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The Contemporary Malaysian Fantastic Film: Imagining an Alternative Modernity

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This is a PhD thesis awarded by the University of Westminster.

The Contemporary Malaysian Fantastic Film

Imagining an Alternative Modernity

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The Centre for Research and Education in Arts and Media (CREAM)
University of Westminster

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the
requirements of the University of Westminster
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

February 2023

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 which to a substantial extent, has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma of any university or other institute of higher learning, except where acknowledgements have been made in the text.

Kok Wai, Khong

Abstract

The thesis posits that contemporary Malaysian fantastic films possess critical characteristics: they offer an alternative version of an imagined community and undermine the status quo. These films deploy elements of fantasy to negotiate the dominant notions of cultural and national identity in Malaysia. However, my study notes that the degree of resistance in such films is contingent on how well the filmmakers navigate the censorship guidelines, and negotiate with the authorities, and highlight the ongoing tension between artistic freedom and state control in film production. Most filmmakers of the fantastic genre do not produce films that are explicitly critical as such. As I will demonstrate, they need to navigate the productive dimension of censorship.

My key aim is to overcome the limitation of Malaysian cinema scholarship that focuses exclusively on censorship as prohibitive. This thesis aims to broaden the scope of research on Malaysian cinema by examining the role of censorship in shaping the emergence and development of the fantastic film as a genre. Rather than simply viewing censorship as a hindrance to creative expression, this thesis argues that censorship can also be productive and lead to new forms of artistic expression. Alongside textual analysis, I interview filmmakers and study the history and recent change in censorship practices to gain a deeper understanding of current fantastic film practices in Malaysia. By doing so, the study hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Malaysian national and ethnic identity is constructed in film. My thesis proposes a definition of the fantastic film that identifies several stylistic features constructing an alternative national identity, thereby promoting diverse

notions of belonging. The Malaysian fantastic films are intertextual. They deploy Computer Graphic Imagery (CGI), and their representation of religious and racial identities explore interaction between official and unofficial definitions of nationhood.

In 2003 the Malaysian censorship policy was revised, thus, allowing the production of fantastic films which had been banned for decades. This shift came with new censorship guidelines that aimed to impose control influenced by the rise of Islamisation and the emphasis on Malay paramountcy. In times of political and ideological crisis the stylistic strategies invoked in these films become crucial in negotiating with the authority and offering relief when other institutions fail. This thesis argues that fantastic films have the tendency to perform criticism with such films serving to present an alternative version of an imagined community and questioning the status quo. The thesis delineates several types of Malaysian fantastic films in terms of stylistic features that construct an alternative national identity and promote different notions of belonging, which are often facilitated by religious influences, racial identity and technological advancement in presenting the conflict of interests between the public and private definitions of nationhood.

Acknowledgement

I have incurred debts of gratitude, larger than what I usually got. First and foremost, to my family and close relatives: Pak Thow and Shin Keow, Chan Wai, Wen Wai and Chew Tze and, by no means least, Chew Lian. Also, not to forget colleagues to whom this thesis is dedicated, including Dr. Razak Mohaideen, Norlela Ismail, Mastura Muhammad and Dr. Norman Yusoff. During my most challenging and difficult times, Dr. Pablo Sanfurgo, Liew Keak Leong, Matt Palliser, Dr. Yan Zhou, Andrew, Kelly Tam, Anthony Tan, Manfred Wong and Eric Lim stayed close by my side. Second, to the many other close friends, too many to mention individually, who have encouraged my effort and from whom I surely learned and absorbed much.

In the earliest stages of this project, when I was engaged with ideas about which I was unsure, Prof. May Adadol Ingawanij and Prof. Rosie Thomas were inspiring and patient listeners who made it possible for me to continue. I benefited immensely from my principal supervisor, May, who first infused me with an understanding of literature along with nationalism and cinematic representations. Examples of great wisdom and passion were set by her via attentive mentoring throughout the project, keeping me on track. Throughout the whole process, I have acquired skills that I will treasure and use for the rest of my life in the

academic world. The patience and love I have received are something that I greatly appreciate, and it will never be forgotten.

In learning how to pose the questions for this research, I was fortunate to have been assisted by brilliant film practitioners and scholars from Malaysia. I am thankful to Hassan Muthalib, James Lee, Woo Min Jin, Razak Mohideen, Dain Said, Nandita Solomon, Yusry Halim, Mohd Zamberi, the late Ahmad Ibrahim, the late Mamat Khalid and the late Azhari Zain who allowed me to interview them and willing to share ideas and research materials with me at crucial stages in my writing. I am also indebted to Doreen and Ches for the proofreading, formatting of the content and the structure of the thesis.

I had the opportunity to present papers at a conference from which I benefitted greatly especially from my host, Philippa Lovett and interlocutors at the ASEAC conference at the University of Glasgow, Scotland in March 2018. At that juncture, I benefited from the generous and collegial company of Khoo Gaik Cheng, Chalida Uabumrungjit, Nguyen Trinh Thi, Ekki Imanjaya and Bliss Cua Lim whose advice and suggestions changed the course of this project.

Last, but definitely not least, I am truly grateful to the staff in the British National Archives, the British Library and the University of Westminster Library for their kindness in providing assistance in locating informative materials and for providing such great environments in which to conduct this research. I feel that I have learnt a lot from writing this thesis and endeavouring to find the truth. The people mentioned here all kept me going throughout the process; without them this thesis would not have been possible.

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INTRODUCTION

The thesis posits that contemporary Malaysian fantastic films possess critical characteristics: they offer an alternative version of an imagined community and undermine the status quo. These films deploy elements of fantasy to negotiate the dominant notions of cultural and national identity in Malaysia. However, my study notes that the degree of resistance in such films is contingent on how well the filmmakers navigate the censorship guidelines, and negotiate with the authorities, and highlight the ongoing tension between artistic freedom and state control in film production. Most filmmakers of the fantastic genre do not produce films that are explicitly critical as such. As I will demonstrate, they need to navigate the productive dimension of censorship.

A key aim of my research is to overcome the limitation of Malaysian cinema scholarship that focuses exclusively on the censorship as prohibitive. Essentially, this thesis aims to broaden the scope of research on Malaysian cinema by examining the role of censorship in shaping the emergence and development of the fantastic film as a genre. Rather than simply viewing censorship as a hindrance to creative expression, this thesis argues that censorship can also be productive and lead to new forms of artistic expression. At the same time, it seeks to move beyond the limitations of textual analysis, and instead, I interviewed filmmakers and studied the history and recent change in censorship practices to gain a deeper

understanding of current fantastic film practices in Malaysia (see Chapter Three). By doing so, the study hopes to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how Malaysian national and ethnic identity is constructed in film. Thus, the thesis will also examine various types of Malaysian fantastic films. It will propose a definition of the fantastic film that identifies several stylistic features constructing an alternative national identity, thereby promoting diverse notions of belonging. As I will discuss, the Malaysian fantastic films often deploy Computer Graphic Imagery (CGI), and their modes of representing religious and racial identities are ways of exploring the interaction between official and unofficial definition of nationhood.

Multiple Interpretations of National Identity

Nasi Lemak 2.0 (Namewee, 2011) is a comedy about Huang who graduates from an international cookery school in China and returns to open a restaurant in Malaysia. Despite his training, he cannot make a proper local Chinese fried rice dish. In order to protect what he believes as authentic Chinese cuisine practices, he declines his customer's request for *sambal* (Malay chili paste) to be added in his fried rice and forbids his workers to consume any food other than Chinese in his restaurant.

One day, Huang is persuaded by a young girl, Xiao K, to participate in a cooking competition, the purpose is to win back the ownership of a famous restaurant that has been inappropriately seized by an enemy. After several failures, Huang eventually tries the *nasi lemak* from a Malay stall and becomes inspired by its remarkable taste. After that, he decides to make his own version of a *nasi lemak* dish in the competition.[1] His initial plan was to seek

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[1] Nasi lemak is the national dish of Malaysia. It is a Malay cuisine that consists of rice cooked in coconut milk and pandan leaf, normally served with anchovies, cucumber and *sambal*.

an apprenticeship with a Malay stall owner who, at the same time, possesses supernatural fighting skills. Instead, he is given a roadmap which takes him on a journey where he ventures into a haunted house and encounters a ghostly *Peranakan* couple. Then, he meets with some Indian characters who teach him the skill of preparing curry and finally, he meets a Malay legendary hero. At each stop, he improves his culinary skill. In the end, he wins the competition and is enlightened by the importance of national unity.

Nasi Lemak 2.0 (2011) is a film that was produced by the controversial director, Namewee.[2] As a result, he received backlash from certain social and political groups who found his film offensive. Nevertheless, he is one of the first Malaysian directors who was made famous by being a YouTube celebrity prior to venturing into commercial filmmaking. Malaysiakini (2011) reported that *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) was produced by the director to recover from his tarnished reputation – an act of redemption at the expense of encouraging racial unity claiming that the film promotes the spirit of '1Malaysia.'[3] With a production budget of less than RM 1 million (USD 220, 000), *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) broke the Malaysian box office records, "grossing an unexpected RM 7 million (USD 1.5 million)," (Ewe, 2011, para. 1). The film has attained commercial success.

The film is a good starting point for this thesis because it creatively brings together the current issues regarding the contemporary fantastic Malaysian cinema. *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) is characterised by Khoo (2014) as, "a flexible and multi-layered genre that lends itself easily to satire and nonsensical wordplay masquerading as Chinese kung-fu comedy

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[2] Namewee has been known to the public since he published a controversial YouTube video title, *Negarakuku/My Negaraku* (2007). Keng (2008) states that Namewee's voluntary removal of the video from YouTube because of government pressure did little to prevent the dissemination of the clip which has attracted more than 400,000 viewers. Consequently, after two months, the video gained over 2 million viewers, caused by the re-uploading of the video by other Youtubers. The video generated public debates on a wide range of political and cultural issues, concerning institutionalised corruption, ethnic marginalisation, religious insensitivity and freedom of expression.

[3] "1 Malaysia" or "One Malaysia" is a government programme established by the 6th Prime Minister, Najib Razak to promote racial unity. It was launched in September 2010, advocating efficient government, national unity and ethnic harmony.

with an insistence of delivering subversive messages targeted to racialised Malaysian identities" (p. 1). This stance taken by Khoo (2014) considers its subversive quality as being delivered through the use of a hybrid genre, thus instigating different levels of cultural-specific interpretations by its audience. The strategy uses parodic elements and double entendre, with is difficult to be pinpointed by the authority for a specific meaning, thereby rendering the film ambiguous. Therefore, it is capable of sending certain subversive messages to a specific target audience without triggering the censorship mechanism. As shown in this case, the film deploys generic hybridity and intertextual elements so that their subversive messages can be conveyed despite censorship. At the same time, the film also appeals to broad audiences through stylistic references to other genres and critiques of social issues through representation.

Interestingly, the film can also be interpreted as reinforcing an "ethnicised spectatorship" due to its stereotypical representation of racialised characters (Ngo, 2019, p. 49). Ngo (2019) provides a detailed analysis about how the narrative structure of *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) embodies the racialised gaze of the filmmaker, and thereby projecting a derogatory stereotypical racial representation among various ethnic groups in compliance with the state-defined ideological construct of ethnic identities.

Therefore, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) engenders multiple notions of national belonging with regard to the issue of ethnic and national identities. It gives rise to the capacity of the film to reaffirm the national ideological constructs of racial identities as in the case of Ngo (2019). At the same time, the film reimagines a multicultural national identity constructed by different races as exposed by Khoo (2014). I juxtapose these two points to explore the dialectic nature of national identity formation in Malaysia. Therefore, the formation of ethnic and national identities presented in the film can be interpreted as submissive or subversive to

the authority. The question is how can these dynamics be reflected and continuously negotiated in Malaysian contemporary fantastic cinema?

According to Shamsul (2007), the imagination of the nation of intent that frames the cultural realities of Malaysia is two-fold and encompasses the notion of "two social realities" (p. 9). It is comprised of the "authority-defined social reality" and "everyday-defined social reality" (Ibid.) where the former is defined by the officials as "part of the dominant power structure", while the latter is "experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life" (Ibid.). As can be seen in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011), the border between these two social realities is often ambiguous and obscured. As much as the film promotes an ethnicised gaze which reinforces the authority-defined racial identity of stereotypes, it also introduces a subversive reading that is intensified by the everyday-defined alternative audience experience. Significantly, while *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (2011) benefitted from the authority's support of its release in the mainstream cinema, it is critical of the official platform. The deployment of this method is rare in the Malay-centric mainstream cinema and highlights the filmmaker's ability to navigate the censorship system.

What I wish to highlight here are the thematic and stylistic strategies deployed in the film, which recasts the dichotomous nature of national identification, in other words, the official and unofficial interpretations of national identity. The official platform refers to the ideological structures that allows the film to be presented as mainstream, thereby generating a mode of address in which the audience is presumed to be engaged in a passive reading and being less resentful of the state-defined ideological racial construct. Whereas the unofficial platform offers an alternative or even an oppositional reading position which deviates from the accepted norm – a characteristic synonymous with the independent cinema.

Nasi Lemak 2.0 (2011) exhibits an interesting dynamic between subversive and submissive contents which can complicate the audience's interpretation of national identity

and sense of belonging. Scenes such as Huang's encounter with the supernatural Kungfu masters and Malay folkloric characters, that are digitally enhanced with CGI effects, thus obfuscating the borders between reality and fantasy. At the same time, the inclusion of ghostly *peranakan* couples and a Bollywood-style dancing sequence adds to the intertextual nature of the film. Despite all these stylistic elements, the film also criticises the racial exclusivity of the Malay-centric mainstream cinema, even though it received support from the authorities for its release.

Scene of the ghostly *Peranakan* couples is described by Ngo (2019) "as being enigmatic of an imaginary past whose existence belongs to a fading history" (p. 62). As it stands, the supernatural ghostly characters represent a form of nostalgic imagining, and at the same time, the scene can also be interpreted as a signal of ethnic marginalisation, highlighting the dying *Peranakan* culture as a result of the Malay-centric policies. The film serves to draw attention to the importance of preserving such cultures and their representations. Alternatively, the representation of ghost in the film may be seen as contradictory to the state-defined Islam, while simultaneously presenting traditional and subaltern beliefs held by certain factions of society. Finally, the Bollywood dance sequence pays homage to Indian cinema, while also presenting stereotypical Indian characters.

Nasi Lemak 2.0 (2011) demonstrates a cinematic representation of a national identity that is not confined to an attempt to promote or discourage a certain form of national identity, but rather as an ongoing negotiation that is continuously shaped by both society and the cinematic apparatus. The film's ability to offer multiple interpretations allows the audience to actively engage with and negotiate the state's definition of national identity, which can change over time. This approach to representation allows for more dynamic and inclusive formation of national identity.

Strategies of Manoeuvre

Namewee's personalised, yet partially authority-compliant film is an example of a filmmaker's successful navigation of the state-controlled cinematic industry which is subjected to censorship. His film offers a remedy within the constraints of the state-initiated cinematic apparatus. In other words, the filmmaker uses a combination of personal and official communication channels to express himself and connect with his audience while adhering to the rules set by the censorship board.

The ability of Namewee to negotiate creatively with the authority opens up a new area of study focusing on stylistic strategies developed by filmmakers in Malaysia's contemporary mainstream film industry within a context of censorship. This stylistic strategy signifies certain negotiating tactics by the filmmaker in order to nurture an amicable productive solution with the authority in a time of crisis. The re-emergence of the director from being a controversial public figure who had triggered a public backlash and was accused of blasphemy, to a reputable alternative filmmaker who implicitly exposes the wrongdoings and injustices by the authorities is a mark of his innovative strategy.

In recent years, independent filmmakers or at least those who were previously involved in alternative filmmaking, such as the late Yasmin Ahmad, James Lee, Amir Muhammad, Tan Chui Mui, Woo Ming Jin, and Liew Seng Tat, have screened their films in the local cinemas. By independent filmmakers, I refer to the producers and directors who involve in film production that operates outside the boundaries of the mainstream industrial-commercial film industry. Their films are typically screened in private settings and online channels, and mostly self-financed. An important characteristic of independent films is their ability to address subjects and narratives that exist independently from state censorship

regulations. Their films often explore themes and ideas that challenge or contradict the dominant ideology promoted by the state, offering alternative interpretations on national identity, racial dynamics, and religious experiences. In terms of style, independent films exhibit distinct artistic approaches that diverge from the conventions found in mainstream commercial cinema.

There are four contributing factors to the progressive involvement of independent filmmakers in mainstream commercial filmmaking. Firstly, the critical acclaim and accolades obtained by Malaysian independent films shown oversea, which have assured the authorities that this is the standard in which Malaysian films should strive for. Secondly, these filmmakers have adopted filmmaking skills in accordance with the commercialised mainstream standard, aiming for more production experience and audience exposure (see Chapter Two). This process has deliberately transformed the stylistic appearance of Malaysian films (see Chapter Four). Thirdly, there have been significant changes in government policy in terms of providing multiple supportive production funding which should be available to all filmmakers regardless of the criteria that used to be extremely restrictive (see Chapter Two). Finally, the revision of censorship policy with the purpose of catching up with Southeast Asian and global trends of supernatural and fantastic film production, thus opening up a new market of localised fantastic films for audiences who would otherwise consume such films from abroad. These changes have brought about a new era in Malaysian cinema where alternative filmmakers can negotiate their identities and values with the state through these mainstream productions.

In addressing these points, my inquiry begins by dealing with earlier scholarship on Malaysian cinema which focuses primarily on independent cinema and issues related to state oppression, political hegemony, and racial alienation of the 'Other' (see Chapter Two). The increasing involvement of independent filmmakers in mainstream production in recent years

necessitates the study of film practices that have been deliberately adapted to the industrial-commercial setting. These modes of production are compelled to follow the censorship policy but must find ways to express alternative perspectives.

The Censorship Apparatus

Films pertaining to the horror and fantasy genre had been banned in Malaysia since the 1990s. At that point, the production of fantastic films, "was counter-productive to build a developed society because they encouraged a belief in mythical beings rather than the scientific approach" (Latiff and Sulaiman, 2011, para. 5). The policy makers reflected the feeling espoused by conservatives that horror films may encourage 'backward' modes of thinking and behaviour in an already superstitious Malaysian audience.[4]

As a result, there was a dearth of fantastic films in Malaysia for over a decade until the censorship policy was revamped in 2002. Immediately after the millennium, locally produced fantastic films returned to cinemas after the lifting of the ban by the Malaysian censorship board. Since then, fantastic film production has been gaining in popularity. As Muthalib (2013a) puts it, "[n]o one could have predicted the 'tsunami' of horror films that were to follow. In a span of six years up to 2011, more than 60 horror movies have appeared that included horror comedies – a popular draw" (p. 229). This transformation highlights the impact of censorship practices and filmmaking strategies aligned with the evolving ideological and religious influences in contemporary Malaysia.

Since 2003, a plethora of fantastic films has re-emerged in Malaysian cinema, most of which are characterised by their ambiguous and hybrid styles. In my definition of the

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[4] As reported by Jamin (2011), Mahathir urged the public to find all solutions to life's problem using science. Supernatural films are blamed for instilling superstitious idea, causing several hysterical incidents involving school and college girls.

fantastic genre (see next section), I argue that these films employ a stylistic strategy which I argue is intended to undermine certain interpretation of filmic representation by the censorship board. They display ambiguous content with reference to the styles and themes seen in other popular and commercially viable foreign fantastic films. Such a practice is a deliberate attempt to negotiate with the censorship law, thus paving the way to redefine the stylistic form of fantastic films.

As I explore in detail in Chapter Three, even though the censorship policy was relaxed from 2002, the domestic film production was put under a new set of censorship guidelines that placed significant control over the representation of Islamic faith and Malay identity. The question arises as to how filmmakers have creatively responded to these restrictions in order to push the boundaries of conventional stylistic and thematic features of fantastic films, especially within the context of Islam as the official religion, and the Malay as the cultural bearer of national identity. As Islamic and cultural authorities were extended to include a new set of filmmaking practices, how did these restrictions reinvent the notion of fantastic films in Malaysia?

While the textual analysis of contemporary films conducted in this study explore the characteristics of contemporary Malaysian fantastic cinema, this study also explores the mode of production of the films in relation to the cinematic apparatus of censorship. The conceptualisation of Malaysian fantastic films as part of national cinema is shown to have developed in dialogue with the dominant ideology of the state's interpretation of ethnic, cultural and religious identity. In other words, the maneuvering strategies employed by filmmakers have resulted in the emergence of a unique and innovative form of Malaysian cinema. Therefore, this thesis focuses on commercial fantastic Malaysian films released between 2003 and 2018 with specific attention to sci-fi, horror and religious films genres. The time span covers the period known as "the resurrection of horror films" (Lee and Anuar,

2015, p. 153). The genres reinvented the notion of contemporary fantastic films in Malaysia despite the new set of censorship guidelines that impose significant control over the representation of Islamic faith and Malay identity.

The Malaysian Fantastic Film

Neale (2000) reminds us that genres set up specific systems of expectation and hypothesis that spectators bring with them to the cinema and use to interact with the films during the viewing process. Thus, when theorising about Malaysian film as a fantastic genre, it is important to consider how state control, economic incentives, cultural globalisation, and technological changes combine to create a specific mode of interpretation. By understanding these factors, we can gain a deeper insight into how commercial filmmakers have navigated the restrictions and expectations imposed upon them, and how they have developed unique approaches to the fantastic genre in the context of Malaysian culture and society.

The characteristics of the contemporary Malaysian fantastic film can be attributed to four main features: firstly, the detachment from conventional modes of the fantastic genre which is characterised by the transgression of rationality and scientific principles; secondly, the projection of alternative national imaginings that blur the boundaries between the distinctive representations of authority-defined and everyday-defined social realities; thirdly, the deployment of CGI aesthetics and intertextual references which create a hybrid of different visual elements; fourthly, the capacity to generate multiple modes of representation that allow filmmakers to negotiate with the censors and reach wider audience. All these features create a distinct form of Malaysian fantastic cinema that reflects the specific cultural, social and political contexts of the country.

The thesis complicates the conventional understanding of the fantastic genre which typically involves a dichotomy between real and unreal events. One of the central

characteristics of conventional fantastic genre is that it displays "a fundamental break with our sense of reality" (Fowkes, 2010, p. 2). The Malaysian fantastic films adopt a different approach from the scientific positivism framework developed by Tzvetan Todorov (1973). He argued that the pure fantastic literature can only exist in the absence of poetic and allegorical interpretations, as the supernatural event is able to provoke hesitation in the reader who only knows the law of nature. However, this thesis suggests that in situations where the law of nature is complicated by ideological implications, a sense of uncertainty can develop in the film that requires a certain mode of poetic and allegorical interpretations. This is especially true in the context of censorship which heightens the suggestive potential of formal strategies that are based on the authority-defined interpretation of social reality. At the same time, it can be challenged by the fragmentary everyday-defined interpretations of social reality which includes recalcitrant elements that invoke alternative allegorical readings.

Therefore, the Malaysian fantastic films employ genre hybridity to challenge the conventional presentation of logic based on scientific principles, as they incorporate religious interpretation. They also reject mainstream Malay-language film practices and aesthetics, opting for pastiche instead. The filmmakers use two distinctive approaches to genre re-appropriation, situated between the symbolic and practical functions: hybrid genre and mode of generic discourse (see Chapter Four). These creative strategies indirectly address censorship regulations concerning superstition and racial issues. While film production is regulated in an authority-defined context of the Malay-centric film practices, the application of such creative strategies is crucial in preserving the nation's fantasy of multiculturalism without direct confrontation with the authorities. As a result, the Malaysian fantastic films survive in the collective dreams of a possible nation, working within the confines of the struggles between the authority-defined and everyday-defined order. They offer an alternative

means of believing in the possibility of sustaining the dream of modernity and achieving a united multicultural nation.

The overlapping sense of social realities as represented in the Malaysian fantastic film invokes a model of the fantastic based on a double-sided situation, an unfolding of national imagining that seems near, but is far away, depending on the individual's perception of the social reality to which he/she belongs and identifies with. This creates a space for viewers to engage in critical reflection and interpretation, challenging their preconceived notions and expanding their understanding of the complexities of Malaysian society. Through this way, the Malaysian fantastic film genre to serve as a site for both contestation and negotiation. The ambiguous representations situated between the discourses of authority-defined and everyday-defined social realities creates an impression of indeterminacy that can be seen as a form of resistance against the dominant discourse, allowing the filmmakers to present their visions of an alternative nation.

Through my exploration of the production and the stylistic features of Malaysian fantastic films, the thesis reveals that the censorship board is advantageous to the fantastic film industry through the censors' effort to negotiate with the filmmakers. This is based on the censorship board's mission to commodify cultures which coalesces with the roles of the state-induced Information Communication Technology (ICT). As a result, filmmakers strive to make their film appealing to wider audiences across different religious and cultural backgrounds through hybrid genres. It allows the Malaysian fantastic films to navigate the constraints imposed by censorship and the need to reach wider audiences, resulting in a successful balance between artistic expression and commercial viability.

The CGI Aesthetics

Due to the authority regarding ICT as an instrument of state modernisation, CGI films secure extensive promotion due to their industrial-commercial and popular blockbuster appeals. Therefore, the argument of prioritising the deployment of digital technology in relation to national imagining calls attention to the technical aspects of fantastic films. The desire to exhibit films in international settings forces both producers and filmmakers to articulate the content beyond the previous framework of fantastic films as previously institutionalised by censorship.

The deployment of CGI aesthetics involves combining visual elements to create a sense of intertextuality allowing for the creation of alternative realities. This renewed technique allows filmmakers to break away from traditional modes of representation and experiment with new forms of visual storytelling. By remixing visual elements from different time periods and genres, filmmakers can create a sense of dislocation and otherworldliness that is characteristic of the fantastic films.

The CGI effects in fantastic films can be seen as a way to critique the technological limitations of the mainstream cinema industry in Malaysia. While the deployment of CGI displays a certain tendency of the mainstream cinema to reflect a developing digital cinematic industry, it is also driven by desires to attract foreign investment, promote global visibility and gain international recognition. Additionally, the use of CGI effects aims to capture the attention of the audiences who are more familiar with Hollywood productions rather than local films (see Chapter Five). Consequently, fantastic films do not only reflect the ideological perspectives of the authority but offer an alternative perspective for the audiences. These different forms of fantastic films, as Kuhn (1990) points out, are replete with the "voice of cultural repression" through the "fantasies they activate" in a certain "network of intertexts" (p. 10). In the context of fantastic film, this notion of voice can be understood as a manifestation of power dynamic that shape the themes, narratives, and representations within

the genre. As I discuss in Chapter Five, intertextuality in the definition proposed by Kuhn (1990) plays a significant role in the manipulation of CGI. By drawing stylistic references from various sources, including older forms of visual effects, animated features and comics, these films embrace a heterogenous style. The use of CGI exemplifies this intermedial approach, thereby allowing for the exploration of diverse identities and cultural expressions. As a result, the use of CGI effects in fantastic films goes beyond the state ICT agenda of technological advancement and national aspirations.

While the films selected in this study only reflect a small number of contemporary fantastic films in Malaysia, they are characteristic works of this emergent genre due to their significant engagement with censorship issues and in this sense are good case studies for my effort to define the Malaysian fantastic film. Many of these films rely on the marketing label of generic hybridity, which are normalised within the current production practices and consumption patterns. Moreover, the fluidity of censorship practices identified in this study implies that they are practices that will continue to be contested and revised, depending on the changing political power and the sociocultural norms in place.

Structure of the Thesis

Chapter One sets the foundation for understanding the significance of Malaysian fantastic cinema in the context of changes to notions of national identity in the country. The chapter demonstrates how the national identity of Malaysia is shaped by the intersection of various factors, including ethnicity, religion, politics and globalisation. The chapter also explores the cultural and political changes that have occurred in Malaysia in recent years, leading to a shifting notion and interpretation of national belonging.

Chapter Two provides a critical survey of the scholarship of contemporary Malaysian cinema, highlighting a gap in the existing literature on the development of mainstream film practices. Most scholarly works studying Malaysian cinema in the early 2000s focus on independent films that challenge the state ideology through the filmmakers' alternative national experiences. These films are characterised by their subversive nature and are primarily distributed through unofficial platforms, such as the internet, pirated DVDs and private screenings. In recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in the production of fantastic films by independent filmmakers who have obtained government funding. These films have deliberately sought access to mainstream cinema and can be seen as a result of evolving practices. The chapter looks critically at the works of film scholars which, for the most part, lack analyses of mainstream films which are more reflective of the current development of the Malaysian cinematic industry. Additionally, it underscores the various influences of independent practices on the contemporary cinema, as well as the growing significance of industrial-commercial films in the Malaysian film industry. By drawing attention to these trends, the chapter helps to situate the study of fantastic films within a broader framework of contemporary Malaysian cinema and its ongoing transformation.

Chapter Three examines the evolution and mechanism of censorship practices through a study of the censorship law, its provisions and guidelines. A comparative study of the censorship provisions of 1947 and those of 2010 reveals an evolution of censorship practices that is predisposed to Islamification, and the protection of Malay sovereignty on the basis of public security, shaping the context of filmmaking in which contemporary fantastic films could strive. It shows the fluidity of censorship practices, shaped by the social and cultural change in Malaysian society.

The chapter also covers fieldwork carried out in 2017, including interviews conducted with seven filmmakers and one producer about their personal experiences with the censors

and their strategies to negotiate with the policy makers. This allows power to be understood as a process and negotiations over what appears to be the 'inconsistency' and 'vagueness' within the censorship system. The analysis of the interviews shows that there is an established rapport between the mainstream commercial filmmakers and the censors which can be achieved through the process of negotiation at times of dispute. The chapter introduces the idea that the censorship mechanism is a determining factor that allows for the production of contemporary fantastic films.

Chapter Four discusses the two distinct categories of the reworking of the fantastic genre through the 'semantic approach' and 'syntactic approach' by the filmmakers. I focus on the films *Mistik* (Razak Mohaideen, 2003) and *Apokalips X* (Mamat Khalid, 2014). The chapter reveals that the fantastic films are produced by the creative strategy of 'poaching' the genre with reference to the semantic and syntactic features of other foreign popular blockbuster films as a pragmatic solution to undermine censorship. As a result, the stylistic appearances of fantastic films are leaning to 'marginal fantasies.' They are characterised by the quality of pastiche and the violation of 'ontological rupture' as the determiner of a renewed, domesticated and indigenised form of fantastic films.

Chapter Five focuses on the specificity of technical strategies used by the filmmakers which, through the deployment of intermedial references as CGI attractions, give the fantastic films an appearance of intertextuality. The chapter will analyse the films, *Badang* (Razak Mohaideen, 2018), *Cicak Man* (Yusry Halim, 2006), *Magika* (Edry Halim, 2010), *Mantera* (Aliyar Kutty & Miza Mohamad, 2012), *Bunohan* (Dain Said, 2012) and *Interchange* (Dain Said, 2016). The fantastic films' display of visual effects refer to different eras and genres, thereby invoking a multi-layered mode of attraction. The chapter argues that the visual attractions of these films can be characterised as an intertextual CGI aesthetics which references to other popular cultures and media forms and uses CGI in a critical manner.

CHAPTER ONE

Contending National Imaginings:
Whose Nation-of-Intent?

This chapter provides a brief overview at the present socio-political scenario in

Malaysia, concerning the formation of national identity and imaginings. The focus will be on

the period starting from the 1990s, which marked the influences of globalisation and the

increase of Islamisation, up until 2018. During this time frame, Malaysia underwent

significant social and political changes that led to the development and reformation of media

and film practices. In this period, although there were ongoing political struggles posed by

different political parties to gain ascendency over the state government, the year 2018 marked

a significant turning point when the opposition parties became the ruling government.[5] The

oppositional coalition, *Pakatan Harapan* (Alliance of Hope) toppled the longest ruling party

in the world.[6] Hence, the study conducted in this thesis is largely based on the films produced

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[5] The political struggle leading up to 2018 occurred primarily throughout this particular period, especially in the
years 2004 – 2014 which have been described as "Malaysia's wasted decade" (M. Bakri Musa, 2016), which
provides a context for this study. The period is marked by the premiership of Abdullah Badawi, and later,
followed by Najib Razak. It is characterised by the corrosion of public institutions, poor economic performance
and the increased polarisation of the society along ethnic and religion at national level. Much of these are the
results of "a poor judge of talent and character" by Mahathir Mohamad in choosing his successors (M. Bakri
Musa, 2016, p. 12).

[6] The UMNO (United Malays National Organisation) is the longest one-party rule in the world (Wong & Ooi,
2018), or, as some calls it, the "world's longest-ruling coalition" (Raghu & Koswanage, 2013, para. 1). The
coalition was toppled in 2018, also known as "a year during which democracy was pushed by populism and
bigotry around the world" (Wong & Ooi, 2018, p. 661).

between 2002 and 2018, which encompasses a time marked by the revision of censorship and the subsequent implementation of other new practices.

Anderson (2016) purports that nationalism is evoked in the people's imagination in order to create a nation, and it is conceivable within "calendrical time and a familiar landscape" (p. 32). This conception of nationalism embodies "a sentiment of 'nationhood', which is a feeling of wholeness and continuity with the past" (Shamsul 1996a, p. 346). The political struggle that led to the victory of the oppositional parties disrupts the former historical landscape with a 'familiar' political background that previously had consolidated a sense of an imagined community, "hence constantly open to contestation" (Shamsul, 1996a, p. 339). As a result, it creates a disrupted sense of nationhood. Thus, it gives rise to a renewed notion of national identity, thereby influencing the manner in which films are produced within the country.

The chapter starts with a discussion of comparative multiculturalism as offered by Goh (2009), in order to provide a historical understanding of the ethnic and political structures of Malaysian society. Subsequently, I will trace the evolution of the multiple versions of 'nation-of-intent' (Shamsul, 1996a) that are continuously shaped by various manifestations of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Along the way, I will discuss the rise of Islamisation and its consequential response from liberalists, resulting in a renewed concept of national imagining. The analysis holds significance in portraying the present socio-political landscape, enabling a comprehensive understanding of the nation's characterisation of national identity.

The Ethnic and Political Construct of Malaysia

The examination of multi-ethnicity in Malaysia reveals its unique characteristic. Within the socio-political context of Malaysia, ethnic categories are employed by the state ideology, reflecting institutionalised racial identities. According to Goh and Holden (2009), "state multiculturalism… institutionalised colonial racial identities and woven them into the fabric of political and social life to the extent that they constitute common sense through which people conceive identities of themselves and others" (pp. 2-3). This social-political situation provides a reference for exploring different versions of national imagining framed by their expressed ideas of racial identities.

According to Watson (2000), theorising a multicultural nation is possible by recognising the differences between the conceptualisations of 'assimilation' and 'integration.' The former refers to the process that a nation deliberately adapts to the state's hegemonic agenda to form a homogenous society. He refers to the vast number of immigrants who migrated to the United States at the end of the nineteenth century as having undergone an assimilation process. Facilitated by the state, they "were encouraged to think as Americans, gradually abandoning their cultures of origin" (Watson, 2000, p. 5). However, the latter concept of integration is manifested differently in Malaysia as expressed here by Khoo (2006).

> …while the concept of multiculturalism did not get underway in Europe and the West until after the fall of European colonialism (and American imperialism), which then included migration from former colonies to metropolitan centres, the post-colonial Malaysian nation was multi-ethnic at its very inception (p. 12)

The independence of Malaya was achieved by means of negotiations between the colonial British and Malay Western-educated leaders resulting in the concept of a nation that hinges

on social stability grounded by the "ethnic bargain between non-Malays and indigenous Malay ethnicity" (Ibrahim 2003, p. 146). Colonialism created a political economy based on "a cultural division of labour," whereby occupational roles were formed along ethnic divisions in society leading to the process of institutional polity and civil society (Ibid.). Because the economic wealth was largely associated with the non-Malays (specifically, minority ethnic Chinese who were considered as immigrants), certain privileges were constitutionalised in favour of the politically dominant ethnic Malay in exchange for the right to economic wealth and citizenship in the newly formed Malayan states. Some of the initial privileges agreed to include a "four-to-one ratio of Malays to non-Malays in the Malayan Civil Service, the status of the Sultans, and the adoption of Malay language as the national language" (Andaya and Andaya, 2017, p. 287). During the process it seems that a form of social integration had taken place in which the display of the plurality of cultures and languages was maintained for each cultural group. The attempts to protect each ethnic language and culture were carried out by the state through the establishment of language-based vernacular schools and other state policies designed to manage social stability.

Nevertheless, since the 1970s, the ruling state governments, namely *Barisan Nasional* (National Front),[7] which comprises a coalition of ethnic-based political parties, have exerted substantial influence in shaping national policies. These policies were developed based on agreements and justifications aimed at preserving the status quo of the nation, thereby posing challenges to the integration process intended to foster social cohesion and stability. Since the 13th May 1969 racial riots, several government policies have been enacted to redress the economic imbalance and integration process through the National Economy Policy (NEP)

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[7] The *Barisan Nasional* (BN) was known as the Alliance Party (AP) founded in 1957 and was renamed the BN in 1973 in the aftermath of the 1969 racial riots and consists of three main ethnic-based political parties "representing three different communities with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds" (Haji Ismail, 2004, p. 138). The United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) with ethnic Malay membership, the Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) representing ethnic Chinese, the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) for ethnic Indian, and other minor political parties formed the government of Malaysia.

and National Cultural Policy (NCP). As a result, the BN was continuously criticised by various scholars for practising policies that deliberately ignored the diversity of other minority ethnic groups in national policies, paving its way to the process of assimilation.

The ideology of the nation-state is commonly promoted by the BN right-wing group as an "excellent example of multiculturalism", with a multi-ethnic social composition consisting of the "Malay majority, Chinese, Indians, Eurasians and other indigenous ethnic groupings" (Ibrahim, 2003, p. 145). However, according to Ibrahim (2007), the NEP was an antidote to Malay economic underdevelopment in that, "[i]t emphasised the need to create a new class of Malay bourgeoisie in order to 'catch up' with the non-Malays, especially the Chinese" (p. 515).

As for the NCP, it was formed to address the "unregulated [heterogeneity of] multiculturalism," with the intention of creating a more central notion of national identity based on the civilised high culture of traditional Malay values and emphasising the assimilation of the non-Malays into the Malay ethnic group (Ibrahim, 2003, p. 146). This was later brought to light in the politic of *Ketuanan Melayu* (Malay paramountcy). The dominance of ethnic Malays within the ruling coalition party has further created a national culture and identity based on Malay culture and identity, institutions or organisations (Shamsul, 1996b, p. 43). Knowing that traditional Malay values were redefined by colonialism, and later by the continuous political and social changes resulting from colonial policies, it is a perpetual way to address the dynamic of multicultural phenomenon in the context of globalisation.

By the 90s, the state policies were shaped by the historical events mentioned above as the nation adopted the state agenda to modernise and become an economically developed nation. Shamsul (1996a) maintains that the 'modernisation project' had two interconnected main components: the economic and the political. The economic component is driven by the

need to industrialise, while the political one is motivated by the need to create a united multicultural nation-state. Hence, the fourth prime minister of Malaysia, Mahathir Mohamad (1991), created the term *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Nation) and proposed nine strategic challenges that had to be embraced by the nation in order for it to become a fully developed and modernised nation by the year 2020.

The analysis of the ethnic composition in Malaysia reveals the intricate interplay between various political factions, each associated with distinct racial identities expressed by their respective groups. In Malaysia's case, multiple forms of racial identities were inherited from pre-existing social hierarchies. As society undergoes transformations, these identities were challenged by an authoritative unified conception of national identity. As a result, the ambition to become a united multicultural nation is challenged by the traditional ethno-cultural makeup of the society that has been debated in the context of the contending social realities.

The Contending Social Realities

The study of Malaysian society can be situated within two paradigms of identification. Shamsul (1996b) proposes a model that would compare the 'two social realities': the 'authority-defined' and the 'everyday-defined' in Malaysian society. This conceptual framework can be used to examine the ambiguity of racial identities experienced by the people in Malaysia, manifested in an inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic relationship. Shamsul (2014) describes the 'authority-defined' paradigm as structured by the dominant power, namely the state, and the 'everyday-defined' paradigm as the social reality commonly experienced by individuals in their normal lives. He expands further as follows.

Like most societal phenomena, identity formation, too, takes place within what I

would call a 'two social realities' context: first, the 'authority-defined' social

reality, one which is authoritatively defined by people who are part of the

dominant power structure; and, second, the 'everyday-defined' social reality, one

which is experienced by the people in the course of their everyday life. These two

social realities exist side by side at any given time. Although intricately linked and

constantly shaping each other, they may or may not be identical. They are in fact

rarely identical because the 'everyday-defined' social reality is experienced and

the 'authority-defined' social reality is only observed and interpreted. Both, then,

are mediated through social class position of those who observe and interpret

social reality and those who experience it. (Shamsul, 1996b, pp. 9-10)

    In the Malaysian society, there is a clear distinction between what is 'observed and

interpreted,' and what is actually 'experienced.' According to Shamsul and Athi (2015),

various social collectives, including political parties, religious or environmental movements,

NGOs, professional groups, trade unions, charity associations, literary groups, intellectuals

and academics, articulate power in these two social realities. The 'observed and interpreted'

reality known as the 'authority-defined,' is documented in official policies, academic

publications and various forms of media. On the other hand, the 'experienced' reality,

referred to as 'everyday-defined,' is usually "disparate, fragmented, intensely personal and

conducted mostly orally" (Shamsul & Athi, 2015, p. 268). It is important to note that personal

experiences expressed in the 'everyday-defined' are not intended for formal documentation

or reference in the future. Even when they are documented, they are often considered as

popular form of expression such as cartoons, songs, poems, gossip and the like. It is

"generally categorised as 'popular forms of expression' or 'popular culture'" (Shamsul,

1996b, p. 478). For this reason, it is regarded as "subjective 'text' often considered as 'unrepresentative' of the empirical reality or 'truth,'" and is treated by the mainstream concern as "being 'unscientific' or 'not objective'" (Ibid. p. 479).

By considering these two methods of identification generated by the proposed theoretical model, the appearance of these two realities can be studied in both documented and non-documented forms of artefacts and personal experiences. For instance, although mass media are commonly perceived to be controlled by the authorities in Malaysia, many dissenting voices are occasionally "present and heard" (Ibid, p. 484) by the government. Therefore, it is not totally ignored by the authority.

While the mainstream media reflects the 'documented' social experience, the non-mainstream and subversive form of media reflects the 'non-documented' form of social experience. Actual social experience happens every day and cannot be documented in official form most of the time. However, they can be referred to by the authority occasionally in order to manage issues arising from different cultural groups, especially in managing the conflicts between the national and individual conception of national identity. As a result, both documented and non-documented forms of artefacts and personal experiences are crucial in the management of a multicultural society, hence implying the ambiguous function of the identification model.

The ambiguous function of the authority-defined and everyday-defined model configures a point of reference to the construction of an imagined community that is based on a double-sided situation – an unfolding national imagining that seems probable, but complicated, depending on the individual's conception of the social reality to which he/she belongs and identifies with. As such, it has become a fertile ground for the inculcation of a

national imagining that is more reliable, productive and forward-looking.[8] The ambiguity of national imagining as a concept highlights the dynamic of the future projection of a nation-to-come, equally, it serves as a political buffer against the conflict arising from the complications between national and individual notions of national identity.

National Identification vs. Self-Identification

Realising the dynamic of a constructed imagined community, national imagining can be continuously reappropriated according to the current political climate. In developing a united Malaysian society, the construction of national imagining is premised on the "unfinished political agenda" as 'nation-of-intent' (Shamsul, 1996a, p. 326). It is a political innovation that provides a space for negotiation between the authority and the dissenting voices of subaltern ethnic groups. In other words, it is a deliberate attempt for national assimilation.

The concept of the 'authority-defined' social reality played a significant role in shaping the perception of Malay identity in Malaysia. In this context, being Malay was defined by adherence to Islam and the status of being a *bumiputera* (sons of the soil).[9] The use of *bumiputera* serves as a "communal balance" to counter the assimilation of other races such as Chinese and Indian people, which was seen as a threat to Malay cultural identity (Ahmad Fauzi, 2002, p. 92). To consolidate political support, the government even included the indigenous Bornean people as *bumiputera.* Hence, the categorisation of the *bumiputera* as

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[8] "The concept of nation-of-intent depicts an idea of a nation that still needs to be constructed or reconstructed" (Shamsul, 1996a, p. 328), which is based on the conceptual discrepancy between the national identification and various ethnic identification of different racial groups which conflates the authority-defined and the everyday-defined realms of society, especially at the time of political crisis.

