located along the Thai-Malaysia border.

Significant in both films' destabilisation of essentialist notions of masculinity is the gendered response to cultural anxieties mediated through the peripheral female characters. In *Bunohan*, the peripheral female attempts to recuperate troubled masculinity through mystical and spiritual modes that resort to magic and healing. In *Budak Kelantan*, both 'feminised' male and female characters attempt to recover destructive forms of masculinity through religious modes that emphasise love, humanity and sacrifice.

In Chapter Five, I analysed *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* and *Sell Out!* as parody and satire, showing how they reiterate, ridicule and hybridise particular film genres and modes, and how they lampoon culture, society and the nation. *Kala Malam* references and parodies American film noir, Malay horror and melodrama while paying homage to the black-and-white Malay genre films of the 1950s and 1960s. *Sell Out!*, which offers a biting critique of a capitalist society built on consumerism and materialism, asserts that in an environment wherein success is measured by the acquisition of commodities and the maximisation of profit, some forms of human relations, including romance, can hardly be developed and pursued. *Kala Malam* references film noir conventions and tropes of anxiety (from lighting to the appearance of *femme fatales*) to foreground its motif of 'troubled masculinity', which is reflected in the hero's anxieties and mediated through several 'modern' *femme fatale* characters.

Similarly, through the depiction of the literal splitting of its hero, *Sell Out!* attributes his masculine identity crisis to his anxiety regarding a capitalist ideology seemingly devoid of hope, ethics and integrity. This anxiety is manifested in the female as the embodiment of capitalist modernity: ambitious, competitive and goal-oriented. The film's gendered critique is realised through the focus on the hybrid genres of Malaysia's art-house independent cinema, karaoke-style music videos and reality television that blur the boundaries between 'fantasy' (often valorised by musicals) and 'reality' (favoured by art-house, independent cinema).

Identified as one of the temporal metaphors that permeate *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam*, *Budak Kelantan*, *Bunohan* and *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang*, nostalgia is anchored more significantly in the narratives of Yasmin Ahmad's interracial romances which I explore in the final chapter of this thesis. I suggest that Yasmin draws on the popular generic conventions of romance and melodrama to articulate tropes of nostalgia, chance and fate, further informing the director's wishful yearning for a certain human togetherness while at the same time commenting upon the post-colonial country's inter-ethnic and cultural relations. My analysis revealed that the adolescent male protagonists in both of Yasmin's *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* recuperate their gendered cultural identity crisis (due to their status as ethnic or class 'other') through a more modern, cosmopolitan form of femininity embodied in the female protagonist.

I argued that the aforementioned yearning constitutes a particular form of nostalgia. On one level, both *Sepet* and *Mukhsin* characterise nostalgia as a desire for a concrete object or moment, depicted through the small town and *kampung*

landscapes, everyday rural lived reality and items and objects. On another, the films define nostalgia as a sensitivity to time driven by fantasy as much as by actual or historic losses, as manifest in the failure of romantic relationships. In this respect, nostalgia is regarded as an alternative temporality for imagining or fantasising a community amid the identity-in-crisis of contemporary Malaysia.

In the process of examining gender representations, Chapters Three to Six have considered the idea of femininity and masculinity as configurations of practice within gender relations, evident in the films' drawing on global generic forms such as romance, buddy movie, gangster and vampire films. Thus, themes of power and powerlessness are always present when analysing gender relations and individual gendered figures. In other instances, my readings have shown that the gender constructions in the films are more fluid and malleable than those endorsed by society and the state.

As I have demonstrated in my close readings, such fluid constructions allude to the tension arising from conflicting forms of modernity, ranging from Westernisation to resurgent Islam. Along with the filmmakers' reworking of genres, this destabilisation of gender and other forms of binaries and categories is achieved through aesthetic styles that encourage certain viewing experiences such as embodied and affective modes. This strategy helps to view depictions of subjectivities and identities as a process of becoming or transformation. For example, in *Pontianak* and *Susuk*, a combination of stylistic and affective modes severs the viewer's objective and subjective perspectives, complicating her/his identification with particular characters. In Yasmin Ahmad's films, trademark 'objective' aesthetics such as long take, long shot and stationary camera, all

produce transcendental, universal subjects, thereby defying fixed subjects and identities.

As a final note, I would like to reflect on the limitations of this study which may or may not have significant bearing on the conclusions of this thesis. First, the film texts I selected for scrutiny do not entirely represent the majority of contemporary Malaysian films due to their oscillating between ‘popular’ and ‘art-house’. Nor can these films be considered prototyped examples in their broad labelling of genre, given that my attempt has been to show that their genres or generic approaches are more fluid and porous while still retaining the tendency to assert their ideological critiques. There remain many areas and focuses of genre that can be further explored in Malaysian cinema: for example, examination of more typical popular mainstream films such as *KL Gangster* and *Ombak Rindu* or questions of genre in Chinese-language or Tamil-language films that have recently enjoyed commercial success (such as *Ah Beng The Movie* and *Petaling Street Warriors*); questions of transnational genres in contemporary Malaysian cinema stemming from the influence and popularity of genres from South Korea (romance and gangster film), Thailand (martial arts film) and Indonesia (Islamic-oriented films); and, focus on the history of genre in Malay cinema (including films made in Singapore and Kuala Lumpur) during the golden age.

This study also does not claim to investigate individual genres; although it emphasises four broad categories, each chapter that focuses on close analyses has dealt with only two films. For example, apropos of comedy, focus is only on specific subgenres such as parody-satire. In contemporary Malaysian cinema, a variety of hybrid subgenres come under the umbrella term ‘comedy’, e.g.,

romantic comedy, action comedy and comedian comedy (comedies that focus on popular comedians such as *Senario*).

It should be noted that my aim in introducing a non-Euro-American account of film genre constituted an attempt to open up future possibilities for scholars and critics to think about film genres differently in a specific national or cultural context. To fully produce meanings in a culturally specific generic context may prove difficult because filmmakers extend their references and influences to global cinematic trends, with some cases being more overt than others. As I have shown, notions of genre in many ways have been imperative to any understanding of Malaysian films, ever since the emergence of early cinema in Singapore.

