

Unfolding Time to Configure a Collective Entity: Alternative Digital Movies as
Malaysian National Cinema

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ABSTRACT

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This dissertation argues that the alternative digital movies that emerged in the early 21st century Malaysia have become a part of the Malaysian national cinema. This group of movies includes independent feature-length films, documentaries, short and experimental films and videos. They closely engage with the unique conditions of Malaysia's economic development, ethnic relationships, and cultural practices, which together comprise significant understandings of the nationhood of Malaysia. The analyses and discussions of the content and practices of these films allow us not only to recognize the economic, social, and historical circumstances of Malaysia, but we also find how these movies reread and rework the existed imagination of the nation, and then actively contribute in configuring the collective entity of Malaysia.

DEDICATION

To parents, family, friends, and cats in my life

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

In the past few decades, many questions have been raised concerning the rigidity and fixity of the notion of national cinema. The concept of transnational cinema has seemingly offered a resolution for understanding how movies interact with (or depart from) the idea of nationhood. When considering the transnational lens, the large-scale migration and displacement of people during and after the colonial era as well as the world wars all suggest constant crossover among ethnicities and cultural groups inside and outside of national boundaries. The movement of peoples has inspired many artistic productions to express the experiences of persons living between nations and cultural identities. In addition, the invention of new technologies, such as the Internet and digital filmmaking and projecting equipment, has further complicated the way film and videos are made and distributed in the global landscape. Given the many insufficiencies in the framework for national cinema, investigations of transnational films, however, often still concern the films' distinct characteristics in relation to a certain national context (Higbee and Lim 12). The framework of transnational cinema cannot fully substitute national cinema, and it continues to adopt what the rubric of national cinema provides. Therefore, focusing on the alternative digital movies in Malaysia, I see the conjunction between transnational cinema and national cinema. This dissertation further argues that national framework continues superseding the transnational one in the case of alternative digital movies in Malaysia.

Meanwhile, many scholars defend the use of national cinema. They find that the problems of studies on national cinema only occur when the use of the nation refers to an

inherent hegemony of cultural specificities and national identity (Yoshimoto 259; Choi 173). Considering the pros and cons in the framework of national cinema, this dissertation stops taking national cinema as a concept that describes a unified category and retools the concept to investigate the interrelations between the cinematic presentations and practices in a nation and the ongoing formation of the nationhood. In this way, national cinema, as an analytic tool, helps illustrate not only the specific qualities of films from a given national context but also the cinema practices from a transnational landscape.

By investigating alternative digital movies in Malaysia— including digital independent feature-length films, documentaries, short and experimental films and videos— this dissertation introduces the active digital film practices that have emerged in Malaysia since 2000. I aim to provide this cinematic phenomenon in Malaysia as a case study for thinking about the interrelations between a national cinema and the constitution of a national society. The alternative digital movies first appear as unlikely candidates for discussing the national cinema in Malaysia. They act on the margins of popular film culture, and Malaysia's general moviegoers often do not recognize their existence. In addition, there are many reasons to position these digital films in a transnational category. For instance, they initially receive attention because of their circulation in international film festivals and on the Internet. Nevertheless, I argue that, even with many transnational qualities, what makes these films significant and meaningful is their engagement with Malaysia's society, history, national culture, and national identity. In this Introduction, I first illustrate the transnational qualities of these independent digital

movies. Then, with the reconsidered concept of national cinema, I conclude that the alternative and independent digital films emerging in the beginning of the 21st century Malaysia are both transnational and national. Yet, the importance of these alternative digital movies in Malaysia comes from how these artistic presentations and practices are capable of both reflecting and helping configure Malaysia's national society.

Malaysian Alternative Films as Transnational Cinema

The alternative films discussed in this dissertation refer to the digital film productions made in Malaysia after 2000. These pieces have mostly been released non-commercially, circulated at international film festivals and distributed on the Internet. They were not released in the domestic commercial movie theaters and, therefore, have been mostly unknown by the general movie goers in Malaysia. In many ways, these films fall into the rubric of transnational film because, firstly, many of them are made, produced, or curated by Chinese Malaysians, a group who could be considered as displaced in Malaysia. Secondly, the global distribution through either film festivals or on the Internet indicates that these productions continually cross over national boundaries.

Although being a non-indigenous and later-migrant minority in Malaysia, ethnic Chinese have grown to play a significant role in digital filmmaking communities. Because the historical backdrop of trade and colonialism has resulted in the migration of the Chinese becoming a part of the population in Malaysia, the independent works from Chinese Malaysian filmmakers inevitably carry cultural and social experiences that underline the differences between Chinese and other significant ethnicities (especially majority indigenous Malays) in Malaysia. In this respect, Mike Walsh claims the

emergence of the digital film in Malaysia to be a movement which follows the trajectories of the Hong Kong New Wave and Taiwanese New Wave cinema (realtimearts.net).¹ Zakir Hossain Raju also addresses the Chinese-language films made by Chinese Malaysian filmmakers James Lee and Tan Chui-mui (two of the major filmmakers discussed in this dissertation) as transnational Chinese cinema instead of as national cinema of Malaysia (“Mahua Cinema” 68). While both Lee and Tan were born, grew up, and educated in Malaysia, and their films all take place in Malaysia, Walsh and Raju’s classifications connect their work to a larger body of Chinese cultural products in the global landscape.

However, instead of depicting the digital films made by Chinese Malaysian filmmakers as transnational Chinese cinema and positioning them alongside Chinese-language films made in Hong Kong and Taiwan, I find that what Hamid Naficy calls “independent transnational cinema” may offer a more appropriate conceptual category for understanding the transnational qualities of the digital films made by independent Chinese Malaysian filmmakers (119). Naficy considers transnational films to be a genre that contains self-narration made out of “the particular transnational location of filmmakers in time and place and in social life and cultural difference” (121). He further states:

By linking genre, authorship, and transnational positioning, the independent transnational genre allows films to be read and reread not only as individual texts produced by authorial vision and generic conventions, but also as sites for

¹ See <http://www.realtimearts.net/article/issue76/8251>

intertextual, cross-cultural, and translational struggles over meanings and identities (121).

In the above explanation, Naficy mostly addresses independent transnational films as creations by filmmakers who live outside of their native land, especially those who are exiles, émigrés, refugees, and expatriates (119-120). Although the Chinese Malaysian filmmakers discussed in this dissertation are all native Malaysian, the transnational tensions regarding the issues of belonging and identity continuously appear as a significant subject in their films. The unsettled Chinese Malaysian identity is a result of Malaysia's economic and political background that has driven the postcolonial state to privilege Muslim Malays as the representatives of Malaysia's national identity. Therefore, even though Chinese and Indians are both significant minorities in Malaysia, the government has not included the traditions and cultures of these two other ethnic groups as official representatives of the national identity of Malaysia.

In this dissertation, the analysis in Chapter 3 of Lee's *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004) and Tan's *Love Conquers All* (2006) points out how both works express the subjectivities of Chinese Malaysian protagonists. Nevertheless, being positioned in the hyper-modernity of the capital city Kuala Lumpur, these characters, instead of struggling between Chinese and Malaysian identities, demonstrate how they become alienated and lose a concrete sense of belonging. These two examples, in Naficy's words, are "sites for intertextual, cross-cultural, and translational struggles over meanings and identities" (121). The translational struggles in *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All* come from not only the films' "liminality" crossing over ethnic and

political boundaries but also from their recognition of the unbalanced transformation between the traditional and modern time. The struggles also reflect these Chinese Malaysians' anxieties in facing the impact of hyper-capitalism imposed by the trends of globalization.

Moreover, as a result of the policies that put images of Muslim Malay culture at the foreground of commercial films made in Malaysia, many Chinese Malaysian filmmakers further fit into a category of filmmakers who produce independent transnational films as those who, defined by Naficy, "not only inhabit interstitial spaces of the host society but also work on the margins of the mainstream film industry" (125). Finding few central positions in the film industry, in the early 2000s, Chinese Malaysian filmmakers sought collaborations with independent filmmakers and founded companies together in order to produce and distribute films. For example, Lee and Tan, along with Liew Seng-tat and Amir Muhammad, started Da Huang Pictures in 2004; Woo Ming-jin also founded Greenlight Pictures in the same year. With this guerrilla style, Khoo Giak-cheng notes that Malaysian independent filmmaking has two main attitudes: "Just do it" and "do it yourself" ("Just-Do-It" 227). This mode of production and distribution often disallows their productions to be released in the mainstream theatrical market, which is dominated by big-budget commercial films. As a result, the filmmakers and their films, like many other independent transnational filmmakers and their works, remain on the margins of the popular film culture in Malaysia.

Another reason to view alternative films in Malaysia through the lens of transnational cinema stems from the way filmmakers often distribute their work through

international film festivals and Internet streaming instead of releasing them in the domestic market. More than hanging on the margins of the film industry due to the independent and small-budget mode of production, these non-conventional films circulate outside of the local exhibition markets because of the social and political restrictions in Malaysia. In Chapter 2, I illustrate how the economic and cultural development plans conducted by the Malaysian government have widely affected the film practices and exhibitions in Malaysia. This background explains how alternative films, especially those that contest the government's development agendas, are given very little room in the film exhibition scene in Malaysia. In this regard, all the films and videos examined in this dissertation received more public screening opportunities in international film festivals than in movie theaters in Malaysia. Most of these works were also released through websites so Internet viewers could watch them for free.

Global circulation inherently comprises the body of spectatorship beyond the limitation of national borders for these Malaysian alternative films. Nevertheless, I do not intend to suggest these works are transnational simply because they have screened outside of Malaysia and, therefore, have viewers of multiple nationalities. Rather, these alternative digital movies are transnational because the state-constructed social, economic, and political climate in Malaysia excludes them from the domestic market, and meanwhile, international film festivals and the Internet offer platforms for showcasing these pieces. Thus, the production and distribution of these Malaysian independent films are transnational because the key reason they could be seen is what Chris Berry points out as the emergent "transnational order of globalization" (124). With elements such as

digital technologies, new media, and transborder organizations and connections in this new emergent order, these films then have audiences.

Paradoxically, while the circulation of Malaysian digital films discussed in this dissertation are made possible by this transnational order of globalization, what is at stake in examining these works cannot depart from asking what specific circumstances of Malaysia's film industry drive these films to find more opportunities outside of the domestic market. Especially in contrast to their global circulation, the subject and content of these films often engage with the experiences of living in Malaysian society. The diegetic content of these films rarely reflect worldwide experiences outside of Malaysia. They show more interest in discussing and imagining what it means to be a collective entity of Malaysian.

These independent digital films first caught my attention through their active circulation on the global platform. They represent examples as cultural products that are showcased across the global cinematic landscape. In this sense, these films belong to transnational cinematic practices. However, when I examine not only individual works but also the digital film movement occurring after 2000 in Malaysia, it is impossible to talk about them without referring to the social, cultural, economic, and historical context of Malaysia in its postcolonial period. The aesthetic and narrative content of some pieces, for example Muhammad's *The Big Durian* (2003), become meaningless if we do not discuss them with the background of Malaysia's social and political specificities.