[9] *Bumiputera* is a term used to describe the Malay race and other indigenous people of Southeast Asia in Malaysia. The term comes from the Sanskrit word *bumiputra* which translated literally, means 'son of the soil.'

an identity can be regarded as a product of the dominant official ideology, relegating the *non-bumiputera* groups to the position of the 'everyday-defined'.

To illustrate the resulting dialectics, Shamsul (1996b) states that the Chinese regard that Chinese language, Chinese vernacular school, religions and cultures should be taken officially as part of the national identity. As a *non-bumiputera* group, they challenge the ethnic supremacy associated with the *bumiputera*-defined identity and advocate for a more pluralistic national identity. He further explains that while the *bumiputera* group supports a national identity based on exclusivity and religious affiliation, the non-Muslim *bumiputera* subgroup proposes that Christianity and native religions should be given equal status alongside Islam. This complex issue of the *bumiputera* identity is further exacerbated by different factions within the Islamic *bumiputera* group. Some reject the 'authority-defined' interpretation of the country as secular and its modernist interpretation of Islam, instead they advocate for a fundamentalist version of the religion. These individuals are often labelled as radical Islam practitioners by the authorities.

With the *bumiputera* hegemony well entrenched in the state agenda, its opposition is perceived as "an anomaly, a social aberration, or as minority voices, which the state allows as an act of benevolence or a form of 'social tokenism'" (Shamsul, 1996a, p. 324). This opposition stems from deep-seated prejudice between different ethnic groups, often originated from the colonial era's racial stereotypes and biases. These stereotypes constructed as the 'Others' as inferior and perpetuated divisions among communities, contributing to the emergence of multiple versions of nation-of-intent.

Th Multiple Versions of Nation-of-Intent

At this stage, it becomes clear that different personal experiences and methods of self-identification could be defined in relation to a number of different sociocultural backgrounds "mediated through… [their] social class position" (Shamsul, 1996b, p. 478). The national dream to construct a unified Malaysian identity is challenged by multiple versions of self-identification, as Shamsul (1996a) suggests.

> A nation-of-intent may imply a radical transformation of a given state, and the exclusion or inclusion of certain groups of people. It may also imply the creation of a new state, but it does not necessarily imply an aspiration for political self-rule on the part of the group of people who are advancing their nation-of-intent. It may be an inclusive construct, open to others, and which is employed as the basis for a political platform voicing dissent or a challenge to the established notion of nation. (p. 328)

Nation-of-intent as a political concept is continuously evolving. Therefore, a new framework must be determined to illustrate the dynamic relationship between national-based ethnic identity and self-based ethnic identity. Marginalised groups and communities that were historically excluded from the mainstream political agenda are now asserting their own perspectives, seeking recognition within a broader national framework. It is important to note that the emergence of multiple versions of nation-of-intent does not necessarily imply fragmentation or division. Instead, it reflects the dynamic nature of societies and the ongoing negotiation of collective identities.

With the rise of Islamisation in the 1970s, what we see is not just the concern of distinct ethnic categories, but differentiation based on the religious domain rather than

ethnocentric differences. In the next section, the national agenda to persuade all members of the society to imagine themselves as a unified imagined community is challenged by religion as a form of political identification.

Islam as Political Device

The confluence between religious and racial issues has been around since 1969 as evidenced in several conflicts between Malay Muslims and non-Muslims. The Federal Constitution, Article 160, stipulates that 'Malay' is a person who professes the religion of Islam. Consequently, Malays are constitutionally predetermined as Muslims. Presently, the construction of racial identity as Malay *bangsa* (race) is constitutionally attached to Islam in Malaysia, however, in Indonesia, the term *bangsa* refers to national citizenship, rather than a particular race, and their people's Islamic affiliation is dispersed. Therefore, the link between the identity of Islam and Malay as a racial category in Malaysia appears to be contingent on the shifting political position of Islam in Southeast Asia specifically, and in the world at large. As we trace the development of Islamic movement in relation to its official position in Malaysia, the ambiguity of ethnic identity becomes obvious along with the development of religious identity.

In contemporary Malaysia, Islam serves as a religious identity for all the Malay ethnic groups. The ethno-nationalistic ideology of Malay paramountcy further consolidates the importance of Islam in society. Although Islam is the official religion, various interpretations of Islam by different factions of charismatic religious leaders have persisted.[10] These

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[10] The rise of Islamic sectarian movement by Darul Arqam in 1968, the construction of Sky Kingdom by Ayah Pin in the 1980s, the case of activist Amri Che Mat who has been accused on spreading Shia beliefs in 2016, and the televangelist Masitah who proclaimed her premonition of Judgement Day in 2021.

situations have made religion susceptible to political manipulation, used in manipulating the expression of everyday-defined religious subjects.

According to Lee (2010), "[w]here ordinary secular means of finding redress for injustices and dissatisfactions were inefficacious, Islam provided another way of expressing grievances and seeking redress" (p. 5). The Malaysian authority has appropriated Islam in its policy in its response to any form of social oppression through the politic of Islam. It is one of the government's attempts to 'officiate' the everyday-defined interpretation of Islam within the realm of the authority defined in its pursuit to convince the public through religion.

Mahathir's disregard for the practice of Malay occult and superstition was not an apolitical step to prevent the spread of an irrational mindset among the Malays as he claimed. His aim was also to promote Islam as holistic and all-encompassing and "opposed to pre-independence Islamists' indigenous-traditional approach of tolerating the presence of endogenously derived *adat* [Malay custom] and nationalism" (Ahmad Fauzi, 2002, p. 91). The action functioned to use Islam as a political device to curb other non-Islamic and counter-hegemonic views of Islamic factions, thereby projecting itself to be inclusive through the politic of Malay supremacy and the religious aspects it is entangled with. In the Mahathir era (1981–2003), an existing 'Malaysian Malaysia' pluralistic ideology of the Vision 2020 project is aligned with the authority-defined version of Islam that became a target of Islam political contestation.

Mahathir's effort to promote Islam to the officialdom was to project Islam in a different light – a tool for capitalist and modernist development. In order to counter the criticism from the Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) that the ruling party is essentially secular, Islam was used as a unifying force to appease the Malay majority, projecting itself as progressive, modern and inclusive. At the same time, keeping the non-Malay groups in check, simultaneously, phasing out other Malays who did not embrace the official version of

Islam. The model was modified by Mahathir in order to catch up with global changes using his own version of national imagining as a fully developed industrialised Islamic country. As a result, he turned a country that was predominately made up of a "Malay-dominated plural society, into a NIC [Newly Industrialised Country]" (Shamsul, 1996a, p. 336). Mahathir was followed by the next premier, Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who continued to promote Islam through "the concept of *Islam Hadari* (Civilisational Islam), which exhorted Malays and other Muslims to create a modern Islamic society that was scientific, rational and tolerant" (Andaya & Andaya, 2017, p. 348). Thus, an alternative version of the nation-of-intent, especially in an Islamic form, found a certain degree of validity through the state's redefinition and reconstruction of national identity based on the indistinctive boundary of the authority-defined and everyday-defined identities.

Fractures within the Islamic Society

Although the influence of Islam in the authority-defined realm is well-established by the government, some fractures and divisions are apparent among the perceived radical Islamic groups. Maznah Mohamad (2020), argues that the development of Islamic resurgence in the last three decades has been built on "a 'double-movement' of hegemonic and plural Islam" (p. 475). The politic of Islam in Malaysia can be categorised, in one way, as "moving in the direction of centralisation, homogenisation and hegemonisation", and in another way as "a counter-movement of pluralisation and diversification" (Ibid.). While the former highlights the official version of state Islam, the latter is characterised by the internal struggle of the Islamic movement among its leaders. Maznah's (2020) contextualisation of double movement' is premised on what she perceives as 'links and fractures' that occurred within the historical framework of Islamic influences in Southeast Asia and Malaysian political

development specifically. She further describes that in the colonial era, Islam as a religion in Southeast Asia had been "plural in nature" (Ibid. p. 476) and without a controlling centre referring to the way that Islam has been propagated by traders and conducted in a kingdom characterised by the political cosmology of mandala devised during colonial time between the Dutch Indonesia and the British Malaya among the Malays, leading to a more hegemonic and fractural configuration of Islam.[11]

Another contributing factor has to do with the fact that the Malay Muslims had to endure political pressures from the non-Muslims endeavouring to garner cultural and ideological security. It may also serve as the NCP's efforts in 1971 to increase the momentum towards the incorporation of non-Malay ethnicities into the Malay elite group. These conditions contributed to the resurgence of Islam that occurred distinctively from how it happened in other parts of the world (Keddie, 1988, pp. 20-21). Consequently, many non-Malays converted to Islam, either through inter-racial marriage or by personal choice in order to gain a certain social class position within the society.

Government policies were enacted to allow large numbers of Malay Muslims to study abroad, especially in the Middle East, where they were indoctrinated by the ideology of Islamic revivalism. Further mobilisation of Islamic resurgence is attributed to the political Islamist influence from the 1979 Iranian Revolution (Noor, 2008). Students who returned, were instrumental in the local resurgence of Islam, thus instigating a movement of Islamic awareness among the younger Malays.

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[11] The earliest feature of the current Islamic resurgence can be traced to the 1970s when the *dakwah* (proselytising) movement began in Malaysia (Nagata, 1984). Contrary to the original meaning of *dakwah* which refers to the advocacy of Islam by Muslims to the non-Muslims, in the Malaysian context, the movement served to persuade the Muslims to be good Muslims rather than bad. *Dakwah* promotes the ideal religious practices necessary to become a "true Muslim" (Maznah Mohamad, 2020, p. 483). It was also one of the first approaches towards building a unified Islamic identity which subsequently, has brought about a revival of interest in Islam, targeting highly educated and middle-class Malay youth in urban areas (Kessler, 1980).

According to Mohamed Nawab and Saleena (2016), there were three distinct permutations of the early Islamic resurgence. Firstly, groups such as the *Jamaat Tabligh* and *Darul Arqam* which were more inclined to Arabic cultures and Islamic studies and, although these groups emphasised the pragmatic aspects more than dogmatic aspects of Islam, they focused on matters in relation to "personal morality, such as sex, liquor, gambling, and clothes" (p. 2). *Darul Arqam* was considered a threat to the state-defined Islam because its charismatic qualities exceeded those put forward by the government. As a result, *Darul Arqam* was banned by the government in 1994. It was also considered a resurgent *dakwah* (proselytising) movement as a part of the rise of a big millenarian movement (Ahmad Fauzi, 2000).

Secondly, was the group, *Angkatan Belia Islam* (ABIM) which was comprised of secularly educated graduates, led by Anwar Ibrahim. These groups were influenced by a worldwide Islamic revolution in Iran which is considered by the Malays as a unifying force of religious identity. In the efforts of the ruling party to consolidate Islam, government agencies such as Islamic banks, insurance, Islamic University and Islamic Medical Centre were developed in response to the influence of radical Islamic group which was portrayed as anti-developmentalists. Although it was never the government's intention to allow this number of Islamic influences in the authority-defined realm in the first place, it managed to infiltrate the government administration. It is an example where an everyday-defined expression of religious identity has been elevated its status in the official realm, indirectly mobilised by government machinery.

Currently, the ethnic Malays are further divided by the internal fractures observed in the Islamic party and the society at large. These fractures were preconditioned intending "to control Muslim minds" (Maznah Mohamad, 2020, p. 482). According to Maznah Mohamad (2020), there are at least two divisions of the Islamic political movement, 1) JAKIM

(Department of Islamic Development) group and 2) the Wahhabi-Salafi group, both of which are differentiated by their interpretation of the concept of *Tauhid* (the oneness of God). The former adheres to *Tauhid Sifat 20*, while the latter to the *Tauhid 3*.[12] Both of them direct the course of Sharia law – to implement *hudud*.[13]

The contestation over the legitimacy of each *Tauhid* determines the content of the Islamic religious school curriculum that may pose threats to the unity of the Malay constituency. There is no significant philosophical difference between these two groups, except for the way Islam is being practised. And their ideas range "from complete servitude to God to the extent of excluding or exterminating others who are considered enemies of Islam" (Ibid.) which initialised the concern of the violent jihadist movement.

The third division is made up of the liberal Malays who embrace the ideology of pluralism, "whether it is a democracy, LGBT, or the idea of multiculturalism that involves giving concessions to non-Muslims" (Ibid. p. 483). Ultimately, the goal of all these groups is to gain authority within the authority-defined realm of mainstream politics in Malaysia.

Other peripheral Islamic organisations in which their expressions increasingly gained popularity in the public sphere recently include *Ikatan Muslimin Malaysia* (ISMA, or Muslim Solidarity Front), the Islamic Renaissance Front (IRF) and Hizb at Tahrir Malaysia (HTM) (Ahmad Fauzi & Che Hamdan, 2016). However, there are ideological differences. So, it is too soon to tell what influences these groups might have had on the government.

As can be seen, the deployment of state apparatus in the formation of national imagining derived from the exploitation of boundaries between the authority-defined and

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[12] *Tauhid* decrees on the approach of worship and standardises measure of a true Muslim. Its spectrum "range from complete servitude to God to the extent of excluding or exterminating others who considered enemies of Islam" (Maznah Mohamad, 2020, p. 482). *Tauhid, Sifat 20*, refers "to the twenty essences of God." (Ibid).
[13] *Hudud* refers to the punishments that is executed under the Shariah law. This form punishment often invokes controversies with the 'supreme law of the Federation' commonly recognised as civil law which is considered to be more secular and liberal.

everyday-defined ethnic identities could possibly promote the rise of multiple peripheral religious entities. It is an unpredictable side effect that occurred out of the ethnonationalist agenda, developed within the authority-defined mechanism and propelled by the modernisation project which aimed originally for a creation of a unified nation. However, it also perpetuates identity boundaries between Malays and non-Malays, and even among Muslims themselves. Nevertheless, the main challenges of driving the nation forward have not been limited to the cultural aspect, but also to the economic aspect, wherein it identifies with a capitalist-driven economy.

The Unintended Consequences of Islamic Resurgence

One of the significant factors that continues to contribute to the strengthening of the Malay identity is the fact that Islamic ideology is tied to the economic prosperity of the country. Islam as a characteristic of Malay identity is strengthened through the practical role of NEP.   While the Malaysian society was shaped by the continuous redefining and shifting of its national agenda through the implementation of NCP, one of the factors that contributed to the rise of Islamisation was the financial support received from the NEP which channelled funding into these activities (Ahmad Fauzi & Che Hamdan, 2016). It is a sign of growing state political influences on religion practices driven by state capitalist economy; and it is the NEP-based reconstruction policies which in a large part contributed to Islamic resurgence among Malays (Ahmad Fauzi, 2002, p. 98). Hence, the resurgence of Islam in politics occurred in the 1970s and 1980s and has persisted up to the present time.

The Malays perceived Islam as an attractive choice for reconciling the demands of modernisation, social life and spiritual demands that have uprooted them from their

traditional values.[14] Muzaffar (1986) asserts that "[t]he urban-industrial society consciously and unconsciously worships the machine and the techniques of production that accompany it… the modern city tends to create a spiritual vacuum in man" (p. 65) thus, promising the citizens an opportunity to participate in a 'grand project' which they can claim as their own because it "bridges the authority-defined and the everyday-defined idea of a nation" (Shamsul, 1996a, p. 328). The deployment of Islam as a political device has caused unintended consequences that has acquired momentum to traverse across the dominant/authority-defined boundary and the dominated/everyday-defined boundary within the Malaysian society.

While the causes of Islamic resurgence are inextricably intertwined with the development of NEP, one cannot ignore the role of global Islamic revivalism as an unintended factor that contributed to the diffusion of religious identity. In the case of Malaysia, modernisation also amplified the needs of the society to self-identify based on their own religion, which, in this case, was the capitalist-driven economy and globalisation. The state's economic development that was evident in the project of NEP, namely industrialisation, modernisation and urbanisation has also prompted the popular demands of the everyday-defined standard, eclipsing the one intended by the authority.

In the consolidation of Islam as the official religion, splinter Islamic movements and influences were deliberately driven away by force to become independent within the everyday-defined realm. By engaging with the religious parameter in the politic of identity, the significance of everyday-defined social practices can be explored in relation to the spread of non-official beliefs. It can be regarded "as symbolic orders which express capitalist

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[14] The earliest influences of state-defined Islamic values in capitalist governance can be observed in the practice of *zakat* (alms) collection. Scott (1988) states that the Malay landlords denied their traditional responsibility to provide tax levies to the poor as it has become unnecessary due to wealth generated from state industrialisation. As a result, *zakat* was implemented to remind them of their Islamic duties.

tensions and contradictions… [,] idioms through which powerless groups express, wrestle with, contain, and manoeuvre themselves in relation to the exploitation, commoditization, and contradictions of capitalist relations." (Goh, 2011, p. 146). The rise of counter-hegemonic forces would not only present a contradiction to capitalism but also would serve as an alternative outlet of anti-authoritarian calibre within the society despite of the deliberate erosion by the state modernising force. In the following sections, I will argue that the non-official politic of religion challenge the definition of mainstream Islam within a globalised context.

The Rise of the Liberal Democratic Public Sphere

The characteristics of Islamic revivalism in Malaysia are motivated internally and externally by political and economic factors. At an earlier section of this chapter, the ethnic issues were highlighted in relation to its traditional cultures and educational systems created to maintain the survival of each ethnic group within a developing society. It is, therefore, important to promote a hegemonic and centralised government within the society at large and assimilate those groups that were still entrenched in the old way. However, as we can see, the problems of national unity were often intensified by the state mission itself. Loh (2020) reminds us that "social mobilisation occurred and egged on popular demands for political participation which, alas, often occurred at a faster rate than that of political institutionalisation" (p. 490). Modernisation such as the development of media technology, and other external factors, plays a significant part.

The rise of Islamic political movement was "encouraged by the developments within the wider Muslim world brought to them by the rapid advancements in mass communications and audio-visual technology" (Ahmad Fauzi & Che Hamdan, 2016, p. 3) which were

developed by people who had become some of the 'new' Malay middle class. The expansion of Islamic influences in Malaysian society has been assisted by the development of state-induced Information Technology Communication (ICT) initiatives enables the government to rely on people's beliefs via the visceral and affective forms of messages and contents expressed. This has benefited from modern form of mediation which has been facilitated by development in the ICT involving the Internet, social networking and blogosphere.

The Multiple Public Spheres

The development of Malaysian society in recent years has not only raised awareness of the social and political hegemony, but also triggers a developing attachment to the global trends of market ideologies and technology know-how. According to Lee and Ackerman (1997), the rationalisation of state religion in the context of secular development context has been regarded as a catalyst for the growth of other religious influences of the charismatic kind. As a result, the process is reinforced by an emergence of a middle class that is involved in the revival of a non-official interpretation of religion in their everyday lives as described here by Lee and Ackerman (1997).

> [R]eligion did not disappear as Malaysia modernised. On the contrary, the processes of rationalisation and secularisation reinforced religious expressions, giving them new meanings and new organizational structures. The notion of the sacred took on more political meanings, and cultural identities became inseparable from religious practices. (p. 134)

This case study suggests that the alternative version of official religious expression has not relented. Modernisation seems to run parallel to the growth of the non-official religious

practice. Consequently, modernisation could be construed as providing a new space for enchantment, paving the way to a new imagining of the nation. The process fits with Plate's (2003) discussion about the increasing mediation of faith displayed across different religions around the globe. For, according to him, "religion and cultures do not merely *use* media, but instead are *used by* media, and created by them." (Plate, 2003, p. 4). The observation suggests the possibility of an alternative form of religious identity within the context of the Malaysian religious movement.

Fraser (1990) with regard to the existence of multiple public spheres, argues in a critique of the Habermas' notion of a single public sphere that "there were always a plurality of competing publics but the relations between bourgeois publics and other publics were always conflictual" and "the bourgeois public was never *the* public" (p. 61). This is due to the increasing transnational and global awareness that shapes public opinion, "[w]hether the issues are global warming or immigration, women's rights… or 'the war on terror'" (Fraser, 2014, p. 19). She contends that the formation of a shared national imagining rooted in nationalist territorial media requires further scrutiny in this globalised world. There is an increase in the frequency of social activism promoting a more liberal version of Islam, not to mention the globalised cultural factors that have continuously shaped it (Lee, 2010). As a result, other alternative and almost conflicting public spheres emerged beyond the official realm as an outlet for expression. Thus, rather than a single mainstream or official public spheres preconditioned by the authority-defined model, multiple versions of national imagining, as developed by different public spheres, exist in contrast to the authoritative form of national expression.

The Liberal Democratic Public Sphere

In the post-millennial era, the consequences of the authority-defined national imagining have a different manifestation. The continuity of Islamisation has prompted several counter-movements by liberal democratic groups, thereby challenging the authority-defined version of national identity in Malaysia. It is important to note that the rise of counter-movements of the liberal democratic group results several issues included the 1988 amendments to the constitution which states "the civil courts shall have no jurisdiction in respect of any matter within the jurisdiction of the Syariah Courts" which have been given unprecedented power in the cases such as Lina Joy's conversion,[15] the Shamala's child custody,[16] and the Moorthy's body snatching case.[17] Consequently, it sparked the beginning of several other liberal counter-movements, including the *Article 11 Coalition*.[18] The controversies arising from the cases can be regarded as the antithesis of the discourse promoted by the authority-defined interpretation of the constitution. These movements are further described by Khoo (2013) "as a counterpoint to the trend of desecularisation" (p. 1).

Contrary to the increase of desecularisation in Malaysian politic as observed by some scholars (Kessler, 2008 & Liow, 2009), Khoo (2013) argues for the rise of constitutional and cosmopolitan patriotism among Malaysians that signifies a growing anti-desecularised movement by the liberals. Although Islamic influences in the authority-defined politic have been built up in recent years, there is a rise of liberal democratic response manifested in a form of 'constitutional or cosmopolitan patriotism' as described by Khoo (2013),

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[15] Lina Joy was born to Muslim parents, but she applied to the National Registration Department to have the word 'Islam' removed from her national identification card, signifying her conversion from Islam. However, the civil court decided that only the Syariah courts have the jurisdiction for this matter.

[16] Shamala's husband has converted both of their two children to Islam without their mother's consent. As a result, her relationship with her husband became estranged. In 2002, when both of them applied for custody of the children, the civil court ruled that jurisdiction for this matter lay with the Syariah courts.

[17] In December 2005, a dispute over the burial ceremony of Moorthy who allegedly practising Hinduism has been overruled by the Syariah court based on the fact that he was a Muslim convert prior to his death, he was finally buried as a Muslim.

[18] The coalition was participated by lawyers, Muslim women's NGOs (Sister in Islam) and activists when they realised that the deterioration of constitutionally enshrined liberties caused by Islamisation.

constitutional patriotic discourse, coupled with acts of citizenship, demonstrates

that liberal democratic ideals are being exercised by activists and individuals. The

theme of love and compassion, evident in the linked discourse of constitutional

patriotism and cosmopatriotism, is used to galvanized individuals for social

change. (Khoo, 2013, p. 15)

The movement was built partially upon the solidarity between Malaysian citizens and former

Malaysians living oversea and based on global compassion – a new identity that embodied

universal love rather than blind allegiance, heading towards a new form of imagined

communities beyond the sovereign nationalist boundary. Hence, the intensifying Islamic

discourse in the public sphere would eventually lead society to challenge authority as a social

response to the over-sanctification of Islam in a multicultural society. Such responses are

influenced by local and global events in which "individuals, and democracy… rely on the

presence of an array of different discourses and realms of action within which to advocate for

what they regard as justice" (Lee, 2010, p. 135). In other words, the course of national

identity and the imagining it entails would be defined by those who would rise to power and

supported by the prevailing public discourse of a particular social group. Equally, they are

capable of justifying the legitimacy of an ideology according to their own cultural logic.

This kind of identity formation finds resonance with what Shamsul (1996b) proposed

as "a second generation [sic] nationalism" (p. 485) which originates from a "quasi-

democracy" system, or a "repressive-responsive regime" (Loh, 2020, p. 507) – like the one

that appeared to be developed in a comprehensive context of global solidarity based on a

sense of universal love and compassion. Shamsul (1996b) appears to have envisioned this by

his contention that "…in the intellectual realm of society… there has been a tendency to

disconnect, on the one side, 'social theory,' and, on the other… the 'moral concern of real people" (p. 479). Presently, it is this 'moral concern' that effectively charges the society's capacity to identify themselves in a universal context of love and compassion and acting as the source for their definition of nationhood.

It is clear now, that the interpretations of the current political climate in Malaysia can be divided into two branches: on the one side, there are increasing elements of religious and ethnocentric policies in the state apparatus, and on the other side, a counter-reaction of liberal movements based on universal and global values. It reflects Loh's (2020) proposition of two types of the current method of imagining the nation: the "ethnic-genealogical" and the "civic-territorial" (p. 500).

The ethnic-genealogical method refers to imagining a nation along the parameter of ethnic, cultural and religious attributes, privileging the majority of an ethno-religious community. In opposition, the civic-territorial method promotes equal rights and also civic responsibilities, appearing more open to alternative cultural influences from within and from outside society. At the moment, the system of governance in Malaysia can be situated between the interval of the two models, oscillating between two extreme concepts of nationhood. Thus, it could be argued that Malaysia is still in search of her national identity in which various forms of national imagining still continued to be articulated.

Conclusion

The discussion in this chapter should allow us to appreciate both the official and non-official interpretations of the current Malaysian socio-political conditions and their development with regard to national identities. Notably, there is an apparent shift in the conception of national identity from ethic-based identity towards cosmopolitan-based identity, both of which are shaped continuously by the national (internal) and the globalised

(external) aspects of the condition. Therefore, what constituted the authority-defined and everyday-defined national identities and imaginings necessitate a certain contextual approach within a particular historical period.

The appropriation of everyday-defined elements as a form of social mitigation by the state was evident in the past: the co-optation of ethnic, cultural and religious elements in the state apparatus has significant implications in shaping the national imagining. Thus, the official ideology encounters opposing forces from different angles, thereby projecting an inconsistent form of national imaginings. Among these is the contested national identification that is not only based on the Malay vs. the non-Malay group, but also within the Malay groups itself, invoking an alternative identification based on religion that is garnered by external forces. As globalisation and popularism rise, it is important to note that the challenge towards state homogenisation may present a transition of focus towards popularism, "from the 'exemplary' to 'popular'." (Kahn, 2004, p. 5). Consequently, a new sense of belonging to the cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism emerged as the new form of national identity. All these serve to gain a definitive position in the construction of a new national identity for a new national imagining.

In the next chapter, I will explore what happens in the film industry as it negotiates with the authority-defined structure, particularly in the context of ideas, narratives and symbols articulated in films which, in turn, reflect the contested terrains of the discourse between the authority-defined and everyday-defined form of national imaginings.

CHAPTER TWO

The Contemporary Cinema:
From Independent to Mainstream Filmmaking

In the previous chapter, I discussed different versions of national identities and imaginings generated for nation-building. Over the course of cinematic development in Malaysia, the concepts and ideas associated with national identities and imaginings have played significant role in shaping the films produced. Whether explicitly or implicitly, these themes have found expression in the narratives, characters and visual representations in the contemporary Malaysian cinema. Malaysian filmmakers have utilised cinema as means to communicate, question and challenge the prevailing notion of national identity, while also contributing to the ongoing discourse surrounding the construction of collective imagination.

My initial focus is on independent films in the way they promote a certain form of alternative national imagining, therefore, this chapter will focus on critical overviews of the scholarships on Malaysian independent cinema, specifically on how they analyse independent films' representations of the non-official version of national identities and imagining. I will emphasise on the emergence of independent films since the 2000s. These independent films have been striving in unofficial platforms benefited indirectly from the advancement in ICT and digital networks. They are products of social and political changes that have nurtured by

the restrictions in censorship laws and prejudice in filmmaking policies. As I have explained in the Introduction chapter, the independent films are characterised by their presence in unofficial channels of exhibition and distribution. The focus now is on the filmmakers who have gradually moved to mainstream filmmaking, resulting in an emergence of fantastic films that characterised by its production and content ambiguity.

Then, I will provide an analytical discussion on the importance of focusing on the practices of the current mainstream filmmaking in which their themes and stylistic strategies overlap with those observed in independent films. These mainstream films often exhibit similar themes and stylistic strategies as independent films. It is worth noting that mainstream productions have increasingly gained advantages from state initiatives and funding, which are not accessible to independent practices. Hence, it may be useful to study the participation of independent filmmakers in mainstream filmmaking to shed light on how these films offer alternative and sometimes oppositional expressions of cultural identities, all the while navigating the space without directly challenging state ideologies.

The films find resonance with the discursive space of nationalism as proposed by Bhabha (1994) who draws attention to an ongoing contestation between the 'pedagogical' call to 'the people', and the 'performative' that obtains in cultural and literary narratives where the figure of 'the people' appear. He describes as follows.

[I]n 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*" (pp. 145-146).

Filmic representations were regulated by state policies and censorship which align with the dominant ideology promoted by the state. As a result, the representation of certain social and ethnic groups is often ambiguous and engaged in constant negotiation with the ideologies surrounding the state's concept of identity. This conflict against state hegemony has given rise to different forms of national imagining, which the intention of the state does not necessarily reflect the will of the people. As a result, there are two contending social realities articulated in the films in which multiple sense of identification is possible. The consequences of this have led to both the practices of state censorship and self-censorship in Malaysian fantastic films – a gesture towards negotiating a national imagining that is continually being constructed and reconstructed.

Independent of What?

Independent films can be defined as any type of filmmaking that takes place outside the mainstream industrial-commercial film industry. According to Kuhn & Westwell (2012), these films may occasionally benefit from a certain form of government funding on the basis of their cultural value, or otherwise, self-funded and distributed within specific platforms of a narrowed audience through certain production formats. Lent (2012) proposes three attributes in the conceptualisation of Southeast Asian Independence cinema in which the films attempt to be independent from, 1) government regulation and censorship; 2) mainstream studios, and 3) styles of filmmaking. Equally significant, Baumgärtel (2012) asserts that the key characteristic of independent cinema is based on its ambiguous boundary between international and national discourse articulated in its contents and styles on the global stage. Therefore, the films that will be discussed not only showcase multiculturalism within the local context, but also display transnational characteristics that go beyond strict notions of

nationality and ethnicity, offering an ambiguous sense of identification. These films straddle between the themes commonly associated with presenting meanings that challenge fixed national identifications and opening up possibilities for broader interpretations.

In the case of Malaysia, themes articulated in independent films are distinct by their contradiction with the ideology promoted by the state. They advocate different concepts of national identity, racial and religious experiences which challenge the authority-defined discourse. Their modes of production, exhibition and distribution differ from the mainstream-commercial system. Most of these films are self-funded and are produced on extremely low budgets, technologically poor and distributed in digital format. Khoo (2007) describes them as "Just-Do-It-(Yourself)" films based on the filmmakers' own entrepreneurial efforts with "the pro-self-empowerment streak of youthful anarchists" (p. 227).

The rise of the independent film movement "would be impossible without the technological progress in digital video" (Baumgärtel, 2012, p. 4). The majority of the films were never released theatrically but were only available for screening at international film festivals or distributed in DVD format. The use of the internet as a medium of dissemination triggers a "democratic cinema revolution" (Ibid., p. 2). In this case, independent films can also serve as one of the manifestations of social activism.

The Contested Representations of Malay Identity

Politically tabooed and socially critical films were not new in the Malaysian filmmaking scene, Mahadi J. Murat, Shuhaimi Baba and U-Wei Haji Saari were a few of prominent filmmakers in the new wave of the 1990s who dealt withissues of identity, social and cultural changes that were faced by the Malay community and the hardships endured during the modernisation era in Malaysia; much of these are brought by the implementation

of government policies such as the NEP. Accordingly, it was followed by independent filmmakers such as James Lee, Amir Muhammad and Woo Min Jin who explored issues affected by the ethnocentric NCP policy, many of them present alternative ideological reactions to the state's hegemonic interpretation of ethnic identities, experiences and social progress.

One of the aspects where independent films have been effective in subverting the authority is on the issue of ethnocentric policy in the filmmaking industry. In the 1970s, the development of Malay-language film studios such as Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris was disrupted by the lack of private investments and national protectionist trade policy (Lent, 2012). The multiethnic studio system was taken over mainly by the independent nationalist studio and Malay entrepreneurs. Therefore, it is commonplace to find the term, 'Malay cinema' or 'Malay films' when people describe the films produced in Malaysia. It has epistemological links to the attempt of Shaw Brothers and Cathay Keris Production during the Studio Era to make Malay-language films palatable for the Malay audience. The lack of non-Malay language production on the local scene at that time rendered it unnecessary, if not misleading, for any other terms to be used. Furthermore, the development of Islam and Malay language as national identity by the ethnocentric government policy of NCP in the 70s has further consolidated the use of the term.

Commonly known as 'Malay cinema', mainstream cinema in Malaysia often provides a false perception that Malaysia is made up of Malays, or that only the problems of the Malays were important enough to be highlighted. These films used mainly Malay actors and the Malay language, and highlighted the Malay community, but failing to account for other ethnic groups including the Chinese, Indians and other indigenous populations that, at the time, form 40 per cent of the Malaysian population.

However, the articulation of Malay identity in the context of the Malaysian nation-state is equally problematic in that it produces complex interpretations and manifestations within the media and film representations. Khoo (2006) exposes the problem experienced by ethnic Malay in the films produced from 1980s and 1990s with the social 'Other', which refers to the structure of the state hegemonic ideology. She further explains that the May 13 racial violence represented Malaysian traumatic social reality which was unable to be symbolised and was, therefore, repressed by the state. The effects of the 1969 racial riots brought about various results such as the enactment of NEP and NCP which reinforced cultural assimilation so that racial riots would never be repeated again, leading to Malay domination in filmic production. As a result, she covers extensively the reading of Malay cinema and claims that the majority of Malaysian films are Malay-centric and targeted to Malay audiences.

Hence, the representation of the ethnic Malay is an ongoing negotiation between the state ideology and Malay identity. A closer look at Khoo's (2006) seminal works shows that the representations of Malay ethnicity in films are shaped by a deliberate act of reclaiming Malay traditional customs and defines Malay identity by analysing Malaysian films' portrayal of characters around considerations of gender, race, folk customs and the consequences of the state's modernisation agenda. Her study of the complexity of ethnic Malay identity is done through the analysis of *Malay Adat* (Malay custom) as reflecting the cultural and religious heritage inherited from the practice of animism, Hindu-Buddhist traditions and other religions. However, these are often challenged by the official ideology, thus, complicating the formulation of "Malayness" (Khoo, 2009, p. 110).

For instance, the representation of native women with sarong tied around the midriff which is embedded in Malay traditional custom is being regarded as 'unIslamic' by the state-defined Islam and its view of modernity. In such cases, the representation of native females is

regarded as being sexually explicit. However, the representation can be interpreted as the male filmmaker's fears of emancipated modern women in Malaysian social reality, thereby resisting the pressure inflicted by modernity as experienced in the social life of the ethnic Malay. The representation of Malay women entails multiple interpretations according to who and where it is viewed context.

The late Yasmin Ahmad is an independent film director whose films create a dreamed image of Malaysia that negotiates with the authority-defined context of ethnicity. For example, in *Sepet/Slit Eyes* (2004) the reality of inter-racial marriage and romance as practised in some minority groups in Malaysia seems to respond to the model of 'everyday-defined' social reality because it is different from the authority-defined models. McKay (2012) suggests Yasmin is an auteur "fashioning a dreamed Malaysia cloaked in a liberal openness," often in contrast to the forces of the cultural hegemony of Malay supremacy (p. 112). Inter-racial romance is common in Malaysian society. However, it is difficult to connect the everyday occurrences of inter-racial romance with the authority-defined representation of racial segregation. Nevertheless, when Yasmin Ahmad attempted to present a sense of multiculturalism stylistically in the setting of her films, it sparked public outrage and criticism. By considering the outrage and critical responses as a symptom of the gap between Yasmin Ahmad's films and authority-defined social reality, her representation of multiculturalism can also be criticised on the basis of contradicting the representation of multiculturalism commonly presented in mainstream Malay-language cinema. Yasmin's representation of multiculturalism seems to contradict the stylistic convention in Malay-language cinema which is generally considered mono-lingual, and largely inhabited by ethnic Malay characters.

It is important to note that the multicultural representation of the inter-racial romance in Yasmin Ahmad's films *Sepet/Slit Eyes* (2004) and *Gubra/Anxiety* (2006) ignited

considerable controversy and debate in Malaysia because representation of inter-ethnic love affairs is considered taboo and challenges several levels of social reality. A television forum was organised by the mainstream TV channel, RTM1, entitled *Sepet dan Gubra Pencemar Budaya*/*Sepet and Gubra, the Cultural Corruptors*, and critics bemoaned by the representation of the inter-racial romance between Jason and Orked.

In that film, it appears possible for a *bilal* to be compassionate towards his sex-worker neighbours, pat a three-legged stray dog, and be seen playing flirtatiously with his wife.[19] However, the film's critics, were uncomfortable with the scene and suggested that a *bilal* should be represented as reporting the Malay sex workers to the religious affairs department, should refrain from touching a dog and should not be seen in his private romantic life (Mustafa, 2006). Significantly, Aidil (2006) reports that the critics were outraged by the portrayal of a Muslim girl, Orked, who entered and hung out in a Chinese restaurant that sold pork with her Chinese boyfriend Jason. A representation of Jason eating pork with Orked saying "it smells good" is considered racially sensitive. Yasmin crossed the boundary between the 'authority-defined' and 'everyday-defined' sense of social reality.

MacKay (2012) who studies Yasmin Ahmad's films, asserts that, "Malaysia seems, on the surface, to conform to Benedict Anderson's notion of an 'imagined community' but further analysis revealed that there is a gulf between surface reality and actual practice" (p. 108). The hegemonic claims for Malay cultural supremacy in actual practice are in conflict with the development of a concrete actual community. McKay (2012) argues the existence of a 'dreamed community' in Yasmin's films as an idealised society responding to the official version of a *Bangsa Malaysia* that is arguably difficult to achieve in reality.

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[19] A *bilal* looks after the house of prayer and recites the call to Muslim prayer. The name is also associated with Bilal ibn Rabah, the first man in history to call Muslims to prayer.

In conclusion, the films reflect the lived experienced of individuals from diverse backgrounds and highlight the importance of cultural exchange in a pluralistic society The interplay of multiple cultures in the films give rise to diverse interpretations. These films often explore the theme of multiculturalism, presenting an alternative reality that is more inclusive compared to the ethnically exclusive perspective nurtured by the official perspective. They challenge the dominant narrative of ethnic exclusivity, and instead emphasise the value of inclusivity, rendering them subversive.

The Representations of Non-Malay Identity

With the emergence of independent films of non-Malay or other ethnic groups in recent years, the subject matter focused on the alternative forms of ethnic identities, which in turn, generates extensive forms of social 'Others'. As stated earlier, the social 'Other' is treated, according to Khoo (2006) as harbouring "social antagonism" with manifested "unsymbolised trauma" grounded in the resistance to the Islamic resurgence and racial riots (p. 85). The dominant *bumiputera* is visibly represented in Malaysian cinema via images of the Malay indigenous identity as the purest, and the essential cultural form that mitigates against representing other ethnic, cultural and language groups due to political sensitivity regarding the racial riots (see Chapter One). Since the social 'Others' are antagonised by the state through the implementation of its policies that focus on them, Lee's (2014) close analysis offers alternative views beyond the mainstream Malay-centric viewing of contemporary non-Malay local films. He describes that the representation of Chinese identity as inferred by the Malaysian Chinese-language films represent a desire for equal identification and nationhood as the Malaysian marginalised ethnic community. He asserts, that in order to challenge the dominance of Malay-language cinema, Chinese Malaysian

filmmakers turned to transnational funding to contest the hegemony of Malay mainstream cinema.

In the Chinese Malaysian independent films, the concept of desire is evoked by comparing the 'desire to eat' with the desire to be equally treated as Malaysian and regarded as part of the nation beyond the restrictions of racial state policies (Lee, 2014). The Chinese Malaysian is represented in isolation by being shown continuously engaged with the consumption of instant noodles in contrast to the depiction of lavish meals in other transnational Chinese-language cinema, thus indicating the struggles of local Chinese filmmakers or ethnic Chinese in obtaining state funding for most social activities to be treated equally to those of the country's *bumiputera* class.[20]

The simple act of eating implies a strategy to survive life's hardships as related to the social struggle for material success and opportunities. This strategy is a manifestation of the legalised quota system and constitutionalised privileges enjoyed by the *bumiputera* in many social and cultural aspects of life in Malaysia. These forms of independent films offer an alternative platform for the visibility of ethnic groups other than the Malay, providing a more realistic reflection of a Malaysian society.

Lee (2014) argues for the representation of Malaysian Chinese that fall within the confines of ethnic marginalisation as experienced in Malaysia, while Khoo (2012) further suggests that the exposure of ethnic identity transcends the national context. In other words, by looking beyond the racial context in the analysis of films directed by independent filmmaker such as James Lee, Khoo (2012) argues that most of his films favours the attitudes that debunked the racial stereotype as opposed to Yasmin Ahmad's films where inter-racial

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[20] Although instant noodles are relatively affordable for everybody and part of the fast-food modern way of life, the original function was in satisfying hunger during difficult situations in remote areas. It is an allegorical representation to the struggles of ethnic Chinese for equal opportunity in this case.

love and the interpretation of religion is commonly expressed in the Malaysian context, thereby, embarking on articulation beyond national border, and displaying a globalised trope.

Cosmopolitanism Transcends the National Identity

The analyses of Chinese Malaysian films lead to the possibility of exploring an alternative form of imagining which is the departure from the official mode of representing the racially hierarchised country. The positioning of these non-nationalistic identities, within the context of urbanisation, modernisation and cosmopolitan, presents the issues as universal, thus complicating the stereotypical and official version of Malaysian identity. While using the Malay-language cinema as a comparative model, the Chinese-language films also conjured up fantasies that are beyond the state's ideological structure and provoke a possible expression of the desire of alternative representation within the globalised transnational space. The 'Others' in these fantasies lie within their own dream of becoming something that is not static and has permanence. They are not only deploying them to define themselves better, but they are essential to fulfil their national dream of social progress framed by the drive to modernity. Therefore, the conceptualisation of independent films is not only possible within the context of the state ideological apparatus but has transcended the scope of the national that exhibits characteristics of the globalised trends in cinematic representation.

In *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (James Lee, 2004), the desire of the character is embodied in the form of a female spirit of the washing machine. As well, the character invests time and effort in smoking as an expression of his desires with the cigarette, becoming an object confronting the character as an autonomous power, as hostile and alien, by "denuding his sense of self yet simultaneously driving his desires, however, it never quite suffices or fulfils him" (Khoo, 2012, p. 128). As well, the consumption of instant noodles

symbolises the "mass industrial production that isolates and individuates" (Ibid., p. 129). This is in contrast to the typical generic Chinese language films which represent "mealtime for social opportunities and interpersonal communication" (Ibid.).

James Lee focuses on the universal themes confronting modern subjects living in an urban, globalised capitalist society in isolation, represented by the depiction of smoking, and eating, in order to talk about love and desire. The image of loneliness in urban settings is also pervasive, representing the desire to become part of a national space shared by all communities without being socially ignored. It highlights the universal debate on loneliness in the context of alienation by the ethnic Chinese communities.

In *Sometimes Love is Beautiful* (James Lee, 2005) the painful experience of unrequited love and desire is represented by a character overcoming her desires by overeating. Even though Khoo (2012) isn't talking about the representation of ethnic marginalisaton in James Lee's films, her insights about desire and love are shown through the personal and interpersonal alienation experienced by the characters, thereby suggesting a new form of identification which rejects the official mode of representation. Ethnic identity is perceived as being fluid, fragmented, and even contradictory, and emerges in multiple forms of material and non-material identities, rather than a single fixed identity, especially the one defined by the state.

Imagining an Alternative Future

On March 8, 2008, a 'political tsunami' marked the day of the general election when the politics in Malaysia showed signs of change by the citizens' rejection of the dominating

political order in the wake of the *Bersih* rally.[21] Although the ruling coalition, the BN, was returned to power, albeit with a reduced majority, the BN realised the need to reassess its political strategy to guarantee continued public support. Malaysia's fifth premier, Abdullah Badawi, said his "biggest mistake" was to ignore the importance of cyber-campaigning on the Internet which resulted in the worst-ever electoral results (AdminK, 2008, para. 1).