In contemporary cinema, genre continues to forge its presence. Many Malaysian filmmakers strive to show their artistry and creative freedom to tell stories through different cultural prisms while at the same time looking at global cinematic trends for inspiration. As well, the industry demands the category of 'genre' to produce and market films for commercial audiences. As in other national cinemas, genre in Malaysian cinema is hardly a stable and static entity: this means that film genre does not always reflect the dominant ideology or the status quo. In this respect, genre should be appreciated as an evolving entity that has the potential to alter according to shifting historical and cultural circumstances. In this sense, genres are performative, as I have tried to show in my readings. To put it simply, the ways in which we read specific generic texts will vary over time.

In short, this thesis has focused on how the reworking of cinematic genres affects the way one recognises and understands gender, particularly constructions of the feminine and masculine inextricably entwined with ethnicity, class and nation, all of which have continuously shifted, evolved and been re-constructed in post-colonial Malaysia. This transformation echoes the filmmakers' narrative and aesthetic articulations of temporality which transcend generic regimes of verisimilitude. Such articulations also echo certain 'fractures' in the narrative and *telos* of the nation which result from Malaysia's contradictory forms of modernity. In this respect, I hope that my analyses of contemporary Malaysian genre films have opened up ways in which genres – as popular cultural forms – can be used to articulate social and cultural critique.

FILMOGRAPHY

- A Go Go 67* (1967, Omar Rojik)
- Anak Pontianak* (1958, Ramon Estella)
- Antara Dua Darjat* (1960, P. Ramlee)
- Azura* (1984, Deddy M. Borhan)
- Bapa Saya* (1951, B. S. Rajhans)
- Batu Belah Batu Bertangkup* (1959, Jamil Sulong)
- Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* (1959, S. Romainoor)
- Budak Kelantan* (2008, Wan Azli Wan Jusoh)
- Bujang Lapok* (1957, P. Ramlee)
- Bunohan* (2012, Dain Said)
- Cinta Dan Lagu* (1976, Jamil Sulong)
- Dendam Pontianak* (1957, B. N. Rao)
- Dia Ibuku* (1981, Yassin Salleh)
- Dua Kali Lima* (1966, M. Amin)
- Dr Rushdi* (1970, P. Ramlee)
- Enam Jahanam* (1969, P. Ramlee)
- Fantasi* (1994, Aziz M. Osman)
- Gerimis* (1968, P. Ramlee)
- Hang Jebat* (1961, Hussain Haniff)
- Hang Tuah* (1956, Phani Majumdar)
- Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah* (2010, Mamat Khalid)
- Jimi Asmara* (1995, Erma Fatima)

Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang (2008, Mamat Khalid)

Keluarga Comat (1975, Aziz Satar)

Kolej 56 (1988, Ahmad Fauzee)

Leila Majnun (1933/1934, B. S. Rajhans)

Loceng Maut (1976, Nas Achnas/ Gui Zi Hang/ Frank Porim Pandey)

Magika (2010, Edry Abdul Halim)

Mat Bond (1967, M. Amin/ Mat Sentul)

Madu Tiga (1964, P. Ramlee)

Matinya Seorang Patriot (1984, Rahim Razali)

Mekanik (1983, Othman Hafsham)

Mukhsin (2007, Yasmin Ahmad)

Musang Berjanggut (1959, P. Ramlee)

Nujum Pak Belalang (1959, P. Ramlee)

Penarek Becha (1955, P. Ramlee)

Pontianak (1957, B. N. Rao)

Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam (2004, Shuhaimi Baba)

Puteri Gunung Ledang (2005, Saw Tiong Hin)

Rahsia (1987, Othman Hafsham)

Sell Out! (2008, Yeo Joon Han)

Sembilu (1994, Yusof Haslam)

Sembilu 2 (1995, Yusof Haslam)

Sepet (2005, Yasmin Ahmad)

Sesudah Subuh (1967, P. Ramlee)

Si Tora Harimau Jadian (1964, P. Ramlee)

Sri Mersing (1961, Salleh Ghani)

Sumpah Orang Minyak (1958, P. Ramlee)

Susuk (2008, Amir Muhammad/ Naiem Ghalili)

Tuah (1990, Anwardi Jamil)

XX-Ray II (1995, Aziz M. Osman)

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Baharudin A Latif. "A Brief History of Malaysian Film." In *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region*, edited by David Hanan. 166, 68, 74-77, 79. Hanoi: SEAPAVAA, 2001.
- "Bunohan Picks up Netpac Award." In, *The Star Online* (24 November 2011). <http://ecentral.my/news/story.asp?file=/2011/11/24/movies/20111124205223&sec=movies>.
- Making of Bunohan, The*. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pbIBYOjWyM>.
- "Malaysian Preacher Warns "Horror Movies" Could Turn Muslims into Polytheists ". In, (30 April, 2011). <http://my.news.yahoo.com/malaysian-preacher-warns-horror-movies-could-turn-muslims-101816793.html>.
- Oxford Dictionaries*, <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/nostalgia>
- "Poor Infrastructure in Kelantan Puts Off Investors." In, *New Straits Times* (28 August 2012). <http://www.nst.com.my/nation/general/poor-infrastructure-in-kelantan-puts-off-investors-1.130145#ixzz27lrP8eg8>.
- "Rempit Ban: Ministry Won't Compensate Filmmakers." In., <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/index.php/malaysia/32823-rempit-ban-ministry-w...>
- "Rempit Ban: Ministry Won't Compensate Filmmakers." In, *The Malaysian Insider* (20 July, 2009). <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/index.php/malaysia/32823-rempit-ban>.
- "Traditional Plays Must Abide by Islam." *New Straits Times*, 7 March 1996, 6.
- A. Wahab Hamzah. "Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang Menggoda Dan Berbahaya' (Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang Seductive and Dangerous) [Review of the Film Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang]." In, *Utusan Malaysia* (15 January 2008). http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2008&dt=0115&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec...
- . "Kejayaan – Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam [‘a Success – Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam’]." In, *Utusan Malaysia* (1 June, 2004). http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2004&dt=0601&pub=utusan_malaysia.