The analyses of these films, therefore, suggest a conjunction between a transnational and national framework. This conjunction is not rare to see in the studies on

transnational cinema. Will Higbee and Song Hwee Lim address this conjunction as a “potential weakness of the conceptual term of ‘transnational cinema’,” because the term often applies to films that engage in cultural and ethnic differences within a nation state (11). Chris Berry later justifies why scholars often return to the national framework when analyzing transnational cinema and clarifies that using transnational cinema to supersede the old model of national cinema does not suggest the disappearance of national state or national cultures (“What is Transnational Cinema” 112). Furthermore, when we discuss films under the framework of transnational cinema, we continue examining how these films present the encounters and negotiations among national spaces and cultures (Berry “What is Transnational Cinema” 112). My studies on Malaysia’s alternative digital films also embody such a conjunction between transnational cinema and national cinema. Only in this case, I find the notion of national cinema actually supersedes the framework of transnational cinema. Finding how nation state, national identity, and national culture play more significant roles than the transnational qualities of Malaysia’s digital films, I ask how we can reconsider the shift from a national to transnational paradigm and therefore take the rubric of national cinema as meaningful tools for understanding the alternative cinematic productions and practices in contemporary Malaysia.

The Evolution of the Conceptual Term “National Cinema”

Peoples’ migration across national boundaries, the flow of capital for cinema productions, and digital films’ accessibility in global distribution in the postmodern era are all factors that both drive us to see films through the lens of transnationalism and refigure the use of “national cinema.” These factors raise the question of whether the

concept still offers relevant framework for film studies today. Defending the continued relevance in using the notion of national cinema, in the following section, I first review criticisms of the framework of national cinema in film studies. In response to these criticisms, scholars such as Philip Rosen, Susan Hayward, Jerry White, and Jung Bong Choi reconfigure the meaning of the term and further offer methods to reconstruct the conceptual framework of national cinema. Through these scholarly debates on national cinema, I hope to illustrate why this dissertation sees the alternative film productions and practices in Malaysia as a permanent part of the national cinema in contemporary Malaysia. I further argue that these films' engagement with the society, politics, identities, and cultures of Malaysia not only reflect but also help transform the nationhood of Malaysia.

Criticisms of the use of national cinema can be summarized by a paragraph in Andrew Higson's 1995 article "Limiting Imagination of National Cinema". The paragraph says:

The problem is that, when describing a national cinema, there is a tendency to focus only on those films that narrate the nation as just this finite, limited space, inhabited by a tightly coherent and unified community, closed off to other identities besides national identity. Or rather, the focus is on films that seem amenable to such an interpretation (66).

The problem of being finite and limited was considered as early as the 1980s when Susan Barrowclough took Quebecois films as an example that contests the framing of national cinema as a social practice that confirms a unified assumption of a certain nationhood (3).

She addresses the Quebec notion of nationhood as “ambiguous, incoherent, and absent of pre-givens,” and therefore explains that Quebecois films ask more questions about what the nation means than answer them because the films often present contradictory experiences living in the nation. Philip Rosen also rejects studying national cinema as “a concrete and automatically unified producer/reader of films” and suggests that the studies of national cinema should seek to illustrate the organic formation of “specific configurations of textuality” (“Textuality” 25). These specific and ongoing configurations of aesthetic and narrative presentations in a national cinema should also reflect the distinct constitution of the nation. With a similar argument, Paul Willemen proposes to avoid taking a national cinema as an immutable object. He instead imagines a national cinema as “a historically (institutionally) delineated set of practices caught within, among others, the dynamics besetting and characterizing a national configuration” (42). Barrowclough, Rosen, and Willemen all try to avoid framing the concept of national cinema with a fixed category and imagine the formation of national cinema as an ongoing configuration.

The openness of Barrowclough, Rosen, and Willemen suggests a critical reply to many canonic early studies on national cinema, such as Siegfried Kracauer’s book on German cinema, *From Caligari to Hitler* and Noel Burch’s writing on Japanese cinema, *To the Distant Observer*. These studies mostly come from researches of film historians, who usually bound a collection of films to a unified description of the national consciousness or national culture in a certain period. Other than these studies, Stephen Crofts, in his article “Reconceptualising National Cinema/s,” points out how the

economic, cultural, and political power structures drive film practices around the world and make different kinds of national cinema (44). Recognizing the “unequal distributions of power across axes of nation,” Crofts finds that several national cinemas are formed in relation to how postcolonial nations attempted to establish their own cultural identities in order to contest the influences from dominated forces such as Hollywood and colonial occupation in general (55). Therefore, many studies classify a national cinema based on film practices in relation to the social and historical circumstances of the postcolonial country, and they focus on illustrating film practices as a part of the nation-building process.

Film production in Malaysia—a country that became independent from British colonization in 1957—has also sought to manifest the country’s cultural authenticity and rootedness. In this respect, this dissertation discusses in Chapter 2 how Malaysia’s national cinema has, for a long time, been tied to Malay cinema, regardless of the hybrid film cultures that have been practiced throughout the country’s history. While binding national cinema to an essential national identity comes from distinct historical and political struggles during postcolonial times, such a tie risks analyzing the film productions in the nation with a homogenous framework. As Mitsuhiro Yoshimoto points out, using the idea of identity to determine the specificities of a national cinema is problematic because the discussions of the national cinema would be unreflective of perceiving whether such identity is homogeneous or heterogeneous (259). The problem here is two-fold: First, if we conceptualized Malaysia’s national identity as a homogeneous Malay identity, we will inevitably include only Malay film practices in our

discussions about Malaysia's national cinema. Second, the studies on national cinema would not reflect the heterogeneous characteristics of the cross-cultural film history as well as society in Malaysia.

Scholars such as Barrowclough, Rosen, and Willemen may attempt to avoid an immutable construction when they conceptualize studies on national cinema; their descriptions, nevertheless, do not take the notion of national cinema away from imagining a configured body of movies. Even though this configuration could always be modified according to the development of the nation, national cinema appears as a category limited by a certain existed geo-political entity. Transnationalism, as a result, strongly challenges how the studies of national cinema classify films since film practices constantly cross geo-political borders nowadays. Many scholars recognize the problems in the rubric of national cinema, yet they still find that nationhood remains significant in diverse film practices within and across national boundaries. In order to solve this dilemma, Rosen in his article "Nation and Anti-Nation Concepts of National Cinema in the 'New' Media Era," Hayward in "Framing National Cinemas," J. White in "National Belonging: Renewing the Concept of National Cinema in Global Culture," and Choi in "National Cinema: An Anachronistic Delirium," all discuss how to rethink the notion of national cinema and therefore take it as a relevant and meaningful tool for film studies today.

Treating national cinema as an analytic framework, Choi suggests the stopping of seeking special styles and themes in a national cinema and starting to find how a national cinema relates to the society and social processes (181). In this sense, instead of asking

what national cinema is, studies on national cinema look for how film practices engage with the economic, cultural, and political experiences of people in relation to the society, where the power of national institutions, the ideas of the national culture and identity, and the presence of the national consciousness are present and effective. As a result, when a study on national cinema analyzes films based on the distinct factors of the nation rather than recognizing certain national qualities in a collection of films, these analyses reveal the relationships between the films (both in the form of artistic objects and practices) and the institutional as well as ideological forces from various aspects of nationhood. Movies, therefore, are not closure containers that address cultural meanings to a certain nationality. Rather, they actively interact to the society and participate in the making of the nation.

Along similar lines, both J. White and Hayward think of national cinema as artistic practice that interacts with the configuration of a nation instead as a part of the discourse of the nation. In other words, national cinema does not mediate the narrative that generalize any national qualities. Movies that labelled as a certain national cinema should function as agents that investigate unique understandings and phenomena of the formation of the nation, whether these phenomena are considered central or marginal to the collective entity of the nation. J. White suggests identifying and discussing national cinema in relation to the national facilities and national consciousness (211); Hayward seeks the relationships between a national cinema and the knowledge about the nation. Studies in this framework of national cinema allow the room to discuss the diversity and hybridity of national cinema because the analyses on different kinds of productions could

suggest different relationships to the economic, political, and cultural configuration of the nation (Hayward 101; J. White 215).

This dissertation focuses on how alternative digital films engage in unique conditions of Malaysia. In Chapter 2, I focus on how film history in the Malaya region interact to Malaysia's political and economic constructions. In Chapter 3, I analyze how independent films emerged around 2000 render the mixed temporalities in the early 21st century modernity in Kuala Lumpur. In Chapter 4, I find how some video compilations present revisions of the historical struggles of ethnicity and identity in Malaysia. In Chapter 5, I state that the novel cultural practices of Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival have created alternative public sphere in Kuala Lumpur as well as many urban areas in Malaysia. Thus, the critical questions for this dissertation become the following: With these foci, how could we embody a meaningful study of a national cinema? Furthermore, what relevant understandings of the nationhood of Malaysia could the study provide?

The Theoretical Structure

To answer the above questions this dissertation examines productions and practices from important filmmakers and practitioners in this digital era. Other than aforementioned Muhammad, Lee, and Tan, I also examine digital film productions from Pete Teo, Yasmin Ahmad, Ho Yuhang, Desmong Ng, Tsai Ming-liang, and an experimental film festival directed by Kok Siew-wai. The chapters in this dissertation follow a chronological order to introduce film productions and practices in Malaysia. This order helps illustrate the relationships between the films and the social processes of

Malaysia. In Chapter 2, I trace the evolution of what is considered Malaysian national cinema since the nation's independence in 1959. By describing the different stages in its evolution, we begin to see how film presentations and practices vary in different social, economic, and political circumstances of Malaysia.

Nevertheless, this dissertation does not imply that there is a singular and linear evolution of Malaysian national cinema. I do not intend to describe a one-dimension and one-direction process of Malaysia to parallel the evolution of the national cinema. On the contrary, this dissertation argues that the digital movies which emerged around 2000 in Malaysia propose a fully opposite way to imagine the time-related status of Malaysian society: In these films, the past and the present do not appear as two polar spots on a linear dimension of time. Rather, via film presentations, such as in *The Big Durian*, *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, and *Love Conquers All*, the past and the present can overlap. Moreover, compilation projects such as *15 Malaysia* (2009) and *Letters from the South* (2013) show that what is now narrated in the present can alter the past through offering new interpretations to long-time existing subjects.

To describe the presentations of time in these movies, I follow Bliss Cua Lim's analyses of time in *fantastic cinema* in the postcolonial Philippines and use Henri Bergson's explanations on *the past*. While Bergson sees *the past* as an idea and as something that "acts no longer," he indicates that *the past* also connects to consciousness and survives through memories (*Matter and Memory* 68, 149). In fact, every present moment that we become conscious about has already passed, so Bergson writes, "Practically, we perceive only the past, the pure present being the invisible progress of

the past gnawing into the future” (*Matter and Memory* 150). With these thoughts, I discuss three films in Chapter 3, which all take place in the beginning of 21st century Kuala Lumpur. In contrast to the postmodernity of the capital city, the three films impose a sense of the past onto Kuala Lumpur’s globalized city spaces through citizens’ memories, mysterious figures, and a recurring urban tale.

Moreover, if *the past* is an idea, the long-time subjects regarding ethnic relationships and national identity in Malaysia are complicated ideas that come from the past and gnaw at the current day. The three the short film compilations discussed in Chapter 4 are made with the intention to re-articulate these long-time narratives in regarding ethnic presentations in Malaysia and the Chinese identity in Southeast Asia. These compilation projects are collaborations of multiple filmmakers, and therefore the mixed shorts in the collection provide diverse revisions to these constructed narratives. As a result, the compilations could be understood as a kind of historiography that investigates historical subjects through revising narratives from various angles. In this aspect, these compilations appear as present constructions that could alter existing ideas from the past, and therefore, they provide different imaginations to re-configure the national culture and identity in Malaysia.