Leong (2014) argues that the importance of the new media role in shaping the political landscape in Malaysia by drawing attention to the study of the 'social imaginaries' formed and facilitated by the new media such as the Internet, blogs, and online multimedia ranging from audio to animation and photographs. She defines social imaginaries as "the body of loosely co-ordinated significations that enable our social acts and practices by making sense of them" (Leong, 2014, p. 6). She further describes here take on this as follows.

> How individuals comprehend the world they live in is not always result of direct experiences. Often, social actors rely on second-hand knowledge passed down from their predecessors through hearsay, custom, tradition, rituals and historical records… individual pictures of the world comprise information gleaned and inferred from the experience of those whom they share a space and time, even if they are not personally acquainted with each other (Ibid., p. 8).

In some respects, this description seems contextually similar to Anderson's concept of imagined community. However, Leong's concept of social imaginaries refers to the current social situation relating to the new media and its circulation in the public sphere. It suggests a

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[21] *Bersih* (The Coalition of Clean and Fair Elections) comprises a group of non-governmental organizations which its objective is to push for electoral reform to enhance the Malaysian democratic system by safeguarding free, clean and fair elections.

more liberal sense of identification and construction of meaning in media different from the state ideology construct.

It is not too far-fetched to link the influences of digital media with the development of independent film production. Muthalib (2013a) argues that young digital filmmakers have an important role in shaping the new political views that are contrary to those of the old regime. Even before the general election, "seeking to transform the social and political landscape, the 'New Wave' of filmmakers was already active in calling for change" (p. 114). By considering filmic representation as part of the media public sphere, multicultural representation is caught up in multiple realms of social realities. In a post-colonial society such as Malaysia where social, ethnic and cultural identification is conditioned by the way it is modelled by the state for a certain period, the call for globalisation creates multi-level forms of identification that continue to challenge the notion of the state and the formulation of the nation.

McKay's (2010) proposition presents a similar contention in his analysis of Amir Muhammad's films within the Malaysian political context. His analyses reveal the director's attempts to reclaim the national past by salvaging the social memory that often contradicts the official ideology as produced by the state. Amir's documentary, *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung/Village People Radio Show* (Amir Muhammad, 2007) features several interviews with former Malaya communist party members in Southern Thailand which reveal a time-warped idyllic rural life inhabited by exiled communities preserving a simple lifestyle. The documentary features the Malay *kampung* in such a setting and presents a sustainable communal society without the intervention of urbanised modernity such as that experienced by other *kampungs* in Malaysian states. It portrays a form of alternative imaginary of cultural exclusion from the state ideology due to an antagonist's communist ideology which is in opposition to the state capitalist agenda.

The role of the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) is regarded as controversial in the struggle against the occupying Japanese forces in Malaya during World War II, and later during the return of British rule when their refusal to submit to them resulted in decreasing public support during the emergency. Interviewees in the film provide alternate historical accounts to the one circulated widely describing the fight for the independence of the Malaysian state. Untouched by the modernity marked by the capitalist material progress in Malaysia, the exiled communities were erased from national memory because of the trauma related to Communist violence.

The Chinese interviewee is portrayed as fully conversant in the Malay language which is contrary to mainstream opinion that ethnic Chinese are only fluent in their Chinese mother tongue. In another scene, the Malay interviewee justified his involvement in Communist ideology rejecting the colonial ideology of British rule as incompatible with the popular portrayal of ethnic Malay as anti-communist. These strategies contradict the depiction of stereotypical national identity developed in mainstream films.

Similarly, *Lelaki Komunis Terakhir/The Last Communist* (Amir Muhammad, 2006) is developed through a non-mainstream approach and inspired by the leader of the disbanded MCP, Chin Peng, and shown in musical and playful documentary style. The film features interviews with townspeople where Chin Peng grew up and demonstrates an alternative perspective and sympathetic views of him.

McKay (2010) offers an alternative political reading for these films about the repression of the moment of national and cultural trauma, which was communism. The banning of the screening of these films locally by the censorship board suggests an attempt to suppress alternate forms of expression and the documentation of facts regarded as contradictory to the understanding of history at the national and authority-defined level.

These forms of independent films appeal in the way of that subverts the political ideology of the nation state.

The Alternative Practices

Independent films, characterised by alternative experiences and representations of ethnic identities, project different versions of national imaginings, which is further complicated by globalised factors that change how cultural and national identities are perceived by the filmmakers. Thus, the alternative themes and styles observed in the contemporary mainstream practices can be explored as the influences from independent practices. Moreover, the development of ICT technology has transformed the practices of filmmaking since the 2000s and has deliberately shaped mainstream filmmaking towards the 2010s.

According to Hernandez (2012) "The drive towards ICT development in the country has stimulated growth in other industries such as call centres, Internet gaming, and the recovery of the once robust animation industry" (p. 225). The phenomenon of digital piracy which served to expose the public to the potential of the new media and to international cinema, to the literacy in digital tools utilisation, the freedom of expression and to making the most out of living economically via the act of piracy. Baumgartël (2012) contends "it is therefore safe to say that piracy has added to Southeast Asian's film literacy and even the quality of media education in the region" (p. 202). The trends involve regulated peer-to-peer sharing of digital contents including music, software, computer games, ripped DVD facilitated by the faster broadband speed, video repository site, torrent software and affordable prices of data provided by local data provider service. Although, the development of digital technology heralded the production practices of what is considered as independent

cinema, the contribution of digital technology to the mainstream production cannot be overlooked.

According to Lent (2012), there are three types of film practices: "centre of mainstream", "outskirts (or periphery) of mainstream," and "outskirt mainstream" (p. 16). 'Centre of mainstream' regards film as a commodity, driven by commercialisation. The 'outskirts of mainstream' attaches to the mainstream formula but less focused on commercial return and targeting a broader choice of subjects. The 'outskirts' are similar to the practices of independent films in which the filmmakers consider films as art. Certainly, independent films can be commercially viable, however, it must not be the first thing that comes into the filmmaker's mind when deciding to make independent films. However, in recent years, independent filmmakers such as James Lee and Woo Ming Jin have produced commercial films that appeal to broad audiences; both of them utilised CGI and digital technology. While obligated to the state ideology, these groups of filmmakers have often worked creatively in exploring alternative strategies to get their messages across.

It is important to acknowledge that the demarcation between the mainstream practices and independent practices may not be clear, much depends on style, theme, language and actors, source of funding, screening platform and distribution channel (Khoo, 2008). Therefore, in the next section, I will focus on the determining factors that define the current mainstream film practices which are continuously reformed by the renewed mode of film production, supportive film policies and censorship revision.

The Contemporary Mainstream Practices

In addressing the Malay films produced in the 1980s, leading to the new wave of the 1990s, Hatta (1997) describes Malay cinema as "a kind of middle cinema" as "a marriage of

art and commercial cinema" (p. 49). His notion of commercial cinema was based on the production of films that focus on popular subject matter and based on an impression that such materials normally generate better financial returns. The audience "turn out in greater numbers to watch a musical or a Western rather than to see a realistic film about workers or fishermen" (Hatta, 1997, p. 230).

Art films are regarded as less commercially viable due to a large number of audiences who would rather watch escapist entertainment. Many films have been successful abroad but have failed to attract local audiences (Hatta, 1997). He proposes that Malay cinema should portray a more diverse ethnic make-up of people from different languages and cultural backgrounds to reflect the reality of Malaysian society. The Malaysian film, in Hatta's view, should transcend the stereotypical racial depiction and offer a more authentic portrayal of society. One of his concerns was the mainstream films' official obligation to maintain racial ties due to social trauma caused by the 1969 racial riot. In the past, films that depict interracial relationships have been regarded as controversial and have to be seriously considered (Muthalib, 2013a). Another view sees, art films as highly dependent on the exotic elements in the film as customised for foreign audiences. He also argues for the inclusion of multi-ethnic make-up, languages and characters in a single film; however, he discouraged the production of films in which the use of particular language is emphasised.

It is important to note here, however, even though he advocates the production practices that reflect the multicultural make-up of Malaysian society, he equally denies the representation of real experiences of other ethnic groups. The depiction of racial struggles in film regardless of whether they are depicted in many languages or in one language shall not be disadvantageous to the artistic value of the film. Either way, the film that reflects the social reality of Malaysian society similarly can be regarded as arty, but the problem lies in what is defined as art cinema? Hatta's (1997) notion of art cinema is contingent upon the

production standard procured by the authority due to the state's concern about racial sensitivity and the issues with the representation of cultural authenticity. Nonetheless, his dichotomy of commercial and art cinema calls attention to the question of how much the aspects of commercial and art can be considered in a film before it is put under such categories, and is it possible that 'commercial cinema' can overlap with 'art cinema?' Therefore, 'middle cinema' in this sense can be re-examined in order to reflect the current mainstream practices in which other ethnic characters and language films are more pervasive, let alone, artistic.[22]

In recent years, the progress of digital filmmaking has changed the Malaysian film's exposure to different groups of audiences in terms of their racial and cultural background. The developments result in, not only a more conducive industrial condition in which multi-lingual films can strive, but they also encourage a more inclusive spectatorial position in mainstream cinema that goes beyond the confines of the audience's language and culture. I argue that many of these are indebted to the influence of independent practices and styles in mainstream production, the deployment of certain alternative production strategy by the mainstream filmmaker, and the financial support from the government initiatives.

The Government Initiatives

Prior to 2010, a film had had at least 60 percent Malay language in order to be considered 'Malaysian' films by the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS). A Chinese language production, *Ice Kacang Puppy Love* (Ah Niu, 2010) was rejected because it had less than 60% of Malay language, and, therefore, was not qualified to

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[22] Before the emergence of independent cinema in Malaysia, the films produced by locals mainly targeted Malay audiences, and, thereby constituting a formation of "Malay spectatorship" (Ngo, 2019, p. 51).

be named as a local film, even though it was produced locally. However, the film was eventually accepted on 29 January 2011 by the Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture because of its unpredictable financial success. The government's efforts to relax rules for the sake of its commercial prospect are evident in this case. Consequently, all locally made movies, whether in Mandarin, Cantonese or Tamil, are recognised as local movies as long as they come with Malay language subtitles (Borneo Post, 2011). Additionally, 25% of tax rebates and extra rulings such as, at least half the film has to be shot locally or half of it owned by local production companies with at least 51% of the movie rights (Rheus, 2011 & Sinema, 2011). At the time of writing, the tax rebate has been increased to 35%, including "the 30% per cent cash rebate" by the Film in Malaysia Incentive Scheme (Fimi), and an additional 5% cultural test rebate to "attract more foreign productions to shoot their films in Malaysia" (Malaysiakini, 2022, para. 1). The standard of what is regarded as 'quality film production' by the authority is defined by their capacity to provide further job prospects and to attract foreign investors.

In the technological aspect, the Creative Industry Development Fund (CIDF-MCMC) provides funding for all films regardless of the languages used with the aim "to facilitate and encourage all Malaysian's involvement in the creation, production and distribution of highly creative, original and marketable multimedia content for domestic and international markets" (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission, 2014). In recent years, the production of these films has benefited from the development of the state-induced digital initiatives. Funding such as the Animation Film Fund (Finas, 2022), Film and Multimedia Arts Development Fund, Special Effects Fund (CGI) from FINAS (Magic, 2022), and e-Content Fund from the Ministry of Science, Technology and Innovation (MOSTI) are offered

by the government for CGI effects and animation producers.[23] The eligibility criterion for funding involves the employment of digital media and contributions to the Nation Building Programme, which was aligned with the 1Malaysia government policy for building a united, multicultural nation.[24]

It is important to note here, that mainstream film production relies on state funding, or at least occasionally, and offering a new focus for studying Malaysian cinema, where previously scholarship has tended to pay more attention to independent film production. One of the most relevant examples of the rise of multicultural representations, in this case, is the involvement of state investment and agencies on an industrial scale in *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (Namewee, 2011) which shows that it can be considered as one of the state's attempts at the cultural and industrial capitalisation of alternative practices. It signals a recent appropriation by the cultural authorities of the alternative practices of independent calibre. Equally significant, there is the increasing involvement of independent filmmakers in the production of mainstream films in which their messages are channelled through a specific stylistic strategy (see Chapter Three). The development of these production styles can hardly be separated out from the contribution of independent filmmakers in mainstream settings and revision of film policies which go hand in hand with the process that involved various stages of production, distribution and consumption.

The Involvement of Independent Filmmakers in the Commercial Setting

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[23] E-Content Fund is the government's initiative to support local creative content companies in developing, producing and marketing their digital content in animation, digital games and interactive media content.
[24] 1Malaysia was initiated by the current premier, Najib Razak, on 16 September 2010 aiming "to emphasize the importance of national unity regardless of race, background or religious belief for a better tomorrow" (The Story of 1Malaysia, 2016).

Woo Ming Jin is one of the directors who started his career in independent films, but later ventured into commercial film productions. His first commercial film was *KL Zombi* (Woo Ming Jin, 2013), which was mainstream and produced under *Grand Brilliance*[25]. According to my interview with him, he was instructed by the censors to conduct 34 cuts in the film which affected its rhythm and continuity (Woo, Appendix A). There were several places where he had to make extra shots for potentially controversial scenes in order to avoid trouble with the censor later. In the interview I conducted, Woo states:

> For *KL Zombie,* we were asked to cut for making it to PG13 (film rating of Parental Guidance for audiences aged 13 and above). It was terrible. We have to beep words that are not even cursed words. There were like *"Saya nak buatkan Singapore golf kelab, ratakan semua bangunan*" (I want to make a golf club in Singapore and flatten its landscape). It was a joke. Even for that, we had to get it beeped out (Woo, Appendix A, p. 193)

However, he was grateful for his involvement in the commercial platform and acknowledged the benefits of gaining a higher reputation and larger audiences' being exposed in mainstream cinema (Woo, Appendix A). He continues to make mainstream-commercial films with alternative styles as in his latest films, *Zombitopia* (2021), an apocalyptic horror thriller, and *Stone Turtle* (2022), a Malaysian-Indonesian thriller film.

Another renowned active independent filmmaker who was involved in mainstream production is James Lee who directed his first studio production, *Histeria/Hysteria* (James Lee, 2008) under the production company, *Tayangan Unggul*.[26] The film suffered minor cuts

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[25] Grand Brilliance is the largest motion picture company in Malaysia that produces and markets films, drama and advertising.

[26] Tayangan Unggul is a film production company belonging to Astro All Asia Networks. It is one of the most prolific film production companies in Malaysia.

by the censors and a different version had to be produced for overseas release. The film became the last commercial film directed by James Lee before he left the film industry and became involved in film production for YouTube (Lee, Appendix A). From my interview with the Lee, access and proficiency in censorship negotiation seem to be one of the criteria that challenge the perseverance of filmmakers in the mainstream-commercial industry. The filmmakers who are able to take the censorship issues positively and manoeuvre around it are likely to have strategically developed an amicable solution with the censors for their films to be released with minimum cuts (see Chapter 3).

In another case, Dain Said has fostered a different style of production that caters to a specific mainstream film's audience. In my interview with the producer, Nandita Solomon stressed creating her own target audiences rather than relying on those "who are already in the cinema" and accustomed to watching Telemovies (Nandita, 2017, Appendix C, p. 262). Nandita targeted audiences she characterised as cosmopolitan, urbanized, and attached to a global taste. The films directed by Dain Said such as *Bunohan* (2012) and *Interchange* (2016) demonstrate a new attempt to reach a group of audiences who does not belong to those who used to watch low-quality Malay-language films. Both films used various languages of different ethnic and cultural backgrounds such as Kelantanese, English, Chinese, and Malay languages.

During the production stage of *Bunohan* (2012), Nandita found out that Malaysian cinema is obligated to screen movie trailers according to a segmented audience. She noted that Hollywood film trailers were normally screened along with non-Malay-language films in the cinema. My observation of the Malaysian cinema validates this by the exposition of Malay-language film trailer or even Indonesian film trailer before a particular Malay-language film commences. A similar situation applies to the Malaysian Chinese-language films in which the trailers of films from Hong Kong and China were shown. By

disassociating the films from other typical Malay-language films, Nandita submitted her films together with other Hollywood films to the censorship board, claiming they were fit for the urbanised audience who were used to watching HBO and Netflix channels. The submission was "in a bundle" (Nandita, 2017, Appendix C, p. 258) or in the same category as other Hollywood films to the censorship board. This strategy would prevent the censors from assessing her films according to the standard normally applied to other Malay-language films.

Her approach signifies the importance of audience segmentation which is further supported by her renewed strategy of production practice in dealing with film policy makers. With regard to this, she has successfully undermined the 'system' to gain specific audience exposure. She refused to attach to the production practices adopted by many Malay-language filmmakers who tend to copy other blockbuster filmmaking styles for commercial success as the benchmark of quality (see Chapter Four). Even though the films were commercially successful locally, they lacked critical acclaim at the international level.

The Censorship Policy

Most independent filmmakers dealt with social issues were not overly favoured by commercial filmmakers who were strictly regulated by state censorship (Muthalib, 2013a). One of the criteria that propels the development of independent filmmaking is the availability of new digital tools that allow independent filmmakers to present subversive subject matters and finally achieve international appeals through the depictions of multi-ethnic characters, religion and language representations (Khoo, 2007). Most independent films are screened in a private setting and online platforms where the censorship board has limited access.

In the 2000s, due to the popularity and proliferation of foreign horror and fantasy films in the Malaysian cinema, most mainstream filmmakers including those who were well-

known in independent practices ventured into the production of fantastic films. James Lee moved into mainstream production by directing *Histeria* (James Lee, 2008), a horror film about six female students who attended a haunted school.

In 2011 alone, an average of one fantastic film was released per month with various sub-genres with box office success that suggest a degree of audience appreciation for these kinds of films. In light of the popularity and commercial potential of these genres, the filmmakers successfully negotiated their films' releases with the censors (see Chapter Three). The state has been supportive of the film industry, as seen in areas where funding and digital infrastructure initiatives such as editing and sound studios. And the conflicts with the filmmakers over the depiction and representation of film content could be resolved through certain negotiation strategies.

The ICT Revolution

Before the popularisation of digital technology in film production, alternative filmmakers in the 1990s used Beta or Mini DV as a shooting format, and later proceeded to the use of HD or professional DV (Muthalib, 2013a). Many filmmakers who produced their films in digital format had to convert their film to 35mm format which was considered as standard practice for the mainstream film screening.

Digitally produced films were regarded as low quality and sub-standard, for example, only films produced in the 35mm format were approved by FINAS for screening in the local cinema. At the turn of the millennium, many filmmakers were influenced by the technological advantages of digital production that required previous experience with digital software and operational skills. Independent filmmakers who were well-versed and had

acquired sufficient proficiency in digital production became trendsetters and pioneers in revolutionising mainstream practices.

One of the initiatives by the former Malaysian 4th Prime Minister Mahathir Muhammad was for the country to become a technologically developed nation by 2020. The state-sponsored Multimedia Super Corridors (MSC) and other ICT development projects have enhanced digital production within the local film industry. The implementation of ICT as a state modernisation project has been influenced by the development of digital technology modelled after Silicon Valley, including its involvement in developing software and hardware. Since the 1980s, digital technology has been utilised in all areas of business, education and entertainment and the Malaysian government have strongly supported the content creation industry through various policies and strategies since the 1990s.

The institutions of higher learning such as Lim Kok Weng University of Creative Technology and The One Academy of Communication Design began offering courses such as digital film, broadcasting, multimedia and animation (Muthalib, 2013b, para. 29). Since 2008, more extensive moves have been made by agencies like the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDeC) in collaboration with FINAS in order to enhance the film industry. These initiatives included providing soft loans to local producers to make films as well as providing grants with the aim of developing intellectual property, producing films using digital effects and 3D animation, and financing the making of pilot animations for the market.

With the state's recognition of the commercial success of CGI films from abroad, the authorities appropriated the term 'creative industries' to promote the current mainstream film practices to include the digital technology and content development in Malaysia (Siti Salwa Isa, Siti Suriawati Isa & Abu Ali, 2011). The use of digital technology became synonymous with alternative productions which were triggered by the influences of the younger generation filmmakers who gained international recognition before they were finally

acknowledged by the authority. In recent years, FINAS and other governmental bodies responsible for commodifying Malaysian films in the global market, have been prioritising digital production in keeping with the government's policy of establishing and strengthening the ICT initiative.

According to FINAS (Finas, 2018), from 2000 until 2012, there were nine films produced that were marketed as fantasy/science fiction or its hybrids. Other feature films have since been produced or collaborated on and have had worldwide distribution including *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa/The Malay Chronicles: Bloodlines* (2011, Yusry A. Halim) and *Vikingdom* (2013, Yusry A. Halim), two CGI effects-laden films with Hollywood actors. All of these films display significant multi-ethnic and intertextual themes and target local and international audiences. CGI effects were deployed as spectacle to generate characters by which alternative cultural and ambiguous intertextual identities can be interpreted. Some reviews about *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa* (2011) state as follows.

> "Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa" is a reasonably well-made film, filled with moments of genuine entertainment, but at heart, it lacks honesty. Throughout the entire running time, there are very few moments that feel like it's a story about a Malaysian legend that is being told by Malaysian filmmakers. From the anachronistic character attitudes that are cribbed straight out of the Disney heroin textbook, to the costume designs that are more appropriate for Hollywood's Swords & Sandals epics, to ethnic characters who speak in perfect English when they have no rightful reason to do so… (Wai, 2011, para. 4)

Creative editing techniques and the interjection of CGI images create alternative fantastic films, thus providing multiple versions of generic references (see Chapter Four). Another

reviewer has this to say about this trend, "it features characters and a cast that would make the United Nations proud, speaking in English, Bahasa and Mandarin to highlight multiple cultures… the main protagonist… whom you can picture as a Captain Jack Sparrow equivalent…" (Stefan, 2011, para. 3).

Similarly, the uses of digital visual effects also represent an effort to make the films looks 'Hollywood' through extravagant CGI settings in order to increase the commercial value. It is important to note that 'digital visual effects' is not a widely used term to describe visual effects in the Malaysian film industry, instead, CGI films (*filem CGI)* is a more common term used to describe films with digital visual effects (Muthalib, 2013a, Wahiduzzaman, 2018, Othman, 2010, The Other Khairul, 2010, Ashari, 2018a). Local film reviews, news articles and scholarly discussions use the CGI terminology to describe film produced with digital visual effects (Hashim, Aziz & Ibrahim, 2014, Utusan, 2012). According to Hashim, Aziz & Ibrahim, (2014), the Malaysian film industry was revolutionised through the application of digital computer technology. In this view, films produced with CGI entail higher commercial values while filmmaking increasingly deploys cutting-edge CGI technology. The films attempt to set the deployment of CGI and 3D animation as standard marker "to gain international acclaim" (The Malaysian Reserve, 2017, para. 9). As can be seen, CGI films project the prospect for commercial viability by the authorities and funding bodies to make local films marketable globally.

Conclusion

A comparison between the independent and mainstream practices shows them to overlap around the issues of themes and stylistic strategies. The emergence of independent practices in Malaysia has had a significant impact on the development of mainstream production. These can be attributed to various factors such as the increase of funding from

the government, independent filmmakers' changing their portfolios, the revision of censorship and film policy, and development of ICT.

Themes focus consistently on the problems of ethnic identity, multi-ethnic relations, counter-official ideologies and the impacts of modernity and globalisation. These topics reflect the social and cultural realities of Malaysia and highlight the complexities of its multicultural society. In terms of style, mainstream films incorporate intertextual references to other films in order to attract larger audiences and tap into international markets. This strategy is facilitated by advancement in ICT, allowing for wider distribution and accessibility of films.

By drawing elements from independent filmmaking and leveraging technology, mainstream films aim to engage a diverse audience while also appealing to global viewers. Therefore, the fantastic films selected for this study demonstrate a consistency in their practices and characteristics, which can be traced back to independent filmmaking. The themes and stylistic strategies derived from independent practices find expression in mainstream films, demonstrating the influence of independent cinema on the contemporary cinematic landscape in Malaysia.

In the proceeding chapters, I will delve into the catalysts that ignite the emergence of such mainstream fantastic films. I will explore the factors and influences that contribute to the popularity of these films. By examining these catalysts, I aim to present a comprehensive explanation of the factors behind the rise of fantastic cinema that embrace multiculturalism and inclusivity, thereby contributing to the evolving industry of Malaysian cinema.

CHAPTER THREE

Film Censorship in Malaysia:
Contemporising Cinematic Apparatus

In this chapter, I divide my research findings on Malaysia film censorship into two different sections. The first section focuses on the evolution of censorship policies, inclined predominantly towards Islamisation and Malay paramountcy. It provides an overview of how the current censorship practices are shaped by these regulations. The second section examines the relationship between censors and mainstream filmmakers as a 'social dynamic,' presenting the issue of film censorship in Malaysia as a type of social practice negotiated between the film censors and filmmakers. It challenges the notion of film censorship which previously performed through a top-down approach. It sheds light on the unofficial aspect of this practice.

The second section will focus specifically on a discussion of the filmmakers' experiences and negotiations with the censorship board in case of a dispute. The filmmakers interviewed were selected from various backgrounds in order to see if they had a similar or different experience with the censors. The interviews were conducted with seven filmmakers and one producer.

Woo Ming Jin and James Lee were previously involved in independent productions but occasionally ventured into commercial filmmaking. Razak Mohaideen, Yusry Halim, the

late Mamat Khalid and the late Azhari Zain are recognised as mainstream-commercial filmmakers. Dain Said and his producer, Nandita Solomon appear to be somewhat ambiguous because of their unique production approach and marketing strategy.

Selecting filmmakers who were inclined to independent or commercial filmmaking provided a better framework for understanding the relationship between them and the censors. The results show that the more established or mainstream filmmakers are the more likely they are to be in a position to negotiate with the censors.

My concerns in this chapter are focused primarily on the filmmakers and selection of films that engage with the mainstream state ideology, as well as the way they utilise unofficial discourse as a platform for exhibiting alternative and even oppositional forms of filmic expressions. Throughout my case studies on the involvement of negotiation strategies, I have made the claim that censorship in Malaysia is a dynamic activity which may reflect a form of everyday-defined social reality in filmmaking practices. It is, therefore, my aim to study censorship in a way that considers the censorship as apparatus.

In this sense, censorship practice is regarded as part of a social institution that functions within a larger structural order of social networks. This form of institutionalised self-censorship conforms to the notion of censorship as an activity that is part of an apparatus. According to Kuhn (1988):

An apparatus… is more than merely the sum total of a series of variegated components. Its most important characteristic is its *activity*, the interactions between its parts – its practices and processes. These interrelations are always fluid, always in a state of becoming, always 'inscribed in a play of power' (p. 6).

Kuhn's (1988) notion of power relations describes the ambiguous hierarchy of action and reaction between the filmmakers and censors. Seemingly, the censors, as a prohibitive institution, exercise authority over filmmakers; however, a close analysis reveals that power itself is a form of relationship which operates in the service of producing and regulating social order, especially as it serves the dominant idea of social propriety.

The 'Official' Censorship Practices

The main theoretical premise behind Khoo's "Cinema of Denial" (2006, p. 83) was the claim that censorship aimed to exclude potentially controversial scenes through both state and self-censorship. The term was based in her analysis of Malay language films produced during the 1980s to 1990s. The fact that there was a lack of non-Malay language films also figures in her discussion.

By the turn of the new millennium, Chinese language films such as *Visits: Hungry Ghost Anthology* (James Lee et al., 2004), *Snipers* (James Lee, 2001), and *Ah Beng Returns* (James Lee, 2001) became the earliest digitally produced Chinese Malaysian commercial films. Tamil language films like *Nan Oru Malaysian/I am a Malaysian* (Suhan Panchacharam, 1991), *Alaikathey* (P. Rameesh, 2001) and *Idaya Nayagan* (J. Rajkamal, 2005) were among the precursors of the Malaysian Tamil cinema. These films had niche markets and small numbers of film aficionados, however, since the phenomenal commercial success of films such as *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (Namewee, 2011), films that portrayed multi-lingual and religious diversity have been increasingly gaining popularity from the general audience in mainstream cinema (see Chapter Two). Although these types of films had been made in the past, such as *Selamat Tinggal Kekasihku/Farewell My Lover* (L. Krishnan, 1958), *Tsu-*

Feh Sofia (Rahim Razali, 1985), they were made mainly in Malay language with a slight mixture of other ethnic languages.

Films made in recent years, like *The Journey* (Chiu Keng Guan, 2014) and *Ola Bola* (Chiu Keng Guan, 2016), successfully garnered the attention of the general public from different racial and language backgrounds. Both films had multi-racial casts and used the languages of the three major Malaysian ethnic groups.

The Journey (2014) became the highest-grossing film in 2014, with box office receipts of RM17.2 million (USD3.6 million) and *Ola Bola* (2016) made RM15.9 million (USD3.4 million). Seemingly, the emergence of a plethora of multi-lingual films had transcended the notion of the 'Cinema of Denial' and opened up a new terrain of studies.

In analysing the rationale for censorship practice in Malaysia, it is essential to investigate the mechanism of censorship in relation to other social, cultural and religious institutions and how it shapes and establishes its prohibitive measures to locate the possible mitigating actions filmmakers can take through creative and thematic strategies in their filmmaking endeavours through self-censorship or state-censorship. It is also important to consider other influences from religious institutions, political entities, media policy, and public views since censorship functions according to concepts that are a part of these.

The Development of Censorship Guidelines

In Malaysia, the process of revising and revamping the censorship policy has been carried out continuously while taking into account the importance of the need for the cinematic exposure of all aspects of life and society. As the nation 'projects' itself towards modernity, the drive to adapt to global and cosmopolitan values is even more urgent.

Malaysia has had six decades of independence, which should allow ample time for the development of a proper independent self-governing polity, yet many of the current administrative systems are still influenced by colonial governmentality. As a result, I will attempt to examine the trajectory of the censorship practice and its effects on a cluster of films from the period between 1947 and the present, a time bound by two significant times. The first documented provisions of censorship was recorded in 1947 and the latest one drafted in 2010 and referred to as the *1947 Draft Directive for Censor* and *Guidelines on Film Censorship (2010)* (from now on referred to as the 2010 Guidelines). The focus is on the evolving provisions or descriptions stipulated under the critical areas of religion and socio-cultural issues. My argument lies with the stricter control of film portrayals demonstrated by the religious and socio-cultural components of the Malay paramountcy in the censorship practice.[27]

In 2002, after five decades, the *1947 Draft Directive for Censor* was replaced by *The Film Censors Act 2002 (Act 620)* and took effect on April 1, 2002 (Tengku, 2002). Nevertheless, most of the old regulations were retained, and the new 2002 act further tightened control with the attention given to rising Islamic conservatism. Therefore, nudity, kissing scenes and sex scenes were strictly prohibited.

Eight years after the introduction of *The Film Censors Act 2002 (Act 620)*, it was appended with the 2010 Guidelines and specific provisions or descriptions of the types of portrayals allowed in films. To expand this further, I will draw upon the material of the 1947 Draft Directive as compared with the 2010 Guidelines understanding that a comparative study of the two will reflect the changes surrounding censorship practices and the films

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[27] Since 1947, different terms have been used to describe the censorship laws. These includes *Cinematograph Films Ordinance of 1952, Film Censorship Guideline 1993, The Film Censors Act 2002* and *Guidelines on Film Censorship (2010)* have been deployed.

produced during that time. The analysis reveals that in the 1947 Draft Directive, the following five major components were included:

(1) General – The general definition of criterion of censorship should be that anything which would offend the susceptibilities of the normal cinema-goer or encourage or instruct anti-social activity should be censored;

(2) Police – a) Scene of civil and individual violence should be closely scrutinised to avoid showing – i) expertise or new methods in the use of any weapon, whether in offense or defence; ii) new methods or opportunities of law-breaking or countering police methods in maintaining law and order. b) The following implications of a film should be eliminated – i) The suggestion that justice can only be achieved by violence as against normal civil processes; ii) That glamor or favourable public light rests on the criminal, in this community, or in any countries.

(3) Inter-racial Feeling – The following scenes should be liable for censorship – a) Those inciting to inter-racial feeling by reflecting on a people or their institutions; b) Those depictory (sic) acts of racial domination and contempt.

(4) Public Morals – The following scenes should be liable for censorship: Any scenes, gesture or dialogue which – a) contravene good taste on matters of religion or sex; or b) undermine the moral standing of the races.

(5) Horror – As there is no distinction between "A" an "U" licences in Malaya, the child audience should be kept in mind when judging horror films or sequences. The

censor should therefore watch for scenes of – a) Horror which would affect the normal film goer; b) Cruelty which shows sadistic delight on the person inflicting it; c) The too realistic showing of the infliction of harm on human beings or animals – e.g., methods of torture, shots of the spilling blood, or of bodies subjected to deliberate violence.

(CO875/51/4, 1951-53, pp. 150-151).

The 2010 Guidelines focus on only four major components as follows.

(1) Security and public order – Dialogue, lyrics or actions that are provocative, slanderous or stir social unrest by bringing about doubt and uneasiness which could finally threaten safety, public order and national security – Discrediting of a government or derision and denigration directed at a foreign government and etc;[28]

(2) Religion – Any teaching that is against god and religion, supports fanatical beliefs, criticizes or discredits any religion – Elements of myth or superstitious and etc;

(3) Socio-culture – Display of negative content that degrades, mocks and disputes the customs and traditions and the sovereignty of the Malay rulers, governors and national issues – Sex scenes between a man and a woman – Horror films which depict worship rituals and cruelty towards humans, animals and nature in horrifying and shocking circumstances and etc;

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[28]The descriptions that follow the components have been selectively chosen to relate to this study – a summarised version. For the complete list of descriptions for each component, please refer to the official 2010 Guidelines.

(4) Decorum and morality – Portrayal of artistic skills such as dancing, theatre, music, visual arts and fashion that are deemed to be disrespectful and in conflict with the artistic values of the Malaysian society – Uncivil, obscene language, code-switching, hate-filled utterances and misspelt words and etc. (National Censorship Board, 2010).

The comparison reveals that many of the key provisions of the 1947 Draft Directive have been retained in one form or another in the current 2010 Guidelines. It is, however, important to emphasise here that, although the major components are reduced from five to four major components, the provisions for each component stipulated in the 2010 Guidelines have been extended. Each of the major components in the 2010 Guidelines is described by a long list of restrictive measures specifically addressed to the types of portrayals, actions, visual representations, narratives and prohibited plots.

At first glance, the component of 'Horror' in the 1947 Draft Directive seems to have been abandoned, but a close analysis of the 2010 Guidelines reveals it has been relocated to 'Social-culture' as one of its sub-components. Likewise, other provisions observed in the 1947 Draft Directive are in the 2010 Guidelines as part of the sub-components.

Notably, "Religion", a new major component, appears in the 2010 Guidelines, having been moved from the sub-component section of "Public Moral" in the 1947 document. As a result, in the new guidelines, it makes up the largest part compared to the rest of the major components, thereby, signifying a predisposition to the portrayals of religion, specifically with regard to the state-definition of Islamic values. And, in the component "(3) Socio-culture", we see an emphasis on, "the customs and traditions and the sovereignty of the Malay rulers," which is a contemporary provision. The new censorship guidelines reflect the

current socio-political influences in shaping the content of the policy according to the predilection of Islamisation and Malay paramountcy.

A Predisposition to Islamic Values

The 1947 document suggests a prohibition of representations concerned with religion, as indicated by the requirement to "contravene good taste on matters of religion," suggesting that some attention to be given to other faiths.

The 2010 Guidelines are, however, predisposed towards controlling the representation of Islam with at least fifty-two provisions under the current religious censorship guidelines regarding the portrayals that contradict and challenge that religion's valves. However, there is not a single reference to other religions.

In the interview with filmmaker Woo Min Jin, he related that a scene of a Malay actor holding a joss stick in *KL Zombi* (2013) was censored and had to be reshot for the sake of continuity (Woo, 2013, Appendix A). (In Malaysia, joss stick is a symbol of polytheist ritual commonly seen in the practice of Hindu, Taoist and Buddhist religions, therefore regarded as taboo for an ethnic Malay Muslim.) Issues like this one illustrate the escalating importance of the religious component in censorship policy in recent years.

Islamic influences were reflected in the censorship practice as part of the more extensive socio-cultural system. According to Nagata's (1997) observation, Malaysia in the 1970s was, "essentially secular, consigning religion to the private domain or to a few highly ritualised and symbolic public and ceremonial occasions" (p. 82), while, by the 1990s, Islam was perceived as a "way of life" in which religion, society, and the polity merged" (Ibid.). Since this proselyting era anti-Islamic elements have become a target for censors.

In recent years, the censorship law has been deployed against films deemed to be disrespectable to authority-defined Islamic values. In March 2017, the Disney production, *Beauty and the Beast* (Bill Condon, 2017) was censored on the grounds of an announcement made by the director about the introduction of a gay character with an 'exclusive gay moment'. To this, LPF Chairman, Abdul Halim Abdul Hamid, responded to this as follows.

> Our role then becomes more pertinent because all fingers would be pointed at us if viewers were offended. Some parents have already emailed their concerns to me when they heard that Russia planned to revise viewers' rating of the movie to allow only mature audiences. In Alabama, in the United States, the movie has also rubbed people up the wrong way with many denouncing its overt gay agenda (Anwar & Babulal, 2017, para. 4)

At that moment, although the film had yet to be released, panic developed because the director's announcement was circulated in the public domain, including, but not limited to, the press and other forms of online media. Even though the LPF Chairman agreed that the film has many positive values, it was subjected to censorship because of the public announcement. He said, "Maybe if Condon had not mentioned the "gay element", people wouldn't be so curious, and we could let it go with a potentially minor cut. And this whole thing may not have been an issue" (Anwar & Babulal, 2017, para. 8).

The ban was employed to curb moral panic created through a network of reactions on the public domain platforms, rather than caused by the film's content. The film had sparked public uproar even before its screening in local cinemas. Despite this, the film was eventually approved by the Film Appeals Committee (FAC), which is a separate entity beyond the jurisdiction of the LPF.

The FAC is independent from the LPF and operates under the Ministry of Home Affairs comprised of panels such as a minister appointed chairman, the National Chief of Police and the Director-general of Education or their representatives. The final decision of the committee cannot be overruled by any court, yet the LPF continually suffered public backlash and police reports were lodged by several NGOs in protest the decision of the Appeals Committee (Bernama, 2017). What seems to have happened here, is a process of communication in which the press circulates reactionary comments, the public believes these accounts, thus enabling the state to secure consent and justification for its actions. According to Kuhn (1988):

Public and private, in other words, are discursive constructs, produced differently in every one of the instances in which they operate as categories in opposition, and yet at the same time appealing to a universal distinction. These categories are to be understood, therefore, as *effects* of negotiation and contestation between discourses and powers in play in particular social, historical or cultural instances (p. 115)

In this case, the private opinions of the few can affect the access of the many. When the public/private dichotomy is placed within a social-historical context, the boundary between the public and private categories becomes the potential site of struggle. Therefore, in the case of Malaysia, it is too simplistic to regard censorship as being carried out in an isolated institution that independently monitors the film industry and its freedom. Analysis of censorship in relation to the cinema should provide a holistic view that explains the phenomenon as a whole, and not merely as a powerful system.

The current censorship practices reflect the changing socio-political landscape of Malaysia which influences the types of film production that exhibit equally the cultural conflicts and subject matter relating to religious depictions, specifically in horror and fantasy films.

Malay Paramountcy and Censorship

In the 2010 Guidelines, censorship policies have reflected the state's view of the importance of films portraying Malay society. Earlier films were censored for being anti-social, however, post-1980 films were constrained by another form of censorship, in particular, the one obliging them to follow the National Cultural Policy (NCP),[29] a policy that generates considerable debates on Malay racial supremacy. In 1988, a musical film, *Akademi Seni/Academy of Art* (Johari Ibrahim, 1988), was banned by LPF because it contained an element of "yellow culture" (Wan Amizah et al., 2009, p. 47). Originally yellow culture referred to "decadent behaviour such as gambling, opium smoking, pornography, prostitution and nepotism that plagued much of China in the last century" (Lee, 1998). Nevertheless, in Malaysia it was associated with Western decadence and non-Eastern culture such as the hippy movement, men with long hair and other so-called deviant customs and behaviour. Recently, the term was applied to include anti-monarchy, anti-Islam and anti-Malay (Muhammad, 2017). This has influenced significantly the films with modern Malay characters that are subjected to the state definition of appropriate behaviour according to traditional Malay culture.

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[29] The National Cultural Policy was established in 1970, emphasising the assimilation of the non-Malay into the Malay ethnic group. (see Chapter One)

Recently, Malay films have been censored for having English titles. Filmmaker, A. Razak Mohaideen related that one of his Malay-language films, *Soulmate…Hingga Janah/Soulmate… till the End* (2017) was in trouble with the LPF because of the English word, 'Soulmate.' The problem was resolved after he suggested to the LPF that the word could be italicised (Razak Mohaideen, Appendix B). Seemingly, the use of an English word in a Malay language film would somehow undermine the Malay language.

For another of Razak Mohaideen's Malay films, entitled *Badang Super* (2017), he was told by the LPF to remove the word 'Super' as it was prohibited to use English words together with the Malay language (Razak Mohaideen, 2017, Appendix A). One of the provisions that most likely govern these issues in the current 2010 Guidelines is, "uncivil, obscene language, code-switching, hate-filled utterances and misspelt words" (National Censorship Board, 2010, p. 13).

For each aspect of a portrayal that is prohibited, the length of the cut is indicated by "start time" and "end time" with the items that it has violated, as stated in the LPF report.[30] It serves as an instruction for the filmmaker to exercise self-censorship suggesting a tendency towards a form of 'typo-control' with regard to the word *Soulmate* used in the film's title. However, one point that might be relevant here is that the Malay language is commonly spoken in a mixture of Malay and English, as well as a small number of other ethnic languages used in cosmopolitan urban Malaysia. The use of mixed language is more acceptable by LPF than the film's title.

In my interview about Razak Mohaideen's film titled *Soulmate… Hingga Janah* (Razak Mohaideen, 2017) disclosed that it was his suggestion to change the font in the title and apply inverted commas for the English word 'Soulmate', marking it as a foreign word

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[30] A report is given by the LPF after the vetting process has ended. A sample of the LPF Report is available in Appendix B.

and consequently not threatening the official status of Malay language. According to the Censorship Report, *Soulmate… Hingga Janah/Soulmate… till the End (*Appendix B, 2017), under the column of "The Basics of Classification/Asas-asas Klasifikasi", states that, "The chairman agreed to 'relax' the decision/Pihak Pengerusi telah 'melonggarkan' keputusan…" (Ibid.). It was, therefore, awarded a more exceptional classification. In this case, good negotiation skills are required to achieve a more lenient outcome. indicating the importance of filmmakers' participation in the current censorship practices as an ongoing negotiation process in which the overlapping between the authority-defined and everyday-defined methods can be observed without unilateral decision-making from the censors.

Filmmaker's Involvement in the Censorship Practices

The views on the practicality provided by the 2010 Guidelines are inconclusive, though initially, they were regarded by the Ministry of Home Affairs as being more lenient because they describe the types of portrayals allowed. It seems that some of the 2010 Guidelines provisions should not be taken as instructional. If filmmakers strictly adhere to each of the stipulated provisions and the restrictions that go along with them, one can understand why some of them remark that, in that case, they would have been unable to produce any films. For instance, in the Socio-cultural component, the depiction of a "scene with passionate kissing on the mouth" (National Censorship Board, 2010, p. 12) would be an area of concern for the filmmakers, even though this does happen in certain representations, especially in imported films, not to mention the complications that arise in representing what is "passionate" and how it will affect the performers from different religions, cultural backgrounds and beliefs. In the religion component, the provision clearly states that, "[a] Muslim who drinks alcohol, gambles, and commits sinful acts (is prohibited), except to

portray a character who transforms from sinful to religious" (National Censorship Board, 2010, p. 8). This would likely interfere with the narrative of a film because of the strict requirements and the expectations demanded in these provisions.

Certain filmmakers and producers praised and supported the 2010 Guidelines because, for the first time, it promised to be more transparent and to provide references for film productions. On this subject, film practitioner Ahmad Puad said, "Before this, the guidelines stated all things that filmmakers should not do... But now, they state that you can do anything, but you must give due consideration to several things" (Koay, 2010, n.p.). Although all the provisions appear to be prohibitions, the description for each component states that a portrayal is "permitted, however, the matters that are set out need to be given attention and be scrutinised so that they do not create any controversy and doubt among the general public" (National Censorship Board, 2010, p. 5). This statement indicates that there are loopholes and room for dispute.