- . "Mukhsin Alam Remaja Yang Indah Penuh Emosi." In, *Utusan Malaysia* (13 March 2007).
http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2007&dt=0313&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=hiburan&pg=hi_04.htm&arc=hivearc=hive.
- . "Seram Dalam Jalur Naratif Yang Mencabar" ('Horror in Virtue of Intricate Narrative')." In, *Utusan Malaysia* (12 August 2008).
http://www.sinemamalaysia.com.my/main/clippingnews/Seram_dalam_jalur_naratif_yang_mencabar.
- . "Sisi Gelap Kuala Lumpur ('Dark Side of Kuala Lumpur')." In, *Utusan Malaysia* (2 November 2008).
http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2008&dt=1102&pub=utusan_malaysia&sec=Hiburan&pg=hi_29.htm.
- Adibah Amin. *Glimpses: Cameos of Malaysian Life*. Petaling Jaya: MPH Publishing, 2008.
- Ahmad Fauzi Abdul Hamid. "Malay Racialism and the Sufi Alternative." In *Melayu: The Politics, Poetics and Paradoxes of Malayness*, edited by Maznah Mohamad and Syed Muhd Khairudin Aljunied. 68-100. Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2011.
- Aimi Jarr, and Mohd Zambery Malek. *Malaysian Films: The Beginning*. Selangor: FINAS, 2009.
- Altman, Rick. *Film/Genre*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1999.
- Amir Muhammad. *120 Malay Movies*. Petaling Jaya: Matahari, 2010.
- . "Yasmin Ahmad's Films." (2009): 123, 29, 31.
- Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*. London: Verso, 1991.
- Anderson, John. "Bunohan." In, *Variety* (11 September 2011).
<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117946050/>.
- Anjum, Tanvir. "Sufism in History and Its Relationship with Power." *Islamic Studies* 45, no. 2 (2006): 222-31.
- Anuar Nor Arai. "Rajuk, Pujuk, Kasih, Kempunan, Resah Gelisah Dan Air Mata: Mengenai Intelligensi Budaya Dalam Filem Melayu." *Jurnal Pengajian Melayu (Malay Studies Journal)* 12 (2002): 145-81.

- Au, Eunice. "When Time Was Standardised." In, *New Straits Times* (1 January, 2012). <http://www.nst.com.my/opinion/letters-to-the-editor/when-time-was-standardised-1.26231>
- Azizan, Hari. "More Than Puppy Love." In, *The Star* (9 March 2007). http://ecentral.my/movies/reviews/review.asp?file=archives/movie_reviews/2007/3/9_2_Mukhsin&title=Mukhsin&id=1279&rid=1308&sec=Movies
- Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan. "Sepet: Sisi Semantik, Sisi Sinematik' ('Sepet: Semantic and Cinematic Sides')." *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia* 3 (2006): 233-46.
- Bell, Claudia. *Rural Way of Life in New Zealand: Myths to Live By*. Auckland: University of Auckland, 1993.
- Benjamin, Walter. *Illuminations*. Translated by Harry Zohn. edited by Hannah Arendt London: Pimlico, 1999.
- Bergson, Henri *Matter and Memory*. Translated by Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1978.
- Bertolin, Paolo. In, *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang* (2008). <http://www.fareastfilm.com/easyne2/LYT.aspx?Code=FEFJ&IDLYT=7505&ST=SQL...>
- Bhabha, Homi. "Dissemination: Time, Narrative and the Margins of the Modern Nation." In *The Location of Culture*. 145-46, 305, 07. London: Routledge, 1994.
- . *The Location of Culture*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Block, Mary. "Mukhsin." In, *The L Magazine* (21 May 2008). <http://www.thelmagazine.com/newyork/mukhsin/Content?oid=1140035>.
- Bogue, R. *Deleuze on Cinema*. New York: Routledge, 2003.
- Bordwell, David. *Narration in the Fiction Film*. London: Routledge, 1985.
- Boym, Svetlana. "Nostalgia and Its Discontents." *Hedgehog Review* 3, no. 7 (2007): 7-18.
- Brennan, C. "Religion, Cultural Identity, and Kelantan's Dikir Barat." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 12, no. 3 (2001): 308.
- Brosius, J. Peter. "The Forest and the Nation: Negotiating Citizenship in Sarawak, East Malaysia." In *Cultural Citizenship in Island Southeast Asia: Nation and Belonging in the Hinterlands* edited by Renato Rosaldo. 76-133. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

- Buckland, Warren. *Film Studies*. London: Hodder Headline Plc., 2003.
- Bunnell, Tim. "Kampung Rules: Landscape and the Contested Government of Urban(E) Malayness." *Urban Studies* 39, no. 9 (2002): 1685-701.
- Buttny, Richard, Azirah Hashim, and Kiranjit Kaur. "The Good-Old Days" and Multicultural Relations in Malaysia: Narratives, Criticism, and Accounts across Ethno-Political Lines." In *The 13th Conference of the International Association for Dialogue Analysis*. Montreal, 26-30 April 2011.
- Carroll, Bret E. (ed.) *American Masculinities: A Historical Encyclopedia*. London: SAGE Publications, 2003.
- Catsoulis, Jeannette. "A Tomboy in Malaysia Is Introduced to Hormones." In, *The New York Times* (28 May 2008).
<http://movies.nytimes.com/2008/05/28/movies/28mukh.html>
- Cawelti, John G. *The Six-Gun Mystique Sequel*. Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Press, 1999.
- Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "The Time of History and the Time of Gods." In *The Politics of Culture in the Shadow of Capital*, edited by Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd. 35-60. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.
- . "Marx After Marxism: History, Subalternity and Difference"
 In *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, edited by Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl. London: Routledge, 1996.
- Chan, Felicia, Angelina Karpovich and Xin Zhang (eds) *Genre in Asian Film and Television: New Approaches*. Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Chew, Fong Peng, and Zahari Ishak. "Malay Folk Literature in Early Childhood Education among Malaysians." *EDUCARE, International Journal for Educational Studies* 2, no. 1 (2009): 70-71.
- Chew, Jon. "Bunohan: The Review." In, *Esquire Malaysia* (7 March 2012).
<http://www.esquire.my/Entertainment/Film/article/Bunohan-the-review>
- Chittick, W. C. . *The Sufi Path of Love: The Spiritual Teaching of Rumi*. Albany: SUNY Press, 1983.
- Chittick, W. C. *Sufism: A Short Introduction*. Oxford: OneWorld Publications, 2000.