While most of film productions use narrative content as their major language, a different kind of film called avant-garde or experimental film breaks the narrative characteristics of film. Such a division also happens in the development of independent digital films in Malaysia. Along the evolution of digital film practices, the filmmakers and practitioners have faced choices in envisioning how the film cultures in Malaysia is

derive by these practices. On one hand, some filmmakers, such as Lee, seek to grow the market for independent films and hope to eventually establish a better and more professional environment for producing films that are capable of competing in commercial and art cinema markets both inside and outside Malaysia. On the other hand, the characteristics of “independent” suggest a further liberation of film styles and practices, and therefore, filmmakers, such as Kok Siew-wai, stood out as the curator of Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival (KLEX) and efforts to foster a different film culture in Malaysia.

KLEX offers another angle for thinking through the relationship between independent digital film culture and national society. The experimental films screened in KLEX in many aspects fit Jean-François Lyotard’s description of *acinema* because these pieces challenge conventional film techniques. To Lyotard, the conventional value of “good” film techniques is tied to the consumption of a film (350-3). In other words, this value of “good” or “bad” is determined in the chain of capitalism. Not limited by conventional film techniques, experimental films resist both the normal film narrative and the commercial value of it. In Kuala Lumpur, a capital city as well as the financial center of Malaysia, by showing experimental films and hosting improvisational music performances, KLEX presents a very different spirit not previously seen in Kuala Lumpur. Therefore, in Chapter 5, I argue that the relationships between KLEX and the outside society, instead of being represented by film narrative, exist in the practices of KLEX itself. In particular, they do so through the alternative public spheres that the events of KLEX generate in society.

Chapter Summaries

To give contextual background for this dissertation, in Chapter 2, titled “A Trajectory: Malaysia’s Developmental Plans and the On-going Composition of a Malaysian National Cinema,” I briefly trace the history of both cinematic practices and the economic, social, and nation-building processes in Malaysia from the 1930s to the 2000s. Using the notion of national cinema as an analytic paradigm, this chapter adopts Choi’s argument in terms of how he questions what conditions drive certain cinematic cultures to be important to national society, and therefore, become the targeted material for understanding a national cinema (173). In the case of Malaysia, historical studies on film practices in the Malay Peninsula show that Indians, Chinese, and Malays had all played significant roles in the region, especially since the beginning of the film scene in the 1930s. Nevertheless, after Malaysia’s independence in 1957, the postcolonial state urged the establishment of a national identity based on the rooted culture of indigenous Malays. Consequently, Malay films became the focal point of the film industry in Malaysia, and P Ramlee, a Malay filmmaker who made many popular films during the 1950s and 60s about topics of negotiation between the Malay tradition and Western modernity, became the face of Malaysian cinema. Then, in the 1970s, the Malaysian government created many national plans, such as the New Economic Policy and National Culture Policy (both introduced in 1971). These national-scale plans not only further privileged Malays’ economic and cultural positions but also sought to establish new ideal images for Malays— middle class Muslims able to cope with the multicultural global community. Along with the social changes that were inevitably affected by the economic

and political constructions from the authorities, in the 1980s, a group of new filmmakers, such as Rahim Razali, U-Wei Haju Saari, and Shuhaimi Baba, stood out with their films that commented on the social changes caused by the economic and political development. The continuous interrelations between the social processes and film practices in Malaysia, in this way, indicate a trajectory of the formation of the national identity between the 1960s and the 1990s.

Finally, in the last section of Chapter 2, I introduce the rise of independent digital films in Malaysia around 2000. Other than the invention of digital technologies, it was the economic and political climates in Malaysia during that turbulent time (due to the Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 and many government scandals) that inspired the beginning of digital filmmaking. In other words, when the government lost its credibility in constructing the economic, cultural, and political reality of Malaysia, filmmakers and artists, such as Muhammad, Lee, Liew, and Tan, grabbed digital video cameras and explored political and personal topics through their own experiences of living in Malaysia. Although digital movies appear marginally in Malaysia's film scene, those productions reflect interconnections between the social processes and film practices in Malaysia. Compared to many commercial films, which avoid social and political commentary due to the strict censorship in Malaysia, they reflect national society more. In the end, the chapter argues that through the practices of producing digital films in Malaysia, we can further investigate the ongoing composition of the national culture and identity in contemporary Malaysia.

Chapter 3, titled “The Past That Gnaws into the Present: The New Millennium Kuala Lumpur and Three Films from the Digital Movement,” focuses on Kuala Lumpur, and investigates how the rise of digital film practices has intertwined with the economic, political, and cultural transformation of this postmodern city. Through analyzing three significant films that led the digital film movement—Muhammad’s *The Big Durian*, Lee’s *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, and Tan’s *Love Conquers All*—this chapter argues that while the spaces in Kuala Lumpur have been drastically reformed in order to represent the iconic images of Malaysia, which are mostly controlled by government constructions, the memories and experiences of living in the city determine the cultural and social structures of the city. The collisions between governmental visions and people’s daily encounters make the development of society to be unevenly formed—the hyper-modern and globalized spaces of the city are often contrasted by the mixed experiences living in these spaces. In this way, the three independent digital films discussed in this chapter engage with how people negotiate and encounter the modernized Kuala Lumpur. Through citizens’ memories in *The Big Durian*, an old washing machine in *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, and a recurring urban tale in *Love Conquers All*, the three films present a sense of the past that continuously haunts people’s daily experiences in the new millennium Kuala Lumpur. Moreover, the past trajectory, instead of providing answers on how the residents of Kuala Lumpur understand their social milieu, it raises questions about the national constructions as well as Malaysians’ identity while being caught in this transforming city.

Among the three films discussed in Chapter 3, two of them come from Chinese Malaysian filmmakers (Lee and Tan). As a minority ethnic group in Malaysia, Chinese Malaysian filmmakers play significant roles in the independent digital film scene. Such a background complicates the considerations on how both Lee's *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and Tan's *Love Conquers All* depict the Chinese Malaysian protagonist as someone who lost a sense of selfhood in the globalized city of Kuala Lumpur. Chapter 4, titled "The Present that Revises the Past: Three Short Video Compilations," further investigates the historical subjects of ethnicities, national identity, and commercial filmmaking in the contemporary Malaysia.

Chapter 4 first illustrates the disagreements between ethno-nationalism and multiculturalism in structuring the national culture in the society of Malaysia. The debates on this subject impacted the independent film communities when, in 2006, a forum in a public television program denounced Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* (2004) and her sequel *Gubra* (2006) as corruptors of the national culture because the two films portray an interracial love story between a Chinese street vendor and a Malay school girl. The attacks on Ahmad and her films became triggers for independent filmmakers to actively review the ethnic relationships and national identity of Malaysia through their films. In this chapter, I examine three short video compilations—*15 Malaysia*, *Letters from the South*, and *3 Doors of Horror* (2013). The three compilations represent a collaborative manner in approaching a realist vision to re-examine the existed constructions of ethnic relationships and national identity in Malaysia. In this sense, *15 Malaysia* appears as a project of social activism. The short videos in this compilation engage with the social

issues caused by a long history of encounters, conflicts, and misunderstandings between people from different ethnic backgrounds. The project of *Letter from the South* explores ethnic Chinese's cultural identity through the topic of the Chinese Diaspora in the Southeast Asian region. Rather than confirming that Chinese identity comes from ethnic roots, the experimental and realist styles of the short films in this project focus on the intimate feelings between Chinese and their current lands. Thus, by attaching the Chinese's experiences to the land of Southeast Asian area, they become a part of the reality of the nation and therefore participate in composing the cultures in their current nation. Finally, *3 Doors of Horror*, a web series, instead of wanting to articulate the national culture of Malaysia, becomes a part of the ambition to create a better environment for culture practices in Malaysia.

In the first few chapters, there are many examples of alternative digital movies in which the content tends to capture a sense of "Malaysianess" through people's experiences living in the society of Malaysia. However, in Chapter 5, titled "An Alternate Spirit: Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival," I argue that, instead of examining film content, the cinematic practice itself could become the social experience. By observing and examining the events of Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival (KLEX), this chapter suggests that KLEX creates an alternative public sphere, which allows experimental videos to interact with the audiences, and therefore the festival itself functions as a gathering for exploring and imagining the social experiences of living in Kuala Lumpur. This new cinematic practices in Kuala Lumpur further add a different film culture to a city that often focuses

on economic growth, and therefore it contributes in constituting diverse social experiences in Kuala Lumpur.

In conclusion, the rubric of transnational cinema and the analytic concept of national cinema could both offer meaningful discussions in understanding Malaysia's independent, short, and experimental films and videos. As minor and marginal enterprises in the film industry of Malaysia, the movies discussed in this dissertation first appear transnational. Nevertheless, looking into the film content as well as the relationships between the film practices and Malaysia's national society, I find that these works closely engage with the unique qualities that comprise the nationhood of Malaysia. The analyses and discussions of the content and practices of these films allow us not only to recognize the economic, social, and historical circumstances of Malaysia but also to compose the ongoing constitution of Malaysia's nationhood.

CHAPTER 2: A TRAJECTORY: MALAYSIA'S DEVELOPMENT PLANS AND THE ON-GOING COMPOSITION OF A MALAYSIAN NATIONAL CINEMA

This chapter aims to use the notion of National Cinema as a conceptual tool for investigating the interaction among socio-political, economic, and cultural forces in Malaysia over the historic trajectory of the nation since independence. By capitalizing National Cinema, I am referencing Jung Bong Choi's argument in his 2011 article "National Cinema: An Anachronistic Delirium". He suggests that National Cinema "needs to be retooled as an analytic paradigm for cultural self-making/becoming, which involves institutional, economic, and discursive negotiations/struggles to determine what has to be done to afford cinematic cultures critical to socio-cultural life in a national society" (173). The evolution of Malaysian national cinema (here, the lower case "national cinema" indicates an example within the concept of National Cinema) appears as an example of how a national cinema negotiates with various forces, such as authorities, the global economic system, and people's social and cultural consciousness. Instead of *representing* a national identity, Malaysian films constantly seek to *capture* a national identity. In a young and diverse country, such attempts reflect the efforts to make sense of what the nation identity contains. While there is no essential form for such an identity, in different periods of time, filmmakers find different issues to articulate the variable dimensions of the identity. These issues indicate the undercurrents during the nation's development in terms of not only the state's urgency for the nation's modernization but also the experience of living in Malaysian society.

Many film scholars, including Mohd Hamdan Hj Adnan, John A. Lent, Fuziah Kartini Hassan Basri, Raja Ahmad Alauddin, William van der Heide, Hassan Muthalib, Wong-Tuck Cheong, and Gordon Gray, have laid out how critical moments in Malaysia's history influence the practices of Malaysian film production, distribution, exhibition, and reception. These scholars provide critical historical context for the discussions on Malaysian national cinema in this chapter. Nevertheless, when they mention Malaysia's national cinema, a common statement is: Malaysia's national cinema is often considered equal to Malay cinema (Muthalib and Cheong 301; G. C. Khoo *Reclaiming Adat* 102; Wee 1; Ahmad "Theorizing the Indies" 158-159; Raju "Mahua Cinema" 70). Even when many Malaysian films nowadays include Chinese and Indian Malaysian characters and cultures, this statement on Malaysian national cinema has little changed. One of the possible reasons for why there is a continuing impression that Malaysian cinema is equal to Malay cinema could be that many scholars still find the claim "Malaysian national cinema is Malay cinema" meaningful in pointing out how Malaysia's national culture has been framed under the domination of Muslim Malays. Even when ethnic Chinese and Indian influences become significant in Malaysia's film cultures, the general atmosphere of privileging the perspective of Muslim Malays does not particularly change, especially when the state's pro-Malay policies remain intact.