On the one hand, the new guidelines allude to the aim of the LPF to encourage the filmmakers to use their own judgement when they perform self-censorship. Seemingly, they were allowed the responsibility of maintaining the social order or to take full responsibility if their film provoked social debates. On the other hand, however, some independent filmmakers and critics regard the censorship revision as just an extra layer of bureaucracy – another form of censorship disguised in a different way or, even worse, the censors are shirking their responsibilities.

It is my view that it is the practice for regulating film content that is different, and less so for the types of images or content of films that are prohibited. In other words, today's filmmakers are meant to 'manoeuvre' these guidelines even before they start making their films. If they run into trouble with the censors, they may exert power over them by requesting scene changes, cuts, muting sounds etc. If the filmmakers don't agree, what

alternatives are possible to secure the film's release? Consequently, the filmmakers are involved in trial and error throughout the process of getting approval from the censors which, explains the widely circulated LPF remarks about how they would refrain from directly 'banning' or 'cutting' films, highlighting a major departure from the procedure of the mid-1940s.

It is hoped that a comparative study of the old and new policies and guidelines with a case study of selected filmmakers, especially the one scrutinised by the LPF, will shed light on how the censorship policy is practised for which the film practitioners have been playing significant roles, and functioning as agents for maintaining social order.

The 'Non-Official' Negotiation with the Censors: A Case Study

When scholars describe the re-emergence of horror and fantasy films from 2003, they usually credit certain filmmakers for getting the ban on such films lifted. Muthalib (2013a) praised the efforts of Shuhaimi Baba in persuading the LPF to reconsider the ban so that the local industry could benefit commercially along with the horror films from abroad. When scholars discuss the abolition of the ban concerning the horror and fantasy film genres, they refer to the leniency of the censors and the changes in production practice rather than the amendment to the law. Although there were no significant changes to the censorship law, especially in the way it dictated the content of horror and fantasy films, the re-emergence of these genres after 2003 strengthened the role of the filmmakers as significant agents of the censorship revision, thus signifying non-official practices of 'censorship in negotiation'. This can be verified using the data collected from Razak Mohaideen (2017).

One good thing about the LPF is whenever they decide to remove any part of the visual; they give notes with the onscreen time in minutes relating to the things (shots) which they want us to remove. When we receive that, either we follow it without any argument, or we go and discuss it with them (Appendix A, p. 206)

From the perspective of the filmmakers, censorship decisions appear to have been made capriciously and for that reason, offer room for negotiation, which is always an advantage. For example, the religion component in the 2010 guidelines states:

Films with a religious theme, storyline, scene, or dialogue are permitted. However, the matters set out below need to be given attention and scrutinised so that they do not create any controversy and doubt among the general public (National Censorship Board, 2010, p. 6).

According to the late Mamat Khalid, one of the filmmakers interviewed, the censors' provisions not only provide information on how to make a film with a low risk of being censored but it also functions as a reference for the filmmakers to broaden their market and reach bigger audiences. Sometimes, filmmakers submit their scripts or seek advice before making a film. Since submitting a script prior to shooting is not mandatory, some filmmakers decide to make films that are 'safe' unless they want to "make something controversial" (Koay, 2010, n.p.).

The 2010 Guidelines aim to make filmmakers and producers aware of the limits of what is acceptable to the censors and are expected to critique and judge their own films. In Mamat Khalid's case, he says that the censorship system is not a hurdle but is beneficial to his films.

Filmmakers' Experiences with the Censors

The filmmakers who were interviewed were asked about their experiences in dealing with the censor authorities. I focused on the following questions: 1) What strategies do filmmakers employ to negotiate with the censors if there is disagreement about their filmic portrayals? And, 2) What stylistic changes to a film's content were made as the result of the negotiation between the filmmaker and censors?

In the interview with Razak Mohaideen, the feedback on the censorship decisions came in the form of a written report. Although the negotiation tasks were usually carried out by their producers, established filmmakers could elaborate on their experiences with the censors at length. The filmmakers I interviewed who could not provide detailed information about what is stipulated in the report which signifies that they had less direct experience negotiating with the censors. Established mainstream filmmakers such as Razak Mohaideen and the late Mamat Khalid provided elaborate personal accounts of the negotiation process.

My findings correlate with Saw's observation of the censors' attitude towards select filmmakers in his assertion that the LPF gives preferential treatment to the producers of certain 'preferred' films, and the censors are inclined to be "'friendlier' to films financed by established production companies" (Saw, 2013, p. 131). While independent filmmakers tend to be disadvantaged in dealing with censorship, commercial filmmakers who had participated in the negotiation process (although they still must be careful about what they portray in their films) have better access to the censorship authorities. This is probably due to the negative perception that the censors have with the independent filmmakers, such as the deployment of non-official language in their films and the subversive background of their practices.

The Negotiation Strategies

In his interview, Dain Said (2017) described the censorship panels as "largely uninformed and uneducated" about films (Appendix A, p. 217). And Yusry Halim (2017) stated, "there is no clear black and white, it's always grey. So, we have to take risks" (Appendix A, p. 210). Filmmakers like Yusry noted their frustration and surprise upon receiving the censorship report after their films had been sent to the LPF. He contends that "There is always 'stuff' like, when we shot [the scenes], we didn't know whether they would be acceptable or not. In the last few months, I shot a [TV] commercial, and suddenly it was banned for all kinds of funny reasons" (Yusry Halim, 2017, Appendix A, p. 210). Most of the filmmakers interviewed felt artistically constrained by the system including Dain Said (2017), who recently directed a few critically acclaimed commercial films, making the following claim.

> They [the censorship board] don't care for films; they don't understand films, and all they look for are pointers… It's the same when you give tips to people who are not enlightened, and all they work on are 'points on a checklist. These checklists constitute certain things that are acceptable or not in the genre" (Appendix A, p. 217).[31]

Dain Said criticised the censorship decisions for being too general when such considerations as the degree of realism, mode of presentation and themes were ignored in the LPF deciding without referring to specific context. The late Mamat Khalid (2017) also gave a similar opinion as follows.

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[31] The "points of a checklist" referred by Dain are the list of provisions stipulated under each of the component in the 2010 Guidelines. For further information, please refer to Appendix B.

They [the censorship board] can't see it. To them the subtexts are 'immaterial'.

They judge by what they see on the screen but not the 'ism' (context) beyond the

screening of a shot. They don't care what your intention behind it is. They regard

it as just a film projected onto a screen. They don't study through to the sub-layers

of the film (Appendix A, p. 212)

However, not all the interviewees agreed that the censorship system is detrimental to the film

industry as a whole, for example, the late Mamat Khalid felt the censorship decisions had a

positive aspect, and he took advantage of it to add multiple layers of subtext that he claimed

the censorship panels were unaware of in most of his films.

When the relationship between the filmmakers and censors became well established,

censorship disputes could be amicably resolved through *quid pro quo,* as clarified here by

Mamat Khalid (2017).

We will negotiate on a 'give and take' basis if issues arise. In *Rock Bro* (Mamat

Khalid, 2016)*,* a there was a masturbation scene with sound was not shown.

However, the censorship board did not accept it. After a few arguments, they

finally allowed it, but with cuts applied to other negative scenes (Appendix A, p.

215).

This coalesces with the interview with Dain Said, wherein he pointed out that there is

certain obscurity in practices that "censorship is used in some particular way, but sometimes

when it's used, you can also find your way out, in what I call, a kind of slip between the

cracks in the vagueness" (Dain Said, Appendix A, p. 217). The filmmaker attempts to locate

the ambiguous boundary between what is permitted and not permitted in the representations

so that he can creatively articulate his subject matter. The filmmakers acknowledged that they could use the grey area of the censorship policy to their advantage.

The Manoeuvrist Approach

Religious insensitivity and racial issues have been considered in dealing with the representation of the supernatural. The case studies imply a consistent maneuvering strategy, characterised by associating Malay superstition and beliefs with the Islamic faith, thus, maintaining the Islamic status quo.

Filmmakers have recently adopted a new production strategy, whereby they take into account the expanding globalised market and demand that they be on par with the religious film or "*film Islami*" production in Indonesia from 2009 – 2011 (Izharuddin, 2017, p. 40). An example of this is a local filmmaker, the late Azhari Zain, who moved from horror to religious genres; however, he claimed the reason for his move from making horror films to religious ones was caused by his personal experience with a supernatural disturbance. To him, making films with religious content was an act of redemption and he believes that his involvement with the production of Malay fantasies with supernatural themes has rendered him 'un-Islamic', thus making him vulnerable to evil forces. He claimed to have experienced a series of supernatural encounters during his filmmaking. According to Azhari Zain (2017),

> When I was involved in the making of horrors, my daughter felt the presence of supernatural beings in my house. During the production, I had the vision of the monster in my mind, which I never told anybody, including my daughter. Yet, I discovered that it was drawn by her in the house. At that moment, I started to realise something was not right. Finally, I sought help from an Ustaz (religious

teacher) who assured me that a spirit was indeed present, and he assured me that a

spirit was indeed there. (Appendix C, p. 253).

Indeed, his fascinating account would be an attractive marketing gimmick for his audience. However, his experience as a Muslim who felt troubled by the production of Malay supernatural films can serve to secure censorship approval for spiritual representation that is considered un-Islamic. According to him, one of the ghost scenes in his horror films was approved by the censor based on his "personal experience", which, in this case, was his "vision of the monster". In this case, the supernatural depiction in his film represents the director's dream or vision rather than a 'real' observation. In other words, if there is some form of reverence or submission by the director to the Islamic faith, it would be acceptable to the censors. This case shows the importance of being seen to comply with the official status of the Islamic faith.

Azhari's example is not new. Filmmakers' struggles with the authoritative status of state religion in filmmaking can be traced back as early as 1957. According to Hussin (1997), the director of *Pontianak* (B. Narayan Rao, 1957) uses an opening scene with an Iman character reciting Quranic verses to ward off evil spirits. It is done to gain a "blessing" for the production crew, even though the director was a Hindu. Acknowledging the complications regarding Malay indigenous views and their Islamic beliefs, the director deployed Quranic verses to get around the censorship rules.

Another filmmaker, Mamat Khalid, is known for his Malay nationalist stance and is the beneficiary of governmental schemes and funding for his films. In the interview, Mamat Khalid (2017) remarked that,

The Malay enclave in a kampong setting is my common theme. One of the messages was racial integration... For example, there was a scene in *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah* (The Ghost of Kak Limah Returns Home) whereby a rice farmer complained about a shortage of rice and asks his wife to borrow some rice from a Chinese grocer. I don't know how much the audience understands its subtext. There are a lot of allegories in my films (Appendix A, p. 215)

He claimed further that the censorship system has guided him to reach larger audiences. He was willing to work with the censor to prevent unnecessary trouble arising from public complaints and agreed with the censorship system because their panels consisted of members of the public. As a result, there was an unexpected positive effect regarding the audience's reaction to his films. In his interview, he had this to say.

Anyway, sometimes censorship did make my films better. When they beeped out some of the disturbing dialogue, the audience thought it was funny. Another scene had a devil reading some verses from the Quran and it was banned. In order to correct it, I reversed the audio, and it appears to be much better because it sounds scarier (Mamat Khalid, 2017, Appendix A, p. 215).

He employed a strategy which offered alternative ways of portraying the subject matter while at the same time unintentionally creating comedic and thrilling effects. He elaborated further with this statement.

In another example, from some of my ghost films, I portrayed a character who read

out some mantra with mumbling sounds, so it was not seen as being related to any

religion, Islam or God (Mamat Khalid, 2017, Appendix A, p. 211).

This comedic portrayal created a parody of religious issues and defined his stylistic approach. He even proposed putting a disclaimer in a potentially controversial shot such as, 'This is a scene required by the censorship board', to inform the audience of his disagreement with the censorship system. [32] Although some of his films were flops and regarded as nonsensical and slapstick, a few have been recognised abroad at international film festivals. According to him, after a few years, such films become classics and academic material for scholars, and for the younger generation who watch his films on TV.

Both filmmakers rework their contents creatively and with a degree of compliance sufficient to adapt to the requirements through self-censorship. The censorship system indirectly serves as a reference for the articulation of content regarding multi-ethic and religious representations.

Conclusion

In Malaysia, similar to other Asian countries, the Censorship Board is closely attached to the state authoritarian regime and holds significant control over economic and artistic aspects, functioning as a moral guardian of the society. Nevertheless, censorship in Malaysia serves not only to prevent potential social outrage caused by film representations

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[32] It is common that a prohibited scene cut by the censors result in confusion for audiences. Some filmmakers resolved this by shooting replacement shots as advised by the censors.

that are perceived to be harmful, illicit, or negative, but also to produce the 'imagined community' as advocated by the state's ideological apparatus.

Nevertheless, the chapter findings highlight the complex nature of power and regulation within the censorship system, demonstrating that it can yield both repressive and productive outcomes. From the interviews, it becomes apparent that power should be understood as an ongoing process, characterised by negotiations surrounding inconsistencies, vagueness, and disruption within the censorship system. Interestingly, these negotiations can eventually become advantageous to the filmmakers.

By recognising the dynamic nature of power, filmmakers can navigate the censorship system more effectively, exploring alternative opportunities within the constraints. The filmmaker's ability to engage in discussions and negotiations with the censors allows for the exploration of alternative creative solutions. The understanding of power as a process one up possibilities for filmmakers to challenge and reshape the boundaries imposed by censorship board, fostering a more nuanced approach to content creation that navigate the complexities of societal norms and state ideologies.

It is also crucial to recognise that the dynamics of power relations can neither be observed nor theorised without referring to a specific social and cultural context. Therefore, the perception of censorship solely as a practice rooted in an institutional/prohibitive model may need to be rethought, thereby paving the way for a productive model.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Marginal Fantasies:
Ontological Rupture and Pastiche

As argued in the previous chapter, the depiction of what is considered inappropriate

by the censors depends on the authoritarian predilection for Islamic values and its emphasis

on Malay paramountcy, which means that commercial filmmakers have to adapt to a

production strategy that occasionally complies with or is eventually approved by the censors.

Because of the popularity and commercial prospects of imported horror and fantasy films

from Japan, and Korea (Ainslie, 2016), these genres were finally recognised by the censors

not only for their commercial prospects but also to correct the lack of local horror (Muthalib,

2013a).

On March 15, 2010, new censorship guidelines were introduced to allow films to be

made with elements that touched upon political, cultural, and religious sensitivity. With the

revised censorship policies and increased acknowledgement by the censors of the commercial

viability of this genre, the films secured better prospects of being released to the general

public. As a result, many producers saw the chance to make a quick profit and jumped on the

bandwagon. The production of local horror and fantasy films that refers to the generic

conventions and narrative formulas of foreign fantastic films became part of their creative

solutions. Nevertheless, these films were regarded by film critics as cheap and easily

recognisable by the general audience as copies of other popular foreign films. By 2011, at

least sixteen horror and fantasy films had been produced (Abangnara, 2011 & Finas, 2017).

In that same year, award nominations for local horror and fantasy films reached a historical

height, as evidenced in the 24th Malaysian Film Festival when at least fourteen horror or

fantasy films received nominations out of a total of thirty-three contestants (Melchidec,

2011). Since then, there has been a profusion of horror and fantasy films.

This chapter points out that the films discussed here are examples of contemporary

fantastic genre films due to how they make intertextual references to other internationally

successful foreign fantasy, sci-fi and horror films. This form of stylistic strategy has produced

films with hybrid qualities.[33] The demand for commercialisation means that a film must meet

the expectation of what is regarded as a blockbuster film. According to Acland (2020),

blockbuster films submit "to tonnage, to outsize production budgets, unusually elaborate

promotional campaigns, and significant box-office results" (p. 6).

To emulate the commercial success commonly attributed to a popular foreign film,

local filmmakers deployed iconographies and narrative styles easily recognisable by the

audience as being from some successful international blockbuster films. In this regard, *Mistik*

(Razak Mohaideen, 2003) and *Apokalips X* (Mamat Khalid, 2014) stand out as particularly

instructive films.[34] Through close analysis of these films, it can be seen that they are

elegantly positioned at the precise point where the representations of authority-defined and

everyday-defined social realities meet and expand. Within this context, the reconfiguration of

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[33]In order to convey my definition of what I mean by 'hybrid' as a key feature of the Malaysian fantastic films, I will refer to the *mise-en-scene* and narrative structure deployed by the filmmakers in order to demonstrate that they are the manifestation of the censorship system that is productive as a result of dealing with Islamic representation, Malay supremacy issues, censorship negotiation and the push for commercialisation.

[34] *Mistik* (2003) is available on Youtube, uploaded by the producer, David Teo.

this genre reflects a process of cultural dialogue, engaging the audiences in a shared discourse that simultaneously promotes and challenges the dominant values of society.

Both films display specific thematic and stylistic features to deal with censorship restrictions on subjects about religion and race. By referring to the analysis model of "syntactic, semantic and pragmatic approach to film genre" proposed by Rick Altman (2000), I will demonstrate how Razak Mohaideen and Mamat Khalid manoeuvre stylistically and complicate the interpretation of authority-defined Islamic values and the issue of Malay paramountcy. My analysis of these films is to show how their references to other films function intertextually as a case of 'marginal fantasies', thereby complicating the authority-defined interpretation of religious and ethnic identities. This claim expands on what Sobchack (2004) calls marginal science fiction because they "do not reject the mainstream formulation, but radically extend it to represent what is perceived as an all-pervasive condition of postmodern existence" (p. 291-292).

The Fantastic Genre in Malaysian Cinema

The fantastic genre is a transnational phenomenon, or at least, it must be regarded as such. Historically, the recognition of films fitting into this category in Malaysian cinema has been problematic. Arguably, the first fantastic film that included a reference to science fiction is *Anita Dunia Ajaib/Anita in Wonderland* (H. M. Said, 1981) (Norman Yusof, 2010), which also displays non-conventional science fiction elements (Ahmad Syazli, 2017). According to Norman Yusoff (2010), the scene which places this film in the genre is the appearance of a housemaid with the mysterious magical ability to help her mistress to conceive a child. As the story unfolds, it transpires that the child belongs to the housemaid and her partner, who are dressed in "futuristic costume a la Flash Gordon… and declares that they come from

outer space" (Norman Yusoff, 2010, para. 3). Presumably, it is an alien being that has some magical ability which was indicated by her appearance in futuristic attire in reference to other blockbuster films. The mainstream films have adapted the fantastic genre and contain tropes acquired from local folklore, myths, and regional popular media. Yet, at the same time, they were regarded as a copy or a substandard version of some other films.

Anita in Wonderland (1981) was "heralded as Malaysia's first sci-fi… [it is the] epitome of grade-B aesthetics – a half-baked, schlocky horror that disguises itself as a sci-fi" (Norman Yusoff, 2010, para. 3). Therefore, it is apparent that film can be reinterpreted and can be seen as part of the process in discerning the obscured influences of local and global genres examined in such a way that divergent origins can be traced.

Similarly, *XX-Ray* (Aziz M. Osman, 1992) is about a physics student who investigates a meteorite which causes him to become invisible because of the laser gun he developed. The science fiction theme can be recognised by the choices regarding stylistic features and generic conventions. Although it gained a jury award for Best Visual Effects at the 1994 Malaysia Film Festival, it was referred to as "slickly-done… carried no subtext" (Muthalib, 2013a, p. 126). Muthalib (2013a) laments the emphasis given to the *mise-en-scene* and special effects of the film without attaching to the generic formula of science fiction. Thus, the critique demonstrates a trend towards a concept of the fantastic genre widespread within the local Malaysian cinema. And it is because of this issue that the filmmakers and censors find common ground in the negotiation of censorship policy. This fantastic genre type of film has to be dealt with by filmmakers who employ stylistic manoeuvring and self-censorship to comply with the censorship policy's directive to ban Violence, Horror, Sex, and Counterculture in all media.

An example of a fantastic film that was shelved for a few years is *Fantasia* (Aziz M. Osman, 1994), for portraying elements deemed to be "anti-Islamic" (Khoo, 2006, p. 109). (It

was later released as *Fantasi).* According to Khoo (2006), "[t]he nitpicking [sic] censorship board took issue with the notion of the spiritual or ghostly realm in the statement" made by one of the female characters who "told her rapist that she would defend her body beyond death" (p. 109). The censors were concerned about an impression made to the viewers of a resurrection of revengeful spirit implied by the character. The filmmakers took other preventive measures to undermine the censorship policy, such as the use of scrambled letters in the words of *Iblis* (devil) for Silbil (the name of the black magician); and Shaitan (devil) for Natiahs (one of the character's names). The film was finally released "after a reshoot and overhaul" (Khoo, 2006, p. 109). "[I]ts title had been changed and extensive alteration had been made to its content… with its plot, messages, and theme markedly different from the originally intended version, and the production company suffered substantial financial losses" (Saw, 2013, p. 3).

The film is adapted from a script written by Zain Mahmood as a science fiction drama (Ahmad Syazli, 2017), but still the fantastic film was put into the context of superstition, causing a dearth of supernatural film production in the latter years. The film was not only regarded as contradictory to Islamic values but assessed as a portrayal between the real world and an imagined one, thereby inciting ambiguous interpretations without regard for their commercial potential.

Previously, the censorship board panels were comprised of groups of senior and retired public officials which aroused concern that they won't be able to reflect the views of the general public. Many filmmakers, including U-Wei Haji Saari, noted that the censors were "conservative and narrow minded" (Saw, 2013, p. 83). They were appointed "because of their knowledge of, and familiarity with, government policies" (Ibid, p. 57). However, during my interview with the censorship officer, Mohd Zamberi (2017), he says,

That happened in the past 10 or 20 years ago. Currently, the LPF has 62 panels…

not all of retired public officials. Some were retirees from private sectors, [such as]

ex-teachers, former engineers, professors… police officers, lawyers and soldiers.

Since 2013, we have employed panels from younger generations, at the age of 30s,

or those who were fresh graduates who have been previously employed in the

private sector for a few years. (Appendix C, p. 248).

The censorship codes of practice have been revised continuously and updated by considering

several contemporary issues such as security and public order, socio-cultural matters, and

moral values, as well as a strong emphasis on religious sensitivity. Although the latest

revision of the censorship policy has allowed more productions of the fantastic genre, issues

that hinge on religious sensitivity in these films have been consistent. For example, a scene

depicting ghosts rising from graves is forbidden; monsters/invisible entities can only be

shown as a series of dreams, and films must contain a 'moral message' and must be resolved

by the triumph of good over evil (Lee and Anuar, 2015, p. 154).

Islamic teaching rejects the notion of ghosts as the spirits of deceased humans.

Consequently, scenes of ghosts that refer to the burial place of human remains are regarded

as misleading and do not comply with Islamic teaching (Amin et al., 2014, p. 44). As a result,

horror films have been lambasted by several political groups for not spreading a 'positive

message' and for 'weakening' the Islamic faith o among the audiences. Films of the fantastic

genre are subject to attack despite their popularity and commercial success.

Shuhaimi Baba, knowing the censorship issues surrounding the production of

fantastic films since 2003, bolstered the genre's reputation by focusing on its commercial

potential for, according to Muthalib (2013a), "[s]he managed to convince the powers that be

(LPF) to reconsider the ban" on horror films so that local films could be financially

competitive with the influx of foreign horror films (p. 228). The release of her *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam/The She-Vampire of the Tuber Roses* (Shuhaimi Baba, 2004) was very well-received by audiences and attained unprecedented commercial success for a local horror film.

While the diversification into sub-genres offers commercial viability, it may also work as a productive outcome of censorship as a way of dealing with sensitive issues. Under these circumstances, the filmmakers produced fantastic films like *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* (2004) and marketed them under hybrid genre categories. The genre was expanded to include several supernatural sub-genres and was subsequently used as a marketing strategy.

Lee and Anuar (2015) claim that six newly formed sub-genres emerged from the fantastic genre, such as 1) horror from myths and legends (*seram daripada mitos dan lagenda*), 2) ghosts and magical power (*hantu dan kuasa ajaib*), 3) comedy horror (*seram komedi*), 4) parody horror (*seram parodi*), 5) slasher; and 6) religious horror (*seram keagaamaan*). At this point, however, the censorship guidelines and the criticism of conservative political and religious groups seem to suggest that films dealing with spirits and ghosts could easily be considered inappropriate. The construction of these sub-genres appears to be a way for filmmakers to justify their films according to the strict censorship codes.

This type of fantastic genre is the extent of sub-genres as manifested in the form of manoeuvring strategy applied in this study. In that case, it may be helpful to contemplate the genre analysis as proposed by Staiger (2002): "1) a *model*, which becomes a formula of production, 2) a *structure*, which exists as a textual system in a film, 3) an *etiquette*, which is the category used by distributors and exhibitors, and 4) a *contract*, which is an agreement with the spectators on how to read a film" (p. 188). Each of these approaches can be expanded to analyse the Malaysian fantastic genre in another way based on: 1) a 'formula of production' that may be used by the filmmakers, 2) a 'textual system in a film' that

filmmakers attempt to rearticulate and occasionally diverge from it, 3) a 'category used by distributors and exhibitors' in which the genres prescribed by them are distinct from the one defined by film critics, and 4) an 'agreement with spectators' in which the genre may be conceived differently by the audience. Hence, the *contract* cannot be readily established because reading among the audiences is a problem in Malaysia. All of these inform my concern not only with the notion of 'genre purity', because the fantastic genre is in constant negotiation with the censorship policy, which is associated further with the audience's responses, thus signifying a repetition of the conventional approach to a genre. Additionally, it is exacerbated by the fact that fantastic films rely heavily on the mode of production that is occasionally affected by cultural backlash.[35] Tudor (1973) points out that the methodology in dealing with the problem of genre definition depends on what he describes as "common cultural consensus," that is, analysing films that people would agree belongs to a particular recognised genre and starting from there. He describes further that "genre is what we collectively believe it to be" (p. 139). Hence, it may be useful to consider the pragmaticism or the "use factor" of this genre, which relates to most Malaysian fantastic films (Altman, 2000, p. 210).

The Semantic/Syntactic/Pragmatic Approach

Hatta (1997) proposes a notion of Malaysian national cinema that must inculcate the aspects of commercial viability and aesthetic values in film production. While the focus on aesthetic values alone could achieve critical acclaim and global recognition at the international

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[35] *Dukun* (Dain Said, 2018) was originally scheduled to be released in 2007 but was banned by the censorship board due to its association with a high-profile homicide case involved with a politician at that time. However, it was given approval after 12 years in 2018 when it was leaked online. Similarly, *Nasi Lemak 2.0* (Namewee, 2011) gained mixed response from the audience who interprets the film between promoting national unity and displaying racist portrayal.

level, most of the time it would fail to attract local audiences commercially and vice versa. He

also asserts that most Malaysian films resemble what he observes as the 'second cinema' "that

consciously and unconsciously strives to reproduce the Hollywood models of production and

circulation, counterfeiting the local sense of historical reality" (Hatta, 1997, p. 21). However,

Grant (2007) reminds us that "genre movies are often understood as the equivalent of 'popular

cinema', as opposed to art cinema and experimental cinema…" (p. 1). Nonetheless, she also

acknowledges the difficulty in categorising them, knowing art cinema can also be imbued with

elements of the genre. Thus, my discussion of these kinds of fantastic films according to their

broad genres and sub-genres is not an attempt to label them taxonomically but to demonstrate

the methods by which the filmmakers creatively reconstruct and hybridise dominant genre

forms, during the process, establishing a renewed form of fantastic genre in compliance with

the current censorship requirements.

The debates surrounding this kind of fantastic film highlight how particular alteration

of the popular genre may challenge or even support the status quo and display a sign of

"indigenising" them according to the local cultural sensibility (O'Regan, 1996, p. 5). While

the generic elements in a popular fantastic film may have predetermined meanings, the social

interpretations and cultural values attached to them are not fixed. They tend to exhibit the

dynamic of social discourse typical of a particular society.

The viability of Malaysian filmmakers to produce hybrid genres characterised by an

impression of 'carried no subtext' or 'grade-B aesthetics' exemplifies an active role of

appropriating strict censorship rules and adapting to the hostile cultural environment. Such a

strategy is culturally specific in the practice of film production in Malaysia as embodied in the

reuse of generic formulas from the stylistic and thematic references of other films.

It is important to highlight that the production of fantastic films involves not only

censorship restriction at the production level but also the concerns of the general audience

about religious and cultural sensitivity. Fowkes (2010) contends that one of the critical requirements in the appreciation of fantasy film is to be able to participate in "imaginative re-visioning" (p. 9). Accordingly, Fowkes (2010) sees that the appreciation of the fantasy genre requires the participation of the general audience to "adopt a kind of shared vision" (p. 10). This broad group of audience members shares a basic understanding of what is credulous, logical, and generically acceptable in a fantastic text. They were informed by what is stylistically appropriate in a particular fantastic film by comparing it to the other generic conventions of fantastic films according to their experiences collectively. It should be noted that this does not mean that the audience has a direct influence on the fantastic text at the production stage, however, the issue lies in the indeterminable scope of the audience's act of revisioning in relation to their sociocultural backgrounds. The focus is on the filmmakers who have to experiment with thematic and stylistic strategies that may or may not be familiar to the audience. Still, at the same time, they have to be creative in not violating the censorship policies.

So, it may be of useful to consider the practical advantages of 'indigenising' this form of the popular genre that the filmmakers reappropriated in the local productions. By referring to Altman's (2000) proposition of the pragmatic approach in genre analysis. He recognises that "pragmatic analysis treats reading as a more complex process involving not just hegemonic complicity across user groups but also a feedback system connecting user groups" (p. 211). Therefore, this analysis "…succeeds in revealing the meaning-grounding institutions that make meaning seem to arise directly out of semantics and syntax" (Altman, 2000, p. 211). Thus, my aim is to demonstrate how certain semantic and syntactic elements are reused and reworked by the filmmakers that reflect the active negotiation process between the censors and the filmmakers. To demonstrate this, I refer to Altman's (1984) two approaches to analysing genre: semantic and syntactic.

Semantic elements deal with words or the context of the building blocks, such as costume, acting, cinematography, in short, the iconography of the film. Syntactic elements deal with the grammar and the way in which the words or symbols are arranged that contribute to the whole thematic feature and meaning of the film. An example of how these theories can be applied in horror films is the semantic elements which consist of ghosts, knives, Victorian mansions, dark lighting, gothic makeup, and scary music, whereas the syntactic elements include disorder, helplessness, and the meaning of death. The semantic approach "stresses the genre's building blocks, while the syntactic view privileges the structures into which they are arranged" (Altman, 1984, p. 10). These two approaches are useful to illustrate how the Malaysian fantastic genre is reconstructed in reference to the other stylistic conventions that recognisably originated from a particularly popular genre.

Mistik (2003), obscures the restriction on official Islamic depictions by the adoption of a narrative structure that can be revealed through the 'syntactic approach', however, *Apokalips X* (2014) reworks sci-fi formula to question the authority's perception of racial politics that can be exposed through the 'semantic approach'. Notably, Altman (2000) realised "that genres may have multiple conflicting audiences… and that these multiple genre practitioners use genres and generic terminology in differing and potentially contradictory ways" (p. 208). Genre studies have introduced the importance of understanding genre production in a specific cultural context. "[T]he possibility that genres might serve diverse groups diversely" applies to the changing discourse of Malaysian society that is reflected in the practices of censorship (Altman, 2000, p. 207). Therefore, my aim follows a similar path towards a theorisation of the fantastic genre but identifying the characteristics of local fantastic films as part of wider cultural negotiations between transnational media exchanges and local practices. "When the diverse groups using the genre are considered together, genres

appear as regulatory schemes facilitating the interrogation of diverse factions into a single social fabric." (Altman, 2000, p. 208).

Horror or Religious Film?: A Case Study of *Mistik* (2003)

During my interview with Razak Mohaideen, he reiterated that he contributes equal shares, if not, more constructive involvement with the censors in the revision of censorship policy. He successfully argued to the LPF that the film had no relevance to superstition or any beliefs as it was just a dream (Mohaideen, 2017, Appendix A).[36] As will be discussed later, Razak Mohaideen has creatively circumvented the censorship board through his manipulation of the fantastic film's formula. In *Mistik* (2003)*,* he came up with a strategy to get around the censors by portraying all the spine-chilling events of the film as one character's dream.

At the time Razak Mohaideen made *Mistik* (2003), it faced threats from the censorship board claiming that the film was 'promoting' *tahyul* (superstition). In order to secure its release, he developed a strategy that included presenting the supernatural elements in the film as the imagined events of one of the characters. The film was marketed commercially as a horror film, therefore, admitting to the censors that he had accepted and formally acknowledged it as a product of creativity: a sort of imaginative construct rather than advocating superstition. Using the narrative to suggest that a character's dream is the imaginative source of all the thrilling and inexplicable supernatural events occurring in the film undermines any suggestion that the film is advocating superstitious beliefs, and is, therefore, less threatening to the principles of Islamic teaching and related religious prohibitions. Consequently, making the film palatable to the general audience.

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[36] My interview with the director conducted in 2017.

Altman (1984) reminds us that "…genres arise in one of two fundamental ways: either a relatively stable set of semantic givens is developed through syntactic experimentation into a coherent and durable syntax, or an already existing syntax adopts a new set of semantic elements" (p. 12). While I am aware that these two approaches can be interdependent and somewhat ambiguous, and in fact, some of the issues that arise in this study can be asked only when they are obscured, it is through the emphasis of the filmmaker during the process of censorship negotiation and the messages intended for the audiences that render pragmatic approaches more significant. Hence, the aim of this particular analysis is not to claim that *Mistik* (2003) displays only one of the two approaches as described above, but to exhibit how the filmmakers consciously exploit a predetermined generic convention. Its stylistic articulation is discussed in comparison to other popular fantastic genres to the extent that it establishes its generic specificity.

The narrative structure of *Mistik* (2003) represents a typical local fantastic film in a way it developed from the censorship's restriction on the representations of superstition. The focus here is on how reworking the fantastic genre conventions are shaped by the censorship's concept of superstitious representation. In *Mistik* (2003), a group of university students venture into the jungle on a secluded island, discover the existence of supernatural beings, and become involved in many mystical events (Figure 4.1). Nevertheless, in the dénouement, one of the main characters is depicted in a way that she is being awaken by his friends implying that all the supernatural events which happened earlier in the narrative were the character's dreams. Consequently, the perceived 'intention' of the film to instil superstitious beliefs among the audiences can be dismissed (Razak Mohaideen, 2017, Appendix A). As a result, the film was finally allowed for public screening.

[REDACTED]

Figure 4.1: The spirits of the jungle in *Mistik* (2003).

The act of 'dreaming the supernatural events' is deemed to be less threatening to Islamic values, whereas the portrayal of supernatural events in the waking world is considered to be superstition. In this case, not only the appearance of Islamic elements in the film was deployed to ensure that appropriate information was disseminated to the audience about how to deal with the supernatural, the conceptualisation of what constitutes the real event, the spiritual or even an imaginative one become a matter for the filmmaker to manage. As we know, there was an unprecedented level of censorship assessment that is based on Islamic sentiments (see Chapter 3), but there is also an equally strong emphasis on beliefs in other contexts, specifically on what is considered real and non-real occurrences in a fantastic film.

It is interesting to point out that when the character is awakened, she is depicted as being on a journey heading back to the island again. The *mise-en-scene* resembles a similar setting when the character travelled to the island earlier in the narrative. At this moment, the audience are left to wonder whether the events that happened earlier were the character's dream, a flashforward, or even the character's premonition that the story should continue? In fact, the story ended soon after that.

This presentation of the narrative structure resonates with many popular fantastic films that can be traced back to Todorov's (1973) proposition of a fantastic text who explains that the character is confused as well as the audience – they both can be regarded as being in a state of "hesitation" (p. 33). He states further that, "the reader makes a decision even if the character does not; he opts for one solution or the other, and thereby emerges from the fantastic" (Todorov, 1973, p. 41).

The narrative structure of *Mistik* (2003) resembles a typical fantastic film in the way it exploits the audience's perception of reality through the manipulation of the syntactic feature of a fantastic text. "[O]ne central aspect of fantasy stories is that they each feature a fundamental break with our sense of reality. This break, an 'ontological rupture,' is one of the hallmarks of the genre" (Fowkes, 2010, p. 2). Fowkes (2010) describes "ontological rupture" as,

a break between what the audience agrees in 'reality' and the fantastic phenomena that define the narrative world. The word 'rupture' distinguishes the fantastic elements in fantasy from those in science fiction, where fantastic phenomena are ostensibly extrapolations or extensions of rational, scientific principles. (p. 5)

A similar strategy can be observed in other popular fantastic films including *The Others* (Alejandro Amenábar, 2001) in which the main character and the audience are unaware that the main character is dead until the end of the story, thus implying that we are seeing the spirit of the main character all the while instead of the main character as a real person. However, the censorship practices in Malaysia render this model of ontology insignificant.

The function of the narrative strategy deployed in *Mistik* (2003) can be deduced at two levels: at one its syntactic feature serves to undermine the representation of supernatural

entities, submitting them to official religious interpretation and at the second level, it serves

to equip the film with commercial viability via references to other horror genres. Both of

these are the outcome of the censorship restriction with regard to superstitious representation

and to cater to the audience's demand for fantastic genres. Nevertheless, the film embraces a

different form of ontological rupture in which the aforementioned 'rational and scientific

principles' are irrelevant.

Mistik (2003) assumes an ontological rupture that relies heavily on the production and

consumption environment that is predetermined by religious belief and the push for

commercialisation. With the insistence of censorship as attached to the authority-defined

religion on the evaluation of filmic content, it is indirectly reflected in the stylistic attempts

made by the filmmaker. It is a fantastic text that invites the audience to embrace, rather than

reject, the "allegorical as well as 'poetic' interpretations" (Todorov, 1973, p. 33). Then, the

question of whether the supernatural events are real or not real is not the concern here,

instead, it is the Islamic and non-Islamic attachments that become the central focus

suggesting an ontological shift that conflates the distinction between the authority-defined

and everyday-defined belief systems.

Moreover, *Mistik* (2003) starts with the caption of a verse from the Quran in Malay

"The characteristic of a believer is to believe in the unseen"[37] *(Ciri-ciri orang yang beriman*

adalah yang percaya kepada perkara yang ghaib). In the narrative, the same Quranic verse is

again uttered by an *ustaz* (religious teacher) as advice to the students as they embark on their

journey. The Quranic verse is targeted to Muslim audiences, to validate the importance of

religious attachment. It also emphasises the existence of an unseen supernatural force,

thereby opening a new possibility for the audience's interpretation. In other words, while the

portrayals of the supernatural in film had been previously associated with superstition as

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[37] My translation

prohibited by state censorship, deploying Quranic verses and religious quotations makes the portrayal of the supernatural seem legitimate. The Quranic verse asserts an allegiance to the official state religion, in tandem with the other interpretations of supernatural depictions in the film. Ultimately, within the context of Malaysian fantastic films, it shows a very good way of grappling with censorship constraints.

Essentially the filmmaker presents a new genre that complicates the "common cultural consensus" of society. "In order to create new film cycles, producers must attach new adjectives to substantival genres. In doing so, producers are 'poaching' on established genre territory" (Altman, 2000, p. 212). Because the film simultaneously uses other different genres to construct a new genre, "may be said to 'speak' the genre" (Altman, 2000, p. 208).

Nostalgia or Science Fiction Film?: A Case Study of *Apokalips X* (2014)

Apokalips X (2014) negotiates the interpretation of Malay paramountcy, thereby complicating the authority-defined interpretation of ethnic identities. The reworking of the genre in this film reflects a dialectic process of cultural identity, engaging the audiences in a globalised style that simultaneously challenges the dominant values promoted by the state through the deployment of semantic elements of an international calibre.

According to Hatta (1997), "[f]ilm as entertainment takes us out of ourselves just as much as it is a factual record of our lives; it can concern itself with our dreams as well as portray our social problems" (p. 230). Mamat Khalid's films serve as one such example in that it challenges the conception of Malay paramountcy in contrast with the reality of multiculturalism in Malaysian society and the racial-political issues around it. Muthalib (2014) comments that the film reflects many aspects of social reality despite being marketed as a fantasy film. He points out the film's subtext is to urge people to resist the current regime

and hope for a better future for Malaysia. Mamat Khalid is known in Malaysia for his prolific productions of the fantastic genre, and, unlike most Malaysian filmmakers, he is one of the directors who has shed light on the complexity of multicultural representation in Malaysia in a metaphorical way. Some aspects of his representations are, in fact, depictions of the reality of the current social condition experienced by Malaysian subjects.

Malaysian films that have attained international success normally gained poor local reception due to the fact that the general audience prefers the escapist genre, rather than realist films which expose the socio-cultural problems in the country. In the past, films dealing with multicultural representations and the inter-ethnic relationship were deemed to be culturally sensitive and have significantly caused controversial issues with the censorship board and the public (Hatta, 1997). For that reason, the production of realist films that exposes the hardship and struggles of society is less likely favoured by the general audience and authorities alike. As an alternative, Mamat Khalid experiments with genre conventions that pokes fun at Malaysian society in most of his films such as *Kala Malam Bulan Mengambang /When the Full Moon Rises* (Mamat Khalid, 2008) where he uses "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" (Yusoff, 2013, p. 205). Hence, Mamat Khalid established a specific stylistic strategy in which hybrid genres are used to attract the general audience.

Mamat Khalid's films were marketed as comedy horror which contributed to the proliferation of horror sub-genres mentioned previously. Films such as *Zombi Kampung Pisang/Zombie from Banana Village* (Mamat Khalid, 2007) and *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah/Kak Limah's Ghost Returns Home* (Mamat Khalid, 2010) have attained commercial success. These films were produced after the revisions to the censorship policy in 2002, and

as a result, they fall under the group of films produced in the era of the "resurrection of horror films in Malaysia" (Lee and Anuar, 2015, p. 153). After the success of his comedy-horrors, Khalid intended "to do something different" (Yeoh, 2014, para. 2). *Apokalips X* (2014) was planned to bring about a "cinematic revolution" (ibid., para. 1), using CGI to construct nearly 70% of its settings with a cast of actors from various ethnic, religious, and cultural backgrounds (Fatin Farhana Ariffin, 2014, para. 2). While the film was nominated for The Best Art Director's Award and The Best Fashion Design Award at the 27th Malaysia Film Festival in 2015, it was a commercial failure (Feride Hikmet Atak, 2014, para. 2-3).

It seems reasonable to suggest that the failure of *Apokalips X* (2014) owes much to its ambitious deployment of a hybrid genre. It prompted different views from various audience groups, thus developing angst in reference to the mainstream sci-fi genre. The generic references in *Apokalips X* (2014) triggered multiple interpretations on various levels. Critical receptions of the film revolved around the elements of the science fiction genre in the film, and the audience critiqued the irrational setting of the apocalyptic world by saying, "[t]here's no force field or anything keeping the supposedly toxic air outside from coming in though, so is this just more lazy-ass writing" (Bowen, 2015, para. 11). Somehow, the characters later roam freely around everywhere without wearing the gas masks as seen earlier in the film. And, Bowen (2015) elaborates further that Mamat Khalid's portrayal of the main character having supernatural abilities is lacking any reasonable scientific explanation, stating, "…X also has some weird-ass 'wings' that look like streams of gas vapour being blown out of his shoulders and allow him to float off of tall buildings, negating the need for elevators" (para. 7). Criticism as such is not surprising due to the fact that the film was a product of an intentional and conscious experiment with other genres by the director.

The film, according to the director, is inspired by a Japanese gangster film adapted from a manga comic titled, *Crows Zero* (Takashi Miike, 2007), depicting the rivalry among a

few student groups (Yeoh, 2014, para. 3). But it is marketed as "Action, Sci-fi" (Rotten Tomatoes, 2014), and even appreciated by some viewer as a "martial arts fantasy" (Hootohtudia, 2014).

The narrative of *Apokalips X* (2014) centres on 'X' as the protagonist's struggle against his position within the social structure. He is directed by an old sage and other clan members to protect the social order – a reference to the 'social contract' of Malaysian society (see Chapter One). However, he is seen occasionally questioning the importance of the social order which is being challenged equally by his underlings and rivals. The social order reflects the social contract established through institutionalised racial governance which has actively legalised race-based politics and regulated the distribution of wealth among different racial groups.

Different clans are threatening the social order and negotiating a new form of the social system representing the diverse ethnic make-up of Malaysian society. An ethnic Indian character is the leader of the *Teratai* clan, referring to an Indian political party, while the leader of the *Flora* clan implies a Chinese political party as she is presented as ethnically Chinese.