- Chow, Rey. *Sentimental Fabulations, Contemporary Chinese Films: Attachment in the Age of Global Visibility*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2007.
- Christopher, Michael. "Everything Masala? Genres in Tamil Cinema." In *Genre in Asian Film and Television*, edited by Felicia Chan, Angelina Karpovich and Xin Zhang. 101-14. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
- Chua, Beng Huat. "That Imagined Space: Nostalgia for Kampung." In *Portraits of Places: History, Community and Identity Singapore*, edited by B.S.A. Yeoh and L. Kong. 222-41. Singapore: Time Editions, 1995.
- Chua, Dennis. "Compelling Drama." In, *New Straits Times* (18 March 2012). <http://www.nst.com.my/compelling-drama-1.62002#>
- Ciecko, Anne T. (ed.) *Contemporary Asian Cinema*. Oxford: Berg, 2006.
- Cohen, Matthew Isaac. *The Komedie Stamboel: Popular Theatre in Colonial Indonesia, 1891-1903*. Ohio: Ohio University Press, 2006.
- Connell, R. W. *Masculinities*. California: University of California Press, 2005.
- Cook, Pam. *Screening the Past: Memory and Nostalgia in Cinema*. London: Routledge, 2005.
- Coulthard, Lisa. "The Open Wound and the World's End in John Woo's Face/Off." In *Bang, Bang, Shoot, Shoot: Essays on Guns and Popular Culture*, edited by Murray Pomerance and John Sakeris. 17. Needham Heights: Simon and Schuster, 1999.
- Dain Said. "Director's Statement." In, (2011). <http://www.silversaltpr.com/news-pics/BunohanPresskit.pdf>.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986.
- Deleuze, Gilles. *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*. Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Roberta Galeta. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press., 1989.
- Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. *Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Translated by B. Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.
- Derich, Claudia. "A Step Forward: Malaysian Ideas for Political Change." *Journal of Asian and African Studies* 37 (2002): 43.

- Diffrient, David Scott. "A Film Is Being Beaten: Notes on the Shock Cut and the Material Violence of Horror." In *Horror Film: Creating and Marketing Fear*, edited by S. Hantke. 52. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2004.
- Dissanayake, Wimal. (ed.) *Melodrama and Asian Cinema*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993.
- Doane, Mary Ann. *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, the Archive*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002.
- Driscoll, Catherine. *Teen Film: A Critical Introduction*. Oxford: Berg, 2011.
- Dyer, Richard. "Entertainment and Utopia." *Movie 24*, (1977, Spring): 2-13.
- Elley, Derek. "When the Full Moon Rises." In, (25 August 2008).
<http://stage.variety.com/review/VE1117938068.html?categoryid=31&cs=1>
- Elsaesser, Thomas. "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama." In *Film Genre Reader 3*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. 363-95. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.
- Fabian, Johannes. *The Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1983.
- Fadli Al-Akiti. "Budak Kelantan (2008)-Realisme Getir ('Budak Kelantan-Gritty Realism')." In *Tontonfilem* (6 November 2008).
<http://tontonfilem.blogspot.com.au/2008/11/budak-kelantan2008-realisme-getir.html>
- Fadli Al-Akiti. "Interview with Amir Muhammad: Tawakal-Allah Amir Buat Susuk." In, (1 August 2008).
<http://tontonfilem.blogspot.com.au/2008/08/tawakal-allah-amir-buat-susuk.html>.
- Fadli Al-Akiti. "Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang: Berahi Dan Bagus' ('Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang: Steamy and Superb')." In, (2007).
<http://tontonfilem.blogspot.com.au/2007/12/kala-malam-bulan-mengambang-2007-berahi.html>.
- Faridul Anwar Farinordin. "Pontianak Returns with a Vengeance." *New Straits Times*, 1 May 2004, 3.
- Farish A. Noor. "From Majapahit to Putrajaya: The Keris as a Symptom of Civilisational Development and Decline." *Journal of Southeast Asia Research* 8, no. 3 (2000).

- . "Hang Tuah the Pacifist: Deconstructing Our National Hero." In *What Your Teacher Didn't Tell You: The Annexe Lectures (Vol. 1)*. 233-77. Petaling Jaya: Matahari Books.
- . "How the Penghulu Shaitan Brought Islam to the Malay World: The Miraculous Coming of Islam to the Malay World According to the Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa." In *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History*. 204, 08. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2002.
- . *In Search of a Malaysian Identity*. Out of the Tempurung: Critical Essays on Malaysian Society. edited by Chin Wei Fong and Ee Kiong Yin. Sydney: East-West Publishing, 2008.
- . "Malaysia." In *Islamist Opposition Parties and the Potential for Engagement* edited by Toby Archer and Heidi Huuhtanen. 60-61. Helsinki: The Finnish Institute of International Affairs, 2007.
- . "Modernity, Islam and Tradition: The Struggle for the Heart and Soul of Art and Culture in Malaysia." In, (December 2004). http://universes-in-universe.org/eng/nafas/articles/2004/modernity_islam_and_tradition.
- . "Modernity, Islam and Tradition: The Struggle for the Heart and Soul of Art and Culture in Malaysia." In, *Zentrum Moderner Orient* (2004). <http://www.zmo.de/pressekit/material/Modernity,Islam%20and%20Tradition,%20engl.9.12.04.pdf>.
- . "Pity the Poor Keris: How a Universal Symbol Became a Tool for Racial Politics." *Aliran Monthly* 26, no. 10 (2006): 7-10.
- Fauwaz Abdul Aziz. "Thank God It's Friday." *Economist*, 7 January 1995, 28-30.
- Firdaus Abdullah "Dimensi Keris Melayu' (Lit. 'Dimension of the Malay Keris')." *Utusan Malaysia* (11 December 2008): 11.
- Fordham, Geoff. "A Study in Ambiguity." In, (2004). <http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/Articles-Spring05/Godfather.html>.
- Fordham, Geoff. "A Study in Ambiguity: The Godfather and the American Gangster Movie Tradition." In, *CrimeCulture* (2004). <http://www.crimeculture.com/Contents/Articles-Spring05/Godfather.html>.
- Frow, John. *Genre*. London: Routledge, 2006.
- Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1957.