I argue that, by releasing Malaysia's national cinema from such an over-simplified description, the discourse of Malaysian national cinema becomes reflective of not only the state's top-down pro-Malay position but also the bottom-up diverse approaches engaging the experience of living in the unique society of Malaysia. In this

way, the notion of Malaysian national cinema can actually encompass films scholars' discussion of the various stages in Malaysia's film cultures through the past decades.

Malaysia's film history began in the 1930s when the nation was still under British colonization. During the colonial period, the film cultures in Malaysia were highly hybridized as reflected in Malay's theater cultures and also by the Chinese and Indian influence. This chapter begins with a brief introduction to the forces giving birth to a film culture in the Malay Peninsula during the colonial period. From the nation's independence in 1957 to the present time, Muthalib tells us:

The Malaysian film industry is made up of players who are divided into three major groups. The first are the studios who fund themselves. The second are the independent producers who procure loans to make films, usually from a government fund. The third are the motley group of young filmmakers (dubbed The Little Cinema of Malaysia or simply, 'the indies'), with very little budgets and who shoot on digital cameras using a minimum crew mostly made up of their friends (1).

While these three groups comprise a wide spectrum of the Malaysian filmmaking scene, the three groups made their first appearances in three different time periods. Each group's first appearance indicates a turning point when the discourse of Malaysian national cinema shifts according to the socio-political climate of the nation. After addressing the colonial backgrounds, this chapter further divides the evolution of Malaysian national cinema into three stages: 1) Post-colonial nation building and a state-certified national cinema, 2) The rise of social consciousness and the diversity of imagination among

Malays, and 3) The emergence of digital filmmaking community as a competing force from the margin redefining Malaysian national cinema.

The third stage introduces the main subject of this dissertation—the alternative digital movies. The stage refers to the emergence of digital filmmaking community around 2000. Many young Malaysian filmmakers from mixed ethnicities formed the community. They were inspired by the social and political milieu they live in everyday and made various kinds of digital works— from three-minute shorts to feature length films. They also make documentaries and experimental pieces. Because of the diverse formats and the small-scale nature of their productions, these movies could not be distributed in the commercial theaters. Instead, they circulated outside of mainstream film cultures and practices in Malaysia. As marginal and alternative as these digital movies are, they engage in presenting and discussing the constitution of Malaysia's national society with a more radical spirit than most of the commercial Malaysian films. Therefore, this dissertation argues that these alternative digital movies make up a significant part of Malaysian national cinema.

The Beginning of Film Cultures in the Malay Peninsula and Malaysia's

Independence (from 1930s to early-1960s)

The origin of film production in Malaysia was highly hybridized. Indian and Chinese populations significantly affected the composition of film cultures in the Malay Peninsula. Increasingly in the early nineteenth century, many trading ships arrived on the west coast of Malay Peninsula, including the cities of Penang and Melaka and the island of Singapore, from India and China. These ships brought goods as well as many Indian

and Chinese to start or work in plantations. In addition, during the late nineteenth century, the British moved the capital of the Federated Malay State to where Kuala Lumpur is located now. Roads, bridges, and water supplies were soon established around the area. A new map was drawn for marking where the government-reserved lands were and what land the public could occupy. Consequently, many Chinese and Indians were attracted by the urban development of Kuala Lumpur and immigrated to Kuala Lumpur area while British colonial government built more and more commercial and social infrastructure for the convenience of exploiting more resources (e.g. tin and rubber) (Ho 2).

Agents from Bollywood, Chinese-language cinema, as well as Malay traditions together built the film industry from the 1930s to the so-called golden age in the 1950s and 60s. The first Malay-language film, *Laila Majnun* (1933), was produced by an Indian businessman K. R. S. Chisty in Singapore (Heide 124; Wan, Kee, and Aziz 42; Gray “Being Modern” 52).² William van der Heide further describes the story of how *Laila Majnun* came from a Persian-Arabic tale, and how it was then adapted by Malay’s traditional *bangsawan* theater (a kind of Malaysian traditional musical theater performance that is considered as an important influence to Malay cinema) and likely by Parsee theater in Hindi performances as well (T. White 1; Heide 81-6). In this way, the film cultures in the Malay Peninsula started with strong ties to both the Persian-Arabic and Indian worlds. Moreover, the Indian director of *Laila Majnun*, B. S. Rajhans, with his

² Singapore was still ruled by British in 1933, and had only merged with Federation of Malaysia for three years (from 1963 to 1965). Yet, it had been the center of film production on the Malay Peninsula before it fully separated from Federation of Malaysia in 1965.

capability to work with *bangsawan* actors, later became one of the major directors from the 1930s to 1960s film production in the region (125-133). Given the popularity of this director, elements from Indian films had already appeared as one of the major influences to the Malay films since the early stage of Malaysian film history.

Chinese-owned film companies also played significant roles in producing and distributing films in the Southeast Asian region from the 1930s to the 1950s. Their arrivals to the Malay Peninsula corresponded with the growth of the Chinese population around urban areas on the peninsula.³ Two notable cases were the Shaw Brothers Studio from Shanghai, China, and the Cathay Organization from Kuala Lumpur (Lent 123; Heidi 117 Kar and Bren 191-7). Darrell Davis writes about Shaw Brothers and points out how they “started their movie empire by supplying *Nanyang* [Southeast Asian] immigrants with accents and images from a distant homeland, offering idealized Chinese material to workers and merchants separated from kin”(43).⁴ While the Shaw Brothers’ investments in Southeast Asia could be simply explained as a result of satisfying the market made up of Chinese immigrants, the consequence was that these Chinese-language films, especially those of *wuxia pian* (martial arts genre), “reinforce the traditional imagery of Chinese patriarchal supremacy to sustain the dignity and pride of Chinese subjectivity”

³ After World War II, the British colonial government was suddenly responsible for securing the Malay Peninsula from the Communist insurgency. Announcing the “Malayan Emergency,” British government targeted control the landless Chinese in the forest in order to suppress the Communists’ guerrilla activities. They set up New Villages, located around the outskirts of existing urban centers, to resettle the rural Chinese, so they could better monitor the activities of the Chinese (Tilman 411; Ho 2). This arrangement further increased Chinese populations around the urban areas.

⁴ Nanyang means “southern ocean” in Mandarin. It refers to Southeast Asia region.

(Ngo 76), and, thereby, help construct the cultural identity of early Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia.

At the time, Chinese-language films, as cultural products, circulated mostly among the Chinese immigrant groups rather than diverse ethnic communities. The Chinese financial capital behind these films, in specific that of the Shaw Brothers and the Cathay Organization, impacted the film industry widely in the Malay Peninsula through both their production and distribution departments. Originally from Shanghai, the Shaw Brothers Studios left their city because the Chinese Revolution brought uncertainty to privately owned entertainment enterprises in Mainland China. Meanwhile, British colonial areas in Malay Peninsula provided a safe haven for the Shaw Brothers Company (Davis 44). As a result, they moved the company and set up production studios in Singapore during the late 1930s (Ngo 78).⁵ After the Shaw Brothers opened their studio in Singapore, they started showing their films by setting up mobile theaters and renting local cinemas in villages with Chinese immigrants population (Uhde and Uhde 23; Ngo 83). The Shaws purchased more cinemas in the 1930s, in order to secure the exhibition of their productions. Their power on film exhibition in Southeast Asia continued to grow. As Law Kar and Frank Bren describe, “By the mid-1930s, the Shaw Brothers owned close to seventy theaters in Nanyang” (192).

Later than the Shaw Brothers, Cathay Organisation opened first theaters beginning in 1935. They started their production departments, Cathay-Keris Studio (for

⁵ Runme Shaw and Runrun Shaw arrived in Singapore during the mid-1920s, and found Singapore as an ideal location for the Shaw Brothers to restore their studios and distributional sectors (Ngo 80).

producing Malay-language films) and Yung Hwa Studio (for producing Chinese-language films), much later in 1953 in Singapore. In other words, Loke Wan Tao, the founder of Cathay Organisation, started his business as a movie theater operator rather than a film producer. After the World War II broke out, Loke's family business took severe impacts. Looked for opportunities to revival the family business, Loke went back to Singapore. With his mother and relatives, they cooperated many small cinemas in Malaysia and Singapore area. This was the beginning of Associate Theater Limited in Kuala Lumpur in 1935. Associate Theater Limited later expanded to become Cathay Organisation (Uhde and Uhde 21; National Library Board Singapore eresources.nlb.gov.sg).⁶ After Cathay Organisation opened the branches of Cathay-Keris Studio and Yung Hwa Studio in 1953, Cathay Organisation became the major challenger to Shaw Brothers' monopoly in Southeast Asia (National Heritage Board roots.sg).⁷ Beyond producing films, both the Shaw Brothers and Cathay Organisation also controlled the distribution/exhibition channels by owning cinema chains throughout the Southeast Asian region (Heidi 117; Kar and Bren 192).

Initially the Shaw Brothers only focused on producing Chinese-language films, and Cathay Organization focused on distributing Chinese-language films. They both further explored the Southeast Asian economy by producing Malay-language films and recognized the profits within this market (Muthalib "Winning Hearts and Minds" 49-56). As a result, in 1947, the Shaw Brothers established their studio under the name Malay

⁶ See http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_782_2005-01-19.html

⁷ See <https://roots.sg/learn/stories/golden-era-of-singapore-cinema/story>

Film Productions (MFP); Cathay Organization, as mentioned, started Cathay Keris Studios in order to produce Malay-language films, so they could distribute them through their cinema chain. Both MFP and Cathay Keris hired Indian directors to make Malay-language films (Lent 189; Muthalib “Winning Hearts and Minds” 49; Heide 133).⁸ Since elements from Indian films were popular not only among the Indian Diaspora groups but also with Malay audiences, the purpose of hiring these directors was to produce films that attracted audiences from Malay communities not only in Malaysia but also in Singapore, Brunei, and Indonesia (Barnard 433).⁹ In this respect, the Malay-language films that were produced by the Shaw Brothers’ MFP and Cathay Keris embodied a mixture of Chinese capital, Indian filmmakers, and Malay language and actors.

After the Shaw Brothers and Cathay Keris had already oriented their productions towards making Malay-language films, the general political climate further accelerated this change in the 1950s. Nationalist sentiments arose around the end of colonial occupation in 1957 in order to re-establish a national identity that belonged to the Malay majority. Naturally, the studios made more efforts to integrate with Malay culture through apprenticeships. Malays started to take up the positions as directors and scriptwriters and made films that captured the cultural nuances of Malays (Heide 135-6; Barnard 435; Muthalib “Winning Hearts and Minds” 51-2). In the 1950s and 60s, through

⁸ For example, MFP hired B. S. Rajhans, the director of *Laila Majnun*. Through Rajhans, the studio further recruited more Indian directors, such as L. Krishnan and S. Ramanathan, who had lived in Malaysia and understood local cultures (Heide 133).

⁹ These Indian directors often simply adapted scripts from Indian films into Malay. Many of these works were criticized as films with “all the Indian nuances, cultural idiosyncrasies and mannerisms, and very little that were truly Malay” (Moraes in Lent 189).

the studio system, Malaysia entered its “golden era” of filmmaking. Many popular films produced during this time, in many ways, resonated with the complex conditions surrounding the country’s period of independence— conditions, such as colonial influences and western modernity, which create multiple anxieties among Malaysians.