In the subplot, X's main underling, Aman Chai, falls in love with the leader, thereby representing an inter-racial romance which is condemned by the other tribes. As a result, she is wounded in a fight instigated by the *Jengking* leader as his ambition to take over X's position in an attempt to unite the disarrayed tribes. The social order is eventually broken when the three main clans, configured as a representation of the three main races in Malaysia, resort to fighting.

The narrative of inter-racial relations and social struggle in Malaysian cinema is not novel (see Chapter Two). Films about inter-racial romance and class struggle are discussed by Yusoff (2013) in relation to nostalgia, arguing the deployment of inter-racial romance in

Yasmin Ahmad's films such as *Sepet* (Yasmin Ahmad, 2005) and *Mukhsin* (Yasmin Ahmad, 2006) "invoke nostalgia to celebrate the past in order to reflect the present… a disposition that implicitly reflects and critiques modernity" (p. 292). Yusoff (2013) interprets nostalgia as the recognition of "yearning for human union and togetherness" among characters from different racial backgrounds (p. 251). However, it should be noted that most of Yasmin Ahmad's films tend to deploy the semantic elements of the past in which settings such as rural kampung and the suburban area that can be appreciated. Therefore, I will focus on *Apokalips X* (2014) in which there is an overt engagement with a peculiar setting typical of the sci-fi genre.

With reference to Jameson (1991), "[n]ostalgia films restructure the whole issue of pastiche and project it onto a collective and social level, where the desperate attempt to appropriate a missing past is now refracted through the iron law of fashion change and the emergent ideology of the generation" (Jameson, 1991. p. 19). *Apokalips X* (2014) is not a critique of modernity but rather it is a reflection of it. The invocation of Japanese manga, dystopian settings, unconvincing CGI effects, and multiracial characters constitute the semantic feature of marginal science fiction aesthetics, that are representative of the "consciousness of postmodern experience" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 317). She explains that the difference between the production of mainstream and marginal science fiction lies in "those unconsciously influenced by postmodern logic and those that consciously embrace that logic…" (Ibid., p. 317). A conscious trial and error attempt was made by the director who moved from his previous portfolio of comedy-horror to the production of film's stylistic imitation of Hollywood's blockbuster sci-fi and the Japanese gangster which film appeals to a marginal genre that can hardly be pinpointed to a specific mainstream genre. Sobchack (2004) states as follows:

[T]he marginal nature of these independent SF films goes far beyond their production budgets and distribution problems, for their playful erasure of the boundaries marked between past, present, and future, between outer space and domestic space, between alien and human, locates them liminally – both "within" and "without" the genre. (Sobchack, 2004, p. 230).

While critics focus on the production of Mamat Khalid's film as a form of parody and satire (Yusoff, 2013 & Muthalib, 2014), I would like to present *Apokalips X* (2014) as an instance of pastiche in the way it cross-references to other popular genre films. Notably, "[t]he familiarity of conventions allows for parody, which becomes possible only when conventions are known to audiences… conventions can also be used by filmmakers for disturbing purposes precisely because viewers expect them" (Grant, 2007, p 11). However, in this case, since the intervention of censorship is integral and embraced by the director (see Chapter Three), the reworking of conventions by the director allows the potential for pastiche in which it becomes possible when generic conventions are violated or rearticulated, and its pragmatic advantages is fully embraced to churn out more generic varieties. The differences between parody and pastiche are clearly illustrated by Jameson (1991) in which,

…parody finds itself without a vocation; it has lived, and that strange new thing pastiche slowly comes to take its place. Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique, idiosyncratic style, the wearing of a linguistic mask, speech in a dead language. But it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without any of parody's ulterior motives… Pastiche is thus blank parody, a statue with blind eyeballs: it is to parody what that other interesting and historically original modern thing, the practice of a kind of blank irony… (p. 17).

In the next section, I will show how Mamat Khalid semantically reconfigures other mainstream popular genres through the conscious use of multiple generic references.

The Marginal Fantasies

The prologue of *Apokalips X* (2014) is presented through an event depicting a large nuclear explosion with flames engulfing a child on her bicycle, which is a tribute to the popular imagery of nuclear catastrophe in *Terminator 2: The Judgement Day* (James Cameron, 1991) – which is still lauded highly today, both inside and outside Malaysia. The child's playground scene entails stylistic references of the popular blockbuster film (Figure 4.2 & 4.3). In this case, Mamat Khalid's film is presented as a remake which is outmoded to the degree to which our awareness of the pre-existence of other versions is now a constitutive and essential part of the film's semantic elements. According to Sobchack (2004),

> [i]f marginal SF "mocks" the big-budget films, its mockery is directed at a
> conservative vision that still sees special effects as "special" cases and "free-
> floating affect" as localized in only certain kinds of objective display. The vision
> of marginal SF does not reject the mainstream formulation, but radically extends it
> to represent what is perceived as an all-pervasive condition of postmodern
> existence. (Sobchack, 2004, pp. 291-292).

The use of CGI effects in the sequence is not 'special' effects that produce a 'free-floating affect', functioning independently to provide excitement for the passive audience. This invokes a kind of active referencing to other popular films, for example, the sequence contains a stylistic reference to the *mise-en-scene* of other films – a kind of referent, with a

shortage of explicit gratification which resonates with the notion that "…finds itself gradually bracketed, and then effaced altogether, leaving us nothing but texts" (Jameson, 1991, p. 18).

[REDACTED]

Figure 4.2: The apocalypse playground scene in *Apokalips X* (2014).

[REDACTED]

Figure 4.3: The apocalypse playground scene in *Terminator 2: Judgement Day* (1991).

The film is set in the ruined city of Kuala Lumpur where the iconic infrastructures of the Petronas Twin Tower, Putrajaya, and the Sultan Abdul Samad building are portrayed as being devastated and situated in a vast uninhabitable desert (Figure 4.4). The use of CGI effects supports the narrative to turn the Kuala Lumpur cityscape into a Hollywood-like apocalyptic world, thus paying homage to typical Hollywood fantastic films in which most of

the iconic cities and infrastructures are destroyed. "[M]ovies showing New York being destroyed is nothing new – and have a long history in cinema" (Chan, 2007, para. 2).

The KL cityscape employs intertextual references to other foreign blockbuster films, and functions as the overdetermined sign of self-referencing, that is, an opportunistic reference with an always already fantastic text from other popular films.

[REDACTED]

Figure 4.4: The Hollywood-like apocalyptic world in *Apokalips X* (2014). On the left, the iconic Petronas Twin Towers are destroyed.

Interestingly, the film also draws semantic references from Japanese manga films in the two-minute opening sequence which is presented through a series of comic strip imagery – a brief montage, in which the film refers to manga and, exposes the development of the remaining five clans out of the original thirty. The style suggests a fictional characteristic of the film closely related to the cultural influence of Japanese manga. Moreover, the custom design of the characters pays homage to a Japanese gangster film adapted from a manga titled *Crows Zero* (2007) (Figure 4.5).

[REDACTED]

Figure 4.5: The characters display stylistic reference from *Crows Zero* (2007) based on the manga *Crows* (1994) by Hiroshi Takahashi.

The nuclear holocaust refers to as an apocalyptic event described in the Quran. The depiction of nuclear warheads entering through the clouds is narrated by a caption, *"Pagi itu mentari terbit di ufuk Barat, bintang berguguran jatuh dari langit"* (That was the day the sun rose in the west and the stars fell from the sky), which, according to Muthalib (2014), was a reference to Islamic Revelation.

At the end of *Apokalips X* (2014), the hero X is resurrected from the dirt and becomes an angel, and then flies into the sky accompanied by other angels (Figure 4.6). The scene can be interpreted as a performance of divine salvation, however, according to the director, certain audiences interpreted the scene as queer due to the portrayal of the angels through a campy representation of male bodies (Khalid, Appendix A, 2017). Indeed, it resembles a part of marginal science fiction that "tend[s] to be generically "dissolute" as well as culturally 'deconstructive'" (Sobchack, 2004, p. 320). Hence, *Apokalips X* (2014) is a hybrid genre in the sense that it is characterised by various generic forms that overlap with each other, and is difficult to be classified under any mainstream genre – a manifestation of postmodern consciousness in which,

> [E]verything can now be a text in that sense (daily life, the body, political
> representations), while objects that were formerly 'works' can now be reread as
> immense ensembles or systems of texts of various kinds, superimposed on each
> other by way of the various intertextualities, successions of fragments, or, yet
> again, sheer process (henceforth called textual production or textualization)
> (Jameson, 1991, p. 60).

This form of 'textualization' is also embodied in the dialogue of the multiracial characters including generic references to the slang, dialogue, and idioms prevalent in local Chinese gangster films. For example, Hokkien[38] words such as '*Gua*' and '*Lu*' (translated as 'I' and 'you') are widely spoken in *Apokalips X* (2014) to interact with the formal conversational dialogue in typical mainstream Malay film. This refers to the outcome of manoeuvring censorship restrictions in the use of non-formal and street language in mainstream film production, providing a momentary relief from the use of formal Malay dialogues in mainstream Malay-language films. The technique is extended further by the periodic use of other ethnic languages while maintaining Malay as the main method of communication.

The ambivalence of racial identity mocks the traditional Malay-centric cinema by providing a dialectic space for the viewer to negotiate and imagine a united multicultural Malaysia, while, at the same time, pondering its validity. To extend this approach even further, multi-lingual graffiti in several other languages are visible on the walls of some of the buildings, symbolising multiple identities as per the narrative.

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[38] The dialect is spoken by the largest Chinese group in Malaysia.

[REDACTED]

Figure 4.6: The effeminate male bodies of the angels.

From another perspective, *Apokalips X* (2014) demonstrates a conflation of forward-looking cultural and historical elements to break the uniformity of space and time. The interplay between the past traditions and the possible future underlies the *mise-en-scene* in *Apokalips X* (2014). It coalesces with Sobchack's description of marginal science fiction in which,

> …the dominant attitude of most marginal SF toward the genre's traditional "futurism" has been a literal (rather than ideological) conservatism: an embrace of pastiche — a non-hierarchical collection of heterogeneous forms and styles from a variety of heretofore distinguishable spaces and times (Sobchack, 2004, p. 230).

The *mise-en-scene* highlights how historical symbols can be used to construct futuristic settings and characters, or, using Sobchack's (2004) term, 'literal conservatism.' However, at the same time, this representation of a possible future and the characters is also inscribed with historical meaning to display 'traditional futurism' such as literal conservatism that can be

observed in the names of the clans which were adapted from customary Malay words. Traditionally, Malay names were words from other languages such as Siamese, Javanese and Sanskrit but recently, they have been seen to be influenced by Persian, Arab and English names where meanings connected to animals and natural elements are less prevalent and even controversial.[39] The urbanised futuristic clans used traditional Malay names which referred to the pre-modern version of Malay cultural identity, comprised of animals and natural elements – a characterisation that expresses a form of 'traditional futurism.' This form of characterisation has failed to provide a direct reference to Malay customs, simultaneously, presenting a contested cultural identity.

The intertextual references observed in *Apokalips X* (2014) can be framed within the structure of current social reality shaped by the 'authority-defined' system. It is possible through the development of skills necessary to circumvent the strict codes of censorship and deliver the messages as intended by the director. As well, my reading of *Apokalips X* (2014) reflects that state-regulated film censorship might work in favour of validating this form of fantasy. In other words, a certain level of appreciation of censorship negotiations is taking place between the censors and filmmakers where modes of production for *Apokalips X* (2014) may have emerged exhibiting the possibility of projecting an alternative version of nation-of-intent within the authority-defined framework which regulates the way society expresses itself. Therefore, marginal fantasies are experimental, irrational, and playful.

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[39] Names which connote the meaning of colours, animals and natural phenomena were banned by the National Registration Department as they were deemed to have 'negative' or 'obscene' meanings (Yusof, 2014, p. 115).

Conclusion

While the genre hybridity in *Mistik* (2003) exhibits a contested form of ontological rupture in which the presentation of logic based on scientific principle is reshaped by religious interpretation of what is real. *Apokalips X* (2014) rejects the domination of mainstream Malay-language film practices and aesthetics through pastiche. Both of these embody the indirect influences of censorship regulations in relation to the representation of superstition and racial issues, thereby diminishing the boundaries between an authority-defined and everyday-defined interpretation of social realities. While film production is regulated in an authority-defined context, the application of such creative strategies and methods to mitigate the censorship prohibitions is important in order to protect the nation's fantasy without direct challenge to the authorities.

The creative strategies model two distinctive approaches situated between the symbolic and practical functions of genre re-appropriation or genre 'poaching' by the filmmakers. Hence, Malaysian fantastic films involve the fantastic elements of other generic conventions. In a sense, they function both as a hybrid genre and as a mode of generic discourse. The films survive in the collective dreams of a possible nations-of-intent, working within the confines of the struggles between the authority-defined and everyday-defined order. The films provide an alternative means for believing in the possibility of sustaining the dream of Islamic modernity and also achieving a united multicultural nation. In the next chapter, I will focus on the aesthetic aspects of fantastic films with CGI attractions.

CHAPTER FIVE

The CGI Attractions:
The Extravagant CGI and the Implicitly Critical Fantastic Films

In the previous chapter, I have demonstrated how Malaysian filmmakers produce

fantastic films that delve into superstitions and alternative national identities within the

confines of censorship by 'poaching' genre conventions. The representation of racial politics,

particularly favouring Malay culture and Islamic religion, is contested by invoking cross-

cultural identities. I observed that these fantastic films have garnered recognition from the

authorities, who promoted their potential for commercial and international appeal. In such

situations, filmmakers have begun exploring the demand for production style which

emphasises the importance of visual effects, particularly CGI, as a critical criterion for

commercial success.

This chapter defines the characteristic of Malaysian fantastic film that is related to

digital technology. My aim is to present the significance of digital image manipulations in

contemporary fantastic films, especially within the context of a state-induced ICT

environment. Through a close examination of films, such as *Badang* (Razak Mohaideen,

2018), *Cicak Man* (Yusry Halim, 2006), *Magika* (Edry Halim, 2010), *Mantera* (Aliyar Kutty & Miza Mohamad, 2012), *Bunohan* (Dain Said, 2012) and *Interchange* (Dain Said, 2016), I highlight their manner of displaying CGI visual attractions in combination with stylistic pastiche, as "constructed by unrelated material accumulations" externalizing in semantic features (Sobchack, 2004, p. 245). I also point out that the fantastic films spectacularise intermedial references as visual attractions. This accumulation of digitally enhanced visual attraction can be contextualised in terms of the state's ambition to induce the production of blockbuster Malaysian films with global reach.

In this context, the use of CGI in fantastic films can be viewed from multiple perspectives. On the one hand, filmmakers who comply with this state-induced agenda use CGI to create extravagant and lavish effects, with the intention of penetrating the global market. My analysis of the films *Badang* (2018), *Cicak Man* (2006), *Magika* (2010) and *Mantera* (2012) in this chapter demonstrates this stylistic strategy. On the other hand, some filmmakers take an alternative approach by using CGI in a critical manner. My analysis of the films *Bunohan* (2012) and *Interchange* (2016) demonstrates this approach. As I will argue, the films imply that using CGI to create fantastic effects result in technically mediocre national cinema, and at the same time this is its way of implicitly challenging the authority-defined valuing of digitally enhanced visual attractions as the hallmark of the good quality Malaysian blockbuster film. Instead, the films *Bunohan* (2012) and *Interchange* (2016) is an example of a more critical kind of fantastic film whose recuperation of the visual attractions of the analogue era of filmmaking offers an alternate version using digital special effects and by implication an alternative vision of national belonging.

CGI as Attraction

As I demonstrated in Chapter Two, the embrace of ICT development in the early twenty-first century was seen as a source of national pride in the official discourse. In this discourse, film production displaying CGI effects were associated with commercial viability. The authority's emphasis on the technological modernity of ICT and the cultural transformation that followed challenged the previous technical and aesthetic standard of fantastic films. Policy makers promoted the ambition to globally export Malaysian films for revenue, and according to this logic, making blockbuster films displaying CGI special effects as the marker of the capacity of Malaysian films to circulate in international markets become the ultimate aim (Hashim & Ibrahim, 2014). They advise film producers "to aggressively work towards creating productions with international appeal, establishing coproduction deals with foreign partners" (The Malaysian Reserve, 201, para. 36). Consequently, the use of CGI in films can carry the agenda of displaying the film's technical proficiency in cutting-edge technology, thus reinforcing the authority's success in implementing ICT initiatives. And, to a certain extent, it serves as an effective propaganda tool for the state to reinforce its ideology of technological modernisation.

In film theory, CGI and its deployment in film highlights multiple levels of concern with regard to visual attractions. For Gunning (1986), writing in the context of twentieth century early cinema, the cinema of attractions "address[es] and holds the spectator, emphasising the act of display" (p. 825). He also emphasizes that early cinema was not fully submitted to the hegemony of narrative films, instead, spectators were involved in a state of aesthetic shock resulting from modern technology. Although his proposition of attractions is linked to the technological wonder of cinema during the early days of film production, Gunning (1990) later wrote that, as the cinematic technology developed in subsequent

periods dominated by narrative film modes, the "attraction does not disappear with the dominance of narrative, but rather goes underground" (p. 57). In recent years, scholars such as Landon (1999) and Bukatman (1999) highlight the potential of digital effects to invoke 'disruption.' For instance, Landon (1999) contends that "…spectacular special effects function as a spectacle that interrupts or even disrupts the narratives: the special effects may simply be so striking as to constitute a kind of show-stopper" (p. 38). In the context of contemporary Malaysia, the deployment of CGI as an attraction derived from the development of ICT articulated in the form of visual disruption, in which the political and institutional aspects of CGI can be explored.

The incorporation of digital technology in film production challenges the historical status of cinema as a medium, apparatus and institution. This has led to a problematisation of the definition and function of digital production through the impact of transnational flows, intermedial relationships, institutional and material heterogeneity, as noted by Rogers (2013). I reflect on the production of Malaysian fantastic films with CGI effects with regard to its urgency for global visibility, transnational stylistic influences, and the ostensible intention of promoting official culture. The transitional period of Malaysian cinema can be located roughly from the implementation of ICT initiatives and the revision of censorship policy in the early 2000s, which marks a significant shift in how modes of digital production can be defined. What is left to be explored are the aesthetic standards in which certain forms of representation could be articulated in the official platform, while others remained unofficial.

For Kessler (2006), the analysis of attractions in film shall not be contextually confined to a certain historical period only but it also necessitates the consideration of what he termed as a "*dispositif*," or in other words, the cinema apparatus (p. 59). He believes that cinematic technology as a dynamic tool can generate a specific dominating form of attraction for different audiences at different moments in history. In his argument, specific cinematic

apparatus induces a specific mode of address. Moreover, Neale (2007) remarks that the deployment of digital effects presents "both a 'textual' and 'institutional' event" (p. 11). While CGI serves as a substitute for events or diegesis that can reinforce the logic of the narrative (textual), it simultaneously invokes a sense of astonishment for the audiences who are bemused by its technological achievement at a specific period of time (institutional). For Neale (2007), the digital effects and audience awareness of its presence are interdependent.

It is important to recognise that the *dispositif* fostered by digital technology is not fixed, but rather can vary based on its context. This is particularly apparent at the time when digital technology began to generate a dynamic concept of cinematic experience which involves censorship and filmmakers framing certain physical and conceptual articulations as cinematic. Braester's (2015) observation on CGI films highlights the danger of accepting the dichotomy between "populist philistines and cinephile purists, resulting in an inaccurate description of both parties and ignoring the institutional and ideological context" (p. 29). Instead, Braester (2015) calls for the consideration of the ethical choices of the filmmakers with the ideological consequences of globalisation. In other words, the way in which digital technology shapes the cinematic experience can be influenced by factors such as censorship and mode of production, and this can impact the way in which certain attractions emerged.

In the context of Malaysian film production, the tension lies between the attachment to the official state-induced ICT style for the popular market, and the unofficial film practices characterised by the production ethics in the context of everyday-defined social reality. As I discuss in Chapter Two, independent film practices have been identified by film scholars as pioneers in the appropriation of digital technology in film production. Khoo (2009) emphasises that most independent filmmakers view digital technology as a cheap and practical alternative rather than a conscious artistic choice, working on the aesthetic impacts on the audience. While this is true for full-fledged independent filmmakers whose

filmmaking tries to remain as distant as possible from state-defined ideology, and turn their backs on state funding, those independent filmmakers who have gradually become involved in commercial mainstream filmmaking, or those mainstream filmmakers who have been influenced by independent practices, may have a different set of ethics (see Chapter Two). The challenge lies in trying to understand the filmmaker's ethical choices and the degree of their compliance with the authority's aesthetic standard through paying attention to the multiple interpretative possibilities in their films' mobilisation of CGI attractions, and moments of possible 'disruptions' to the state-induced ideological agendas.

Censorship, Audience Maximisation and CGI Contents

In an interview I conducted with the censorship officer in response to the public complaints about the level of violence tolerable in the content, Mohamad Zamberi (2017), had this to say:

> We only have three categories of U, PG13 and 18. In other countries, they have
> more categories. One of the problems we have is the limited market. We can't have
> many classifications like in other countries because of the lesser number of
> productions and markets. Sometimes, the producer wants a lower classification in
> order to reach a broader market. Therefore, it has to be cut. In other words, the
> films have to accommodate a lower classification in order to sell. (Appendix C, p.
> 248).

In this case, the censor believes that having too many categories would be disadvantageous for the national film industry as it may further divide the audience. Therefore, when a

producer wants a lower classification, such as U for Universal, this is seen as a way to reach a wider audience. Given this peculiar combination of censorship and ambition for audience maximization, when there is a push to make films commercially viability, the routine practices of censorship appear to be accommodating to the filmmakers (see Chapter Three). This accommodation to the producer's request is an example of everyday-defined practices of censorship that allow films to reach a broader market. However, at the same time, the producer is required to cut scenes from their film in order to obtain lower classification. It indicates that both the censor and producer view lower classification as a marketing strategy even though the film's content is compromised.

In May 2012, the censorship policy underwent revision with the introduction of "Film Censorship Guidelines for Cartoon and Animation" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2012). The revision was prompted by concerns raised by the film censorship board chairman, Mohd Hussain Shafie (The Star, 2010a, The Star 2010b & Animenewsnetwork, 2010). Certain members of public group, such as the president of Anime and Visual Culture Society, Nur Liyana Jaafar said, "There are animes [sic] which are made for kids and there are those which catered for mature audiences" (Lowyat.net, 2010). Concerns were raised about the increase of pornographic and violent depictions in certain Japanese and American animations. The policy was then amended through a circular, defining 'cartoon' and 'animated features' separately. Consequently, the term cartoon (*Filem kartun*) became defined by the censorship board as a "film that is made from a series of illustrated pictures" and "generally catered for children" (Ministry of Home Affairs, 2012). Whereas animated features (*Filem animasi*) "catered to all age groups" as "films that have the depictions of Computer-Generated Images (CGI), which is adapted from simulated movement, activities, emotion, conversation and etc" (Ibid.). The distinction marked a change in censorship practices, with cartoon and animated features now being treated as separate categories under the censorship guidelines.

The revision signifies, not only a change of censorship policy that is uniformly exercised on all previous digital contents, but an attitude to further diversify a standalone category of film to the categories of cartoon and animated features respectively. Categorisations as such can be rationalised as an attempt by the censors to pacify a certain segment of the audiences through impressions of cartoons as light-hearted children's entertainment, thereby suitable for the lower age groups. It is a constrictive solution that takes advantage of the debatable, and often perceived historical nature of cartoons as children's genre by certain groups of audiences, intensified by the concerns of cultural elements that are not considered local, thus, inappropriate for the younger audiences. At the same time, it posits marketing challenges for filmmakers who produce digital contents.

On the one hand, the censor aims to remove pornographic and violent content from animation. And on the other hand, they must consider some filmmaker's and audience's demand for more exposure to various animation genres. This dilemma is compounded by the diverse cultural effects of animation and the challenge of promoting a specific mode of digital production to attract the viewers. The ambiguity in censorship practices creates a production ethics issue, forcing filmmakers to balance marketing viability with artistic quality. It also highlights the artistic challenge of dealing with a specific mode of spectatorship in the era of digital technology. The censor's conflicting stance is apparent between 'film censorship' which includes pornographic and violent contents, and 'film classification' which considers certain filmmaker's and audience's demand for more animation genres, including various types of digital contents. These complexities arise not only from dealing with diverse audience groups but also promoting a particular mode of digital production for commercial purpose. It promotes a disarray of production ethics. Filmmakers are required to consider both the financial viability and artistic quality. As censorship practices indirectly contribute to convoluted definitions of animation through

reductive terms like 'cartoon,' the appropriation of lower classification reveals the dynamic in dealing with specific modes of spectatorship in the era of digital technology.

Due to the state's demand for complying with the international model framed by the constraint of technical compatibility with the Hollywood industry, the presentation of CGI in fantastic films can be interpreted at different levels. Firstly, filmmakers who support the international model have portrayed their subject matter through the use of extravagant and lavish CGI effects and utilise CGI excessively with the intention to penetrate the global market. For instance, the use of CGI effects to create spectacular through the appearance of technological plenitude, thereby rendering the concern about visual excess defined by their stylistic references to other popular films. This is one of the maneuvering strategies to meet the policy maker's demands in modernising the nation through ICT infrastructures in which film is considered a cultural commodity. Secondly, those filmmakers who take a different stance on CGI focus on articulating their subject matter in a critical manner. This new form of fantastic films exhibits critical manipulation of CGI in order to challenge the official standard. While equally compelled by the urge to conform to international styles, these fantastic films creatively engage with substandard version of CGI manipulation.

The Extravagant CGI Fantastic Film

The deployment of CGI in fantastic films is associated with their technological appeals with the local animation industry and the economic development of cutting-edge technology propelled by the ICT. This reflects the intertwined relationship between technology, culture and economy, and highlights the importance of considering these interconnections when analysing the films. As I will demonstrate in my discussion below of the films *Badang* (2018), *Cicak Man* (2006), *Magika* (2010) and *Mantera* (2012), the playful and comical character design in fantastic films may appeal to wider audience beyond the

traditional children's entertainment market. At the same time, this stylistic feature serves as a way to subvert and challenge audience's expectation against the dominance of other popular blockbuster generic conventions.

The Heterogenous Style

One of the methods in exploring the multiplicity of digital contents is to underscore what Rogers (2013) terms as cinema's 'heterogeneity.' This is characterised by the recognition of "fluidity in cinema's relationship with other media, and diversity in its material forms" (p. 5). Rogers (2013) critiques the psychoanalytic-semiotic theory that promotes the cinema's immersive nature and instead calls for an approach that acknowledges the historical and technological dimensions of contemporary film experiences that are "far from immersing viewers in illusion, [and] invited them to rehearse the forms of shock and fragmentation" (Ibid., p. 11). Applying this insight to the context of the Malaysian fantastic film genre, I propose that the deployment of CGI in the films heightens the attractions of cinematic heterogeneity, and therefore requires that we pay significant attention to stylistic display. Fantastic films such as *Badang* (2018) and *Cicak Man* (2006) incorporate a heterogenous style. I will now show how this style assimilates intermedial elements, and how this is one strategy of complying with the state-induced ambition to make blockbuster films showcasing CGI attractions for the agenda of market export and maximisation of domestic audience.

Local folklore such as Badang and other supernatural tales have been retold through various mediums. The deployment of folk cultural elements in the local superhero genre is common practice in other forms of media, especially in animation. In 2018, the director Razak Mohaideen released the film *Badang* (2018), which is a spin-off of the classic Malay tale about a strong man named Badang. The film is part of a larger merchandising campaign

that includes action figures, books, and games developed in the animation industry, and in this sense fits the description of the blockbuster film that uses the strategy of transmedia proliferation of its products. While the traditional version of this tale portrays Badang as a demon fighter, in this film version, Badang is portrayed as a bullied schoolboy who acquired superpowers from a giant bamboo stalk kept by his mother. The stalk is where he was conceived, and a jungle spirit promised his supernatural ability after 300 months. With his new powers, Badang becomes a superhero capable of teleportation and invisibility at will.

The use of CGI and its connection with the Malay folklore conventions reinforce the intermedial storytelling and positions the superhero as an attraction within the censors' definition of the cartoon film, suitable for young viewers. Despite containing numerous scenes of violent exchange, the director stated in an interview that the film was approved as PG13 instead of higher classification such as PG18 by censors. The director further clarified that "*Badang* is different from the traditional Malay myth of Badang because the real Badang eats human flesh. That is too violent." (Razak Mohaideen, 2018). In saying this, he is claiming that his portrayal of the character in the film is less violent.

The violent and restrictive representations in the film that could have been disapproved by the censorship board were mitigated by the reference to comics. The film incorporates comic book styles and features references to the superhero character (Figure 5.1).

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.1: A publicity image frames *Badang* (2018) as a superhero with a fancy costume portraying the distorted folkloric figure of Badang.

According to a report by Ashari (2018a), the film received negative criticism from local netizens who disliked the acting style of the main actor Alif Syukri and the storyline. Despite obtaining negative reviews on the social media network, largely concerned with the poor visual quality and bad acting of the main actor, the filmmaker insisted that the film was meant for young viewers. He defended the film by saying, "I hope the audience would not judge the film without watching it first. What I can say is, this work can entertain the children" (Ashari, 2018b, para. 19). In a more in-depth interview, the director stated that, "the story in *Badang* cannot be complicated, it has to be filled with children's elements… when you watch the film, you have to assume you are a child" (Mustazah, 2018, para. 5). The potential of CGI as an enhancement for superhero character was established by the filmmaker who associates fancy costumes and lavish CGI as an attraction for children.

The film's comical style was acknowledged by Ashari (2018c) in his comment that, "[p]ushing aside the issues of the main actor, *Badang* has its own attraction in [its] costume,

the special effects of computer-generated images (CGI) and the action that is suitable for the viewing of children" (para. 10). This is further emphasised in the film's publicity image which features the titular character in a highly saturated green colour, dominating the composition and highlighting him as the superhero attraction (Figure 5.1). I asked the director Razak Mohaideen, about the reviewers' comments on the social media network. He had this to say about the issue:

> It has been targeted to young viewers even in the script-writing stage. I realised that it's impossible to compete with Hollywood's superhero movies with the available budget of RM2 million [approximately USD400,000] only. The costume design was based on the concept of comic or cartoon, so we used striking green colour. It was made by the same creative team that was involved in the production of *Cicak Man.* The decision was finalised with input from a young viewer's focus group enquiring about their favourite colour. Accordingly, green was their favourite colour. In the narratives, however, the green colour represented the giant bamboo. (Razak Mohaideen, Personal Interview, 2018)

The director decided to use elements pertaining to the comic genre in his production (Figure 5.2). In the opening credits, *Badang* (2018) uses a comic strip montage that references Hollywood Marvel's superhero films and pays tribute to local superhero films such as *Cicak Man* (2006) (Figure 5.3).[40] As much as these stylistic strategies are used, these films are based on the tradition of Malay folkloric narrative commonly seen in comic books.

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[40] After the commercial success of Cicak Man's feature films in 2006 and 2008, the producer decided to extend their franchise through the comic book which was popular at the time with consumers. 30,000 copies were ordered as of mid-2008 and its animated TV series was broadcast in 2017 (Umar Hakim Mohd Hasri, Md Azalanshah Md Syed and Christine Runnel, 2020).

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.2: Comic features in the opening credits of *Badang* (2018) allude to the stylistic convention of comic books.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.3: Comic strip montage in the opening credits of *Cicak Man* (2006) – a reference to the opening credits of the Marvel superhero franchise.

The fantastic films deploy the stylistic conventions of the comic book and uses the superhero character as an attraction. They benefit from the reputation that the animation industry has gained through intermedial storytelling practices in other media. This conforms to Tomasovic's (2006) proposal of an alternative form of attraction, in which blockbuster films such as the *Spiderman* franchise continuously produced themselves through self-reference to earlier or other versions, and on different media platforms, thus, submitting

"itself to a logic of self-consuming and incessant hybridisation…" (p. 318). In the Malaysian context, the process is further reinforced by the censor board's definition of CGI and cartoon representations with regard to age-group and their commercial potential. This strategy is considered to be productive and represents a plausible effort to capitalise on the audience that is already familiar with the character in other media, especially in animation and comics.

The Popular Blockbuster Attractions

I will now analyse how the Malaysian fantastic films tends to emulate certain stylistic cues from other popular blockbusters, especially in the films *Magika* (2010) and *Mantera* (2012). By paying homage to these films, fantastic films signal that they are stylistically globalised. To achieve this, the films employ "migratory cues." According to Ruppel (2012), appropriate intermedia content necessitates "migratory cues" that actively direct the audience in making connections between different media platforms. The term 'migratory' "…refers to the act of mentally 'shifting' the content from one site and blending it with the content of another," whereas "…the 'cues' are prompts or signals that promote an active linking of content between multiple sites" to (p. 62).

In film reviews in Malaysia, fantastic films are often evaluated through the reviewers' perceived technical quality of the CGI effects. In response to the release of *Magika* (2010), online film reviews and fan pages alike discussed viewing experiences with regard to CGI quality. Some of them note that, "it is a lot of improvement in the CGI quality. For example, the techniques on Maya Karin, the monkeys and dogs. Also, the panorama and the atmosphere in the magical world is indeed cool. Bravo KRU production…" (The Other Khairul, 2010, para. 11).[41] The 'improvement' in the context of technical achievement was

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[41] My own translation

the result of a systematic comparison of CGI technique with the one observed in foreign

popular blockbuster films.

In other responses to the release of *Magika* (2010), online film reviews and fan pages

discussed viewing experiences with regard to the 'Hollywood' appeals of blockbusters. Some

reviewers state that, "do not always condemn… it is a Malaysian film anyway… not

Hollywood movies" (Cikgu Khairul Arif, 2010, para. 3).[42] Other comment states, "we as a

family, are fans of Hollywood movies but we still selectively support certain films [which is

Magika (2010)]" (Tanpa Nama, 2010, para. 3).[43] They refer to the film's aesthetic quality to

match those produced in Hollywood. In this case, the references to other foreign blockbuster

films become a point of evaluation for the aesthetic standard in which the visual composition

unfolds across various fantasy genres, capable of standing on its own and providing

audiences the choices as to how deeply it explores the experiences.

The digital character design in *Magika* (2012) displays an intertextual approach of

manipulating other Malay folkloric characters such as Badang, the Dragon of Chini Lake,[44]

Puteri Bunian,[45] Hang Tuah,[46] Mount Ledang Princess,[47] Nenek Kebayan,[48] Orang Minyak[49]

and others. This approach pays tribute to the character design of the film *Shrek* (Andrew

Adamson & Vicky Jenson, 2001). In *Shrek* (2001), intertextuality is deployed to incorporate

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[42] My own translation

[43] My own translation

[44] Also known as Seri Gumum Dragon (*Naga Seri Gumum*). It is a legendary serpent-like monster believed to live in the Lake of Chini in the state of Pahang.

[45] *Puteri Bunian* is supernatural beings in Malay folklore, they are invisible to most humans except those with spiritual sight. It literally translates to 'hidden people' or 'whistling people'.

[46] *Hang Tuah* is a prominent legendary Malay warrior who lived in Malacca in the 15th century. His story has been adapted into several films, comics and literatures in the Malaysian popular culture.

[47] A legendary princess who lived on Mount Ledang, located in the state of Johor.

[48] *Nenek Kebayan* was described as an old woman with a hunchback and a wrinkled face. Her movement is aided with a walking stick, possessing magical power, and can transform into many forms or disappear into thin air.

[49] *Orang Minyak* is literally translated as oily man in Malay. He is a cursed man who rapes women at night. His shiny and greasy body has made him difficult to be caught by anybody.

various other folkloric characters into its narrative. While *Magika* (2012) draws inspiration from traditional fairy tales and folklore, it reimagines the iconic Malay folkloric characters by incorporating intertextual storylines similar to the recent global blockbuster films such as *Shrek* (2011). In another sequence, the use of a scroll with animated pictures references the moving figures in the newspapers of the Harry Potter franchise (Figure 5.4).

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.4: The animated figure in the scroll resembles a moving newspaper as seen in the Harry Potter franchise.

The film *Mantera* (2012) deployed CGI to construct robotic characters that resembles those in Hollywood's *Transfomers* (2007) (Figure 5.5). In a supernatural combat sequence, the extravagant use of CGI makes the stark visual contrast between the realistic appearance of the human character and the CGI used in constructing the digital armour (Figure 5.6). The contrast is notable between the human character's face and the high-resolution appearances of the robotic suits. At the dénouement, the pseudo-human character gains supernatural power to defeat the robotic villains. The film draws on the attraction of other popular blockbusters by creating a visual contrast between the 'live' appearance of the characters and the computer-generated robotic entities.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.5: Robotic characters as stylistic reference to the Hollywood's *Transfomers* (2007).

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.6: A stark contrast between the animated robotic amour and the realistic-looking characters in *Mantera* (2012).

In one of the sequences in *Cicak Man* (2006), we see another example of the stylistic strategy used in citing other globally popular blockbuster films. The Ginger Boys in the film are a clear imitation of the Twins from *Matrix Reloaded* (2003) (Figure 5.7).

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.7: The Ginger Boy in *Cicakman* (2006) refers to the *Matrix Reloaded* (2003) characters.

The manipulation of CGI serves to showcase the technical capability of a local film, implying that a Malaysian film can technically approximate the technical effects and visual icons of a globally famous blockbuster, while simultaneously mocking the dominant style of this kind of Hollywood mainstream aesthetic. This playful mockery is an example of pastiche and an explicit celebration of intertextuality. The increasing hybridity and digital composite illusionism of mainstream popular blockbusters has given rise to a range of alternative CGI innovations in contemporary Malaysian filmmaking practices.

CGI Attractions and the Implicitly Critical Fantastic Film

In the previous section, I explored examples of fantastic films that use CGI elements to combine Malay traditional folk traditions with popular icons from other media and globally well-known blockbuster films. My argument links this stylistic feature to the state's drive to promote films deemed to be exportable. However, those seeking alternatives have relied on a more radical aesthetics and production ethics. Radical aesthetics in the fantastic film form addressed here, with reference to the films *Bunohan* (2012) and *Interchange*

(2016), involves using CGI to replicate analogue era cinematic images, and in doing so addressing collective amnesia and state ideological repression. As I will discuss in my reading of the film, the attractions here concerns recuperating the aesthetic quality of analogue film, including its materiality, texture, grain, colour, movement, and the ways in which these qualities interact with images and sounds. These aesthetic qualities are significant because they refer to the physical and historical development of analogue film production, which are different from the mainstream digital processes used in contemporary filmmaking. Dain Said's films, in particular, call for a reassessment of the state-of-the-art digitisation in filmmaking as they focus on the return to the film's function as event recording.

Breaster (2015) reminds us that CGI as a digital construct is considered an impoverished version of what cinema could previously have accomplished. "CGI is controversial mainly because of its complicity with globalisation, as it encourages spectatorial consumerism, disregards local film practices, and flattens historical perspective" (Ibid., p. 29). Cubitt (2004) asserts that digital effects "sever the link between meaning and truth, meaning and reference, meaning and observation. Digital media do not refer," making it difficult to refer to anything real (p. 250). Despite these criticisms, many filmmakers have embraced digital style as an active agent. However, some filmmakers, such as Dain Said, have taken a different approach, displaying traditional cinematic practices to reassert subaltern cultural identities. In this way, his films intend to reaffirm cinema's role as a means of documenting and preserving localised social and cultural experiences.

Bunohan (2012) possesses an ideological affinity with independent practices and responds to the independent film disguised as mainstream film (see Chapter Two). Contrary to the commonly urbanised Kuala Lumpur landscape depicted in some fantastic films, the film's location is set on the border between Kelantan and Thai border, a contested area

between Islamic separatists in southern Thailand and the opposition party-controlled

Kelantan state. *Bunohan* (2012) alludes to the political issues surrounding the exploitation of

Malay-protected land, and the conflict of inheritance between family members. It tells a story

about three estranged brothers who are involved in the conflict. The film revolves around the

father, Pok Eng, a retired shadow play master and the landowner. He first married a

mysterious woman who is known as Mek Yah, ostensibly depicted as a half-human/half-

crocodile creature and gave birth to their first son, Ilham. Pok Eng then divorced and

remarried again to a woman who bore him a second child, Bakar. While Pok Eng's initial

plan was to pass the land's ownership on to all of his sons equally, he is forced by his second

son, Bakar, to sell his land for a development project without the agreement of the rest of his

children. Meanwhile, Adil, the youngest son, has incurred significant debt and plans to

escape to the Thai border to meet his elder brother, who is hired to kill him because of his

unsettled debt. When Ilham learns that Adil is his biological brother, he has a change of heart

and becomes remorseful. When Adil finally returns, Bakar feels threatened that he will lose

the land to his siblings and decides to kill his own father. In the end, Bakar's accomplices kill

Ilham and Adil, and Bakar successfully obtained the land.

In a sequence of Ilham's moment of despair, the origin of Meh Yah appears as Ilham

is pondering a strange incident that occurred at his mother's grave. Here, we notice that the

first shot shows a lit frame box with pictures, paying homage to the analogue reproduction of

images through celluloid film (Figure 5.8). The following shots are displayed through a series

of separate footage. From the frame box shot, it cuts to the black-and-white scene of

crocodile hunting (Figure 5.9), which is digitally synchronised with the noise of an old film

projector. The hunting footage appears grainy, grunge-textured, and in fast motion,

reminiscent of early cinema. Next, Mek Yah appears, digitally superimposed with the effects

of chromatic aberration (Figure 5.10),[50] followed by a fossilised crocodile image presented with white noise and statics effects (Figure 5.11). It suggests a retrospective technique of imagery reproduction synonymous with analogue technology. The sequence ends when we see Ilham waking up from his dream.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.8: A lit frame box comprised of celluloid films.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.9: The black-and-white footage of crocodile hunting.

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[50] Chromatic aberration manifests itself as 'fringes'of colour along the boundaries that divide dark and bright parts of an analogue image. It caused by the failure of optical camera lens to focus all colours to the same point.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.10: The chromatic aberration effects are digitally superimposed

on the figure of Mek Yah.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.11: The white noise effects as representation of analogue technology.

The flashback sequence not only showcases the recollection of Ilham's memory but also highlights the evolution of film technology particularly before the digital era. In contrast to the extravagant industrial-commercial CGI films, this sequence utilises basic computer-generated images and references earlier film production practices synonymous with analogue media. It questions the notion of modernity represented by the use of overt CGI effects and, through referencing the analogue era mode of image making, instead presents a contemplative use of digital images. Dain Said's stylistic approach differs from other

fantastic films that use CGI to create visual spectacle displaying the pleasures of fantastical and intertextual images of digital blockbuster films and captivating the audience.

In Dain Said's other film, *Interchange* (2016), the industrial-commercial appeal of CGI is undermined throughout the story which highlights the adverse effects of modern technology on the lives of pre-modern societies. The plot revolves around the Tinggang tribe in which their spirits were captured decades ago using an early photography camera by a travelling cameraman and trapped inside photographic glass plates. Iva, one of the lead characters and the last surviving member of her tribe, dedicates her life to releasing her ancestors' spirits from the glass plates. We can see that the figures printed on the glass plate are still 'alive' as indicated by the respiratory droplets and blinking eyes with teardrops which are visible due to the manipulation of CGI (Figure 5.12), Yet, the use of CGI effects in the film is not for the sake of the industrial-commercial spectacle but to animate the characters inside the glass plates, demonstrating a critical employment of digital techniques. The use of photographic glass plates as a medium for the portrayal of these CGI effects alludes to the negotiation between new and old media technologies.

[REDACTED]

Figure 5.12: The spirit of a *Tinggang* tribesmen is trapped inside a glass plate and still breathing.

Dain Said's fascination with the history of cinematic technology, particularly before the digital age, is evident in his films. These films use sequences that highlight the nature of

historical memory as depicted through the cinematic medium. These sequences draw attention to the ways in which older forms of technology are remediated in film, creating palimpsests of cultural memory. Through the use of CGI, Dain Said's films engage with different layers of cultural memory, questioning the representation of technology from an historical perspective. While both sequences deploy CGI, it is used critically to challenge the cutting-edge and industrial-commercial appeals of other fantastic films. Overall, while Dain Said's films engage with Malaysian folklores, it offers a unique perspective on the intersection of cinematic technology and memory, using both to reimagine and recontextualise the past.