- Fuchs, Cynthia. "The Buddy Politics." In *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema* edited by Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark. 196. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri and Raja Ahmad Alauddin. "The Search for a Malaysian Cinema: Between U-Wei, Shuhaimi, Yusof and Lpfm." *Asian Cinema* 7, no. 2 (1995): 60.
- Giddens, Anthony *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991.
- Giddens, Gary. "Jazz Is Back of Films Too." *Village Voice* (31 October 1977): 53.
- Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof. "Mak Yong as Ritual." In *Performing Arts: The Encyclopedia of Malaysia*. Singapore: Archipelago Press, 2004.
- Gledhill, Christine. *Gender Meets Genre in Postwar Cinemas*. Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2012.
- Gledhill, Christine. "Rethinking Genre." In *Reinventing Film Studies*, edited by Christine Gledhill and Linda Williams. 221, 26-27. London: Arnold, 2000.
- Goh, Joseph N. "Malaysian Masculine Exposé: Queering the Politics of Non-Heteronormative Malay-Muslim Men." In *Queer Sexualities Conference*. Sydney, 11-13 February, 2013.
- Goldstein, Patrick. "It's Still a Guy Thing: The Evolution of Buddy Movies." In *Los Angeles Times* (9 October 2001).
<http://articles.latimes.com/2001/oct/09/entertainment/ca-54963/2>.
- Gopalan, Lalitha. *Cinema of Interruptions: Action Genres in Contemporary Indian Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 2002.
- Gorbman, Claudia. *Unheard Melodies: Narrative Film Music*. London: British Film Institute, 1987.
- Grant, Barry Keith. *Film Genre: From Iconography to Ideology*. London: Wallflower Press, 2007.
- Grosz, Elizabeth. *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution and the Untimely*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2004.
- Guillen, Michael. "Review of Susuk." In, (17 July 2008).
<http://twitchfilm.com/reviews/2008/07/review-of-susuk.php>.

- Gurba, Joe. "Sell Out! Review." In, (December 2010).
http://www.vuweekly.com/film/story/sell_out/.
- Halberstam, J. *Skin Shows: Gothic Horror and the Technology of Monsters*.
 Durham: Duke University Press, 1995.
- Hamzah Hussin. *Memoir Hamzah Hussin: Dari Cathay Keris Ke Studio Merdeka*. Bangi: Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 1998.
- Hanita Mohd Mokhtar-Ritchie. "Negotiating Melodrama and the Malay Woman: Female Representation and the Melodramatic Mode in Malaysian-Malay Films from the Early 1990s-2009." Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Glasgow, 2011.
- Harries, Dan. *Film Parody*. London: British Film Institute, 2000.
- Harvey, David. *The Limits to Capital*. London: Verso, 2006.
- Harvey, Dennis. "Sepet." In, (17 May 2005). Variety,
<http://www.variety.com/review/VE1117927159?refcatid=31>.
- Harun Mat Piah. *Kesusasteraan Melayu Tradisional ('Traditional Malay Literature')*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2006.
- Hassan Abdul Muthalib. "From Shadow Play to the Silver Screen: Wayang Kulit and Bangsawan as Precursors of Early Malay Cinema" Unpublished paper, 2010.
- Hasting, James. *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*. Kessinger Publishing, 2003.
- Healey, Lucy. "Modernity, Identity and Construction of Malay Womanhood." In *Modernity and Identity: Asian Illustrations*, edited by Albert Gomez. 111. Bundoora: La Trobe University Press, 1994.
- Higson, Andrew. "The Heritage Film and British Cinema." In *Dissolving Views: Key Writings on British Cinema*, edited by A. Higson. 238. London: Cassell, 1996.
- Horton, Andrew S. . *Comedy/ Cinema/ Theory*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991.
- Ishak Shari. "Rural Development and Rural Poverty in Malaysia: The Experience During the New Economic Policy (1971-1990) Period." In *Poverty Amidst Plenty: Research Findings in the Gender Dimensions in Malaysia*. Petaling Jaya: Pelanduk Publications, 1994.

- Jameson, Fredric. "Magical Narratives: Romance as Genre." *New Literary History* 7, no. 1 (1975): 135-63.
- Kalinak, Kathryn. *Settling the Score: Music and the Classical Hollywood Film*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992.
- Karim Raslan. "Bunohan Makes a Killing." In, *The Star* (July 24 2012). <http://thestar.com.my/columnists/story.asp?file=/2012/7/24/columnists/ceritalah/11716397&sec=ceritalh>.
- Karnad, Girish. "Theatre in India." *Daedalus* 118, no. 4 (1989): 336.
- Khoo, Gaik Cheng. "Exploring "Chinese" Art Film Aesthetic Influences on Independent Chinese Malaysian Filmmakers." *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia* 5 (2008): 50.
- . "The Politics of Love: Malaysia's Yasmin Ahmad." *Metro Magazine* 155 (2007): 54-56, 155.
- . *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*. Vancouver: UBC Press, 2006.
- Khoo, Kay Kim. "The Road to Nationhood and Nation Building." In *Out of the Tempurung: Critical Essays on Malaysian Society*. 26-61. Sydney: East West Publishing, 2008.
- King, Geoff. *Film Comedy*. London: Wallflower, 2002.
- Knappert, Jan. *Malay Myths and Legends*. Asia: Heinemann Educational Books, 1980.
- Knee, Adam. "Thailand Haunted: The Power of the Past in the Contemporary Thai Horror Film." In *Horror International*, edited by Steven Jay Schneider and Tony Williams. 141-59. Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2005.
- Koay, Allan. "Famed Foe, the Pontianak." In, *The Star* (5 August 2005). <http://ecentral.my/news/story.asp?file=/2005/8/5/movies/11062763&sec=movies>
- . "Not That Magical." In, *The Star* (2008). http://star-ecentral.com/services/printerfriendly.asp?file=archives/movie_reviews/2008/.
- Krutnik, Frank *In a Lonely Street: Film Noir, Genre, Masculinity*. London: Routledge, 1991.