Among the popular films during this golden era of Malaysian films, P. Ramlee’s films rendered the desires for establishing an ideal Malay identity and the anxieties facing modernization. P. Ramlee started as an actor and then became a director. He starred in, as well as created, many film characters that represented the working and oppressed class of Malays who struggled in the modern world. Some of his characters, such as the stableman in *Call of the Island* (*Panggilan Pulau*, 1954) and the trishaw-peddler in *The Poor* (*Penarik Beca*, 1955), worked through obstacles and ended the films with an optimistic tone. Some of his roles, such as the saxophone musician in *My Mother-in-Law* (*Ibu Mertuaku*, 1962), however, experienced distress fighting the class differences in the materialistic modern society and chose to go back to rural village in the end of the movie. P. Ramlee’s characters encountered the changing society during modernization that corresponded to a critical moment in the nation’s initial experience of self-governance. Happily successful or heartbreakingly wretched, the talented and charismatic roles played by P. Ramlee in films attracted wide empathy from the Malay majority. These depictions provided substance for building a postcolonial national identity centered on Malay ethnicity.

My Mother-in-Law provides a good example. This 1962 movie in many aspects shows the underlying tensions between accepting and rejecting western modernity in the

postcolonial Malaysia. P. Ramlee is not only the director of the film, but he also acts as the protagonist, Kassim Selamat, a jazz saxophone musician. With his white suit and bowtie, Kassim is talented, charming, and popular among not only audiences but also his friends. Sabariah, a Malay girl from a wealthy family in Singapore, is attracted by Kassim's music. When Kassim and his band perform in Singapore, she asks to meet him. With help from Kassim's band mates and Sabariah's sister-like servant, they soon fall in love.

In the first half hour of *My Mother-in-Law*, the modern social settings in Singapore, such as restaurants and nightclubs, appear as playgrounds where Kassim and Sabariah develop their affection for each other. They dance in the nightclub and then take a night ride to flirt in the park. The way Kassim and Sabariah enjoy their time in the modernized Singapore is similar to how young couples fall in love in classic Hollywood romantic comedies. Up to this point in the movie, the modern lifestyle Kassim and Sabariah find in Singapore has been happy and exciting.

The tone of the film changes quickly. The modern world in Singapore is not supportive of the young couple, especially when they come from very different economic classes. Sabariah's materialistic mother disapproves of her daughter's relationship with a musician. The disagreement finally breaks the mother-daughter relationship, and Kassim takes Sabariah to go back to his hometown, Penang, a place currently going through rapid social and economic development. From this point on, the modernity appears much less glamorous as compared to what we saw in Singapore. Sabariah forbids Kassim to play music, because if he continues to play, her mother will never forgive them. Without a job,

Kassim is literally stripped from his white suit piece by piece. They move from a hotel suite to an empty room and finally to a basement. Kassim ends up working at an oil well. Failing to overcome such a struggle, Sabariah leaves Kasim and goes back to Singapore to her materialistic mother.

From Singapore to Penang, we see comparisons of how modernization between these two places affects the lives of the young Malay couple. Singapore represents a fully westernized city. While the life there looks glamorous, the city is clouded by materialistic values and class prejudice. In Penang, at first, we see that modernity is symbolized by the cold, dark iron skeleton of the oil wells. Without music and working as a worker in the oil fields, Kassim loses all hope of making a decent living for Sabariah. Nevertheless, Penang has not been changed completely by western modernity. After Sabariah leaves, her mother sends a fake letter to inform Kassim that Sabariah has passed away. Kassim, as a result, cries so much so that he becomes blind. In Penang, the poor and blinded Kassim receives helps from people he encounters. Especially, when he drifts to the *kampung* (village) area around Penang. He is not only hospitalized by total strangers, Chombi and her family, but also has a chance to pick up a saxophone again. Kassim then changes his name to Osman Jailani and plays his way back to a famous musician who tours all over Malaysia. *My Mother-in-Law* does not end with Kassim being successful again. When Kassim tours with his band to Singapore, Sabariah, who is now married to Dr. Ismadi as her mother's wished, sees him. She asks Dr. Ismadi to cure Kassim's eyes without revealing her identity. Kassim finally sees again. However, when he finds out the

identity of Sabariah and the fact that she is married to the doctor who cured his eyes, he blinds himself and asks Chombi to take him home to Penang.

In *My Mother-in-Law*, the comparisons between Singapore and Penang, as well as between Sabariah and Chombi, metaphorically express the choices Malaysia has to make in order to establish its own postcolonial modern society. While modernization is not only appealing but also unstoppable, *My Mother-in-Law* appraises the traditional values preserved in Malaysia's villages and criticizes the materialism and class prejudices connected to the western modernity. This is not to say P. Ramlee rejects all western influences. On the contrary, from the soundtrack to cinematography, P. Ramlee obviously embraces film techniques and styles from classic Hollywood melodrama to make *My Mother-in-Law*. Nevertheless, in using these techniques, P. Ramlee depicts the oppressed positions of working-class Malays in the unbalanced modern society, and he expresses the essential differences between western modernity and the modernity Malaysians seek to build.

My Mother-in-Law was made in 1963, one year before Singapore became a part of Malaysia following the merger with Malaya, North Borneo, and Sarawak. Although *My Mother-in-Law* was fictional and highly dramatized, it sharply pointed out Malays' anxieties at the moment in facing the westernized and capitalistic Singapore. Kassim's dramatic final depiction to his Malay values, which are metaphorically represented by Penang, echoes Malaysia's later choice to separate from Singapore in 1965. This may also explain why the 1962 film has been so popular and that even today people in Malaysia know its main characters (Barnard 449; Muhammad *Malay Movies* 225). Other

then being a well-made entertaining film, the ideology of building a modern society based on traditional Malay morals has been relevant to the developmental agenda in Malaysia for decades.

P. Ramlee more than created and played many characters representing working class Malays who struggle with the processes of modernization. He also made many iconic films marking the film history of Malaysia. For example, *Semerah Padi*, a 1956 film directed and acted by P. Ramlee, is considered the first truly “Malay film” to break film styles from Indian influences (Muhammad *120 Malay Movies* 105). In addition, in *Hang Tuah* (1957), P. Ramlee acts Hang Tuah, the legendary warrior of the fifteenth century Melaka. Because Hang Tuah was both a skilled warrior and an intelligent ambassador who mingled among foreign allies with full loyalty to the king, so until this day, he represents the figure of a Malay hero. Such a collection of P. Ramlee’s films and characters elevated him to become the most recognized filmmaker and star in Malaysia (Ahmad and Lee 411-2). P. Ramlee’s films have become the ideal examples of Malaysian national cinema.

During the late 1950s and early 60s, while still owning most of the cinema chains in Malaysia, the production sector of the Shaw Brothers Studio and Cathay Keris gradually withdrew from Singapore and Kuala Lumpur and moved their production center to Hong Kong (Kar and Bren 161; Curtin 4).¹⁰ When we trace the development of

¹⁰ During the World War II, large amounts of capital and labor, which included many filmmakers, were moved from mainland China to Hong Kong. After the war, these resources became influential for the film industry in Hong Kong. Meanwhile, Cantonese cinema became popular globally, even more than Chinese-language cinema. With these factors in mind, in 1955, Cathay

the film industry in the Malay Peninsula, including the dimensions of production, distribution, exhibition, and reception, highly cross-cultural history is evident. Not only did influences brought by Indian filmmakers and the Chinese studios blend heavily with Malay-language films, but Hindu, Tamil, and Chinese films were also notable contributors to the film cultures in Malaysia. However, when we understand that the development of Malay films coincides with the changes in postcolonial society in Malaysia, it makes sense why both the state and collective mentality of Malay-majority of Malaysia see P. Ramlee's movies as *the* representatives for the national cinema. As a result, instead of celebrating the diverse cultural origins that composed the early film history in Malaysia, Malaysia's national cinema gradually has become synonymous with Malay cinema. In an effort to create a balance between the constructions of modernization and the non-western values that differentiate Malaysian identity from the previous colonial occupation, the government, beginning in the 1970s, implemented a series of developmental plans. In the next section, I argue that these economic and political plans continuously encouraged Malay cinema to be the predominant image of Malaysia's national cinema.

Postcolonial Nation Building and a State-Certified National Cinema (The 1970s)

The outbreak of the May 13th, 1969, post-election riot in Kuala Lumpur revealed how economic issues had been, for a long time, tightly interwoven with ethnic and political issues. 1969 was an election year in Malaysia. The election elevated the already-

brought Yung Hwa studios to Hong Kong and started MP&GI. In 1957, Shaw Brothers also moved their studios from Singapore to Hong Kong (Kar and Bren 161-8).

existing tensions between Malays and Chinese. Many middle-class Malays had become increasingly exasperated by economic inequality in Malaysia. They found the laissez-faire nature of the economy privileged those who were capable of manipulating capital and monopoly in the market, which were mostly ethnic Chinese. Election results showed marked gains by the Chinese Democratic Action Party (DAP) at the expense of the ruling coalition, and supporters of the DAP took to the streets in celebration. It is not clear how things turned violent, but “Hostilities worsened with news of the killing of a Malay family by Chinese youths as they exited from a cinema in a Chinese neighborhood (Chow Kit in Kuala Lumpur)” (Tajuddin 151-152). Attacks towards ethnic Chinese individuals and business escalated rapidly. Following this incident, ethnic violence spread in and beyond Kuala Lumpur. The riot “left hundreds, mostly Chinese, dead and badly injured” (Tajuddin 152).

This severe conflict between Malays and Chinese marked the pinnacle of economic and ethnic tensions in postcolonial Malaysian society. From the colonial era to the independence, many Chinese businesses expanded in areas such as manufacturing, real estate trading, construction and property development, and even banking (Jesudason 60-4). Unlike the Shaw Brothers or Cathay Keris, who found interests in working with Malay filmmakers, most of the Chinese businesses neither collaborated with Malay partners nor hired Malays (Jesudason 64). Consequently, ethnic Chinese dominated most of the middle and high-level positions in Malaysia’s economic system and left few positions for Malays, while Malays had special political and economic rights of their own, including ownership of agricultural land. The economic imbalances elevated ethnic

tensions between the two groups and eventually triggered the tragedy of May 13th (Milne “National Ideology” 563; Rabushka 709; Wick 17; Case 138; Tan 954; Williamson 406). Two years later, the Malaysian government announced The New Economic Policy (NEP), which was clearly a reaction towards the high ethnic tensions at the moment (Milne “The Politics of Malaysia’s NEP” 239; Jesudason 67; Jomo “Malaysia’s NEP” 41; “The New Economic Policy” 6-7; Stafford 557). Through the NEP, the government attempted to deal with the “new realism” of Malaysian social and political climate, which urged the government to get involved in controlling economic activities as well as in uniting the nation (Wick 18-20).

The National Economic Policy (NEP) and the National Cultural Policy (NCP)

Two critical strategies were implemented to deal with the conflicts between the Malays and the Chinese. First, the government emphasized “national unity” as an ultimate goal for the country after the server ethnic conflicts of May 13th. An immediate action was to start a new Department of National Unity in July 1969 (Saad 249). The department’s first mission was to compose a Statement of National Ideology to promote a mutual understanding that crossed ethnicities, religions, cultures, classes, and political parties. The government believed they could assuage the ethnic tension by awaking patriotic awareness. They claimed that the patriotism could lead the nation to overcome the national tragedy of May 13th, and, more importantly, survive and continue progressing towards a fully developed modern nation (Wick 20; Jomo “Malaysia’s NEP” 41; Heng 265). The government pointed out that the western economic system, in particular the “laissez-faire” economic policies, failed to be an appropriate structure in

Malaysia's case (Wick 18; Jomo "Malaysia's NEP" 41; Jesudason 67). The text of the NEP illustrates that ethnic inequality existed as a fundamental issue in the economic structure of the nation.¹¹ The differences between the Malays and the Chinese began from the economic sectors as well as their place in the hierarchy of the sectors in which they were positioned—Malays often worked in agriculture sectors while Chinese often were employed in finance and technology sectors. In addition, Chinese and foreigners occupied most managerial positions ("The New Economic Policy" 6). To reverse such problematic links between ethnic groups and economic hierarchies, the government needed to get involved. As a result, the implementation of the NEP required both bureaucratic institutions and private companies to hire a certain ratio of *bumiputera* ("son of the soil"), members of the indigenous ethnic groups of Malaysia in managerial positions. In the case of the Malay Peninsula, the term refers to those whose parents are either Muslim Malay or Orang Asli (Jomo "Malaysia's NEP" 42-6; "Whither Malaysia's NEP" 474).¹² With these strategies, the NEP was intended to restructure the economic conditions of Malays. The goal was to increase the percentage of middle-class and wealthy Malays, and thereby alleviate the ethnic tensions that had weakened the social and political life of the nation.