Dian's approach to CGI is characterised by a commitment to stylistic authenticity and a rejection of overt references to other popular films and media forms. Instead, he employs an alternative manipulation of CGI that is sophisticated and distinctive. The appreciation of Dain Said's films as representative of a renewed interest in CGI technology demands examining encounters with old technologies. By viewing digital remediation through the lens of earlier forms of technology, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of the current technology and its potential. *Bunohan* (2012) and *Interchange* (2016) are examples of a deliberate departure from the digital attractions commonly associated with the state-sanctioned fantastic film styles using CGI effects, instead foregrounding a sense of temporal disjuncture through stylistic dissonance.

Fantastic films adapted from myths and folklores often engaged in the promotion of traditional Malay culture. In Dain Said's films, the representation of cultural identity is an alternative to what is defined by the state ideology of Malay paramountcy. Dain Said presents the animistic practices of the subaltern identities through the use CGI display of primordial form, manifested in contrast with the extravagant appearance the CGI films mentioned earlier. This representation of subaltern identities and their social struggles is seen as a moral

responsibility by the filmmakers, expressed through the tension between analogue and digital aesthetics as an important aspect of a renewed contemporary cinematic practices.

Conclusion

All films discussed above, despite their innovative use of CGI, are still subject to the state's ambition for global visibility and commercial success. These films are backed by economic incentives from the state which aim to increase their marketability as Malaysian products, at the same time, promoting local cultures and values to both local and international audiences. The choices filmmakers make, whether to fully comply with the state's agenda or establish some critical distance, can be measured by the extent to which they use CGI effects in their films.

Fantastic films that comply to a large extent with the state's agendas can be characterised by the use of CGI to make overt allusions to other modes of production, such as animation, and popular blockbusters, and displaying cartoonish tropes, intermedial references, and cutting-edge technology. These elements come together to create a spectacular attraction that aims to maximise the audience base. By idealising animated objects and popular media, these films present digital experiences that feel familiar in a world where digital media is ubiquitous. However, while these films embrace the prevalence of digital media culture, they also raise questions about the specificities of cultural heritage and identity.

On the other hand, films that use CGI in a critical manner encourage deeper artistic contemplation. These films stand in contrast to the CGI-laden fantastic films that often emulate popular genres and are more appealing to local audiences. These renewed form of CGI films are motivated by the intellectual critique of digital media as a framework for

aesthetic standards, aiming to make local fantasy films intelligible to a global audience. As a result, these films encourage greater scrutiny and appreciation of their artistic merits.

CONCLUSION

This thesis began with the assumption that there is an emergence of new forms of cinematic styles and modes of practices that needed to be examined closely with regard to the increasingly popular digitalised technologies, and state-induced initiatives to commodify culture. This study has reconceptualised the Malaysian fantastic films as a case of mainstream commercial cultural forms shaped by four determinants: the intensifying Islamic and Malay-centric ideology on censorship practices, the film industry's manoeuvring capacity in search for official legitimacy, the characteristics of pastiche and intertextual features in fantastic films, and the deployment of CGI effects as attractions.

The contemporary Malaysian fantastic films are a manifestation of state and self-censorship practices, however, as the exploratory study in the latter chapters suggests, there is a possible emergence of counter-official practices that implicitly challenge the official interpretations and the methodologies employed in articulating those representations. What is at stake here is highlighting the prospects that contribute to the construction of alternative national imaginings in relation to specific ambiguous and implicit strategies of a possible representation of subaltern or even oppositional forces for Malaysian fantastic film as a whole. Additionally, this thesis explores the challenges in locating the cinema's capacity to

offer audiences multiple senses of belongings – specifically with regard to the shifting terms of cultural and national identities.

The Negotiation Strategies

The negotiation strategies take on two premises, the permissible and the non-permissible representations. Permissible representation refers to the audio-visual forms characterised by the practices of state-conforming filmmaking, and it is subjected to the outcomes of censorship practices based on official control and reductive interpretations that presumes the pedagogical and didactic effects of filmic representations. As a result, the representations are involved in the mechanics of searching for order and adherence to the status quo, in order to secure and thrive in the official platforms, which in turn has caused countereffects of resolving with alternative and inventive strategies as observed in the contemporary Malaysian fantastic cinema. These constraints did not go unnoticed by the authorities which culminates in unpredictable decision-making and vague interpretations of censorship policies, thereby generating possibilities for negotiation, and offering compromised solutions to the filmmakers.

The non-permissible representations are highly censorable images that are manifested in a way that can be construed as prohibitive and are regarded as counter-mainstream and anti-official. These representations can be traced from both official and non-official sources, thus, complicating a homogenous interpretation of national imagining and sense of identity. The boundary between permissible and non-permissible representations is obscured by the shifting methods employed both in production strategies and the mode of presentation framed within the dichotomy between the official and non-official discourses in relation to the censorship dynamic. As a result, censorship control evolves continuously or may even

become increasingly irrelevant due to the democratic characteristics it garnered from the state hegemony through the development of ICT technology, thereby paving the way to an alternative mode of consumption.

The outcomes of the negotiating strategies in relation to the effects of censorship policies are demonstrated in Chapter Three, which is concerned with the impact of the dialogue between filmmakers and the policy makers that present the censorship practices as dynamic and interactive. The result not only applies to specific negotiation strategies developed at the production level but also to the censors' attitude in recognising the importance of the filmmakers' and audiences' responses as key players, significantly intensified by the urge to commodify films.

In this thesis, censorship is presumed to be executed autonomously as a symbol of social progress focused on religiosity and Malay paramountcy, targeting the attachment to an economic-viable cinematic industry of capitalist modernity. Thus, a primary interest was to look at the potential representations used to detach from officialdom and reflect a constrain of contesting social realities represented by the everyday platforms of social discourse with the interest that reflected on the filmmakers' playful attitudes and experimentalist behaviours in their production styles (see Chapter Four). That interest reveals the act of censorship that might be productive or perhaps more than prohibitive in their consequences.

Nevertheless, the delineation between permissible and non-permissible representations requires an ongoing investigation with regard to the effect of the changing socio-political on production styles, modes of address, and the deployment of technology. Therefore, the determination between subversive and submissive films shall not be limited to the formal styles as defined by previous scholarship. They are complicated by different forms of *dispositif* that are associated with the fluidity of social realities and the imagining subjects.

The Fantastic Forms

Chapter Four provides an example of these fantastic films. It demonstrates that the film *Apokalips X* (2014) displays a futuristic Kuala Lumpur, however, the struggle with racial issues in the multicultural society is presented in an apocalyptic setting, thus, creating an alternative version of modernity. The pastiche elements are displayed within an imaginative contested space – in a future apocalyptic city, and further complicated by cultural displacement of racial stereotypes in relation to a fixed national identity. In this way, the filmmaker can avoid dealing directly with the issues of racial prejudice and political otherness associated with the state ideology.

In *Mistik* (2003), the filmmaker portrays superstition, thereby, challenging the attitudes of censors towards the predetermined restrictive Islamic values, which in turn, establishes an opportunity for the emergence of Malaysian fantastic cinema. It exhibits two distinct modes of address – to regard the supernatural events as one of the character's dreams, thereby attaching to the state-defined Islam, and employing a creative strategy of reworking conventional formula of fantastic genre to reach larger audiences who interested in supernatural films. Either way, both of them successfully gained acceptance from the censors without having direct conflict with the censorship policy and its Islamic ties.

There were attempts to draw significant connections with the activities of 'poaching' the genre by the filmmakers – the practices that can be observed in fantastic films. It takes its subject matters beyond what commonly appeals to conventional fantastic films based on its relationship with the status quo and its predictable outcomes associated with the audience's expectations, especially dealing with issues of superstition. The analysis presents a stylistic transition in articulating superstition that significantly reflects the dynamism of society.

The amicable solution achieved via the negotiation of the censorship decision caused a spike in supernatural genres, often imbued with ambiguous portrayals. Since 2003, there have been significant productions of fantastic films and their hybrids paving the way for further stylistic transgressions. The topics employed throughout this study is based upon a larger, boarder concept of culture that views itself as part of a social dynamic, similarly inhabited by the notion of cultural progress that hinges on modernity. When the focus is on the domestic mainstream production form, the goal is to describe how universal styles are appropriated for regional and local audiences rather than to promote a universal standard.

Fantastic films present a specifically effective medium for discussing the negotiations of national and cultural identity. In Chapter Two, a close investigation of the previous scholarship on independent films shows that for all the characteristics of film genres and formal approaches, and that most of the films are produced with a certain degree of subversion. A significant number of independent films negotiate with cultural perversity, social transgression, the supernatural, tabooed sexuality, political warfare, and religious insensitivity. This is essential in order to form ideological responses and cultural acquaintances with the construction of 'otherness'. Similarly, the films display alternative fantasies that might be considered manifestations of social and cultural repression.

Independent filmmakers have developed an alternative method for projecting imagined communities, by allowing its audiences to participate in criticism through filmic representations with which they are unfamiliar and maybe even revolutionary. This condition would not have been possible without the development of ICT which has become one of the criteria of modernity for pro-technology governance. The state's intent in adopting ICT as a symbol of modernity requires consideration about how technology can be deployed to generate cultural transformation and how it is manifested in the Malaysian films. Consequently, the fantastic films are preoccupied with the deployment of CGI attractions –

either through the use of extravagant CGI or implicitly exposed through basic digital techniques synonymous with analogue technology. As digital technology opened up possibilities for further exploitation, its effects generated an ambiguous form of spectacular attractions that is tied to the mechanism employed for negotiating the dominant ideological form.

In the context of the Malay fantastic films, to apply the 'laws of nature' in the evaluation of fantastic texts is reductive. The production of largely fantastic texts was preconditioned by the censors to be thematically articulated in the context of 'dreamlike' or 'character's imagination' as predetermined by the requirement of Islamic values in the censorship policy (see Chapter Four). In contrast with the typical fantastic films based on events that are ostensibly extensions of rational and scientific principles, rendering the text as either scientific or quasi-scientific in origin, the Malaysian fantastic films do not adhere to this model. When supernatural occurrences are imagined or dreamed by the characters, the question of scientific principles in the story is irrelevant. But at the same time, it appeals to the characteristic of fantastic in which supernatural force is unquestionably present as defined by Islamic values.

Nevertheless, the Malaysian fantastic films are premised on a certain mode of presentation, in that it necessitates a preconditioned sense of attachment of the audiences to a particular set of beliefs in order to arrive at a certain level of fantastical experience. Therefore, the convention of scientific principality does not apply here but it gives the impression that the events rely on the audience's attachment to the religious and ideological status of the representations. The mode of presentation implied in the Malaysian fantastic films must be recognised by the audience, who must decide whether or not to engage in the films according to their attachment to that certain form of ideology, either official or non-official.

This mode of presentation challenges the official interpretation of religion and culture by the authorities, signifying an increasing tendency of religious remediation in fantastic films including a specific mode of stylistic strategy. As a result, the reading of Malay fantastic films hinges on the outcomes of official and unofficial levels of experiences and rejects the proposition described in the conventional fantastic model.

Hence, I propose a fantastic formula that submits to the 'law of officialdom', instead the 'laws of nature' as a framework of reference. The official status of the Islamic faith is promoted, and, at the same time, is challenged by presenting alternative modes of presentation as seen in other alternative Malaysian fantastic films, creating an impression of ambiguity. The dominance of the Islamic faith articulated as part of the state ideology and specifically in the censorship policy has redefined the way in which the Malaysian fantastic films can be produced and viewed.

The central constraint observed in Chapter Five concerns the logic of cultural expansion into the unofficial realm by incorporating contested representations of technology. This is the case with Dain Said who opposes the mainstream representation of ICT derived from attachment to lavish CGI effects. The techniques applied not only function as an instrument of attraction but as an embodied alternative form. My interpretation of Dain's works is on how he presented alternative modes of presentation that had been influenced by censorship. Instead of attaching to the forces operating in the polarised spectacular attractions of extravagant CGI, Dain focused on the formal appearance in dialogue with the prevailing digital production norms. Rather than using a set of established instruments, he incorporated a sort of technical ambiguity that allows his films to integrate prohibition within the permitted styles while redirecting his own stylistic procedures to initiate an alternative religious attachment.

Considerably, in the future, the strategic question may be addressed on how filmmakers benefit from censorable representations and undermine the official restrictive religious interpretation through a certain digital production technique. Emerging fantastic films that deal with other non-official forms of religious representations such as Animism, Christianity, Buddhism, Hinduism and Taoism practised by other ethnic groups in Malaysian and their syncretic characteristics with Islam can be explored in future studies.

Meanwhile, the remaining areas of exploration may be traced in the emergence of alternative digital filmmaking practices in which their audiences are identified and constructed through non-official engagement in cross-national border channels where the source and the transferring of capital and its modes of exhibition defy conventional methods. For example, some of the fantastic films produced by filmmakers such as Namewee, Namron, and James Lee have recouped financial losses due to censorship restrictions through funding raised collectively in an online platform. More interestingly, similar formal strategies have begun to surface in different channels and across various international regions via online and social media platforms in which the attention given to alternative social imagining remains in focus. The issues are whether or not, these instances also imply the emergence of a new form of de-territorialised national imagining. As discussed in Chapter One, either way, the proposition of fantastic films as an act of imagining an alternative version of modernity might need to be rethought in relation to the alternative audience engagement methods and technological change.

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APPENDIX A:
Fieldwork Outcomes 1

Date: 18th Jan – 3rd Feb 2017
Interviewer: Khong Kok Wai
Respondents:
1. **Woo Ming Jin**
2. **James Lee**
3. **A. Razak Mohaideen**
4. **Yusry A. Halim**
5. **Mamat Khalid**
6. **Dain Said**

The aim of this questionnaire is to fulfill the following key questions:
1) What are the distinguishing characteristics of multicultural and supernatural films in Malaysia.

2) What are the difficulties experienced by the censors with the filmmakers in all levels of productions.

3) How the filmmakers negotiate with the board of censors in film production, distribution and exhibition.

4) What strategies that are employed by the censors to keep up with the local and international audiences' expectation.

[Disclaimer: This document is a transcription. It is the interviewer's best effort to read and transcribe the original responses that varied in different forms of language.]

1.
Date: 18th Jan 2017
Respondent: Woo Ming Jin

Let's talk about your zombie movies, what is your goal and how do you define it?

I just shot a zombie film. It will come out either in early 2018 or late 2017. It calls *Zombietopia* with some local stars. We've been developing this film for [the past] three years. Five years ago, I have made a zombie film called *KL Zombie*. I was not satisfied with it but it was financially successful. I didn't feel good about it and I think I can do better. However, I am not a zombie or ghost films fan. I made a film called *Seru* in 2010. It was not a ghost film but a 'possession' film. I'm interested to make films like thriller. For *Seru*, my reference was from a French film called *Haute Tension/ High Tension*. It was about a girl who goes crazy and kills a family in a farm. We don't know whether she is crazy or possessed. It was not a spooky ghost story like in *Conjuring*. I'm not the fan of those types of horror films. I'm more a fan of the thriller, monster films and zombie films. I do not treat zombie films as horror at all. I took them as [an] action or drama. If you see *Walking Dead*, it was basically an action movie, not a horror movie.

It seems like you characterise your movie like an action more than something that scares people.

No, I prefer to make movie that is based on non-supernatural elements. The purpose is not to scare people.

I've seen *KL Zombie*. I take it as having a different type of meaning and it is quite political.

It was a comedy. *KL Zombie* is a comedy with action and actor like Zizan (a well-known local comedian).

From your records, you used to make films with heavy themes on human relationship relating to issues like same-sex relationship which belongs to independent genre, what makes you change your styles in recent years?

There are different aspects. Number one was because of the 'technicality' of it. A lot of these films are studio films. They (the *Astro* studio) asked me if I wanted to make a film with them. We made a commercial film. Most filmmakers want to reach a broader audience, a lot of my art films were not being shown here. Although *Astro* has bought them all, I-flicks and it started to show not in a traditional sense.

How about the issue of censorship because some elements were deemed to be sensitive?

The censorship was not really that strict. Some filmmakers just make one kind of film [a certain genre]. I'm still sort of finding what kind of films I'm doing well. There was a

period when I was just testing. I want to make a film that present a challenge to me. Like *Seru* was meant to be a one takes film. It meant to be a film with long takes and it has been revised for forty shots. Each day we just shot two or three shots. Sometimes just twenty takes and fifteen takes and the shots were two to three minutes long. As a young director, I took the opportunity to explore new things. Like what I'm doing for each of my film.

For the past ten years, do you agree that the way you made your film has changed because of certain thing that has changed your life?

Of course, when I look back into my previous films like *The Elephant and the Sea* in 2007 and *The Tiger Factory, a*s a person, I have changed and because the works changed me as well.

Would you say that you are motivated by the commercial aspect?

In some way, yes. I want to reach wider audiences but, in many ways, when I make a film, to be honest, I didn't care much about the audiences. Fundamentally, I make films that pleased me. I'm still making films that please me, but my intention has [been] shifted a bit. Now I want to make films that please the audiences, but it doesn't mean I wanted to make a commercial film. Even for a TV show, I would want to make high quality 'stuffs.' Previously I can have [it] my own way because it was funded abroad. You don't have to be accountable to investors. When I make [a] studio films, I have to be accountable to investors. Previously, I was just hired by *Astro* or *Media Prima* and now I wish I can control much of the content. I don't have the final cut on those films. I [have] started to change, and my approach is different now. I want to develop a project under the name of my company, *Greenlight Pictures*. We want to have creative control of the content and we want to reach the audiences. The audience need not be the cinematic audiences. We want to reach our intended audiences. I don't have to go through two different processes. Do you know like you do one for you (myself) and you do another one for them (the studio)?

It seems to me when you do one under *Astro*, you have to agree with them because they funded the film.

I do not want to differentiate the process no matter where the funding is coming from. It is no longer one for them and another one for me. Right now, the approach is different. The local films are not up to the acceptable standard. I was one of the juries in Malaysian Film Festival last year. From the total of forty films, the decision making was very controversial. Eighty percent were terrible. I don't want to contribute or be part of it. I want to make better film. I'll let all my previous films as it is but I want to make it better. I was quite proud of *Seru*, I think *Seru* was good. For *KL Zombie*, the idea was good, but the execution was a bit 'lacking'.

Everybody knows being an independent filmmaker are not that easy. Not only in terms of budget and funding but also sometimes issues with authorities and the censorship. So how do you see it and maybe talk about some of your experience with them?

It was highly problematic. For *KL Zombie* we were asked to cut for making it to PG13 (film rating of parental guidance for audiences aged 13 and above). It was terrible. We have to beep words that are not even a cursed word. There were like "*Saya nak buatkan Singapore golf kelab, ratakan semua bangunan*" (I want to make a golf club in Singapore and flatten its landscape) It was a joke. Even for that, we have to get it beeped out. I wonder who were in the censorship board. It is offensive to anyone? Somehow it was offensive for a film that shown in Malaysia. They asked for 34 cuts if I remember it correctly. Also issues like Zizan as a character who did some praying, and he was holding a joss stick. Come on, it is a comedy. It was just a prop. So, we had so much censorship issues in *KL Zombie* and at the end I just could not watch the film.

You were not satisfied with it?

Of course.

At the end, how do you negotiate with them?

I didn't do it. It was *Grand Brilliance* (producer) who did it. My studio did it. I'm not involved in the process. They just tell me I have to cut all these, and I was just like, "what the hell, the film is going to get butchered". While we are shooting it, everybody says this is going to be fine, it is a family film, it is going to be fine.

Who are those people? The director, the producer?

It is the producer. As I said, it was ok, no problem but when it went to the censorship. It was a different story completely, like in 180 [degrees].

That means out of thirty-four shots how many of them were passed?

I don't remember. It was not satisfactory to me.

During the process normally who get controlled to what are being shown besides than producer?

No, it is the censorship board. They give you a report with all the cuts.

Is there any intervention of censors during the production?

No.

That means you have full freedom and when you finish everything, you send them, and you have the thirty-four cuts?

The truth is for *KL Zombie* I have a lot of creativity idea in the process of making it. It was my idea. I was the script writer with my crews in the post-production. The film turned out to be what you saw in the cinema and it was different.

When you make *KL Zombie*, it is following the trend of horror films?

No. I'm not really a horror film fan. I don't like ghost films. Normally, I watched ghost films because of the filmmakers. I like James Wan's *Conjuring* because his films are not just normal horror films. His films are more like for family [genre], I never treated his films just as a normal horror film. For my films particularly, I treat it as [a] slasher. I remembered [when] I went to *Astro* and I said I'm not making horror film but a slasher film. A film that I used a French film called *High Tension* which a girl goes crazy and kill the entire family. So *Seru* was modeled after a slasher film. Slasher is classified as horror film because there are horrific, but they are not 'ghost oriented'. Just like zombie films are classified as horror films but they are not supernatural. I never classified my films as horror. *KL Zombie* is a comedy.

Like in KL Zombie, some of the scenes were taken as subversive as the people are infected by a virus from a dog which is an animal that is problematic to some.

Some people got it (the subtext) but the normal audiences are totally different from academics.

My next question is why the censorship did not realise it but...

They cut [out] the unrelated thing that nobody talks about.

That means they are not smarter than we think.

There are no set guidelines. The only set guidelines were just no nudity and all that.

They just cut all that superficial 'thing'?

I don't know. It depends on the day, who are watching it and you know. They threw important thing away and it just became ten times worse than before and I still got a PG13 rating (Parental Guidance for audience aged below 13). But somehow, we did it.

The better standard you got the more audience you can cover with lower rating.

For *KL Zombie* the inception was when I talked to Amir Muhammad, the book was from a book called *Zombijaya* from Petaling Jaya. So, the book was very different from the movie.

So, it was actually the adaptation from the book?

Yeah, but it was my idea. I owned the IP (Intellectual Property) but I didn't write the book. We got a writer for the book and it was very successful. And we come out with a movie, but we decided to make it lighter. We didn't have the money. The book has some crashing [action]. It was a very big budget movie. So, we made it smaller and more like a comedy. Even though it is a comedy the censorship was unfair to it.

The censorship was not in the level of standard to read 'things' and they got a different meaning from it?

Yeah

How about all those benefits from government such as production incentive, have you ever got it?

I'm not involving in any of these because I worked for studio. However, for my new film, we have a CGI grant (Computer Graphic Imagery Grant).

Did you benefit from *Wajib Tayang Scheme*?

I don't have problem with *Wajib Tayang*. I think after the last few years of bad box office for most films. The numbers of film production are reduced mainly because of the (commercial) failure of ninety five percent of films that come out. So, I think we (film industry) need to make fewer films. Our industry cannot support eighty films per year. We only have thirty million people and they are all separated by race, religions. Therefore, we (film industry) can only support thirty to forty films.

Recently, the productions are decreased...

It has been increasing for the past ten years but for this year, it dropped. I hope for this year; it will keep dropping. The lower it gets, the better for the industry, until it reaches a sustainable level.

I see there are a lot of 'language films' that are not doing well.

No 'language films' are well. The Chinese language films are not doing well. However, the Malay films did well. The rest were not. There were five films that did well out of fifty films. There was only ten percent. The ten percent success rate is a very low success rate.

What are the characteristics or creative methods that make a film sell? Maybe on the usage of certain characters or language?

I think fundamentally just make 'better' films.

That means it is more important than the characters and languages itself because I see there is this mixture of languages and characters from different races in your recent films as well?
I don't believe in that. The truth is, unless you have a huge marketing push like *Astro* which spent millions in pushing the film. I really don't believe you can get, for example, a Chinese film for a Malay audience or a Malay film for Chinese audiences. It is very difficult.

Haven't we reached the stage where people can accept different cultures?

Yes, of course. Sometimes you have a big budget film like *Ola Bola* with a huge *Astro* [financial] backup behind it.

It means it depends on marketing and supports they got behind the film? Wouldn't it come from the audiences.

Not the audiences especially if *Astro* are spending five million or three million and using their entire platform to promote their films. Unfortunately, in a theatrical release, we need a big marketing push. During the first weekend, we need words of mouth, whereby the people come and watch the film. If they don't do that, we will have to move to a smaller movie hall within four days.

Even though with all these policies that are done by FINAS, is it helpful?

Whatever it is, you only get until Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. The movie will get pulled on Sunday morning already. I have known it and I have seen it. The *Wajib Tayang* policy, yes it gets movies on screen but if you don't do well. They will put you on a smaller hall, and after a few days, they (the exhibitors) will change your screening time because nobody is going to your movie and it's wasting their halls. So, the *Wajib Tayang* allows the movie to be in the theatres at the first place.

Is the policy being helpful?

It is helpful. Otherwise, nobody will want to watch all these movies.

From your experience, are the Malaysian audiences disinterested with local films and just go for Hollywood films. They are not into the level of taking subversive characteristic of films with deeper meaning.

It is not only in Malaysia. It is the world. I mean, look at the worldwide audiences. Now, people are making superhero movies and difficult movies don't sell anymore. Ten years ago, when I started making films, our film audiences were increasing but now nobody cares. The younger generation could watch Youtube and online films. They won't go to movie theatres. We have to make an 'eventful' film, a film that everybody goes to watch. Then, they will go to watch it. Everybody prefers to watch online films. So it is a worldwide thing, it is not only in Malaysia. Nothing is special about Malaysia. We are not stupider than anyone else. We are all the same.

How do you promote your films in the local and positioned it in the international market?

This film (*Zombietopia*) is targeted for local audiences. We need to get a distributor and we need to employ in a good marketing strategy. I think some of the producers were mistaken when they spent most of their money in making a film, but nobody knows it, nobody hears about it, nobody sees it. That is a shame, I think.

Have any other external factors changed the way you made your films such as social and political situation of the demands from the audiences?

I'm a very stubborn person. At the end of the day, I feel I need to do what I needed to do. Of course, as a director, certain external circumstances will change me. But they won't change me 'internally'. I wouldn't be governed by policies. I have had people invited me and said there is this type 'scheme' and they want to do 'this' and you should make a film. I was not interested, if you want to pay me to make something I really don't want to make, it going to cost a lot of money and it won't be enough.

It seems that the movies you made ten years ago are much more subversive and original compare to the recent one.

It's not true. The last film I made was a gay film. So, it was not released theatrically.

How do you sell all these types of films?

It was not shown in Malaysia. I sold it to *Astro* but it was not shown.

How did you get profits or funding from it?

There were no profits. It was funded by two or three European granting boards. The last of my three or four films were funded from overseas. We never sought the funding here. However, those opportunities were now 'died out' simply because the funding board namely the European government does not give us as much money anymore. More and more people are competing for a smaller amount of money. Most of my art films were not made for profits. I usually don't make films for profits because I don't have to. They were funded by grant. For a grant, you don't have to pay back the money. Even the movie made zero money. I don't have to pay back anybody, but it will be very hard to get that money because you are competing with the entire world.

Which one do you like, with the grant or without it?

Of course, with grant but it was not easy to get one. Sometimes, you have a period when people come up and want to see your work. They support your creative work once it hits. But when you are out of your early career and in your mid- career, you need to defend for yourself. The films that I am developing are actually much more daring than my earlier works. They are much more subversive. I have been developing it for a year and it's about religion and conversion [into a religion] and all that. It's extremely controversial and I haven't change at all. In fact, I have double down. I just took a longer time to make the film because I have been distracted by family and other stuffs.

I can see you maintain your style, but you'll have lesser hope for a local market.

The truth is people are not going to fund your film if it is not intended for wider audiences. You can get a very small funding so we can make a very small budget film. We made a film with an advertisement last month. It was a low budget film. If you need a bigger budget to make a non-commercial film, nobody will do that in Malaysia. That is why we don't have an independent film movement. The Thai people have it. The Philippines has it. The Indonesian has it. Malaysia doesn't fund it. All those films are funded abroad from Europe and all that.

Recently, a lot of independent filmmakers are making commercial films like James Lee.

James Lee made his commercial films like ten years ago, not recently. And it is the same five people. Everyone else has gone to *Youtube* and they have gone commercial

and nobody is interested in making this kind of so-called art-house films anymore. They are not so interested. They are more interest in the other stuffs.

That means one of the factors is its hardship to reach the audiences.

Number one, they can't get their films funded. Number two, they are not interested. They grew up in the era of *Youtube* and all that. They want to make *Youtube* videos. They want to make funny videos for their friends.

I'm really salute those people who can make all these films during those time and you were quite daring to do it. How this burning kind of passion comes out?

I think when I first came back thirteen or fourteen years ago. We just wanted to make films. It was what I ever thought about, when I woke up in the morning, I just wanted to make films. When I go to bed, I wanted to make films. The drive was so high. I have to say being in Malaysia does reduce your drives and motivation because it is not a good environment for artistic expression. We just wanted to make films and there are a bunch of people made it up together and we made films on our own, separated and sometimes getting back together. It was individual films, but we helped in one way or another.

During the time when you come back it was quite happening...

The matter of fact is there was a movement and the films were funded. People wanted to extend it. They don't want to make a film for one hundred or two hundred thousand ringgits. They want to make a film for millions of ringgits, that's it. Who are going to give you one million ringgits? Maybe the government will give you but definitely not for an art film that nobody will watch. But Singapore does that, Europe does that. For *Astro*, they will give Apitchapong some money, but they know he has won the Palm d'Or. Are they going to give you the money? We tried but they didn't give us the money. Do we wait for ten years? We can't. We got to think a different way. Is either made the film cheap or find some money for it. Sometimes the dynamic of it does change. We make the film in a manner that we can sell. Unless you are like a hardcore person such as Seng Tat, they can't make a small film. Their films are very big. They are going to make a film in five or eight years instead of one or two films per year. If you want to be that prolific, the film has to be cheap or you got to have a 'godfather' to write you a cheque. It was not easy; the films won't make money. Back in ten or nine years ago, art films can make some money from screening in film festivals or some people will buy it. Now, festival won't pay screening fees because their budgets are tight.

How about your recent film about *Seruan Merdeka* that got nominated in Busan?

That was made for Busan. That film is an example of film that was funded abroad. I had the freedom to do whatever I want. I have the final cut and I delivered it.

It's still good.

But it was very rare and if you think about it, only a few people got it. It was one person per country.

Do you think if the government can understand all these? Would the film industry be better?

Yeah. I would like the government to help me but if I just do that, you will say the government is responsible to your lively hood which is ridiculous.

Do you think there is any improvement to the industry after Kamil taken the position in FINAS?

I think he did a good job. I'm sad he has to leave. I don't know how the new regime is.

2.
Date: 22nd Jan 2017
Respondent: James Lee

Can you describe about your films? For the past decades, how much it evolved and what is your goal?

I started my independent films [production] in art house. They went to film festivals a lot. Back in those days, we don't have money. The best thing was we just shot [the] small and low budget films. Independent films are most viable. We can focus on our stories and characters. From there, we went into mainstream. In 2006, I started [to] direct for TV and studios. I made Chinese and Malay TV dramas and features films, horror and action. In 2012, I left the [film] industry. Now I'm totally on my own again. Basically, I'm focusing on *Youtube*. I have a website [that] focuses on online filmmaking. Maybe I'm curious with it. Since 2013, I have not involved in the [film] industry anymore. I'm not sure what have changed and what happened during those time for the past four years.

In terms of your own personal goals. What are the objectives if you have any, when you make your films?

I wanted to make [a] better Malaysian films. Films that win local awards and the audiences will say are good. At least, I'll make a difference, different things that people would never accept in this country. Even though the creative industry supposed to be innovative, but we never really innovate anything. I can guarantee that. Most TV stations are producing the same thing. That's why nobody watches TV. Nobody wants to pay thirteen to sixteen bucks (USD2.90 - USD3.60) to watch a film. I can't blame them because it's a risk. Most of the time, nine out of ten of films are like sh**t. It's not deserved to be in cinemas. The industry has no workers union to say who are supposed to be in the industry. That's the reason I left. It looks like anyone can be in the industry as long they have money. So, you got all these people who are not used to be in the industry, suddenly become film directors and producers, which is quite disturbing. There are a lot of films come out from money laundering. That's why they make films even though it's [going to be] a flop in box office. It's very suspicious. You can't invest in a film that is losing money. That's doesn't look like a strategy at all. I know in US, Korea and Europe. They have film union, director's union. Whoever that

wanted to direct a film, [have] to be verified by them. It's either you are trained, or you have enough experience, then they will let your films to be screened. Then, there is problem with our exhibitors. They are very afraid to screen local films because the films are quite bad. Cinema is a business. They want to fill the seats and sell pop corns. If you screen a local film with less than ten people in the hall, it's not good. Whilst they can screen *Transformers* episode 10, if you like crap, [the film] still get full [house] because people won't mind paying for that. It is the downside that killing the film industry. There is no QC (quality control) to protect the people in the industry. I was involved for twenty-five years in the industry to become a director. Somebody who used to be a doctor (or from other profession) can become a director the next day. If he able to find budget, he [could] make [a] film and put up in the cinema. When you watch it, you were horrified like who actually invested and made these films and let it [be] screened. As it goes on, I think the local audiences were very pity [in] this way. I felt like for the past few years, they don't mind supporting a local content that is good. They are still very patriotic apart of that I was quite shocked that the ticket is now cost sixteen bucks (USD3.60).

I just bought some tickets yesterday and it costs me seventeen.

Seventeen? It is a new movie?

I bought from TGV and it was not new movie.

You can see it is not cheap to watch a film. It does affect the choices of people made. Four to five years ago, they don't mind supporting a local film, to have a good laugh or like "sh**t, never minds, it's just ten bucks". Now it's different and you are wasting your time for two hours. I think time is the thing that most people don't have today. A lot of films, people can watch today by download legally and illegally online. The industry at this stage has become like nobody give a f**k.

Have you benefited from Producer Incentive and *Wajib Tayang* Scheme?

No.

Do you think there are certain disadvantage of the scheme or it based on racial bias because you mentioned in Korea and other countries and they have their professional bodies, but we have it as well?

They don't really do much because in Malaysia there are a lot of unions and associations that are very political, and they are more focus on money making. Besides than organising some annual dinner and all these craps. I think the problem is we are still [like] a very third world country in lots of industries. In terms of the mindset, I believe a lot of associations in other countries make money too. At the same time, they protect [the] people in the industry to make sure that they have overtime [payment], they are not abused, they get paid well, they have a standard salary for everyone in the industry. In Malaysia, we don't have overtime since 1995 until now. They worked twelve, twenty-four hours, they got no overtime. If you work in the construction, you still have overtime. In film (industry), we don't. In the third world country, their labours are not protected. So, what is the future for them? In US, a DP (Director of Photography) in their sixties, they are still a DP. They are not retired yet

but in Malaysia, you can't do that. Once you are fifty and you have enough of experience, either they can't pay you because of your experience [or because it's expensive]. The good news is they will give chance to new guys, but the quality will suffer. The veterans will be eventually out of jobs because you can't afford them and definitely, they won't get paid like they get paid [like] ten years ago.

The industry is actually 'going down'.

It is in my point of view. The budget was never increased but reduced. When the Ringgit depreciates, the camera equipment and software's prices are now doubled up because of transaction in USD. I was freaking out this year. But the budget we got is still the same, [even worse] they have to reduce it. So how can this business survive?

What drives you to make film for *Youtube* if it is not targeting for commercialised audience?

I want to build more audience for my films. Ten years ago, the distribution [method] was decided by TV stations. If they like your work, they'll produce it and distribute it in every way they want. You have to deal with the investor, censorship and a lot of stuffs. For *Youtube* in the past four years since I started in 2012, I have a very strong online presence [through] *Doghouse 73 Pictures* (James Lee's production house). I've got more opportunity in these four years. If I stay in local, nobody knows me beyond this country.

Did you get any international TV stations supports?

Not TV station but I got some conference job from Singapore and I was invited to do a China film workshop in last year's December. They found me through *Google*. This allowed me to promote and brand myself. It's better [for me] to invest in my short films, they all very cheap and was [uploaded] online and I can stay active. It looks like I'm a working filmmaker. This is one of the matters I always encourage young people to do. I used to make one or two short films per year because it was expensive. It took one year to make a film. This form of workflow is a bit slow. It will become irrelevant. I believe you should keep making work as fast as possible. We are always active in the industry. By doing online films, I got pitching job from Vietnam and China. They sent email [and contacted me] because they have seen my short film in Singapore last year. It was a commercial short film. They found me on *Youtube*. These are some of the advantages or benefits I managed to build in these four years. It was not easy because I'm competing with the whole world once [I'm] online. Personally, I'm very proud. They contacted me through my works. It was not because I knew them. They were no connections prior to the workshop in China. I have no personal contact to the people in Singapore in the past five years. So now they have invited me to pitch. I think it's an honour.

Was it totally a different form of story?

It has to be different. In Malaysia, there are too much things that need 'people connection' to get a job. In these four years, I would say [that] not everybody like it but I manage to find people who like it.

Do you get any income from *Youtube*?

No, unless you are doing a Vlog as a Youtuber. For a short film, it's quite lengthy for that. You have to write a script, go through pre-production, shot in few days and [do] postproduction. It takes too long [for] about two years to recover your profits from *Youtube*. I have given up taking a sustainable living out from *Youtube*.

In term of your work for the past ten years, how much intervention from other people like the investor or policy makers that changed your style in filmmaking?

Everybody who works in the media should know what the criteria of censorship are. We need to get updated with them once in a while. If not, we are going to face trouble.

Such as?

I got one film that was banned in Malaysia and from that moment I have chosen to leave the industry. The industry doesn't have a system to support my works. For *Histeria*, we got some minor cuts. We have backup cuts to show in international scene just in case it gets cut for stronger and solid story.

At the first place, why you were being involved in horror? Was it to follow the trend of horror filmmaking in Malaysia?

In fact, I was one of the first directors who make it along with others. I think horror films can easily get audiences. Most of the filmmakers were interested in making horror films. It is one the most popular genre in cinema, regardless of big or low budget. If it's good, it will get its audiences. But this genre is hard to develop because of many restrictions. The local industry does not support new ideas and new talents.

Do you have any problem in making horror for *Youtube*?

In *Youtube*, as long as there is no full nudity and extreme violence, it will be ok. It does not abide to [the] Malaysian law.

Recently, as far as I concerned, you are involved in many roadshows screening your films and conducting workshop around the country. Can you talk a bit more about it?

Those are all the invitations I got from colleges. They invited us for screening and sharing session. I just finished a workshop in Multimedia University in Cyberjaya. We are still doing it as part of our mission, the idea that independent films are beneficial to the country and the industry, a platform of expression regardless of how many budgets you have. I don't want the youngster to come out and think the only way they could make films is through the mainstream industry. Most of them will be disappointed.

It seems to be really difficult because local filmmakers have to get established in oversea before they are locally acknowledged?

This is one of the things that I hope to improve throughout my years in the industry. I think it's unfair if people claimed they are Malaysian directors [whereby] they just born

here, and they are active in Australia. People such as Angela Lee, some game designer, VFX supervisor in Hollywood are being credited. We are losing talents. Now most of them are in Singapore making game. The whole system is not only stifled talents. They chased out all our talents.

All talents of certain race?

No. It's everyone. It's not about race. It is the business mentality.

You mean it doesn't support the industry?

They just support it for a short while to make a lot of money, but it never builds a creative industry that is about talents and software development. It was all about hardware. They [only] think of the investment in studios and cameras and it is not going to be better. The talents [or wetware] are the most important thing in all creative industry. Three years ago, people asked me why I produced *Three Doors of Horrors?* They were made by all young directors. Some filmmaker asked me, aren't you afraid if they will become better than me?" I was like, that was my whole point. If you want to see better works in the industry, I don't mind being part of it, if I can do that. I hate everybody is being selfish. It is a different mentality in term of business. Everybody is like protecting themselves. They won't even promote a young guy who is working with [in] their office because they afraid they will become their competitor one day. There are lots of monopolies in this country. The press and media for instance tend to keep everybody 'below' them so they are safe. They killed the industry and are very old-fashioned. I have tried to promote cooperative culture for the past four years; I produced a movie and I gave chance to younger filmmakers. The younger filmmakers have no resource and experience. The [practice in the] creative industry culture should change. *Doghouse 73* is doing that, but I hope other players will do it too. Hopefully, they are not doing it for monetary profits but out of improving the industry.

When it involves funding?

When people get funding, instead thinking on how to make a good story, the first thing they ask was how much money I can make out of this project? It is very unhealthy and detrimental to the industry. Ten years ago, I don't mind that because we were still in old school. Now we are so lagging behind from other countries because of our mentality. [It's] not because we don't have talents. I think there are many talents among Malaysian. We are not the best, but we are not that bad too.

Recently, there are many commercial films with multiracial and languages in their characters. Are these films potentially successful?

There is future for all types of movies.

Does it change the styles of your films?

It doesn't. You have to make a story that people can relate to. We can't make multicultural films for the sake of it, the story comes first. Regardless of the characters

and the languages used, as long as the story is good, people will watch. We watch Korean films; we watch Thai films and Bollywood films regardless of race because it is good. Personally, [I think] certain filmmakers still make film targeted to certain race. If they want to progress, they should abandon those practices.

What is your thought about the recent revised category for best Malay language film instead of just having a stands alone best Malaysian film category in Festival Film Malaysia last year?

I think the festival is redundant because it is not recognised internationally. There is no value on the awards. Ask if anybody who get the award. Will they get a better job opportunity in the industry? If you won an Oscar, the next day, you can demand for a better pay. You get recognition to move further. For Malaysian Awards, people don't want to hire award winners because they are expensive. And [some of] the winners have to announce in Facebook that wining an award doesn't mean he going to increase his price.

It's sad to learn there are no development in the industry?

The recent two countries that beat us are Vietnam and Cambodia.

What about Singapore?

Singapore is better. Their art house films are better than ours. Most filmmakers in Singapore are trained, they went to proper schools. Most of us are not. They came from other disciplines. Even for my earlier films there are a lot of flaws because we do not know the "how". Sometimes it's funny that we sent films to Oscar. Our films are no way Oscar's standard.

3.
Date: 23rd Jan 2017
Respondent: A. Razak Mohaideen

You are the first director who make the first local horror film titled *Mistik* in 2003 after a long period of ban for local horrors. Can you tell us how did you make it?

I was thinking to come up with a horror movie. I came to know that a horror movie which came out twenty years ago was banned. It was directed by M. Aziz Othman titled *Fantasi*. I wanted to produce something that can get away from the ban. At the ending of *Mistik*, I made the story as a dream. If you watch the film, you will realise everything that happened was actually a dream of a person's mind when they travel to a place. By applying the twist, I managed to get away from the LPF (The National Censorship Board).

In your opinion, why nobody is willing to make horror films before you?

Maybe they didn't see the reasons behind all the banning of the genre. Most of them try to portray *tahyul* (superstitious) as something that is "realism". I was thinking that *tahyul* is something that shouldn't be relate to Islamic perspective. I was thinking how we can tell them that in our mind, anything can happen. In our dream, it can be *tahyul*. We portrayed through our movie and it might get over from the banning. When I was shooting this movie, I was having a plan B. Just in case, if it gets banned, I took some extra shots and if it needs to be replaced, I have to do it. I have pre-planned it. Finally, I have a smooth release for that film.

How about for your another horror *Skrip 7077*?

For that film, I had three cuts. There was a shot when Fasha Sandha used a *lidah buaya* (aloe vera). I did not show her private part. It was an act when she uses it to insert into her private part to abort her child. The blood supposed to dip out and flow on the leaves. They (censorship board) asked me to take it out. There was another shot that has to be removed, but the act was not showing any lower part, just the upper part when she was screaming and trying to push in. It was according to them; the shots were not appropriate. The final shot was about a crawling baby with blood. I used a toy but when it has a lot of blood, it looks real. At the same time, I film some baby crawling, but they were ok with 'toy' instead. For that shot, I replaced two parts.

It seems like some extra shots has to be made for precaution. Is there any way to know what will be censored before started shooting?

Basically, there are no proper or clear guidelines from LPF. So far, films were watched, discussed by their panels and the results will get decided. If any one of their panels, feel that a particular shot is not appropriate or touching the sensitivity of religions and all that. He will voice out his concern and the board will discuss about it.

It is just totally depending on what types of people in the board and it changes all the time?

When the (panels sitting in) board changes, their mentality changes, their decision changes, the films also will change. It's all depends on their feeling.

How much of 'changes' has taken place in for the past ten or twenty years?

From my experience for the past 25 years, there were three waves of changes. Now, it is coming back to the previous situation like in early 90s whereby they ban all these, things that relates to mystic and violence. They are moving towards that direction again. In fact, they are quite strict at the moment. I can't even use English title for Malay films.

What are the 'waves'?