- Ku Seman Ku Hussain "Benarkah Susuk Menyesatkan? ('Can Susuk Be Deviant?')." In, *Utusan Malaysia* (17 August 2008).
http://www.utusan.com.my/utusan/info.asp?y=2008&dt=0817&pub=Utusan_Malaysia&sec=Hiburan&pg=hi_37.htm.
- Lee, Julian C. H. *Islamization and Activism in Malaysia*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2010.
- Leherpeur, Xavier "Muksin. Telecineobs." In, (2008).
<http://yasminthestoryteller.blogspot.com.au/2008/02/some-french-pressmagazine-ratings-for.html>.
- Leitch, Thomas. *Crime Films*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.
- . "The Rhetoric of the Remake." *Literature/Film Quarterly* 18, no. 3 (1990): 144.
- Levack, Chandler "When the Full Moon Rises." In, (11 November, 2009).
<http://www.eyeweekly.com/film/onscreen/article/76837>
- Lim, Bliss Cua. "Spectral Times: The Ghost Film as Historical Allegory." *Position* 9, no. 2 (2001): 287.
- Lim, Bliss Cua *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique*. London: Duke University Press, 2009.
- Lim, Chang Moh. "Sell Out: A Refreshingly New Black Comedy." In, (28 April 2009). <http://limchangmoh.blogspot.com/2009/04/sell-out-refreshingly-new-black-comedy.html>.
- Lim, David C. L. "Cruising Mat Motor: Malay Biker Masculinity and Queer Desire in/through KL Menjerit." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 7, no. 1 (2006): 62-80.
- Ling, Chok Suat. "Frightening Logic and Fearful Gaps in Local Horror Flicks." In, *New Straits Times* (16 June, 2011).
<http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-259066943/frightening-logic-and-fearful.html>.
- Lu, Zeta. "Smell Like Mean Spirit." In, *The Star* (14 June, 2004).
http://ecentral.my/services/printerfriendly.asp?file=archives/movie_reviews/2004/6/14.
- Ma, Jean. *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010.

- Mahathir Mohamad. *The Malay Dilemma*. Singapore: Times Books International, 1970.
- . "Malaysia: The Way Forward." In *Inaugural Meeting of the Malaysian Business Council*. Kuala Lumpur, 28 February, 1991.
- Mandal, Sumit K. "Transethnic Solidarities, Racialisation and Social Equality." In *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, Equity and Reform*, edited by Edmund Terence Gomez. 59-60. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004.
- Mamat, Raja Rohana Raja. *The Role and Status of Malay Women in Malaysia: Social and Legal Perspectives*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991.
- Maznah Mohamad. "From Nationalism to Post-Developmentalism: The Intersection of Gender, Race and Religion in Malaysia." *Macalester International* 1 (2002): 95-96.
- . "A Tale of Two Cities: Monuments to Misplaced Pride." In., <http://aliran.com/archives/high9912e.htm>
- . "Women in the Umno and Pas Labyrinth." In *Risking Malaysia: Culture, Politics and Identity*, edited by Maznah Mohamad and Soak Koon Wong. 112-38. Bangi: Penerbit Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2001.
- McClintock, Anne. "No Longer in a Future Heaven: Gender, Race, and Nationalism." In *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti and Ella Shohat. 183-209. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997.
- McKay, Benjamin. "Auteur-Ing Malaysia: Yasmin Ahmad and Dreamed Communities." In *Fringe Benefits: Essays and Reflections on Malaysian Arts and Cinema*, edited by S.G. Yeoh and J.C.H. Lee. 115-36. Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2010.
- McKay, Benjamin. "Biting Cinema: Viewing the Country's Liminal Zone." *Off the Edge* (October, 2008): 18.
- McKay, Benjamin. "The Golden Age." In, (2007). <http://www.kakiseni.com/printpage.php?page=articlebody&id=1076>
- Millet, Raphael. *Singapore Cinema*. Singapore: Editions Didier Millet, 2006.
- Mittell, Jason. "A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory." *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (2001): 10-11.

- Mohd Azizuddin Mohd Sani. "Media Freedom in Malaysia." *Journal of Contemporary Asia* 35, no. 3 (2007): 341-67.
- Mohammad Mahdi Abas. "Manusia Terpinggir Dalam Filem Melayu: Analisis Terhadap Fenomena Rajuk Dan Pujuk" (Marginalised Individuals in Malay Film: An Analysis of the Phenomenon of Rajuk and Pujuk)." *Jurnal Pengajian Media Malaysia* 12, no. 2 (2010): 83-95
- Mohd Ghouse Nasuruddin. *Malay Dance*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1995.
- Mohd Taib Osman. *Malay Folk Beliefs: An Integration of Disparate Elements*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1989.
- . "Patterns of Supernatural Premises Underlying the Institution of the Bomoh in Malay Culture." *Bijdragen tot de Taal-Land-en Volkekunde* 128 (1972): 221-22.
- Muhammad Haji Salleh. "In Search of Literary Love in Malay Literature: The Early Stages of Relationship." *Asiatic* 5, no. 2 (December, 2011): 37.
- . "In Search of Literary Love in Malay Literature: The Early Stages of Relationship." *Asiatic* 5, no. 2 (December 2011): 37.
- . *The Poetics of Malay Literature*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 2008.
- . *Yang Empunya Cerita: The Mind of the Malay Author*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1991.
- Murata, Sachiko. "The Tao of Islam." In, *Sufi* 5, (1990). http://sufism.ru/eng/txts/a_tao_of_islam.htm.
- Mustafar A. R. "A. R. Tompel: Lawaknya Mencuit Dan Menggelikan Hati." In, *Filem Klasik Malaysia* (20 October 2011). <http://filemklasikmalaysia.blogspot.com.au/2011/10/ar-tompel-lawaknya-mencuit-dan.html>.
- Mustafar A. R., and Zaini Yusop. "'Pontianak' (1957): Mencapai Kejayaan Box-Office Luar Jangkaan." In, *Filem Klasik Malaysia* (9 October 2012). <http://filemklasikmalaysia.blogspot.com.au/2012/10/pontianak-1957-mencapai-kejayaan-box.html>.
- Nagata, Judith. "The Impact of the Islamic Revival (Dakwah) on the Religious Culture of Malaysia." In *Religion, Values and Development in Southeast Asia*, edited by Bruce Matthews and Judith Nagata. 4, 37-50. Singapore: ISEAS, 1986.