¹¹ In the documents of NEP, it clearly states: "The problem in Malaysia is compounded by the fact that average incomes between the major social groups vary widely. In terms of *per capita* income, the Malays received \$34 per month or one-half that of the Chinese at \$68, while Indians obtained \$57 or some 70% more than the Malays. Of all poor households, about 74% were Malay, 17% Chinese and 8% Indian" ("The New Economic Policy" 5).

¹² In the documents of NEP, the government demands that every company have at least 30% ethnic Malays in the managers' positions ("The New Economic Policy" 5).

The general political and social atmosphere influenced the film cultures in Malaysia as well. The intention to enhance equality for *bumiputera* in the NEP were applied to the production sectors of the film industry beginning in the 1970s (Raju “Mahua Cinema” 70). First, funding became more available for supporting production companies owned by *bumiputera*. Therefore, more and more Malay filmmakers (as well as actors) started to set up production companies by themselves (Heidi 150). In the 1980s, the government further established official organizations, such as National Film Development Corporation (FINAS), with missions to encourage local production as well as Malay filmmakers (Heidi 151-154). Secondly, the aim of national unity in the NEP and the ethno-nationalist vision that grew out of the spirit of the NEP further influenced the content of films. The National Culture Policy (NCP) was announced in 1971. The NCP echoed the NEP’s pro-*bumiputera*/Malay policy and stated that “Malaysian national culture must be based on the indigenous (Malay) culture; that suitable elements from the other cultures may be accepted as part of the national culture and that Islam is an important component in the construction of national culture” (Gabriel 356). Under the implementation of the NEP, the Malaysian film industry had to identify its own cultural elements instead of assimilating all the existed components from either ethnic Chinese or Indian’s film cultures. During this process, to initiate the goals of the NEP, the industry sought for successful productions that presented both the elements of modernity and traditional moral values.

The Film Scene under the NEP and the NCP

In the early 1960s, major studios owned by Chinese, such as the Shaw Brothers and Cathay Keris, had already passed their studio to Malay management and moved their headquarters to Hong Kong. Yet, they still owned many chain cinemas and dominated the distribution and exhibition sectors in Malaysia (Lent 193; Heidi 150). Following the practices of the NEP, the government started to pay serious attention to the monopoly of Cathay and the Shaw Brothers in the film distribution market. The *Straits Times* newspaper in 1972 reported that the government built cinema halls in each state in Malaysia and screened films made from Malaysian Film Industry (Perusahaan Filem *Malaysia*, aka. *Perfima*) (Lent 192). In 1976, the government further required all theaters to display Malay subtitles for non-Malay-language films (Lent 193; Heidi 150).

Another significant impact on film exhibition occurred when, after a long history of Malay-Muslim rule and cultural domination, Malay nationalists, influenced by a wide Islamic Revivalism movement in many Muslim states around the world, reaffirmed an Islamic ethos in the 1970s (Muthalib *Islam in Malaysia* ix).¹³ This led to the execution of a strict censorship from the Malaysian government. The Malaysian Film Censorship Board examined films based on three grounds—religious, cultural and moral values

¹³ Muthalib explains that, “The Islamic revolution in Iran, the Soviet invasion, and later withdrawal from a predominantly Muslim Afghanistan, the shooting at the Ka’aba, the declaration to implement the *shar’iah* laws by an increasing number of Muslim states, the Gulf War between Iraq and United States-coalition forces, the thwarted Islamic State experiment in Algeria, and other recent events in Central Asia, have influenced, albeit in varying degrees, the social-political development of many countries” (ix).

(Wan, Kee, and Aziz 44; Rao 44).¹⁴ Although there was a censorship guideline, many filmmakers expressed confusion when their films were banned (Wan, Kee, and Aziz 45-8; Gray “Being Modern” 54). Seemingly, the key factor was the Department of Islamic Development. “Their guaranteed participation is almost the only aspect of the censorship process that is consistent” (Gray “Being Modern” 54). Following their interpretation of Islamic doctrine, any films that contain spiritual subjects outside of Islamic belief, such as ghosts and traditional animal spirits, or sexual content, such as kissing and the depiction of certain female body parts, were not allowed in public media (Aqullia 437; Gray “Being Modern” 54). In summary, more than encouraging the distribution and exhibition of pro-*bumiputera*/ Malay films, the government discriminated against the expressions of non-*bumiputera* traditions on the silver screen. These actions established the rigid, ideological imagination of Malaysia’s national identity. In this respect, Wan, Kee, and Aziz argue that the censorship signifies how “[t]he makers of sovereignty find its meaning in the religion, and moral as well as cultural ownership of its citizen” (48). Thus, through censorship, these makers of policy manipulated and instructed the development of Malaysian national cinema regardless of how film practitioners themselves wish to cultivated the film cultures in Malaysia.

All of the above factors, from privileging of *bumiputera* culture as the national culture to conducting strict censorship of all film produced and screened, have shaped the discourse of Malaysia’s national cinema into a narrow category that operated as a part of

¹⁴ The Film Censorship Board was established in Kuala Lumpur in 1966. It was functioned “as the implementer of film censorship policy and system for Malaysia, including for Sabah and Sarawak” (Wan, Kee, and Aziz 44).

(or under) the national ideology painted by the government. This is not to say that the film industry intended to make propaganda films to glorify national unity, rather “[t]he effect of such scenarios is to drive filmmakers back to the safe middle ground of teen comedies and romances” (Heidi 153). Consequently, for the next decades, the most popular films in Malaysia’s domestic cinemas are primarily sequel-driven teen melodramas and comedies (Heidi 95).

The Unrecognized Indian Influences

The focus on the socio-economic relations between ethnic Chinese and Malays in the NEP often aids the nation in forgetting there is a third major ethnic group in Malaysia— Indians.

Indian communities are highly visible in Malaysian society. However, the oppression of their economic and political positions often makes Indian Malaysians to be described as a marginal and subordinate group (Rajakrishnan 217; Fenton 139-40; Jain 76-77). When observing the economic development policies of contemporary Malaysia, the conflicts between Malays and Chinese are always the most substantial. UMNO and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) take major roles, even though Indian Malaysians also have their own political party, Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). The MIC has relatively weak visibility and offers limited assistances on the social status of Indian Malaysians. The socio-economic conditions of Indian Malaysians, especially the poor, have not changed significantly since Malaysia’s Independence in 1957 (Tate 106). In this way, while Indian groups participate substantially in the composition of society in Kuala

Lumpur, they were absent from the consideration when the government designed urban plans (Baxstrom “Institutional Planning in KL” 70; Pandi 73).

Although the MIC performs deficiently and Indian communities in Malaysia suffers from lack of political powers, Indian cultures have always been influential in Malaysian society. As mentioned, Indian filmmakers and film styles have played a significant part of film productions in Malaysia since the beginning of filmmaking history in Malaya in the 1930s. Thus, theatric components in the Indian cinema, such as dance, music, and melodrama, became integral as important attractions for Malaysian audiences. After Malaysian film industry started producing films centered on the Muslim Malay culture in the spirit of the NEP and the NCP, Hindi and Tamil films actually appeared as one of the biggest competitors to Malay-language films in the commercial market in Malaysia. Amir Muhammad, a Malaysian writer and filmmaker, describes the Malaysian film industry as, to an extent, “shackled by Indian culture,” since Malay-language films needed to be as entertaining as Indian films in order to compete in Malaysia’s local market (Raj and Sreekumar 158). All these tangled relations between Indian and Malay cinema described above suggest the critical role of Indian influences in the formation of the national cinema of Malaysia.

Nevertheless, regardless of how profoundly cinematic components from Indian culture have affected Malay-language films, no official statement recognized Indian influences as a part of the national culture of Malaysia during the implementation of the NEP and the NCP. The government continued to discriminate against “the others” in comparison to the indigenous Malay culture, and held that any film made in a language

other than Malay did not represent the cinema of Malaysia. In considering how the national cinema of Malaysia was established under the government's ethno-nationalist ideology, we can see how state policies drove Malaysian national cinema to become equivalent to Malay cinema. Yet, this top-down framework cannot erase the diverse origins that comprise the film culture since before Malaysia independence.

In summary, during the 1970s, through the implementation of the NEP and the NCP, Malaysia has undergone a period of building a postcolonial nation and searching for its national identity. As Paul Willemen describes:

Cinema itself emerges as an object in the same way that the nation becomes manifest: in the process of addressing the specific dynamics underpinning and regulating power relations between and within institutional networks. That process is never neutral; as a process, it always seeks to move in a particular direction, towards an arrangement of power-relations that is to be identified and calibrated as somewhere along the continuum between absolute democracy and absolutist authoritarianism (41-2).

In the case of the formation of Malaysia's national cinema in the 1970s, the authorities forcefully synchronized the process of establishing the national culture and the process of formatting the national cinema. From production to exhibition, the government's involvement proceeded with an ethno-nationalist discourse. Regardless of the aggressive efforts on the part of the government, many other forces, such as the already-existing diverse film cultures and the ongoing impacts of globalization, inevitably challenged this top-down imagination of Malaysia's national cinema. Even with encouragement from the

government, the 1970s began the period of decreasing in producing Malay-language cinema. The cinema faced comparison with and competition from Hollywood, Bollywood, and pan-Chinese cinema from China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan. This coincided with the drastic decline in production and consumption of Malay-language films after the studio era (the 1950s and 60s). Consequently, instead of filmmakers trained in the studio system, western-educated Malay filmmakers appeared as the new generation who produce art cinema in the 1980s and 1990s (Raju “Filmic Imaginations” 71).¹⁵ These filmmakers, such as U-Wei Hajisaari’s *The Arsonist* (*Kaki Bakar*, 1994) were the first Malaysian directors to show films in the Cannes Film Festival. Thus appeared Malaysian films screened at international film festivals.

**The Raise of Social Consciousness and the Diversity of Imagination among Malays
(The 1980s and 1990s)**

While the Malaysian government held an Islamic ethos and Malay identity close to the heart and made efforts to establish the modernity accordingly, the nation was also intent on becoming competitive and successful in the global capitalist system. A reason to glorify P. Ramlee’s films as the ideal model for Malaysia’s national cinema, other than the images of modern Malays they generate, was to display how popular and economically successful his films were in Malaysia. However, the visions of a prosperous modern nation that were led by middle-class Malays were not realized after the implementation of the NEP. Such an expectation also failed to come to fruition in the

¹⁵ These filmmakers include U-Wei Hajisaari, Mansur Puteh, Anuar Nor Arai and Shuahaimi Baba...etc (Raju “Mahua Cinema” 71).

film industry. The studio system fell apart in the 1970s and Malaysia's film industry could no longer produce films with such high profits (Heidi 123; Ahmad "Theorizing the Indies" 154). No profit meant no capital investment. Thus, a national cinema based on the studio system's commercial films could no longer sustain itself. Instead, an independent film scene started to emerge in the vacuum period left by P. Ramlee and the golden era (Ibrahim "Neo-Realist Imaginings" 511). With the support of official grants from institutions like The National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS), several filmmakers, such as Rahim Razali in the 1980s and U-Wei Haji Saari in the 1990s, made films that changed the formula of Malaysian national cinema from P. Ramlee's glamorous studio style (Muthalib and Cheong 317; Ibrahim "The Search for a New Cinema" 145; "Neo-Realist Imaginings" 511).