The first wave. They were very strict. They were concern about *mendaulatkan bahasa Melayu* (to protect the sovereignty of Malay language), to adhere to the principles stipulated in the constitution, and to be Islamic. After 2003, there was a new wave whereby they allowed all these, they became lenient. It was when I started *Mistik*. There are a lot of films related to suspense, horror, gangsterism and different kind of

cultures. After that, they became strict again. The third wave is now. In my latest film *Chowrasta,* they told us to take out the word a*nak haram* (bastard). They told us either to beep out that part or remake it. So, I have chosen to cut out that part. In that particular scene, the hero would be called *haram jadah* (misbegotten). That was also partly taken out. In another film *Anak Mami Nasi Kandar*, there is one dialogue "kalau tak dapat anak, kiter buat lagi" (if we couldn't get any child, we 'make' again). So that kind of language was also asked to be removed. Sometimes, it was very difficult shooting in such situation. We have to allow the actor or actresses to act with the dialogue that they feel like 'easy' (goes with the flow). If they can't pronounce certain thing, we will change the wording. In that process, we tend to let go certain thing. To me, *haram jadah* is something that is commonly used by Northerners to tell that they are not happy. But when it comes to certain situation, it is quite rude to be used. But to me the gangsters will use that kind of language, so to me for the sake of realism, that was not a problem. Somehow, the panels in the LPF think it was not proper.

Besides the director, do other crew members or actors got to decide what is proper or not proper to be shot?

From my experience, they just followed whatever I told them. As a director, I'm supposed to be the gatekeeper. At the end of the day, if something went wrong, the director who is going to be responsible.

Do you as a director has the authority to negotiate with the censorship?

One good thing about the LPF is whenever they decide to remove any part of the visual, they give notes with the onscreen time in minutes relating to the things (shots) which they want us to remove. When we receive that, either we follow it without any argument, or we go and discuss it with them. For another film *Soulmate*, I chose to go and discuss with them about the title. It was an English title. At that particular time, all Malay films should use Malay titles. Unfortunately, I was the first film that violates the rules. Then, I argued with them, I told them, if you wanted to practise all these kinds of new rulings, they should give notice in prior to all the producers. After some argument, they finally allow it but change the *Soulmate* word to Italic font. That was my suggestion. I said "it's not fair to ask us to change in last minutes. You should tell us in advance so in future we won't make the mistake. Fair enough for this time, the title supposed to be *Badang Super*. I take out the word 'Super'.

Have you benefited from the Production Incentive Scheme?

As a director, I didn't benefit from it. I don't see any Malaysian director will benefit from it. This scheme is only for producers and the finances of their films.

How the welfare of the workforce is being taken care off?

Currently, all the welfare of the workforce is not being taken care. The IP (Intellectual Property) of film directors, script writers was never been discussed.

Why there are no certain action to improve it?

It's partly because of the union. At the moment in Malaysia, there is no union. It's more to persatuan (association), like *Persatuan Pengarah Film* (Film Directors' Association Malaysia) or *Persatuan Pengeluar Filem* (Film Producers Association) and they acted or approved under ROC (Return on Capital) but they are not benefited from any of the current rulings or regulations and law. If you look at the music industry, they have legislation to protect them. When it comes to film business, there is nothing.

How about *Wajib Tayang Scheme* (Compulsory Screening Scheme)?

The producer as a financier will get all these. Previously, they got around nineteen percent as a rebate. Meaning after twenty five percent has been deducted by government for entertainment tax. Each cinema will pay back twenty five percent to the government. FINAS (Film Development Corporation Malaysia) will collect the twenty five percent [in which] they will give four percent to *Persatuan Penerbit Filem* (Film Producers Association), and another one or two percent to [finance] another film under FINAS themselves. The balance of nineteen percent will be given back to the producer. That was previous practice. But, four years ago, they have stopped it. Now, they based on [certain] figure. If we collect one million, we will get ten percent, not nineteen but only ten percent. If two million, the rates will become higher until a certain maximum figure.

For the *Wajib Tayang Scheme*, do you think it will benefit the industry specifically in your films?

There are parts of it that I think it will benefit the producers. It supposed to benefit the producer 'on paper' (in official procedure). For example, if there is a Malay film and registered to *Wajib Tayang Scheme.* Directors have a choice whether or not they wanted to register and get *Wajib Tayang Scheme.* It is not compulsory. If the producer registers for *Wajib Tayang Scheme,* they will get the rebate. If they don't, they won't get the advantages. Furthermore, when a film goes to the cinema, the cinema cannot take out the film from screening if their audience is more than thirty percent in a hall. If they have a hundred seats, it is only after two weeks, they can start to pull out the film if it's less than thirty audiences. Although there were no audiences, the cinemas have to screen it for two weeks. However, the cinema owners protested. If they have a good Hollywood film, why not they show it? So FINAS has allowed them to bend over the rules by screening the film in a smaller hall. As the consequences, the cinema owners become greedy. They screened for only one show during midnight. Although there are people interested into the films, but they couldn't watch because it's only one show for a day even though it's under the *Wajib Tayang Scheme.*

In order to be qualified in Wajib *Tayang* Scheme, the films has to be in at least seventy percent of dialogue in Malay language. How does it affect your film amid the popularity of films with multi-languages dialogue recently?

If you are talking about Malay films, it should be in Malay language. But if you mean Malaysian films, then you can allow what you see [it] 'in front of your eyes' (like in reality). You can see Chinese speaking Tamil [or Indian speaks Chinese]. If a director makes a film with hundred percent of Chinese or Tamil language, it is a Malaysian film but not a Malay film. Some people said it is very racist to make such a statement. To me, it is not about racism, it is how you (people) define it. If an award is given for the

best Malay film to *Ola Bola* (a multi-language film), it's not fair because it's not Malay film. Malay language is a language spoken by a majority called Malay. In order to define what a Malaysian film is, there should be [a] certain percentage to determine the usage of [the] languages. If it is hundred percent in Chinese or Tamil, it can be called the best Malaysian Chinese film or the best Malaysian Tamil film. The problem in the Malaysian film industry, most of the decisions are made overnight. It was not discussed further, argued and decided. When the decision is made for a new category of the best Malaysian film in twenty-four hours, it becomes polemic.

If a category like the best Malaysian Chinese film is made, what happen to the film which have the mixture of all languages?

Then they have to look at which percentage is higher. It can't be in thirty three percent for each language. If you look at duration of [the] dialogue went through, you can definitely get the percentage. For example, it can be seen from the main character and the duration elapsed for [each] language they used. They must be a formula.

Did you have problem with your films regarding to language issues?

I have produced a hundred percent Mandarin film and I don't take that film as a Malaysian film. To me, it's a Chinese film.

As far as I concerned, the benefit is only applied to Malay films, how about other films then?

The ruling must be applied to everybody. Previously, there were not many directors who produced Chinese and Tamil films. They (authority) have to change the rules and regulation to fit into the current situation. Before, nobody wanted to make these types of films because we sourced direct from Hong Kong and India. People didn't want to watch local films. Now, it's different and they have to make some new rulings or acts.

Recently, a lot of film directors were into the trends of making Hollywood's superhero or science fiction genre. For your current film, *Badang*, it is part of the trend?

From the production point of view, it is related to the audiences' frame of references, the audiences' interest. If this kind of 'presentation' can attract more audience, why not? From the business perspective, Hollywood framework can be applied for local films. If we produced a film that nobody has produced before, it might bring a bigger risk to the financier. It's a risk to do something that is out of the norm. Some people might say we are not creative but that is a minority point of view. As a businessman, I have to cater to the majority who make up the audiences.

In your twenty-five years of experience, do you see the audience has improved in term of their taste and mentality?

The power of advertisement is taken over. Before, we can get over it, even with less advertisement. Now, we have to invest more in advertisement because the competition is high, the proliferation of media channels. Previously, there were only three TV channels and forty-five cinemas. Currently, there are hundred forty plus

cinemas, eighty over TV channels [plus] social media. These are all unprecedented. In order to attract cinema goers, we need to 'imprint' them through the advertisement. We have to come out with something extraordinary like a promotion or [a] certain marketing strategy. For instance, in *Ola Bola,* they spent four to five million to promote the film compare to other films which only spent two hundred thousand. The film was able to gain 'repeating sale'. The audiences will return to watch the film for second time or more. They sold by mouth of words. For last year, the highest grossing films were Tamil and Chinese films. [The] Malay film was [in] the third although the Malay made up most of the population. Normally in Malay films, they (audiences) just seen [it] once and it will be distributed in *Astro First* and another TV channel.

How does this affect the way you market your films in future?

As a director, when it comes to marketing, I can just [give my] advice. The financier will make the decision. Personally, for all my films, I hope to spend a million for A&P (Advertising and Promotion). Most of the producers who spent 1.5 million, they don't want to spend more because they don't have money to 'turn up'. For Astro, they have all the channels and available facilities to promote their productions. For independent producers, they don't have all these channels and they have to prepare to spend a lot. I think if an outsider needs to promote [in a way] like how Astro did, they would have to spend around eleven to twelve million just to market their films. Let's imagine a production cost for a film is six million, plus eleven million for marketing, it will be total up to seventeen million. If the box office collects only seven million, three and half millions would be given to the cinema and the balance is three and a half millions. It will go bankrupt.

Do you think there are potential for social media as a form of marketing tools?

It is worth a try. For the film *Munafik,* they spent less money to advertise through TV channel. They marketed their film through social media and words of mouth. They have to spend money to boost up the numbers of viewers. In *Badang*, I want somebody who is famous but not an actor. He (Datuk Aliff Syukri - a cosmetic products entrepreneur, and social media celebrity) is famous in facebook. Let's see how it's going to work.

4.
Date: 23ʳᵈ Jan 2017
Respondent: Yusry A. Halim

Most of your films were produced with heavy usage of special effects. Some of it are science fiction and fantasy genres. Can you describe a bit about your films?

My first film was *Cicakman*. The reason we produce it because nobody has done it before. It was like our first [music] album. When we recorded our first rap album, no one else was doing it. It is the matter of filling the market gap. It has always been the KRU mission to produce something that has not been produced before.

How does it go along with your previous works because it requires high-end technology and budget to be persist?

As I said, nothing is easy. If I do what everybody does, I am not developing a new market. I am just 'tapping' on whatever which already there. There is no point of trying to be someone else. I was trying to be pioneered in the thing that I did. We had made many superhero films after *Cicakman*. No filmmakers have made all these films before.

How do you keep up with the development of the film technology?

At first, it was me alone. We have no staffs. I did not learn it from school. I just bought 'used books' and learn from it. Back then, we don't have *Youtube* or any other learning media.

How about prosthetic costumes and high-tech props we seen in your films?

As I went along, I gathered and trained people along the process with many trials and errors. When it progressed, we started to import tools from the 'West'. In the first episode of *Cicakman*, we did it all manually. Not like in *Cicakman 3* whereby we have 3D printers which was already common. We did it by 'trials and errors' and keeping up with the [latest] technology. We don't want to [be] left behind in term of these.

Normally, when people talk about technology in film, they will relate to the production of science fiction. The local science fiction is still new and unexplored, what are the positions of your films?

I think science fiction films have not got a 'place' in our society. If you go to [the] US, they have strong culture with UFO believers and [they] took science as a form of 'religion'. It is different from our cultures and the things we believed. I don't think science fiction films [will] 'work' here. Therefore, when we made *Cicakman*, it has the elements of comedy. We made fun of Western culture and it was a parody. I don't think audience can accept a superhero flying around KLCC towers [because they'll confuse with Hollywood films]. Honestly, I don't they are ready for that.

Do any of your films then being confused to be related to supernatural genre and have censorship issues?

In Malaysia, with the LPF (National Board of Censorship), there is no clear black and white, it's always grey. So, we have to take risks. We are risk-takers.

Do you have any shots in your films that was being censored?

There are always 'stuffs' like when we shoot [the scenes], we didn't know whether it will be accepted. Last few months, when I shoot a commercial, all of sudden it was banned with all kinds of funny reasons.

How do you position you films in the international market?

For our past few films, we always target it internationally. Ever since, *Hikayat Merong Maha Wangsa,* we had marketed our films not only in Malaysia but elsewhere. Sometimes people complain why we don't make films with local content. Like *Vikingdom*, we already have our buyer even before the films were being produced.

5.
Date: 23rd Jan 2017
Respondent: Mamat Khalid

How do you define your films? What are their characteristics and your goals?

I like surreal films. I think that defines much of my films. I like to watch fantasy films; I don't like realist films. Even when I make a film with [the] police [force], I like the mix with mystic, fantasy and adventures. To me, films are medium of escapism. Most of my films are not based on realism.

From your experience, were any of your films have issues with censorship?

Yes, I have. In fact, I have [other] problems with the audiences. The board of censors consists of ordinary people, they are the audiences. They are people who have no film or any 'entertainment' background. They were former staffs from Department of Social Welfare or Road Transport Department. In my opinion, that's not bad because art films are targeted at minority audiences [whereas] commercial films are made for the common people. If my films are censored, it is for the sake of the general audiences and this will form a 'counterbalance' to my art films so that they will become more acceptable. However, it was not easy because as time goes by, I have to tune to the audiences' wavelength (mentality).

As you are learning about the censorship board and the 'audiences', can you give examples of it?

In a scene that shows a smoking character, it would be fine as long as I showed he is tense up even though he is a teacher. They (censorship) didn't even realise that because of the 'intensity' of the shot. I learned that as long as I did not glorify the act of smoking, it would be fine. In another example, from some of my ghost films, I portrayed a character who read out some mantra with mumbling sounds, so it was not seen as being related to any religion, Islam or God.

According to the censorship guidelines, some of the prohibitions are to prevent people from being *khurafat* (superstitious). In *Zombi Kampung Pisang,* there are zombie characters and zombies are a sort of walking dead. How it is not related to superstitious?

The zombies are actually [being] poisoned by chemical at the ending of the film. They were contaminated by radioactive and the authority was sent to recover them. They were not dead. They [were] only appeared to be zombies (but they were not).

I can see there are many political messages and subtexts underlying your films. How come the censorship could not see it or maybe they were just fine with it?

They [the censorship board] can't see it. To them the subtexts are 'immaterial'. They judge by on what they see on the screen but not the 'ism' (context) beyond the screening of a shot. They don't care what your intention behind it is. They regard it as just a film projected onto a screen. They don't study through to the sub-layers of the film.

How many percentages of your audiences do you think who can figure out roughly what was you wanted to show in?

Not many but it's ok to me. For *Zombi Kampung Pisang*, I had screened [it] on TV channel and afterward people had discussed about it. It was a good sign. I think eventually the audiences will understand its hidden meanings. It was screened ten years ago and finally the audiences were slowly begun to accept it. Many of my films were used to be flops when it came out. Finally, when they understand it, it has become classic. A lot of my films are like that.

If I try to classify your films, there are some senses of 'nostalgic' in *Malam Kala Bulan Mengambang*, 'horror' in *Zombi Kampung Pisang* and 'apocalyptic' in *Apokalips X*. However, it would be reductive to put it this way. Can you elaborate it?

Apokalips X is a fantasy film. The style of the film is manga oriented. It was like watching Japanese comic films. I just wanted to take a break from making horrors and comedies. I wanted to do something with my son. Back then, my son was into Japanese manga *Crows Zero* which was famous among the youngsters. We discussed and made it as a family project. We hoped it will relate to the youngsters, but somehow, they didn't really like it.

What would you say to the audiences who tends to compare your apocalypse films or zombies film with the Hollywood films and they think your films are the copycat of those films?

They have the rights to say whatever they want. As for me, I always wanted to do something which is different from other local films. For *Zombi Kampung Pisang*, it was the first Malaysian zombie films. I was having doubt on whether or not the audiences would understand it (subversive content). I purposely made it into a comedy and had fun. It was not a serious film. The zombies don't attack. After ten years, they compare my zombie's film with *The Train to Busan.* My films were comedy not serious films like *The Train to Busan.* I made [my] zombies wear *Sarong*. It was selected by some [of the] international film festivals in Italy, Switzerland and London. I went to many places because of that film. It was well-received in Italy because Malay zombies are new to them.

There are no proper unions for the workers in the film industry. How did you manage the problem with your staffs?

We are in a team whereby we are all closely related. I treat my staffs like family. If there is problem during the production, we will know and [we will] deal it together. If we have problem like salary payment, we [would] deal with *Tayangan Unggul* (the financier). I always work with people who close with me and they will understand.

Have you benefited from any of government funds for filmmaking?

Yes, a lot. We received our first funding for *Apokalips X*. Since then, most of our films has benefited from the government funds like three hundred to four hundred thousand [ringgits] for our CGI production. We have to check and documented our spending. Every two months, we have to present our progress. It was done by the CGI Company that I have chosen to work with my film. They will present under their company name and the government will reimburse to them not me or the producer. So, in one way or another, the fund helped to cover big portion of the production cost for a film.

How about the Producer Incentive Scheme? Have you benefited from it?

No.

What do you think about the Wajib Tayang Scheme (Compulsory Screening Scheme)? Do you think it is beneficial?

Yes, very much. The exhibitors or cinemas will not screen local films without that scheme. To them, local films don't make money. So, they have to show for few days at least.

Let's get to the audiences. What is your fuss about the audiences?

They can say whatever they want. As [a] filmmakers, I have to cater for them. As much as I want to make arty films, they are the audiences who will watch and judge it. We will fail without their supports.

From your experience for the past ten years, have you seen their taste and mentality changed?

Not much changes. They want to watch a good film according to their standard. For instance, *Mat Rempit* (bikers) films never failed. It will be a commercial success. I know what the audiences want but at the same time I like surrealist films and I hope I can apply their styles into my films. Sometimes, it was difficult because I have to 'oscillate' between my style and what the audiences want.

Recently, social media and *Youtube* seems to become an effective way for filmmakers to market their films. What do you think about it?

That is the best way. I marketed my films through *Youtube* and *Facebook*. Normally, the studio will do it, not me.

Do you know how much percentage allocates for the marketing expenditure of your film? I know normally local films will not spend much on marketing.

Currently, more money was allocated to social media for marketing. Before, we advertised through TV channel and billboard. Nowadays, you don't see billboard anywhere for local films. If we advertise it in *Facebook*, it will get viral.

For the studios like *Astro*, they maximised their TV channels and other media facilities to market their films. For an independent commercial filmmaker like you, how do you manage it?

They have spent six or seven million (ringgits) for the marketing of each film. But recently, I doubt they will do it anymore. Let say the film gross amount of sixteen million and they have spent seven million for promotion. From the balance of nine million, fifty percent has been deducted for the cinemas, the final returns is only four and half million (ringgits). Can you imagine from sixteen million to four and half million (ringgits)? However, it is different for *Munafik*. It grossed seventeen million (ringgits), [they spent] zero money for promotion. They promoted it through *Facebook*, and it got viral.

Recently, there is a trend of films with multi-racial characters and languages. What do you think about it and how will you refer to it?

I did one titled *Estet*. It was a total flop because I can't get enough Indian and Malay audiences for that film. I think they want to watch Indian films made by Indian or Chinese films made by Chinese. I think a film with multicultural theme promoting the government ideology is a turn off. I don't have problem with other directors, but it was not for me.

What are the comments or feedback you got from the international audiences and how did it change your films?

I learned [that] in order to appeal to the international audiences, I need to produce films that portray the 'negative side our culture'. For instance, a religiously moderate character is struggling in a country where the 'Islamicisation' or radical Islam took place. The character wanted to express his dissatisfaction. I think this sort of film will win jury selection for the International Film Festival. In contrast, a film that proselytise a religion, it won't be successful. Another example, a bisexual or 'sexually dysfunction' character, it might stand a chance.

If I put the directors into two categories between commercial directors and independent directors, which categories that you think you are more incline towards?

I think all directors hope their films to hit box office. Sometimes I enjoy making films out of passion. *Apokalips X* is one of it. Some of my films are box office films (which normally are formulaic films) but I took time to get relax and made my films out of passion. I don't make 'easy' romance or horror films. We care enough to make some differences in the film industry. *Man Laksa* was one of my films that didn't get any attention from the press and audiences when it was released. However, as time goes by, it appeared to be a classic for local [contemporary] Malay films. Normally, a local box office films was just 'hype' for a short time. Nobody will talk about it afterwards. [However], people still talk about my old films once in a while.

Are there any subversive elements in your films, would you like to expand it?

The Malay enclave in a *kampong* (village) setting is my common theme. One of the messages was 'integration'. Nowadays, I think people take a lot of things for granted and are over attended to small matters. There are lots of subtext and hidden meanings in my films if you study it carefully. For example, there was a scene in *Hantu Kak Limah Balik Rumah* (The Ghost of Kak Limah Returns Home) whereby a rice farmer complained about a shortage of rice and asks her wife to borrow some rice from a Chinese grocer. I don't know how much the audience understands its subtext. There are a lot of allegories in my films.

Talking about allegories, how much of it were correctly understood by the censorship board and were there any issues raised?

If issues arise, we will negotiate on a 'give and take' basis. In *Rock Bro* (Mamat Khalid, 2016)*,* there was a masturbating scene with sound, but it was not visually shown. However, the censorship board did not accept it. After a few arguments, they finally allowed it, but with cuts applied to other negative. I have to defend with [certain] reason and luckily, they were able to accept it.

Have you ever made some extra shots to replace the shots that might be censored, just in case it happens?

Yes. In *Man Laksa*, at the end, the story became strange and surrealistic whereby somebody was descended from the sky. I have to make some extra scene to show that it was happened in a dream. I even have a thought of putting a disclaimer like "this is a scene required by censorship board" so that the audiences would not turn off because [of] the unwanted dream scene required by the censorship. In another example, in *Apokalips X*, there were [some] angels descended from the sky, but I have to make a dialogue and said, "If I were dead". It was one of the character's imaginations and he was actually still alive. However, some of my friends had interpreted it as three gay angels descended and saved the hero. To be honest, the actors were gays. After all, it was just a fantasy film. I don't think it should be taken seriously (by the censorship). I don't think I need to put a disclaimer in all my films to state it is a fantasy film. Anyway, sometimes censorship did make my films better. When they beeped out some of the disturbing dialogue, the audience thought it was funny. Another scene had a devil reading some verses from the Quran and it was banned. In order to correct it, I reversed the audio and it appears to be much better because it sounds scarier.

In term of the stylistic features, there were many references to other Hollywood or Japanese films styles and settings in your films. Are there any reasons for that?

It was one of my ways to pay tribute and homage to the films and directors I loved. I wanted to thank them. In the opening sequence of *Kampung Zombie Pisang,* I was paying tribute to the film *Hotshot.* In *Malam Kala Bulan Mengambang,* I paid tribute not only through stylistic features but technical features such as [the usage of] black and white celluloid film and the acting.

6.
Date: 2nd Feb 2017
Respondent: Dain Said

In Malaysia, the strict censorship practice is somehow 'shapes' the genre of horror films. What do you think about that?

I think most horror films are only the by-product censorship, it's more like an inevitable outcome of censorship but the point of censorship is not to create them. Censorship is a form of control to what is subjective. Why should we have a control mechanism towards something subjective and the subject is always socially and politically relevant. I don't see censorship creates or contributes toward the rise of horror genre. The horror genre is always been there but how it was done and negotiated and translated onto a screen is part and parcel possible from the censorship but it's not the main.

Certain directors will agree that the censorship 'helps' them to know what types of content are appealing to their audiences. What about that?

You ought to be disengaged the two, that is not the same thing. Most of the filmmakers here do not understand that is not the same thing. The social political relevance in shaping any texts or narratives is related to what is the outcome but it's not the main motivating force that creates the outcome. In terms of whether the genre becomes hybrid or whatever, it maybe has an impact but it's not a central cause of why a particular genre exists or develops. It's good to look at what are the main causes but it's not the central force on the rise of certain theme. For example, there is a rise in the Islamic theme, which is also the rise in a way of generally social and cultural enforcement of morality and religiosity as a political tool in this country. Therefore, of course it bounds to seep into media. So, I think it's valid but it's not the central cause. For example, if we look at James Lee's *Histeria*, in terms of subtext and the text. I don't think any directors will say I'm going to engage into a horror and do this because of the restrictions in censorship, I don't see how that is possible. I certainly don't. When I made *Dukun*, I certainly didn't submit to the censorship issue. I think there was in the back of my mind but my producer Nandita who said to me "you just write, and you do what you do, let me deal with the censorship issue". So, it does not limit the way I approach anything or the story or whatever that we are doing. To be honest, when we did *Bunohan*, *Dukun* and *Interchange*, I certainly didn't write 'like this' and 'like that' or 'should I do this?', 'what about censorship?'. I think it's there; I'm not denying that it isn't but I don't bring it into my approach of working on a script. Another example in *Interchange*, we made a country with a ASEAN police force which is not PDRM (The Royal Malaysian Police) but that is not because we were trying to avoid censorship. We created this ASEAN police force because we wanted the story to be located within the ASEAN environment. One of *Apparat* (Dain's production house) objective is to bring in all kinds of cultural elements within ASEAN or Nusantara regions. Hence, we have a Thai DP, Indonesian Editor, Swedish Iranian Editor and etc. We tried to engage people within this region and the story is from Borneo. Coincidentally, if this has helped

to avoid censorship, so be it. It doesn't have to be any reason for censorship in this country because there is no real policy as such; the policy is not black and white. There are not stated, and this is true of all authoritarian regimes in any aspect of cultural, political and social life because when you do not have articulated policy, it's easy for you to bend the law. If you have it, you can't bend it whereas if you don't have it or it's not stated, it becomes vague. That vagueness became part of parcel of the tool of power and authority to bend. And randomly, in an ad-hoc fashion able to dictate what are the terms and rules of the policy. So, censorship is used in some particular way but sometimes when it's used, you can also find your way in what I called, a kind of slip between the cracks in the vagueness. Although that's not always readily available because one; is policy, and two; is also the people who run it. The people who run it are largely uninformed and uneducated. They [the censorship board] don't care for films; they don't understand films and all they look for are pointers… It's the same when you give pointers to people who are not enlightened and all they work on are 'points on a checklist'. These checklists constitute certain things that are acceptable or not in the genre.

Are your films representing a kind of multi-national or communities in ASEAN?

We would like to think it as a community but the 'community' in Malaysia or in the region is not really that formed. If it is formed anywhere but I don't even think it defined or formed in other countries. They all have different articulation for a same kind of problem. The problems were always been two things. One which is rose out of 60s and 70s, an awareness of a cultural hegemony or dominance of essentially Hollywood. Now, if you have a cultural dominance coming up from a particular country or place and over time it has because the machinery is so slick and so advance. Then what happened is each country will face a same problem, but its articulation and its formulation is different. So, the Philippines will have to face Hollywood in a different way, as would in Singapore, Indonesia and Malaysia. There were just all different permutations of the same kind of problem. It depended on the trajectory of cinema within the context of each particular community and society within that country. The country like Malaysia is already socially fragmented not along just class rank but it's fragmented along cultural lines. The majority Chinese, Indian and Malay don't watch each other films. Whereas in Indonesia as far more homogeneous in its population or identity. Therefore, doesn't have the same kind of problem because Indonesian language is used entirely by everyone even you are Sulawesi or Sumatera. In Malaysia, Bahasa Malaysia (Malay language) is a tool or instrument or medium of instruction in schools. In reality, Chinese speaks Chinese, Indian speaks Indian and where it's overlapped, we speak in English. Therefore, the context is extremely different.

Do you have any specific goals for your films?

I just want to make a socially and culturally relevant good film, one which can travel internationally. Of course, if you asked me what are the elements that go toward making that? I'll leave the scholars to answer.

Do you have any direct experience with censorship or the scene that has been cut?

That I left to my producer. I don't deal with [the] censorship.

How about the benefits such as Producer Incentive Scheme and it is useful for you?

You have to ask my producer.

How about *Wajib Tayang Scheme* (Mandatory Screening Screen)?

We know what *Wajib Tayang* is and it's problematic at the moment. There are no proper studies on the effectiveness of it. In Malaysia, the *Wajib Tayang* has no controlling factor as a protection against Hollywood's [influx]. They tried to essentially control the market without taking effective measure such as legal law. In Korea, there was a certain period when there were no imports of foreign films, the Korean 'homegrown' their local audiences to appreciate their own films.

Recently, local films that portray multiracial characters and languages are increasing in Malaysia. Did it influence the way you make your films?

Multicultural and globalisation has been here for ages. My family and my crews are all from different races and cultures and language backgrounds. I guess my own films reflect that somehow.

Some directors said we don't have proper film community or a union that is strong to support the development of film industry, I wondered if you agree with that?

The community is fragmented in a lot of places. Hollywood is Hollywood but they also have Indie everywhere in the US. I'm sure this cut across the whole world globally but to say they don't support each other, maybe they don't because it's hard enough. It's not because they are not supportive, but it takes everything that they can do to make a film. It takes so much energy. It takes so many efforts because we don't have an enlightened business community. We don't have a banking system which provides the funding. In Europe, they have Eurobank and they fund [their] films. We don't have any of those things [here], all you have is the government and they are doing their best to actually pour money into [the] content. In Southeast Asia this is the best government because Indonesia doesn't give funding of any kind, not even loans. The same with Thailand and Philippines but only recently they got it. The government can't control everything although they should, but they have tried. Before the current FINAS (National Film Development Corporation) director who is extremely good. He just left. Before him, who gets funding and the loans? His friends of who…inside FINAS. So, the government can't always be at fault for that. But it is the people who practising it, but they can't be at fault of putting the kinds of people there. Also, there is an election process and at the end the Minister will approve it. So that is one section for the kinds of people who wants to get funding and loans. Then, there are others who have succeeded through a combination of getting FINAS money but also *Astro* TV channels and *Media Prima*. The independence filmmakers like me, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui and Da Huang people, and few others. This kind of hierarchy or fragmentation or different diversities in filmmaking exists everywhere in the world with different circumstances. Then, there were not being supported for many reasons. When Da

Huang Pictures started, they just made Chinese films for Chinese cinema but then after that Ming Jin, Joon Han and even James Lee started making Malay language films because they realised Chinese people in Malaysian don't watch Chinese filmmakers' films. So where is the line? There is no boundary, it begins to bleed, and it already has. So, I don't think censorship is relevant in the Internet age. But then, it's still an important question when it comes to cinema and how does it impact or what does it means because we have the Internet now. This is important to look at.

What types of feedback or interests generated in your films from the international audiences?

I don't believe the [tickets] sales or whatever is the only way to judge a film. One album might not sell as good as ABBA but I know who the genius in that area of music is. It was not ABBA for sure. When you look at films, you can say I don't go by box office because I know a lot of crap films that are very big box office. If you talk about box office, I don't know that, but for festivals, the responses were very good. The one who do come up for me said they love the films, particularly in *Bunohan*. Everywhere we went, the festival like Toronto, Rotterdam and other festivals, we get ninety percents full house. When we went to the fantastic film festival in Barcelona, the capacity was one thousand and forty seats, it was eighty percent full at lunch time. So, to me, that's 'speak' for itself. But then, in the context of Spanish population, how many people watch this kind of films and how many would rather watch *X Men*. The responses can be also from the write up. *Bunohan* was a lot better in terms of responses from reviews. *Interchange* gets mixed reviews which is fine. I don't make film for international film festivals. It's good that it got in but at the end of the day I want to make films for my people. That's why I don't make art house films because I know they will never understand. Most of the Malaysian audiences have never been to see Da Huang films because they don't understand it.

From *Bunohan* to *Interchange*, there is a shift towards more commercialism in terms of heavier usage of CGI and the narrative was less surreal and much audiences friendly. It is intentionally to reach broader audiences.

The story needed it. You can say it's more commercialised, but we didn't sit down and say "we [will] make it more commercial". However, I'm aware of that but it was also we still stuck on our own story which it based on what happened in Borneo in 1950s. It was based on a Norwegian who travelled to Borneo. It was a historical fact and I took into fantasy realm set in the modern day. The tribal people believe if you take a picture, you'll take the soul of the subject. So, I just see where we can go with it but it's still Borneo culture. We don't want to denigrate or insult tribal people. A lot of the comments came was there could not recognise KL which was great. CGI itself is not easy because they are a lot of hand holding and people are not into details so when the bird (a prosthetic and digital creature) comes out, it took months. They can't get the shadows right and a lot of things… the people could not get it right. We don't have enough of time and we have a Norwegian fund but the timing for approval pushed too late for us. They need to make sure whatever money they gave is spent wisely and return to their country. What we said was we looking for CGI Company which is better or any other aspects of production that we could then use that add value in our production. What I proud for *Interchange* is also people said it looks more than what it actually cost.

Will you consider about making films that utilise more CGI in the future?

I think CGI is just a tool. It is not relevant for the sake of it. I'm not interested in that because technology is only a tool. It's not the big thing that make us decide what is our story is about. There is always way around with technology as well with censorship, if you look at *Dukun* in the trailer. There were a lot of effects that I done manually on camera.

APPENDIX B:
Censorship Official Documents

1. The Censorship Letter and Fees for *Nirrojim, 2012*
2. Translation of the Censorship Letter and Fees for *Nirrojim, 2012*[51]
3. The Censorship Report for *Nirrojim, 2012*
4. Translation of the Censorship Report for *Nirrojim, 2012*[52]
5. The Censorship Letter and Fees for *Soulmate…Hingga Jannah, 2016*
6. Translation of the Censorship Letter and Fees for *Soulmate…Hingga Jannah, 2016*[53]
7. The Censorship Report for *Soulmate…Hingga Jannah, 2016*
8. Translation of the Censorship Report for *Soulmate… Hingga Jannah, 2016*[54]
9. Certificate A for *Soulmate…Hingga Jannah, 2016*[55]

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[51] My translation in Italic
[52] My translation in Italic
[53] My translation in Italic
[54] My translation in Italic
[55] My translation in Italic

1. The Censorship Letter and Fees for *Nirrojim, 2012*

[REDACTED]

2. Translation of the Censorship Letter and Fees for *Nirrojim, 2012*

[REDACTED]

3. The Censorship Report for *Nirrojim, 2012*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

4. Translation of the Censorship Report for *Nirrojim, 2012*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

5. The Censorship Letter and Fees for *Soulmate…Hingga Jannah, 2016*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

6. Translation of the Censorship Letter and Fees for *Soulmate…Hingga Jannah, 2016*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

7. The Censorship Report for *Soulmate…Hingga Jannah, 2016*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

8. Translation of the Censorship Report for *Soulmate… Hingga Jannah, 2016*

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

[REDACTED]

9. Certificate A for *Soulmate…Hingga Jannah, 2016*

[REDACTED]

APPENDIX C:
Fieldwork Outcomes 2

Fieldwork Outcomes 2
Date: 7th Sept – 22nd Sept 2017
Interviewer: Khong Kok Wai
Respondents:
7. **Ex-Censorship Panel, Ahmad Ibrahim, 7th Sept**
8. **Censorship Officer, Tn. Hj. Mohd Zamberi bin Abdul Aziz ,8th Sept**
9. **Film Producer, Azhari Zain, 20th Sept**
10. **Film Producer, Nandita Solomon, 22nd Sept**

The aim of this questionnaire is to fulfill the following key questions:
1) What are the distinguishing characteristics of fantastic and supernatural films in Malaysia?

2) What are the challenges faced by filmmakers with censorship in all levels of productions?

3) How the filmmakers negotiate with the government's support in film production, distribution and exhibition?

4) What marketing strategies are employed to meet the local and international audiences' expectation?

1.

Date: 7th Sept 2017
Respondent: Ex-Censorship Panel, Ahmad Ibrahim

What are the proceedings involved in appointing you as a censorship panel?

I used to be acted as one of the censorship panels about 6-7 years ago, for 3 years. I was appointed as an Associate Board of Director of the Censors. I was selected because of my experience and expertise as the president of FDAM (Film Director's Association of Malaysia). I was also an advisor for various organisations in the film industry including, but not limited to, the LPF (Censorship Board). It is important to have people from the industry like me, so that they realise of not cutting a scene that will jeopardise the flow of the story. Thus, reduce its marketability. In order to solve the problem, the LPF give a 'higher' classification to allow the film release.

There were some cases in which the film censored even though it has already obtained its 'highest' classification, like 18 above?

That was because it violated Malaysian culture. In Malaysian culture, we can't tolerate the depiction of kissing, sexual acts or any obscene portrayals. However, we allowed 'sign languages' which are not the direct depiction of the acts itself. Like pointing middle fingers.

Throughout your experience, what was the most controversial decision you have made as a censor?

It was in the film titled *Anu Dalam Botol* (A Penis in a Bottle, 2010). There was a depiction of a penis in a bottle. We censored the scene because it was considered obscene. However, the opposing side of the panels argued that sometimes people wondered the look of a shrunken penis. They said, it was the part and the parcel of 'science and anatomy'. The audience might need to see the biological and emotional effects of a castrated body. Everybody has their *Anu* (penis). It was supposed to be symbolic. But finally, the censors rejected their justification.

How a censorship decision was finalised?

It depends on the majority votes of the panels in which they have to refer to the censorship guidelines. However, if the decision is not favourable to the head panel, he/she can overrule the decision. In the case of the *Beauty of the Beast* (2017), the censorship board's decision is overruled by an independent appeal committee. A different group of people are invited to make a review on the censorship decision after an appeal is made by the producer. However, in this case, the censorship board seemed to have lost its credibility.

On the censorship guidelines, how they were strictly followed by the panels?

It depends on the panels' judgement. We have to be considerate in making decision. For example, if you run a red light, you should be prosecuted. That was according to the law. The law that is understood by the majority. But somehow the police will give you a warning instead. That is a byelaw. Although the censorship guidelines dictate over the representations in a film. The film directors can suggest a solution to the problem. The byelaw is practiced by involving the director, producer or script writer. These are the three important individuals who are qualified to negotiate and reinterpret the censorship rules.

Previously, there was a move to vet the script before a film is produced. How is the progression so far?

There is a huge difference between what is written on a script and what is finally produced as a film. All this can be solved by the understanding of the viability of law and byelaw. Filmmaker should have the freedom to communicate their idea with the censor even before the film is made. For example, all representations which is prohibited by the censors can be portrayed in a dream. In a dream, almost everything is possible, including the representation of God. This can be discussed and finalised with the censors before the production. The filmmakers are encouraged to discuss their idea with the censor, but at the moment, they are not required to submit their script for vetting.

If all fantasy films are based on dream, wouldn't it be stifling the creativity of the directors and the aesthetic viability of film industry as a whole?

Ideally, the censorship guidelines should state that the concept of dream can be used to portray all religious representation. Then, it should allow a certain level of violation so that the filmmakers can creatively articulate their films.

By referring to the idea of the Malaysian culture you have mentioned just now, who is the determiner of such an idea?

It depends on the quorum of the censors in the room. At the same time, they also referred to the censorship guidelines which is drafted according to the state religious department (JAKIM). If the censors cannot finalised their decision, they have to refer to the board of directors.

If a film causes public complaint, what are the proceedings required to solve the problem?

In order to safeguard the censorship board, the classification of certain film can be levelled higher. For example, if cursing languages are used in almost all scenes, we can't censor the film, we have to classify it higher like 18 above. Normally, public complaints occur in the film below classification of 18. But so far, it has been a while since the last complaint. It only happens in films above the classification of 13. However, it is hard to regulate that. We can't tell the real age of a person until he

shows his identity card. A mechanism of identification should be in place to regulate all these. Such as a 'tap and go' device to verify their age.

How does the censorship board respond to the film reviews published in the media on certain portrayals that is considered not appropriate?

The censorship report can be used as a reference to justify to the media. Certain films were released without any cuts or were given higher classification than applied by the producers. For example, a film can be approved at 18, even though it was applied for 13. Normally, media reviews were targeted on TV productions, not on films. All the TV stations have their own different practices of censorship with their own panels. However, they are using the guidelines provided by the censorship board even though they are not engaged to the Home Ministry. The main problem was the subscriber's issue. Subscription is based on private viewing in private space. It is not considered as public viewing such as in the case of cinema. In fact, most of the viewers were from rural (FELDA) areas. They were the biggest subscribers. Their lives were 'incomplete' without the subscription because the lack of entertainment in rural areas. They were less open-minded compared to the urban viewers. In Malaysia, the majority are made up of private viewing. This is one of the biggest causes for all the complaints.

What are the shortcomings of the current censorship board practices?

The mission of the censorship board to protect the viewers from inappropriate portrayals is redundant. At the moment, the censorship board is unable to regulate viewers who watch online materials. Online viewing is regulated by the Ministry of Multimedia. How does the Home Ministry execute its mission to protect the viewers is the next question? Perhaps, more collaborations between different Ministries are necessary. Currently, although TV subscription is normally catered to private home viewing, it is used to screen sport tournament in public place such as in coffee shops (Mamak stalls). In my opinion, in the future more viewers will be engaged in online viewing more than in cinema. There is no regulation on the censorship side to monitor online viewing. For the live shows, the censorship board should conduct more seminars and briefings to the broadcasters to prevent the expression of racist statements, vulgar words, sexual connotations and obscene acts. For example, to inform the editor to cut unnecessary portrayals during a live broadcast or to brief the performers on certain restricted expressions.

The second point is about enforcement. Although the censorship board is responsible to censor DVD and to issue certificates A and B for their release and distribution, they could not prevent them from being sold in parking space or illegally copied. It causes the loses of income to the other governmental departments such as the local council and FINAS (National Film Development Corporation). We seldom hear about raids or implementation of severe penalties by the censorship board. Normally, the raid is performed by the Home Revenue department or the local council. If DVDs are sold on the corridors or parking space, they are under the jurisdiction of local council, other than that, they are under the jurisdiction of FINAS.

The third point is public awareness. How to prevent the public from obtaining illegal materials. At the moment, the Ministry of Domestic Trade, Co-operatives and Consumerism has the rights to arrest anybody who possessed illegal material in their

hand but there is no enforcement. All these departments have to work together with the censorship board. Perhaps, organising a convention or seminar to get all these departments to work together.

The next point is the censorship panels. Most of the panels are made of the governmental top officials (JUSA A). They are mainly consisted of retired officials from the army, police, the board of director of a Ministry and officials from various governmental departments. They receive monthly wages of RM4,000 to RM5,000 and have a different viewing taste compares to the public, most of them are conservatives. They censor films based on superficial reading without understanding the subtexts of the films. They can't provide appropriate justification of why a certain film is censored. Some of them seldom went to the cinema, they just started to watch films after they were appointed. The censorship panels should be represented by the people from the film industry. People who used to work in the film industry requires the job more than all these officials because they get used to the fast-moving working environment. They can't afford to sit in their home to enjoy their retirement. Currently, there are only 5-6 industrial players in the censorship board. They should comprise the majority of panels in the board.

2.
Date: 8ᵗʰ Sept 2017
Respondent: Censorship Officer, Tn. Hj. Mohd Zamberi bin Abdul Aziz

Can you roughly describe about the LPF?

The LPF (Lembaga Penapisan Filem/The Film Censorship Board) was established through the Film Censors 2002 (Act 620) provision. It was placed under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Home Affairs which ruled that at least one chairman, an assistant and at least two panels of censors to sit in the board. Its main function is to censor films.

How does the LPF defines films in the current context?

All films that are produced locally or imported from abroad for the purpose of screening, selling, distributing or rental to the public must be inspected by the censors. The main focus is the public. If you buy a few DVDs from Korea for an example, and you view it at your home, it doesn't need to be censored. That is the responsibility of the viewer, their discretion is advised. But if you buy the DVDs with the intention of copying for public screening, it required to be censored. The LPF's concerns are about the effects of the films to the public, not the individual. For another example, if you make a wedding video for your own uses, it doesn't need to be submitted to the censors. But if you make it for TV broadcast, it needs to be inspected by the censors.

The second exception is the films that are made and sponsored by the government sectors. There are not required to be submitted to the censors. The respective government sector will perform self-censorship. Thirdly, a film that is imported from abroad and intended to be sent to other places but not screened locally, is not required to be inspected as well. It includes the films that are made locally but screened abroad. The Film Censors 2002 (Act 620) stipulates that films or videos distributed or sold via internet or intranet are not under the jurisdiction of the act.

How does the LPF defines 'public'? If I make my own video and I screen it to an audience that makes up of 10 to 20 persons in an enclosed space?

That would be considered as public. Private screening is normally performed within a private setting with family members.

According to the functions of the LPF, the vision of the LPF is to maintain the public order through the medium of film, and its mission is to ensure that films do not appear in contrary to the public interest and threatening the National Security. Currently, knowing the development of technology that drastically changed the mode of viewership, how relevant is the LPF to keep its functions?