- Nagata, Judith. "Islamic Revival and the Problem of Legitimacy among Rural Religious Elites in Malaysia." *Man* 17, no. 1 (1982): 42-57.
- Nagata, Judith. "Religious Correctness and the Place of Islam in Malaysia's Economic Policies." In *Culture and Economy: The Shaping of Capitalism in Eastern Asia*, edited by Timothy Brook and Hy V Luong. 99-100. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997.
- Neale, Steve. *Genre*. London: British Film Institute, 1980.
- . *Genre and Hollywood*. London: Routledge, 2000.
- . "Melodrama and Tears." *Screen* 27, no. 6 (1986): 6-23.
- Neale, Steve, and Frank Krutnik. *Popular Film and Television Comedy*. London: Routledge, 1990.
- Ng, Andrew. "A Cultural History of the Pontianak Films." In *New Malaysian Essay 2*, edited by Amir Muhammad. 217, 22-23, 38. Petaling Jaya: Matahari, 2009.
- . "Death and the Maiden: The Pontianak as Excess in Malay Popular Culture." In *Draculas, Vampires, and Other Undead Forms* edited by John Edgar Browning and Caroline Joan 'Kay' Picart. 167-86. Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 2009.
- Norman Yusoff. "Sepet, Mukhsin, and Talentime: Yasmin Ahmad's Melodrama of the Melancholic Boy-in-Love." *Asian Cinema* 22, no. 2 (Fall/Winter, 2011): 20-46
- Nurliana Kamaruddin. "Review of Sepet." In, (2005). http://www.cinema.com.my/movies/movie_contents.aspx?search=2005.1986.sepet.6820§ion=review.
- Ong, Aihwa. "The Production of Possession: Spirits and the Multinational Corporation in Malaysia." *American Ethnologists* 15, no. 1 (February, 1988): 30-31.
- Ong, Aihwa. "State Versus Islam: Malay Families, Women's Bodies, and the Body Politic in Malaysia." In *Bewitching Women, Pious Men: Gender and Body Politics in Southeast Asia*, edited by Aihwa Ong and Michael G. Peletz. 163, 71-72. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995.
- Ong, Terry. "Movie Review: Sell Out!" In, (30 August 2008). <http://hk.asia-city.com/movie-review/sell-out>.

- Osman Bakar. "Islam and Political Legitimacy in Malaysia." In *Islam and Political Legitimacy*, edited by Shahram Akbarzadeh and Abdullah Saeed. 133-34. London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *Heretical Empiricism*. Translated by B. Lawton and L. K. Barnett. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988.
- Peletz, Michael G. . *Gender, Sexuality, and Body Politics in Modern Asia*. Ann Arbor: Association for Asian Studies, Inc., 2007.
- Philip, Susan. "Dismantling Gendered Nationalism in Kee Thuan Chye's *We Could **** You, Mr. Birch*." *Asiatic* 2, no. 1 (June, 2008): 84.
- Poole, Gaye. *Reel Meals, Set Meals: Food in Film and Theatre*. Sydney: Currency Press, 1999.
- Radin Sri Ghazali. "A Study in Contrasts." In, *New Straits Times* (30 October 2008).
http://www.sinemamalaysia.com.my/main/clippingnews/A_study_in_contrasts_1554.
- Rajadhyaksha, Ashish, and Paul Willemsen. *Encyclopedia of Indian Cinema*. London: British Film Institute, 1999.
- Rizzo, Teresa. *Deleuze and Film: A Feminist Introduction*. London: Continuum, 2012.
- Rose Yasmin Karim. "Needles & Thread." In, *The Star* (10 February 2007).
<http://thestar.com.my/lifestyle/story.asp?file=/2007/2/10/lifefocus/16802277>.
- Rotberg, Robert I. "African Nationalism: Concept or Confusion?". *Journal of Modern African Studies* 4, no. 1 (1966): 33-46.
- Rozanna Latiff, and Aisyah Sulaiman. "Horror Films Reflect Beliefs in Society." In, *New Straits Times* (3 October, 2011).
<http://www.asionone.com/print/News/AsiaOne%2BNews/Malaysia/Story/A1Story20111>.
- Samsudin A. Rahim, and Latiffah Pawanteh. "The Local Content Industry and Cultural Identity in Malaysia." *Journal of Media and Communication Studies* 2, no. 10 (2010): 215-20.
- Satiman Jamin. "Dr M: Ghost Films Hurt Society." In, *New Straits Times* (2 October, 2011). <http://www.nst.com/nst/articles/16halo-2/Article/art>

- Saw, Swee-Hock. *The Population of Peninsular Malaysia*. Singapore: ISEAS Publishing, 2007.
- Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Railway Journey: Trains and Travel in the 19th Century*. Translated by Anselm Hollo. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1977.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1985.
- Shamsul A. B. "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of Malayness in Malaysia Reconsidered." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 355-66.
- . "A History of an Identity, an Identity of a History: The Idea and Practice of Malayness in Malaysia Reconsidered." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 32, no. 3 (2001): 355.
- . "Nations-of-Intent in Malaysia." In *Asian Forms of the Nation* edited by Stein Tonnesson and Hans Antlov. 323-47. London: Curzon Press, 1996.
- . "A Revival in the Study of Islam." *Man* 18, no. 2 (1983): 399-404.
- Sicinski, Michael. "Mercy and Love: The Populist Optimism and Humanistic Islam of Yasmin Ahmad's Films." In *Moving Image Source: Museum of the Moving Image* (2010), <http://www.movingimagesource.us/articles/mercy-and-love-20100505>
- Siddique, Sophia. "Haunting Visions of the Sundelbolong: Vampire Ghosts and the Indonesian National Imaginary." *Spectator* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2002): 24-33.
- Sim, Gerald. "Yasmin Ahmad's Orked Trilogy." *Film Quarterly* 62, no. 3 (2009): 48.
- Simmel, Georg. "The Metropolis and Mental Life." In *On Individuality and Social Forms*, edited by Donald Levine. 324-39. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1971.
- Skeat, Walter, and Charles Blagden. *Malay Magic: An Introduction to the Folklore and Popular Religion of the Malay Peninsular*. London: Routledge, 1965.
- Sofjan, Dicky. "Malaysian Dilemma: Race, Religion and the Quest for National Unity." Paper presented at the Asian Alternatives for a Sustainable World: Transborder Engagements in Knowledge Formation, The Work of the 2007/2008 API Fellows.