Muthalib and Cheong describe Malaysia's filmmaking environment in the 1980s as shifting from high-budget studio productions to low budget films. Such a change opened the door for new filmmakers (315). Analyzing the production modes and the content of these new filmmaker's works, they further state that:

The change in Malaysian storytelling in the early 1980s, coincided with a change in the country's leadership. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad became the fourth Prime Minister in 1981, spearheading changes that were going to rock the very foundation of the country. The socio-cultural and political changes were reflected in the films of Rahim Razali, Nasir Jani and Mansor Puteh in the 1980s and later in the films of Shuhaimi Baba and U-Wei Bin Hajisaari in the '90s (137).

I argue that the changes in filmmaking should not be seen as the result of the new leadership in Malaysia. Through scholars' examination of these new filmmakers' productions, we see that the simultaneity of these events occurred in a twofold manner. On one hand, the production modes as well as the subjects of some of these films continuously resonated with the national images promoted by the government. Malay actors/actresses still dominated all these new filmmakers' productions, and the images of the modern Malay remained significant for most of these works. On the other hand, these films started engaging subtle social issues observed through on-the-ground living experiences in Malaysia. With this observation, these films became even more critical than P. Ramlee's films on the problems that were emerging from the rapid development processes with the modernization of Malaysia.

The 1980s

One of the key filmmakers who led to the turning point following P. Ramlee's domination was Rahim Razali. Razali's films, while often focusing on the professional and modern images of urban Malay, criticize how wealthy Malays are corrupted by capitalism and are thus often nostalgic in regards to Malays' traditional moral values and lifestyle. In this respect, Razali still incorporated theme similar those in many of P. Ramlee's films. Compared to how P. Ramlee's films, which are often seen as assisting the ruling Malays' nation-building agenda in postcolonial Malaysia, Razali's films appeared as criticism to the ruling class Malay and especially to the corrupt authorities (Ahmad and Lee 410-2).

Razali's first film, *Big Brother (Abang)* (1981), starts with a family corporation falling into crises after the elder son goes overseas to find treatment for his cancer. The company is in trouble because of mismanagement by the wasteful and corrupt family members. To rescue the business, Abang comes back to the family. In the end, after resolving the crisis, he finds peace and happiness in his home village. In *Abang*, while we see a continuum comparison between modernity and tradition, which has been notable since P. Ramlee's films, Razali goes further and seeks to capture the idea of the *New Malay (Melayu Baru)*. This New Malay refers to middle class Muslim-Malays who are able to cope with the multicultural global community (Muthalib and Cheong 318; Ibrahim "The Search for a New Cinema" 156). Abang is a *New Malay*. He has lived in the West's modernity overseas. Because of his global experiences, he gains skills for handling the conflicts in the corporation. Yet, instead of being westernized, Abang holds onto his identity and integrity as a Muslim Malay.

Razali's 1985 film, *The Death of a Patriot (Matinya Seorang Patriot)*, also touches upon the issue of corruption in a corporation's management level with subtle references to the political reality of Malaysia (Ibrahim "Neo-Realist Imaginings" 518). *The Death of a Patriot* is about the war in a company between three corrupt directors and, Haji Shaaban, the ethical chairman. As the descendent of warriors, Haji Shaaban urges to expose the corrupt practices. However, he is killed during the process of exposing the corruption. His death enrages his five warrior children to take revenge on the corrupt directors. In *The Death of a Patriot*, we see the five warrior children depicted as moving between their mysterious and supernatural heritage and their modern appearances,

appearances that follow the fashions of western pop culture. During the revenge sequences, Razali further uses montages to cut between the images of modern spaces around the villain (the corruptor) and the images of psychological sensations that punish the villain from the spiritual world. In this way, Razali magnifies the interrelations between the new and the old.

Although Razali's films were not box-offices hits, his works caught the eyes of film critics, won awards from Malaysian Film Festivals and are highlighted by many film scholars when discussing Malaysia's film productions of the 1980s (Muthalib and Cheong 318-9; Ibrahim "Neo-Realist Imaginings" 511; Ahmad "Theorizing the Indies" 159).¹⁶ Instead of appreciating the technical and entertainment values of these works, Razali's films were considered important because they represent artistic representations from a thinking mind that notices the existing social problems as well as the underlying tensions in society (Ibrahim "Neo-Realist Imaginings" 523).

Other than Razali, many new directors during the 1980s, such as Othman Hafsham, Nasir Jani, and Mansor Puteh, added various elements and styles to expand the spectrum of the Malaysian national cinema. In their films, the image of modern Malays have become diverse. Beyond the New Malays in the corporate worlds (which represent the elites and bourgeois Malays) of Razali's films, we see the large impact of global pop culture on the image of modern Malays.

¹⁶ *Abang* (1981) won the Best Script in the 2nd Malaysian Film Festival; *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1984) won the Best Film and Best Director in the 5th Malaysian Film Festival; *Tsu Feh Sofiah* (1986) won the Best Film, Best Director, and Best Script in the 6th Malaysian Film Festival.

Many films have shown lifestyles influenced by America/Hollywood. One of the most outstanding examples is Nasir Jani's *The Traveling Artist (Kembara Seniman Jalanan, 1986)*, which opens with a scene of the protagonist looking at the posters of Bob Marley as well as Malay musicians who are influenced by the fashion styles of Michael Jackson and other pop stars from The West. The influx of many different forces, including the state's vision for development, Malays' traditional moral values, and the influences of global trends, not only left significant marks in the 1980s' Malaysian films but also pointed out socio-political changes in Malaysia.

The on-going revision of Malaysian national cinema, in a way, manifests the socio-cultural and political shifts in Malaysia. In the 1980s, the influence of the state was waning in instructing the national culture presented by Malaysian-made films. The actual experience of living in the society gradually substituted for the state's top-down government vision in new filmmakers' interpretations of Malaysia's national identity. Malaysia's national identity escaped the framework constituted by the authorities and became a more flexible concept with the seeking, capturing, representing, and digesting of these real-life experiences through these new films. In this respect, although the *bumiputera*/Malay identity still dominated most of films made during the 1980s, the social experiences of living among diverse cultural groups inevitably demanded further considerations in illustrations of non-homogenous Malaysia's national identities.

The 1990s

The socio-cultural and political changes during the 1980s led to Mahathir Mohamad's infamous speech in 1991, where he announced the new developmental plans,

Wawasan 2020 (“Vision 2020”). The ultimate goal of Vision 2020 was to make Malaysia a economically fully developed nation by the year of 2020. The most important measurements of success of this plan was to be the gross domestic product (GDP) of the nation. Mahathir said “...[O]ur GDP should be about eight times larger by the year 2020 than it was in 1990. Our GDP in 1990 was 115 billion Ringgit. Our GDP in 2020 should, therefore, be about 920 billion Ringgit in real (1990 Ringgit) terms” (wawasan2020.com).¹⁷ Different from the statement in NEP, Mahathir stressed the importance of establishing the belief that this nation belonged to all colors, cultures, customs, and religions. This statement addressed a significant shift from the NEP to the Vision 2020 era. In relating to the goals of Vision 2020, Mahathir used *Bangsa Malaysia* (“Malaysian Nation”) for the previous National Culture Policy (NCP). While Mahathir (1991) followed NEP’s principles and continued to emphasize the significance of *bumiputera*’s communities in achieving the economic goals, he further addressed that bumiputera and non-bumiputera would have to collaborate in order to ensure the nation be “economically resilient and fully competitive” (wawasan2020.com).

Analyzing the shift from the NCP to *Bangsa Malaysia*, Sharmani Patricia Gabriel argues that: “This cultural vision (*Bangsa Malaysia*) of a unified nation was also linked with the economic aims of *Wawasan* (Vision) 2020 to achieve fully industrialized status for the country” (366). The motivation behind the shift, in this sense, did not necessarily refer to the reorganization and inclusion of all ethnic groups when imagining the national identity of Malaysia. Instead, “...the state has been mindful of the implications of

¹⁷ See <http://www.wawasan2020.com/vision/>

political and social crises for Malaysia's economic development and its status as part of a larger international community in the current climate of globalization" (Gabriel 366). Through Vision 2020, capitalism challenged, and finally, to a degree, overwhelmed ethno-nationalism.

More and more new filmmakers, such as U-Wei Haji Saari and Shuhaimi Baba, appeared on the horizon in the 1990s. Saari and Baba are considered two of the first-generation art film directors in Malaysian film history (Heidi 155; Khoo "Gendering Old and New Malays" 302). Both come from western film-school-trained backgrounds, and so their works are inevitably influenced by Euro-American art cinema.¹⁸ Thus, Saari and Baba's films have received more interest in the international film festival circuits than the domestic film market. They became the first group of Malaysian filmmakers to be active in the scene of global art cinema.

Their films also offer diversity to the idea of national cinema in Malaysia. Addressing Saari and Baba's films as a similar kind of Malaysian national cinema to that represented by the films of P. Ramlee and Razali could be misleading, and we should not equate their pieces to film presentations that imagine Malaysia's unified identity. This is precisely what scholars criticize as an oversimplified depiction of a national cinema, which treats the term as nothing more than a "taxonomic labeling device" (Higson 64) or as a container of categorical factors for a stiff and stereotypical national identity (Yoshimoto 259). From the NCP to Mahathir's *Bangsa Malaysia*, the government

¹⁸ Saari studied film in New School in Social Research in New York City; Baba studied film in London (Basri and Alauddin 62; Muthalib and Cheong 321).

attempted to make national culture a container with a list of preferable factors in it. They encouraged Malaysia-made films to follow such a narrow vision of the national culture. Saari and Baba never intended to follow such a vision.

If we see Razali and the filmmakers in the 1980s as inovators, who made sensitive social comments through film medium, we can look at Saari and Baba, in the 1990s, as having delved even deeper into rarely touched upon subjects, such as immigration, class, and gender. Productions with “social consciousness and artistic integrity” to many film scholars, their works played critical roles in representing the 1990s’ Malaysian film culture, even though many of these films failed terribly at the box-office (or had not even been shown) within Malaysia’s domestic film market (Ibrahim “The Search for a New Cinema” 145; G. C. Khoo “Gendering Old and New Malays” 302).

Baba’s work provides a female Muslim point of view in modern Malaysian society. Disagreeing with the how Islamic fundamentalists portray Islamic practices, as a devoted Muslim, Baba wanted to point out “the real teachings of Islam and channel their energies to solving some of the problems of the modern world” (Muthalib and Cheong 322). Saari’s films focus on people living in lower class Malaysian society. Instead of representing the elite New Malay, the protagonists in his films are all under-privileged workers in the villages struggling to earn a living in their own surroundings (Ibrahim “The Search for a New Cinema” 147-50). Both Baba and Saari’s films suggest there are multiple dimensions to the identity of being a Muslim Malay. One might argue that Saari and Baba’s films, as with most Malaysian-made films before their time, continue to focus on the dominant Muslim Malay communities and fail in representing other major ethnic

groups in Malaysia. I find that in light of Mahathir's *Bangsa Malaysia*, their films appear to radically and fully reject the top-down constitution of the national identity. Faithful to their social conscience, rather than falling into the mechanism of the state's nation-building strategies, which call for superficial multicultural representations with Chinese and Indian faces in their films, directors, such as Saari, Baba, Raja Ahmad Alauddin, and Adman Sallah, took a serious look inward towards the socio-political and economic problems in Malaysia's Malay Muslim communities.