The function of the LPF is a tradition that passed down since its inception in 1900. Therefore, its element of public protection is still largely played as a part. In reality, the censorship board does not cover all the media. The censorship of online media such as the internet is carried out by the other governmental department such as MCMC (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission). It is due to historical reason that the department are separated. The Commission was established after the digital era. Furthermore, although the LPF is called Board of Censors, technically we do not censor any films anymore. The board viewed the films and ordered certain shots or scenes to be censored. The filmmakers have to censor them before they were getting distributed. Currently, most of the films are produced in digital formats, no more in film forms.

The censorship of online materials is conducted by MCMC, is there any collaboration between the LPF and the MCMC to regulate online content to the reach of their audience?

The censorship guidelines are available online for free. The MCMC does refer to our censorship guidelines. However, the MCMC only performs blockage of links to certain websites if they received complaints from the public. Personally, I don't think the MCMC can perform censorship like it is done by the LPF. It is impossible to inspect and check all websites to make sure that there are conforming to the censorship guidelines. We do not want a society like in Vietnam, China or Middle East where most of their online materials were censored and causes low literacy. Moreover, online materials are normally consumed privately and do not involve public screening. This is the boundary that separated the involvement of LPF. For another example, like in TV station, their programmes are transmitted to the whole nation, they have to perform censorship on their own. However, if an individual subscribes to *Netflix*, they can view it based on their discretion. The LPF's concerns are over the public.

How does the LPF justifies its decision between the interest of the public and the state?

There is no doubt that the LPF gives more weightage to protect the national interests. Even in Singapore, their first priority in the censorship guidelines is to protect their national interests. However, different countries define their national interests

differently. In Singapore, their national interests cover the national security area. For Malaysia, the national interest is widely defined in which it includes, but not limited to, security and public order. For example, the security and public order section can cover part like racial issues. The racial issues consist of other issues such as different cultures, languages and religions. Other factors such as economic stability can also causes public disorder. For examples, a portrayal of the destruction of the palm oil industry. We know that the industry is one of the key commodities which generates income to the country, therefore such portrayal could posit danger to the security and public order of the state.

Currently, although there are four key components in the censorship guidelines, which are Security and Public Order, Religion, Socio-culture, and Decorum and Morality, the rest of the three components are all the sub-categories of the first component. Having said that, we have no problem for the depiction of cultural and religious matters as long as it does not disrupt the public order. For examples, we can allow the depiction of Islamic faith, but it should not criticise other faiths because it will cause public disorder. We received criticism from some filmmakers saying that their audience did not act in violence according to the images that were being shown. They said their films won't cause public disorder after they were shown in the cinema. However, our concern as censors is their long-term effects to the audience. Their effects might not be detectable at once, but it takes times to develop a certain behavior. There are two types of effects; an immediate effects and long-term effects. During my time in the 70s, immediate effects can be caused by film such as John Travolta's Grease, in which people followed their trend of dressing in high-heeled shoes and trumpet pants. An exposure of obscene imagery also causes immediate effect. We received complaints of certain audience engaging in sexual activities in the cinema when a certain sexual scene is shown. Long-term effects are films shown in school for examples, it will change the behavior of the students. If we always screen film showing racial fights, slowly, it will motivate the audience to think it is a norm, thus causes public disorder.

If the censorship guidelines are so important in determining the behavior of the audience, why it revised all the times and what causes the changes?

The revision was made by engaging feedbacks from the industrial practitioners, NGOs, TV stations and other organisations as the society changed. It has been a while since the last revision took place in the 70s and followed by the one in 2010. Previously, there are only two classifications which are the of category U (General) and 18 (above 18). After 2010, additional category is added, the PG13 (Parental Guidance 13). The revision that you see happened all the times is the one done by TV station but not for cinemas. The revision was made through circulars of additional censorship guidelines directed to TV stations in response to the complaints received from the viewers. This is specifically applied to the TV stations but not for cinemas.

How does the LPF responds to the feedbacks or complaints received from the public?

Normally, we received complaints and feedbacks through all sorts of media ranging from social media, email, phone calls, direct communication and etc. But we are not going to entertain all of them. We only discuss those that are really critical and get highlighted most of the times. We assessed them like a product review from our

customers. Most of the feedbacks are collected and studied occasionally in a proper meeting. At the same times, the LPF conducted many public road shows and seminars annually in colleges and universities to inform the public about the importance of censorship and to receive feedbacks from them. Sometimes, a portrayal of a loving couple in a swimming pool is considered sensitive and obscene by certain people. After we collected all the feedbacks, we will present the report to other governmental agencies and receive their comments. Once it is done, we will present it to the industry players and get their feedbacks. Finally, we will revise the censorship policy according to all these feedbacks. Currently, we are in the process of revising the 2010 censorship policy.

Recently, the LPF is focused on the issues of classification. In order to discourage censorship, we promote classification of films. We only have three categories of U, PG13 and 18. In other countries, they have more categories. One of the problems we have is the limited market. We can't have many classifications as in other countries because of lesser number of productions and markets. Sometimes, the producer wants a lower classification in order to reach a broader market. Therefore, it has to be cut. In other words, the films have to accommodate to lower classification in order to sell. This will cause complaints from the audience who need more imagery exposure and less censorship. However, the market viability of a film needed to be considered as well. Nevertheless, certain films were censored although the highest classification was given because of their unacceptable degree of obscenity and violence. For example, in a decapitating scene, a portrayal of the act before the head get separated from the body, can be passed for PG13. If a direct depiction of the gory decapitating act, it would be classified as 18. But if the act is clearly shown in a slow-motion, it would be totally censored. It doesn't matter whether or not the images are created by CGI or visual effects, if it seems real, it is prohibited.

There are criticisms from the industry players and audience that the censorship panels do not represent the public, they consist of retired government staffs whom are less literate about film generally. What do you make of it?

That happened in the past of 10 or 20 years ago. Currently, the LPF has 62 panels. It was not all made up of retired government officials. Some were retired from private sectors, ex-teachers, former engineers, professors and all retired police officers, lawyers and soldiers. Since 2013, we employed panels from the younger generation, at their age of 30s, or those who were freshly graduates or has been privately employed for few years before they applied for the post as censors. They were officially employed under the LPF but did not apply to the normal governmental servant's scheme with income strata and retirement benefits. Some of them were sent to the TV stations as representative of LPF.

About the recent outcry of the Disney's *Beauty and the Beast* film, the LPF (Board of Censors) seems to lose its credibility as a censor when the earlier decision to ban the film is overruled by an external committee. Would you please elaborate more?

According to the Film Censors 2002 (Act 620), the LPF is entrusted to make censorship decision. However, if the decision is not satisfied, the producer can file for an appeal to the Appeal Committee. Although the Appeal Committee is an

independent body separated from the LPF, it is still placed under the government department. It is a temporary quorum consists of 21 panels and pensioners from all walks of life. In the case of the *Beauty and the Beast*, the LPF has approved the film for PG13 earlier. However, when the producer announced that there was a LGBT character in the film, it became polemic. We knew that the film was banned in certain countries like Russia. Our country did not recognise LGBT, so when the producer announced that there was a LGBT character in the film, we have to re-evaluate the film. We noticed in one of the scenes when LeFou expressed his fondness to Gaston which we recognised as promoting the element of LGBT. We do not have any problem if the producer did not publicise about the character earlier. We do not want the audience to blame us for doing nothing. There were some people who can accept LGBT and some cannot. In order to prevent it from becoming more controversial and causing public disruption, we decided to cut that particular scene. But the producer disagreed with our decision and decided to refrain it from screening in Malaysia. The delay of the screening was not caused by the LPF but the re-assessment required to be carried out by the Appeal Committee. Finally, it was approved. The LPF still stick to its decision but the decision was overruled by the Appeal Committee which is independent from the LPF.

What are the LPF's roles on the Live TV programmes?

The Live TV programmes are 100% under the authority of MCMC. We do not monitor the content of Live programmes, however, we are responsible for recorded Live programmes. Our representatives will censor the recorded programmes before they are broadcast to the public.

In the case of Watson Nyambek, the TV host was fired because he made fun of Watson's family name of Nyambek. Why did the LPF take no necessary action to prevent this from happening?

The name of the TV programme is *Berita Tak Central* (Not Serious News). The programme is meant to be playful. In fact, it happened several times already in which the TV host was found making fun of other guests and artists. It was a programme that shouldn't be taken seriously. This is an exceptional case in which somebody personally informed Watson about the insult despite knowing that it is a norm for this type of show. The issue was when Watson felt that this is a deliberate effort of the host to tarnish his reputation and disrespectful to his family. When we reassessed the scene again, we concluded that the host was indeed a little bit insulting. We can accept the host saying "Nyambek or Nyanbeeeeek". But we think it was inappropriate for the host to say "Nyambek bek bek" (bek bek bek is the sound of a goat).

The issue of sounds and languages seems to become one of the important aspects of censorship in recent years. Contrary to the images, the censorship of sound could have appeared more noticeable than imagery censorship in terms of the continuity of a film. Is there any exception given by the LPF to allow the producer to defend their styles?

The negotiation method has been our approach for the past two years. We have given this priority to the local production regardless of the languages used in their films. We welcome any producer who wish to submit their script to us and ask for our advice.

But it is still difficult for us to judge based on the script itself. For local productions, almost each of the producers, even Yusof Haslam (a renowned local film producer), were invited by the LPF to negotiate with us before we make the final decision. If we have issues with some scenes, we will call the producer and ask for their explanation. For example, the *Jakim* (Department of Islamic Development Malaysia) was consulted to deal with the religion issues. According to *Jakim*, the portrayal of a character's physical interaction with a jinni is forbidden. If a character is seen asking the jinni to kill somebody and the jinni say "yes", it is prohibited. However, it doesn't mean that the portrayal of jinn is totally forbidden. If a jinni is not seen answering the call of the character, it would be permitted because there is no interaction.

Another example is the prohibited portrayal of spirit of a deceased human. This is only applied to Malay films; other films are permitted because it does not deal with the Islamic faith. However, the portrayal of a spirit in a character's dream is allowed as everything is regarded as possible in a dream. If we can't agree to a solution, the LPF will conduct four methods of censorship. Firstly, to cut a scene. Secondly, to mute the sound or dialogue. Thirdly, to blur a certain part of the images. Finally, to erase the subtitles. If the producer insists on the portrayal of a spirit, we will make sure there is no dialogue by muting the sound, hence no spiritual interaction is depicted.

Why is the LPF so particular on censoring the titles of a film recently?

It was about the issue of upholding the sovereignty of Malay language. We received complaints from the public about their confusion in understanding whether a film is spoken in Malay or English because of their mixed-language titles. We have no problem for a Malay film that used either English or Malay title, but we have issues with the title that mixed them both. This prohibition has not been drafted in the guidelines yet, but we advise the producer to attach to it. In fiction films or drama, we allowed mixed language to be used in the dialogue to reflect the reality of a normal conversation but in documentary, we emphasised the usage of proper Malay language. Nevertheless, we allowed certain exception because we understand the marketing viability of a film. We suggest the usage of foreign title in bracket or in italic form. Film such as *Kalang Anak Langkau: The Warrior* was passed without any issues.

How the LPF explains about the portrayal that is clearly prohibited in the censorship guidelines, but still passed for viewing in the cinemas?

Sometimes, we made mistakes. There were certain negative portrayals that passed without being noticed by all the panels. The panels have to attach to the requirement of the censorship guidelines but sometimes it didn't really describe the portrayals. There was a case in which the audience noticed the word Allah covered in blood stains in a Turkish Dracula film. That was supposed to be prohibited, however, it was passed unnoticed by the censors and finally highlighted by one of the audiences. The audience interpreted the message differently compare to the censors.

Recently, a producer argued for a gun fighting scene in which the characters were involved in handling their guns. We noticed when one the guns was pointed at the head of one of the characters; the shot was blurred. But there was another shot showing the gun pointing at the crotch is focused. The producer defended the portrayal as a comedic, but we thought it was inappropriate. There are many ways to show funny gun fighting act, it doesn't have to focus on the private part.

For political films, if it is not too critical to the ruling government, it is normally get passed. For examples, we all know the issue of the *Kangkung* (water spinach) minister. If a scene showing a minister involves in selling the *Kangkung*, it will cause trouble. In *Banglasia* (2015), a character was dressed in her wig in to criticise Rosmah; the wife of the Prime Minister. That was considered inappropriate in the current context of censorship.

What is the most difficult or controversial decision has ever been made by the LPF?

So far, there has been no difficult decision as the board is led by a chairman. He will make the final decision of censorship. Normally, the dispute would be resolved by referring to the guidelines alone. The censorship guidelines serve as a mediator to solve the problem of different opinions of the censors from various backgrounds.

How did the LPF takes action to the films that were released without approval?

Although the LPF is a government agency that functions under the authority of the Home Ministry, it does not carry out enforcement. The enforcement of censorship law is carried out by the Film Censorship Control and Enforcement Division. Normally, they take action according to public complaints and through monitoring. They conduct inspection on films that are released and screened without the approval of the LPF which indicated by Certificate A and B. This should not be confused with the raids conducted on pirated DVDs. That is under the authority of the Ministry of Domestic Trade, Co-operatives and Consumerism. They inspect by checking on the hologram stickers (authentication certificates). Furthermore, a film may be passed by censors but then it is copied and distributed illegally.

How does the censorship fees charged and used by the LPF?

All censorship fees were collected as state revenue into the *Amanah* account. Previously, the censorship fees were charged by the total length of an inspected film. In recent years, since the increasing usage of digital films in the production, we charged by the duration of the film in minutes. If I'm not mistaken, we charged about RM5.20 for one-hour duration on film that was screened in the cinema. We applied different charges for film in DVD forms, perhaps RM50 per hour. Normally, the payment is made by the producer or the distributor of a film.

Knowing the development of technology that promote online viewing, how far do you think the LPF is significant? What is the LPF's future plan?

We think it is still significant. The film censorship is still practised in developed countries like in the UK and US such as the BBFC and MPAA. They function separately from the government as an independent organisation. At the moment, we assess the films based on its contents and portrayals according to the four aspects of censorship criteria which I mentioned earlier. In the future, we will incorporate aspects such as the themes, the narratives, scenes and dialogues. For examples, we will ban film with the theme that glorify the communist during the Malayan Emergency even though the films portray no restricted imagery from the censorship guidelines. We do not want the film to bring back the sentiment of communism again in long term. For

the narrative, we do not want misleading narrative that causes confusion such as inappropriate use of flashback and flash forward. For examples, sometimes a character is shown as a ghost, but later he becomes alive again. This will cause confusion among the younger viewers. Furthermore, we will change the guidelines to strictly describe what are permitted and not permitted in order to be classified in a certain category. At the moment, the guidelines stated that certain portrayals are allowed, but it has to be applied with serious attention of certain issues. That are very subjective.

Finally, we would like to encourage individuals to be more responsible to the materials they are viewing. If an underage viewer chooses to view a prohibited material, he/she should take their responsibility. However, if the cinema or any adult who allows them to view it, they should be held accountable. We would like to promote public awareness and their responsibility to their own action. We do not want to be punitive and make it as a law, we are here to assist the audience. We only classify the films and give advice. The audience have to make their own choices of viewing.

In the future, do you think the LPF would be established as an independent body?

We are already independent. We made most of our decision internally without any intrusion from the third party.

3.
Date: 20ᵗʰ Sept 2017
Respondent: Film Producer, Azhari Zain

You were one of the earliest directors who produced many horror films during the times when the banning of horror films in Malaysia was lifted by the censorship board. Can you describe why you were involved in this venture and what is your main drives?

I like to get people entertained through manipulating their expectations. When I make horrors, I would like to test their fear limits. Once they afraid, they feel that they are challenged by the film. Once they are challenged, they will feel entertained. To me, their fears can be recognised by how much they shared and talked about the films after the viewing. I still remember when I was young, I closed my eyes when I watched horror scenes. That reaction determined the success level of my horror films. This principle become the key concept for all my eight horror films directed so far. Each of them emotionally challenged the audience in a different way.

Recently, you have changed your directing style from horrors, to making religious films. Why you took such a move?

I need to take a break from making horrors so that I won't find myself stagnant on a recurring style. I changed to making films with Islamic themes. Perhaps, I was inspired by the trend of religious films in Indonesia such as *Ketika Cinta Bertasbih* (2009) and *Perempuan Berkalung Sorban* (2009). That revolution was started in Indonesia and it

has drawn our audience to the cinemas. I would like to experiment with that style through local production and test the market.

The second reason was rather personal. After the production of all these horrors, my house was felt by my daughter with the presence of many different supernatural beings. The spirits have followed me back to my home. In one of the cases, during the film production, I have the concept of the monster in my mind and I never told anybody about it. Yet, I found out that my daughter was able to draw them in the house. That was the moment I realised something was not right. Therefore, I asked the assistance from an *Ustaz* (religious teacher). Later, he confirmed that the spiritual elements were indeed presence in the house originating from the production sites. For examples, during the production of *Mantra* (2010) in Pudu prison. Before the prison was demolished in the next few days, the spirit followed me back to my home.

Another case happened when we filmed at Lenggong, a location that was popular for supernatural sighting. Then, the spirit followed me back to my home as well. The next event was when I made *Keramat* (2012) in an abandoned mansion. They also followed me too. At a certain stage, I have to travel to Penang to see a high-ranking Buddhist monk so that he can explain the situation to me. I have many dreams about all these supernatural entities before I materialised them in my films. They showed their appearance in my dream. According to the monk, the act of making horror films is an act of trying to be friendly to the entities. It has drawn their attentions to me. I recalled about them from my dream and I asked the make-up artist to develop the character in my films. To me, I felt that I am gifted with the ability to see all these and I felt the need to redeem myself by making some films with religious contents. It was a form of ritual to me.

Do the horror films you produced have any issues with the censorship board?

My films had two issues with the censorship board which were the depictions of the monster and violence. According to the censorship board, nobody can see the monster or spiritual beings in real. We have to show them in blurred or appearing from afar. However, in most of my horrors, you'll see the monster clearly because I have my own explanation to the censorship board. I told them all these were part of my dream. The vision was vivid and true. They meant no harm to us. It depends on yourself whether you choose to afraid or accept them. It was a reflection on how far a person can become violent if they are triggered by fear. In *Santau* (2009), the film suffered one cut on the depiction of the eyes of a nine-year-old girl turned red under a bed because it was too fearsome according to the censorship board.

The second issue was about the portrayal of blood. In *Santau* (2009) and *Mantra* (2010), the portrayal of blood was not allowed, because in the censors' perspective, if the monster does not exist in real, it shouldn't have caused any harm. Therefore, there should be no physical injury that causes blood. I justified it by explaining that the blood was not caused by the monster, but it was a symbolic expression of the fear of the characters. The fear which was manifested in their excretion of blood or vomits as it happened when a person gets cursed (santau) in real-life situation.

After one week negotiating with the censor, the scene was finally approved. We have to go to the censorship board almost every day to convince everybody. The film has been watched by different panels in different grouping, which at the final stage, produced a censorship report stating the scenes that were problematic. We have to perform self-censorship according to the report given by the

censors which stipulated the duration of the problematic shots. If we agreed to the report, we will perform the censorship. If we do not agree, we have to appeal to the board of censor and give a proper justification to them. In the other words, the censorship board was actually quite flexible in their ruling.

In most of the opening scenes in your horror films, there were some quotation or phrases which I believed quoted from religious texts. What are the reasons for that?

It's to remind the people so that they confront their fear through religion. If they experience fear, they should seek help and guidance from Islam or the religion they believed in. They can only find the answer from religion but not from other source such as witchcraft or occult practices. The phrase served as a reminder so that the audience knows they should not go over the limit in fear and remember that there is a greater power out there to guide them.

Besides producing hardcore horrors, you also involved in the production of a comedy supernatural film titled *Jin Notti* (2009). Why?

It was one of my strategies to make my horror films looked more 'relaxed'. I would like to promote a less serious mode of viewing so that the audience could learn something rather than being scared all the times. My aim was to make the audience reflected on themselves through a jinni character (Farah Fauzana) who can be good and can fall in love. Jinni is a well-known evil entity. If an evil jinni can become good, I hope the audience will learn that they can be a lot better.

The film had some issues with the censorship board, but it was not as serious as in my other horrors. It was easier to defend through the comedy fantasy genre. However, other aspects of censorship were raised such as the representation of police. There was one scene when Mawi dressed in police uniform and he was mingling with other bad characters. For examples, the censors were unhappy with the dialogue spoken by Adam Corrie. It was a catchy dialogue, but it went against the authority such as "I'm not afraid to the police, I have my own backup. I'll have my own team members, the police are bad, they are the king in Malaysia". The censors were not happy with the dialogue "polis raja di Malaysia" (police are the king in Malaysia). Supposedly, it should sound "Polis DiRaja Malaysia" (Royal Malaysia Police). It was a parody to show that the police are also involved in certain unlawful activities. The censors thought that it would tarnish the reputation of the police force. Mawi was portrayed as a gangster character but at the end, he was actually a police officer. When the censors realised this, they re-watched the whole film again, ticking on their censorship forms, to show how a police character was misrepresented through vulgar words.

Have you benefited from the Production Incentive Scheme?

So far, nope. All of my producers like David Teo used their own funding. Some were funded by commercial sponsors. *Jin Notti* (2009) which produced by KRU Studio was funded by sponsors such as TM Net (Internet Service Provider Company) at about RM1.5 million. The TM Net promotional materials had become part of promotional features in the film. One of my films like *Seram Sejuk* (2012) was funded by a family.

For the *Wajib Tayang Scheme*, do you think it will benefit the film industry especially in your films?

Most of my films were audience-friendly and normally commercially successful, so I don't have any problem with the scheme. However, one of my films, *Jin Notti* (2009) was arranged by *Wajib Tayang* to be screened concurrently with *Momok* (2009), it prevented the film from reaching the target of RM8 million. As a result, the film only gained RM6 million instead. The selection of films is a process conducted by *Wajib Tayang* in their discretion. After a film is approved by the LPF, the *Wajib Tayang* has their own panel members to determine which slot or time period of the film belongs to. Some of the films were placed during school holidays and others were arranged simultaneously with other Hollywood blockbuster releases. If we disagree with the arrangement, we can apply for changes after we discussed it with our producers.

Not all films are engaged with the *Wajib Tayang* scheme, if you confident that your film is going to sell, you don't have to apply for the scheme. The scheme is to ensure that a film secures a certain screening period, normally for two weeks, before it is taken down by the exhibitors. There are additional regulations to secure the profit of the cinema as well, such as if a film does not fulfill at least 50% of the audience within the first few days, a cinema is allowed to withdraw the film. However, certain commercially poor-performing films have been deliberately slotted into grave hours or smaller cinema by the exhibitors to reduce the percentage of the audience attending so that it can be removed within a week.

There was a practice of giving out free tickets when a film released during the first few days of their premiere, does that relates to the *Wajib Tayang*?

The tickets were released by an appointed A&P agency to promote the film. Normally, they give out free tickets to the audience during its premiere. It functioned to boost the numbers of audience in the first few days of the screening, normally through word of mouth. However, if the film is not popular, it would be slotted to irregular hours like in the morning, or to be reduced its screening times per day, or to be placed in a smaller cinema.

In your opinion, how can the government improve to develop the local film industry?

I think one of the main problems in the local film industry is the films are not being protected from foreign movies. For examples, when *Cicakman* (2006) competes with *Spider-Man* (2002), it will lose to *Spider-Man* (2002) because people tend to go for higher budget movies. It was like the National Automotive Policy; foreign cars were taxed higher than locally produced car to boost the sales of local cars. In my view, the government should implement a policy to charged higher price for foreign films, perhaps, RM30 per ticket, compares to local film which is RM10. We have voiced out this to the government but so far there has been no improvement because I think the cinemas played a great part to make sure enough profits were generated for their businesses which would be secured from Hollywood blockbusters. Hollywood films filled up most of the screening times in the cinema because of their large numbers of production, whereas the local films were limited in production. In Thailand and Indonesia, tickets for foreign films were charged differently compared to local

production as they were subtitled. Their local films have different markets compared to foreign films because of the language barrier. The larger profits gained from local productions could be beneficial to the growth of the local film industry.

There are a few governmental organisations that could improve the situation. Firstly, FINAS (National Film Development Corporation) must have enough statistical records to plan for the future trajectory of the local film industry. MCMC (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission) needs to co-operate with FINAS to regulate how much of foreign productions are allowed in local markets and to make sure it is profitable to the cinemas and also to the producers. The LPF which is only responsible for film censorship did not co-operate with other governmental organisations to improve the commercial viability of the films. There was no synergy between all these organisations, a film has to go through a few organisations before it could be finally released. There was no single entity established like the SIRIM (Standard and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia) to guarantee the standards and quality of film as a viable product. In my opinion, there should be an established system to assess the film in the pre-production stage, such as vetting of the script, selecting appropriate performers and the forecasting the possible impact to the audiences.

It was different from the script-vetting plan as proposed by FINAS a few years ago as the panels who sit in the board were comprised of retired schoolteachers, armies and police, instead of professional people who know about films. The panels were paid by the government as a form of retirement supports or probably influenced by the practice of cronyism. The method angered the people who made films in the film industry because they would question the qualification of these people, in which they were appointed to justify whether the films which cost about RM1.5 millions, is worth to be made. The producer or professional players from the film industry knows better what is going to work for their films and the markets. They don't need these people to tell them. I think in governmental wise. It has always been administrated by the wrong types of people. Things might have been different had the panels were comprised of people who were script writers, or renowned film critics. They should provide at least a guideline to indicate what types of films that would be successful as a reference. For examples, the AFC (Australian Film Commission) which is responsible to give advice about what kind of contents and approaches that would attract the audience. Similarly, in Korea with their KDI (Korean Development Institute) was responsible for the development of the script of *Winter Sonata* before it was finally made and released.

Recently, the director of *Hijabsta Ballet* (2017) said his film was made from 12 out of 55 storytelling elements that he claimed would be a winning formula for local box office success. Unsuccessful local films were only comprised of maximum 2 elements, whereas commercially successful films would have between 7 to over 10 elements. The elements were recognised from the study of the films that he thought was the common denominators found in most of the international and local box office films. Do you think this is a viable move to produce a quality local film?

I think it was a good effort, but this research was only conducted by the director on the films. Further efforts are required to synergise with other agencies such as the press, A&P, and other professional quality control agency. Then, it has to be exposed to the audience earlier so that they know what to expect and prepare for a film. At the

moment, the audience knew about these in the last minutes before the films were released. Not to mention the film that might have gone through some changes after it has been censored or reviewed by other governmental agencies, the final product would have been completely different. The audience were not engaged with the films. Some of them might even avoid watching the films in the cinema and wait for them to be released in Astro First (Local Satellite TV Channel Provider). They wanted to avoid all hassle like queuing up for popcorns or finding parking. Most of the filmmakers lost their revenue from all these problems. In the case of *Hijabsta* (2017), the filmmakers can try all his efforts to develop his film but if there is no engagement with the audience through appropriate promotional and marketing periods, it will not be successful.

From your experience in the past few years, how much changes of audience's mentality or viewing taste you observed in the way they consumed films?

With the proliferation of smart phones and the usage of social media, the audience were much more informed on a certain film. They judged the quality of a film by comparing them with other international productions. However, the audience also know about other alternative sources. They tend to engage with other forms of media and channels like Youtube and illegal downloads. Therefore, the audience engagement effort was as important as the process of making a film. The audience should have engaged through adequate promotional periods so that they felt a certain level of attachment to a film before it was released. Recently, Astro has been taking up to the challenge. They advertised their films during the pre-production stage. Then, they promoted their films like *Ola Bola* (2016) and *Polis Evo* (2015) for three months, so that people aware and engaged with the films. Films which employed these strategies performed well commercially, whereas certain films with high production quality and cost of production failed in the market without appropriate promotional period. The film *Vikingdom* (2013) spent at about RM50 millions in production, but only took 1 month for promotional period. The audience did not know anything about the film prior to release. It was similar to *Hikayat Merong Mahawangsa/The Malay Chronicles: Bloodlines* (2011), the audience have no engagement to the film who have not been accustomed to local film viewing.

4.
Date: 22nd Sept 2018
Respondent: Film Producer, Nandita Solomon

What is your professional experience with the censors (LPF) when censorship issues arise in your films?

About *Bunohan* (2012), after we submitted all the required documents and the final version of the film, we were given the classification of PG13 (Parental Guidance for Age Below 13). According to the censors, they can give us higher classification for U (General Viewing), provided that we agreed with some minor cuts. But since it was not our target for younger audience, we agreed to be classified at PG13. There were some scenes which considered problematic, like the fighting and spiting of blood, had the film approved for U. But overall, the censors were quite accepting with its violence

level. Overall, the film can easily get away from light sexual scene, as long as it has nothing to do with religion. So far, all of my films have no issues with religion especially Islam.

For *Interchange* (2016), we went to the LPF with the distributors and they held a lot of films, so it easily got passed in a bundle. For *Bunohan*, we started off as an Indie production, so we have to advise them on not to be too hard on the film. It was 5 years between the production of *Bunohan* and *Interchange*, the perception of violence has changed. They were more open-minded now and could accept swearing. In *Bunohan*, there was some swearing words. However, since it was produced in Kelantanese, we didn't directly translate it into Malay word. We used 'softer' words instead. The Kelantanese people would have known for its harshness, but not the Malay public. It works like a double entendre and a lot of Chinese films have got away with that strategy as well. There was one line in *Bunohan* when somebody said "berkubur di Jolok". It means fucking in Jolok, but it went unnoticed. In *Interchange*, the film was submitted together with a lot of Hollywood films by the distributors and perhaps the LPF didn't notice that it was a Malaysian film. The film was approved for PG13. I still remembered what was written in the censorship report because it was just happened last year. They have problem in their violence category. They highlighted one of the scenes when a character turning into a bird, they said it was too gory. Earlier, we thought they would have problem with his costume because he was wearing a loin cloth, but that was passed with no issues. We were self-censored in a scene when Adam and Eva got together in the act of kissing and touching. Anyway, we were able to convey the intended meaning without showing those acts. Actually, it was not meant to be sexual, it was just a ritualistic dance with an instruction from a professional choreographer.

About the feedbacks from the report, I thought it was funny because most of them sounded like "it has those elements but not too extreme". So, we never had any issues with the censorship board so far. Based on my understanding, the censorship decision was made from a quorum of censors consisting of 7 people. So, the passing chance depends on the mentality of those people in the sitting. There were not really referring to any guidelines or available facts. Earlier, we were quite concerned with some similar portrayals in other films that had problem with the LPF, but they were quiet in our films. There were some restrictions in the guidelines where they forbid the uses of words such as *sial* (jinx) or *binatang* (animal), but we have all that in *Interchange*. I guessed because we did not translate those words, so it seemed less harmful.

There was another scene when the inspector confronts the girl, the shaman, he called her "binatang". To us, story wise, it was very important because it was what the girl represent; the wilderness. So, we submitted it and we prayed so that they won't notice, and it worked. Perhaps, they thought it was appropriate to the story. As far as I concerned, we can argue with them. If they we don't accept their decision, we can go see them and justify why it is needed for the story. They would consider it. Although so far, we don't have to go to that extend, me as a producer were aware by the social context in the country where we are living in. Although the guidelines were in black and white on the paper, it was only served as an overall perception. I think what we did, when we make the film, was to think about how we maneuvered around that. It was restricting and frustrating. If we make another type of story, perhaps we don't have to think a lot about that. But we were quite aware of all these limitations.

In the opening sequence of *Interchange*, some people might think that it contradicting to the censorship guidelines in which the singer was put in cross-

dressing. It was a transgendered singer who dressed in a *tudung* (hijab) looked-alike appearance. Originally, it was not meant to be like that. Edwin, the costume designer, wanted to create a hood but not a *tudung*. The dress was supposed to pair with some jewels to build the character, but during the shooting, the hood kept on sliding off his head. So, we have to use cellophane tape to hold it. At the end, it looked like Siti Nurhaliza (a well-known local pop female singer with hijab). I guess because we did not intentionally show them as drag, the censors could not accuse us of portraying cross-dressing in hiijab. Furthermore, I guess Dain did it in a way that the audience were so into the narratives and the censors forget to point out the issue. I knew that at the end of the assessment, the censors would have to write synopses about the story in their censorship report. I think they wrote it passionately, and you can tell it from the choices of words they used, which means they were enjoying the film. We already preempted certain scenes to be cut and have prepared how to justify them to the censors.

For the song in the opening sequence, it was a prelude to the whole story. The lyric sounds like "*Cinta hatiku meninggalkanku, bagaikan berpisah jiwa dari jasadku*" (My love has deserted me, it feels like my soul is separating from my body). The song was created in one day by Edwin and his composer. Edwin was so smart that he just drafted the lyrics without reading the whole script. He just knew which parts in the script that he would require acting. But we did tell him about the story earlier. So, the next day, they presented the song to Dain, and he said ok. We understood the song would have indirectly communicate its message. At the end, whoever who think about the film will got it than the one who didn't. It was also Dain's strategy to put as much as issues as possible in the film so people can relate to many things.

Dain as a director would have eagerly hoped to gain total artistic freedom in its production, how do you communicate with him as you are also aware with all the restrictions?

Usually, I found Dain was more concerned with all these. I will tell him to just write a good story first, then it was my job as a producer to make sure the film can survive and intact as good as possible. I have to know the right timing to submit the film as it was one of the factors as well. As I said, I never had any issues with the censorship so far. All my films were approved. Even in *Dukun* (2006), although I was not the producer, I knew it was approved with no cuts, even though it was about black magic. Dain was good in making the film to look less obvious with the usage of shadows and etc. The film was produced by Astro. They practised a different censorship rule compares to the LPF which is more extreme because of their domestic viewership. I think the people from the cinema lobbied the LPF so that they relaxed the censorship rules in Astro so more films can be approved without cuts.

Knowing the hardship of going through the censorship process, what drive you to be a film producer?

I realised there was a lot of fun in the process. It was not like going through a monotonous life as everyday was different and took a lot of challenges. It really tested my level of intelligence, skill and stamina. But I enjoyed about it. Things were started from an idea in the head, through the whole process, finally, made it to the screen. Commercial drive was one of them, but I don't make films to make money. If not, I would be like David Teo and others. I guess I treated film as an art form. I've placed a

lot of values on that. I think It's very important. But I also think because it's a form of art, it doesn't mean it cannot be financially sustainable. I believe it takes times. So, I am not somebody who think that my first film will become a box office. I've also studied all the trends just like what was done by Datuk Yusof Haslam, it was not his first film that started making money. He has to produced three to four films, then only he started to make money. He has to build his own audience. Like his *Abang Long Fadil 2* (2017) now, it hits RM17 to RM18 million. The last time I heard was RM16 million. In any countries in the world, at least 70% of their box-office collections were covered by foreign films, usually Hollywood's. For our country, it's even higher because we have competition from Hong Kong and India. So, our local domestic market shares are very small. If a certain quality film can reach up to RM15 to RM16 million, it seems like I'm just setting my foot in. But with the kind of films I've made, hopefully over times, it can reach up to RM5 million, and I'll be in a very good place. Now, my films have not gained even RM1 million. So, my target was to secure RM1 million now, and hopefully it will improve, because I know it always takes times.

What is your drive for making the kind of the films we seen in *Bunohan* (2012) and *Interchange* (2016)?

The recurring motives in both of my films such as the ware-crocodile, ware-bird and shamanism was my personal choice. As a child, I was very attracted to Asian story that have the elements of mystical nature like in the story of Garuda and Hanuman, or the Monkey God. Stories which the animals can talk. I grew up with these kinds of stories. I think these are still in my memory. I worked very close with Dain on the scripts as a researcher for both of the films. The ware-crocodile was my idea. The story talks about where we live today in this so-called modern era. Things are getting more rigid from the issues of apartheid to religion. I feel that there is something wrong in or society because we are denying some part of ourselves. Especially in Southeast Asia where we are connected to the earth and the past, something is very beautiful about that. Politically, there is nothing ever happened until what is happening now. So, we tried to cut it off from there. I think we are all feeling it, and it can be expressed in the idea of wilderness that represents freedom. That is what fantasy for us in both of our films.

In *Bunohan*, the concept of 'where we are?', or liminality was explored through the physical locations of the mangrove swamp because it was situated between the sea, the water and the land. It was even manifested in the characters like a person who can be a murder or an assassin, but their heart is purer than any other normal people. The ambiguity between the good and the bad, or corruption and kindness is articulated.

In *Interchange*, again, we brought the question of 'where we are?', through the landscape of Kuala Lumpur. It was easy to travel from buildings to jungle, and from jungle to skyscrapers. I don't think we can find these in the other cities. However, we did not really explicitly portray it as Kuala Lumpur. In fact, we went into some efforts to remove the Petronas Twin Towers every time it appeared in the scene. Then, I think the fantastical elements in *Interchange* was also about how people were being trapped by images, about losing ourselves and of not knowing who we are, by breaking the images, they find their imagination.

Did the films benefitted from any governmental funding such as Incentive Production Scheme or CGI Grant, if not, how did you get funding for your films?

For *Bunohan*, it was very sad. At those times, there was only funding from MDec (Multimedia Development Corporation) for CGI production. In FINAS, they didn't have any grant, but they have a loan system. Before that, we have tried to make it from a bank, but it took very long times for them to consider our application. Somebody told Dain to book a karaoke room and invited them. We didn't do that. We kept our principles because we felt corruption has destroyed the industry. Then, there was another bank, they opened up a new loan scheme for filmmakers who doesn't have their own money, and if they want to produce independently, we can apply from them. Moreover, we learnt our lesson from *Dukun*, we didn't trust going with the big studio like Astro. For *Bunohan*, we even went to pitch at Media Prima and they also liked it. But we know if the studio put their money in, they will own the film and its revenue, and we won't get anything in return So, after what happened to *Dukun*, we learned that we must own our film. We can't let anybody say, "Sorry, we don't want to release your film". Finally, that was what we did. We took the risk to take the FINAS loan, and that was how we made it.

In *Interchange*, the process of securing a funding took so long. In the meantime, we have to keep finding other jobs to do. When it happened, we can't focus on developing a single script. We tried to optimise our times by working on other scripts or films simultaneously. At the same times, I took the chance to attend some workshop in Europe, and I learnt how the producers can do what they are doing. Our system here is quite crippled. They have different way of getting funding. However, over here, the only choices we have were the big studios like Media Prima and Astro, or somebody doing money laundering, or applying for a loan from FINAS. But it wasn't the right way to work. MDec offered grant for films but only limited to films with heavy VFX production. At the times when the VFX grant was put under the administration of MDec, there were films that obtained the grant of at least RM5 - RM6 million for their VFX production. Athough the VFX was good but the overall the quality of the film was quite poor because of their bad narrative. After the production of *Bunohan*, when Kamil Othman started to become the director for FINAS, he took the funding to be placed under FINAS and restructured it. They offered a grant system in which the filmmakers were funded stage by stage from script writing to production, to marketing. Film like *Interchange* was not fully funded, but the film obtained the grant up to 40%, which is enough to give the filmmaker a boost. Then, we can start to talk to Astro, if we want.

The rest of the 60% can be obtained from other sources such as *Khazanah*, which is a grant given by the Pinewood Studio in Johor. They have set up a smaller equity fund to support individual production company. We tried to secure the funding for few of our films, so it can cover the production cost as much as possible. Look at any producers in the film industry, the only exception was *Upin & Ipin* (Animated TV Series), in which it hits when it released. But, consider the level of hard works and years it took for them to develop the product, to broadcast it through the TV station, to build their audience, and finally, to put it in the cinema. They adopted a different model. So far, it was the only successfully model. Even for the big studio like Astro, people talk about the hits like *Ola Bola* (2016), *The Journey* (2014) and *Polis Evo* (2015). But before that, how many films have hit box-office, how many they have been released in a year, how many of them were losing money? It takes time for people to learn for filmmakers to build their audience to like these kinds of films, and to go to cinema to watch them.

So, most of my funding or soft money for the films were obtained from multiples sources. Soft money can be a grant, rebate or a loan from the government. Ideally, I would like to work with broadcaster because when they invest in my films, they should

get the copyright to air in their platform. That is how it works in Europe. If they put their logo and their money into our films, in exchange, we will have to put our films into their TV stations for three to four years. We don't have this kind of system in Malaysia. As an independent producer, we can never have prepared enough money for production. There is always up and down until everything is signed and on paper. The funding is always a problem, and, in the meantime, we will find other things to do.

What is your suggestion for the government or policy makers to improve the current situation?

At the moment, we are having problem with digital piracy. For *Interchange*, it was available in the Malay torrent. We monitored in-house and had it pulled down. We also registered the film with some internet services for it to be pulled down automatically. That was why it is not in Facebook and Youtube. The only problem was it used to be in the Live Streaming on Facebook after the first day it was released through Astro First. The internet services that we registered had it pulled down. The MCMC (Malaysian Communications and Multimedia Commission) played no roles in this process. We don't have more budget to produce in DVD format, therefore we don't have problem with the DVD piracy. Plus, the DVD market is dead now.

What marketing strategy you employed to promote your films?

The marketing aspects is very poorly developed in our country. It involves the whole process such as the script writing, which is very weak, the financial options which are not very great, and it is a new industry that needs to be grown. If you look at the marketing and distributors, there are no agencies that do marketing and distribution job well, except Astro and Skop. They already have their audience and marketing mechanism in place. Even the online marketing strategy employed in the film *Munafik* (2016) by Skop was quite successful as well. They were very clear of who are they talking to, and what kind of films they made. For us, we used online marketing in a way that it would guarantee of how many people would see the trailer. It shows up on people feeds. It depends on our budget to determine how many weeks or days people might see it. For examples, if I want to do it for one week, and I want at least 2,000 people to see it. It would appear on their Facebook, but it depends on whether they like it or they want to make comments. So, we gained audience's reach and their engagement through their comments. However, we have to be really responsive to those comments.

Furthermore, do you know in Malaysia, they never run local trailer with the foreign films? They only put local trailer with local movies, and the Hollywood trailer with the Hollywood movies during the screening. Nowadays, local movies can be easily categorised as box-office when it reaches RM7,000 or RM30,000, even though they were just crap. If nobody watches the local movies, it is not appropriate to run my movie trailer with them. GSC (Golden Screen Cinema) was not very supportive but TGV (Tanjung Golden Village Cinema) played our trailer with Hollywood movies. The mentality of the marketing people was like "a Malay films would be for Malay audience", which is not right. My target audience are not somebody who watches *Munafik* (2016). My primary audience are people who stay at home and watches HBO or Netflix. Basically. I'm not making films for the audience who are already in the cinema. But for new audience who are still out there that will take times to build.

Did your films benefit from *Skim Wajib Tayang* Scheme (Compulsory Screening Scheme)?

It is useless. It used to be useful. The times when the filmmakers made about 20 films per year. They specifically blocked the time space for local films so that the audience can have enough time to watch it. But it also has to be occupied by good quality films. If they put all the telemovies, especially after the year when there were substantial loans released, there were more local movies. Because some of David Teo's films gained RM 8 million, so everybody was like "Let's go make RM 8 million". You see, this kind of mentality and they all made bad films like Telemovies. They failed to engage the audience. They rather wait to see all these films to come out on Astro First channel. This has changed the policy to allow the screening of two films per week, instead of one week in cinemas. Let's imagine if you are an average Malaysian viewer who earned about RM2,500 per month, how often you are going to the cinema? With the limited budget you have, what you are going to watch? *Fast and Furious* (box-office films) or *Cendol Suka Mami Hantu* (local films)? That's why *Wajib Tayang Scheme* failed. They have failed to take notice of the changes that was happening in the industry and has diverted from their main objectives. Their objective is to encourage the viewership of the Malaysian films! If there were 20 films per year, everybody can screen their films but if there were 40 films, they have to be selective to the films.

When the *Wajib Tayang* committee did the screening, they invited the filmmakers to be there and made them sit outside. One of the committee members told me that they can't even finished one of the films because it was so bad. They said they were here to watch *Interchange*. It was very nice for them to say that, but I was thinking if they can't even finish watching the films, why do they allocate them under the scheme? They can just reject it and tell the director to survive on their own. But, out of the 'Malaysian culture' which normally abstaining from offended anybody, it doesn't really help. It really spoiled the market for the audience. I knew somebody who did a survey to give out free movie tickets at the queue to watch local movies. They were refused. This situation will affect the filmmakers like us, because we were perceived as part of that particular film category.

The next challenging issue was about the film festivals. We have worked hard and fortunately; we have been selected for some international film festivals. During those times, it was a big news for *Bunohan* to be selected into Toronto Film Festival. But nowadays, whenever films went into a film festival, the press will report about it as a festival film. Of course, the audience won't be able to differentiate between Cannes and other Timbuktu film festival. That's really happening now. There was a saturation of film festivals and the media was not helping to clarify things up.