- Solehah Ishak. "Malay Theatre: An Exegesis of Plot and Narrative." *Tirai Panggung* 8 (2008): 58-59.
- Staiger, Janet. "Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History." In *Film Genre Reader 3*, edited by Barry Keith Grant. 186. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2003.
- Stivens, Maila. "Gender and Modernity in Malaysia." In *Modernity and Identity: Asian Illustrations*, edited by Albert Gomez. 80-81. Bundoora: La Trobe University Press, 1994.
- . "Sex, Gender and the Making of the New Malay Middle Classes." In *Gender and Power Affluent Asia*, edited by Krishna Sen and Maila Stivens. 60, 93. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Suraiya Mohd Nor. "Aspirasi Sepet." In, *Berita Harian* (26 February 2005). http://cinemamalaysia.com.my/article/read/Berita-Harian/Aspirasi_Sepet_1340.
- Syed Husin Ali. "Authoritarian State, Ethnic Violence and Our Tasks." In *Out of the Tempurung: Critical Essays on Malaysian Society*, edited by Chin Wei Fong and Ee Kiong Yin. 62-95. Sydney: East-West, 2008.
- Tan, Sooi Beng. *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera*. Singapore: Oxford University Press, 1993.
- Tasker, Yvonne. *Spectacular Bodies: Gender, Genre and the Action Cinema*. London: Routledge, 1993.
- Toh, S. B. "Noir-Stalgia' [Review of the Film Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang]." In, *The Star* (19 January 2008). <http://star-ecentral.com/movies/reviews/review.asp?file=archives/moviereviews/2008/1/1>.
- Tudor, Andrew. *Theories of Film*. London: British Film Institute, 1973.
- Uhde, Jan, and Yvonne Ng. *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*. Singapore: Ridge Books, NUS Press.
- van der Heide, William. *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: Border Crossings and National Cultures*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2002.
- van Heeren, Katinka. *Contemporary Indonesian Film: Spirits of Reform and Ghosts from the Past*. Leiden: KITLV Press, 2012.

Wahiduzzaman. "Bunohan Ketepikan Sosio-Budaya Dan 'Berpecah-Belah' (Lit "Bunohan Disregards Socio-Culture and Is 'Messy'")." *MStar Online* (16 March 2012).

———. "Made in Kelantan." In, (1 November 2008).
http://www.cinema.com.my/news/news.aspx?search=2008.made_in_kelantan_2984.

Walber, Daniel. "Bunohan Balances Mystical Spirituality and Gritty Violence in an Enigmatic Borderland." In, (2011).
http://www.blogs.indiewire.com/spout/bunohan_review

Wazir Jahan Karim. "Introduction: Emotions in Perspective." In *Emotions of Culture: A Malay Perspective*, edited by Wazir Jahan Karim. 14. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990.

———. *Women and Culture: Between Malay Adat and Islam*. Boulder: Westview, 1992.

West-Pavlov, Russell *Temporalities*. London: Routledge, 2013.

White, Timothy R. "Exactly the Same but Completely Different: Product Differentiation in the Singaporean Films of Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions and Cathay-Keris." In *Conference on the Shaw Brothers on the International Movie Stage*, 2-4, 8. Hong Kong, 2002.

———. "Historical Poetics, Malaysian Cinema, and the Japanese Occupation." In, *KINEMA* (1996). <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/white962.htm>.

Williams, Linda. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44, no. 4 (Summer, 1991): 2-13.

———. "Melodrama Revised." In *Refiguring American Film Genres: History and Theory*, edited by N. Browne. 66. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.

Williams, Tony. "To Live and Die in Hong Kong: The Crisis Cinema of John Woo." *Cineaction* 36 (February 1995): 42-52.

Williamson, Robert. "Tears, Sneers and New Frontiers: Has Sepet Turned Malaysian Cinema on Its Head?" In, *Firecracker Magazine* (2005).
<http://www.firecracker-media.com>.

Winstedt, R. O. *Malaya and Its History*. London: Hutchinson House, 1951.

Wong, Soak Koon. "Discussing "Sepet" over Tau Chooi." *Aliran Monthly* 25, no. 3 (2005): 21.

- Wright, Barbara S. "Dance Is the Cure: The Arts as Metaphor for Healing in Kelantanese Malay Spirit Exorcism." *Dance Research Journal* 12, no. 2 (1980): 8.
- Yin, Ee Kiong. "Through Race Tinted Glasses." In *Out of the Tempurung: Critical Essays on Malaysian Society* edited by Chin Wei Fong and Ee Kiong Yin. 285. Sydney: East-West Publishing, 2008.
- Zaharan Razak. "The Many-Splendored Appeal of Dikir Barat." In, (2008). <http://zveloyak.blogspot.com/2008/12/many-splendored-appeal-of-dikir-barat.html>.
- Zaharom Nain "The Structure of the Media Industry: Implications for Democracy." In *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*, edited by Francis Loh Kok Wah Wah and Khoo Boon Teik. Richmond: Curzon, 2002.
- Zan Azlee. "Devil in Kebaya: U-Wei's Buai Laju-Laju and Shuhaimi Baba's Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam." In, (May 2004). <http://www.kakiseni.com>.
- Zawawi Ibrahim. "The Search for a 'New Cinema' in Post-Colonial Malaysia: The Films of U-Wei Bin Haji Saari as Counter-Narrations of National Identity." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2003): 151.
- . "The Search for a 'New Cinema' in Post-Colonial Malaysia: The Films of U-Wei Haji Saari as Counter-Narrations of National Identity." *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 4, no. 1 (2003): 145-54.
- Zuilhof, Gertjan. "Bunohan." In, (2011). <http://www.filmfestivalrotterdam.com/en/films/bunohan/>.
- Zulkiple Ibrahim. "Horror Movies Highest Grosser in Malay Film Industry." In, (18 July 2011). <http://www.bernama.com.my/bernama/v5/newsfeatures.php?id=602124>.
- Zuraidah Mohd Don. "Kelantanese in a New Ethnolinguistic Environment." *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 161 (2003): 55.