Mahathir's *Bangsa Malaysia*, in Homi Bhabha's sense, embodies a common narration for building a modern nation—the narration that constructs a social totality. Yet, this narration can be easily challenged. Bhabha writes: “We may begin by questioning that progressive metaphor of modern social cohesion—*the many as one*—shared by organic theories of the holism of culture and community, and by theorists who treat gender, class, or race as radically ‘expressive’ social totalities” (294). Disregarding all the disjunctive past of the various cultures and communities in the history of Malaysia, *Bangsa Malaysia* intended to collect Malay, Chinese, Indian and all the other ethnicities in Malaysia together, and then create an innocent “one”. Saari and Baba's films began the challenge of pointing out that such a totality does not exist even within Muslim Malay communities. They portrayed disagreements in the interpretation of femininity and conflicts among cultural and economic classes. Through this process of rejecting the totality, Saari and Baba's films also positioned marginal and alternative groups at the center of representing Malaysia's national culture. This destabilized the state's version of national culture, and so, with their films, the Malaysian national cinema

was reconsidered according to this new relationship generated between Malaysian films and the national society.

While still focusing on Malay community, the films made in the 1980s and 90s opened a door for filmmakers to challenge the authorized imagination of their nation and society. Moreover, because the government often failed in achieving the goals claimed in the national policies and plans due to corruption and internal conflicts, filmmakers no longer echoed the government visions in imagining Malaysia in their productions. Instead, many independent filmmakers, with the assistance of digital filmmaking equipment, become more and more critical of the government as well as Malaysian society despite of strict censorship.

The Emergence of Digital Filmmaking Community as a Competing Force from the Margin to Redefine Malaysian National Cinema (around the New Millennium)

Before 2000, with the impacts of Asian Financial Crisis in 1997 as well severe corruption and infighting between politicians with the government, the people of Malaysia gradually lost trust in the government. Many protests broke out beginning in the late 1990s. In 1998, a movement of protests, *Reformasi* (Reformation), erupted (Bunnell “Entrapment Controversy” 301; Miles and Croucher 419). Although *Reformasi* was originally triggered by the political conflicts between Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed and Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim, it initiated a wave of social criticism and “signified a massive erosion of the regime’s hegemony over civil society” (O’Shannassy 94). The reexamination of the previous goals in the NEP and Vision 2020 also resulted in more distrust towards both the government of Malaysia and social life in general.

Lurking behind the political turmoil were digital technologies and the Internet becoming more and more accessible, especially around the Kuala Lumpur area (Hernandez 225).¹⁹ Many artists from various backgrounds picked up digital video cameras and made films with subjects inspired from their everyday life (Khoo “Just-Do-It-Yourself” 227). These artists included Amir Muhammad, a writer who graduated with a law degree; James Lee, a visual designer who usually worked in theaters; Yasmin Ahmad, who started her career as a copywriter in an advertisement company; Liew Seng-tat and Tan Chu-mui both graduated from the film and animation major in Malaysian Multimedia University; Woo Ming-jin was trained in the master program of film and television production in San Diego State University; Edmund Yeo holds a PhD on global information and telecommunications studies from Waseda University in Japan. They were later known as “indies” for leading a new wave of independent Malaysian cinema (Khoo “Just-Do-It” 218; Ibrahim “Neo-Realist Imaginings” 512; Ahmad “Theorizing the Indies” 163-5; Cabagnet 140).

Freer than Saari and Baba, who were trained by formal film schools, these digital filmmakers began to explore political and personal subjects through not only controversial content but also unorthodox styles. Many of them started with short videos and later collaborated with each other to make feature-length films. Other than being labeled “indies”, Muthalib further described this trend of digital filmmaking as a

¹⁹ The Commission on Information and Communications Technology in Malaysia has instructed to set up the Multimedia Super Corridor. “The Multimedia Super Corridor in Malaysia is a geographically designated area that stretches from Kuala Lumpur City Centre (KLCC) to Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA), and also includes Putrajaya, Cyberjaya, and the wider Klang Valley” (Hernandez 225).

movement of The Little Cinema (kinema.uwaterloo.ca).²⁰ While this name mostly points out the low-budget and “amateur” status of the digital video productions, more importantly, Muthalib describes these productions as “iconoclastic filmmaking,” in comparison to the pure entertainment and stereotypical commercial films that dominated the Malaysian film markets (kinema.uwaterloo.ca). In addition, since all the short digital movies (and some feature-length) were not made for releasing in commercial cinemas, unlike the self-censored mainstream Malaysian films, these digital pieces were made with a more radical spirit. Gaik-cheng Khoo describes: “An indie film means to provoke critical engagement from its audience, whether by way of its social political content or form (i.e. experimental work, anti-narrative, etc.)” (228). In this sense, digital technologies have emancipated a diverse filmmaking scene, and therefore drastically impacted the content of Malaysian national cinema.

One of the most significant contributors in this digital film movement is Amir Muhammad, whose works smartly and explicitly criticizes the hypocrisy of the multicultural national unity constituted by the government. Muhammad began his video-making portfolio with experimental video essays. As a writer, Muhammad’s works are often driven by his voiceover or written text. The voiceover or the text, combined with the visual images, shows Muhammad’s discerning observation on Kuala Lumpur’s social atmosphere. One of Amir’s short films is *Friday* (2002). The title refers to the practices of Muslims who gather at the Mosques every Friday. In Muhammad’s words, “Friday is the Muslim Sabbath”. Taking images from the National Mosque in Kuala Lumpur,

²⁰ See <http://www.kinema.uwaterloo.ca/article.php?id=31>

Muhammad addresses his wonder with subtitles. First, the subtitles explain how the official website of this mosque describes the mosque as a symbol of national unity, because ethnic Indian and Chinese all participated in building it with both labor and financial supports. Then the subtitles explain how, “A true test of unity would be if Muslims gave money to the construction of non-Muslim houses of worship as well. After all, fair is fair”. While the film captures images of a Friday from inside to outside of the National Mosque, we find the official statement about this Mosque and the images of regular practices in Kuala Lumpur to be in conflict with each other. In a similar spirit, Muhammad made another short video *Pangyau* (2003), meaning “friend” in Chinese. In *Pangyau*, visually, the images show the chaotic and busy Petaling Street (the Chinatown of Kuala Lumpur) around dusk. Against the blur and out-of-focus image of people preparing the opening of food stands and clothes/accessories shops, Muhammad narrates, through voiceover, his teenage memories about a close friend who is an ethnic Chinese. The narration tells of trivial moments between himself and the friend. Some of these moments in the film show how they are simply two young men wondering about their sexuality. Some moments address the awareness of their cultural differences. Towards the end of the video, Muhammad narrates how the friend later moved to Australia with his family in 1987. He explains that it was because the economic environment in Malaysia went bad at that time, and the political climate was becoming unfriendly to ethnic Chinese. Both *Friday* and *Pangyau*, while appearing as one’s personal opinion or individual life experience, expose the gaps between the government-made vision and residents’ daily encounters in Kuala Lumpur. Just as the National Mosque does not

particularly embody the symbol of national unity, the slogan of ethnic equality does not actually bring rapport among ethnic groups.

Muhammad is only one of the “indies.” I highlight his short videos because these works are emblematic of the productions that take advantages of the freedom created by digital technologies and boldly confront the elephant in the room— the problematic multicultural image of Malaysia’s national unity— while other filmmakers focus more on subjects such as individuality (e.g. Tan Chui-mui) and the alienated sensibility in the capitalist world (e.g. James Lee). Even though how new media fits in the discourse of a national cinema is still under discussion (Rosen 382), in the case of Malaysia, film scholars doubtlessly put these digital works under the spotlight when they describe the filmmaking scene in Malaysia after 2000. Placing these works within the trajectory of Malaysian national cinema, these productions not only engage with alternative themes but also become a very different apparatus. This movement of digital filmmaking further changes the common paths of film production and exhibition in Malaysia. More discussions of this new digital film movement will take place in the following chapters.

Conclusion

After independence, various political, religious, economic, and cultural forces in Malaysia continuously interacted with each other. The nation, as a result, functioned as a complex body negotiating between modern and traditional; Islam fundamentalist and western neoliberalism; ethno nationalism and multiculturalism. The government of Malaysia has always acted as a strong force driving the development of the nation through implementing economic and cultural plans. Nevertheless, from the 1970s’ NEP

and the NCP, as well as the most recent National Integrated Plan (NIP) and Satu Malaysia (One Malaysia), the government has gradually lost its credibility due to the issues of corruption and Malaysian's conflicting feelings between governmental vision and the actual experience of living in Malaysian society. Reflecting on the formation as well as the shifts of Malaysian national culture and identity, the evolution of Malaysian national cinema requires an analysis rendering the nuances of socio-political changes. This chapter, by laying out the interrelated trajectories between Malaysia's political and economic development beside an evolution of its national cinema, investigates the ongoing composition of Malaysian national culture and identity. In addition, this chapter also provides a general context for the further discussions on Malaysia's contemporary digital film movement in the ensuing chapters.



Figure 1. A street scene on the way from Petaling Street (the Chinatown of Kuala Lumpur) to Masjid India (one of the Indian districts in Kuala Lumpur). Shot by the author.

CHAPTER 3: THE PAST THAT GNAWS INTO THE PRESENT: THE NEW MILLENNIUM KUALA LUMPUR AND THREE FILMS FROM THE DIGITAL MOVEMENT

The emergence of the digital film movement in around 2000 brought significant revisions to the description of Malaysian national cinema. The movement began in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. Many films that were produced during this movement, such as Amir Muhammad's short videos and documentaries, bluntly challenged the government's social and political agendas. Some, such as James Lee and Tan Chui-mui's narrative films, addressed how the alienated individuals, in particular urban Chinese Malaysians, became trapped in a milieu of hyper capitalism and globalization. These subject matters continue to be relevant in the negotiation between the late modernity and the traditional identity in the postcolonial era in the beginning of 21st century. These subjects were very different from how Malaysian films presented, in the previous chapter, a nostalgia towards Malay's indigenous roots and values. The new focus was on the people's daily experiences in Kuala Lumpur's blossoming millennium which established these films as imagining Malaysian society in its present time.

This chapter first illustrates the connections between Kuala Lumpur and the digital film movement. Through scholarly case studies, this chapter then describe the transformation of Kuala Lumpur in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century. Under the context of Kuala Lumpur's hyper-modernization, globalization, and Islamification, the third section in this chapter examines three films: Muhammad's *The Big Durian* (2003), Lee's *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004), and Tan's *Love*

Conquers All (2006). All three films project a sense of rupture between the new millennium city and its past trajectories. While the feeling of fracture reflects the rapid changes in the city spaces, and the experiences of living through the mega-scale transformations in Kuala Lumpur, the three films further show the impossibility of fully escaping from the past. Just as how some anachronic constructions from the past inevitably remain in the highly modernized districts of Kuala Lumpur, when these films depict the postmodern city in the beginning of 21st century, the past continues to exist in various forms: In *The Big Durian*, the past is revealed through the citizens' memories. In *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All*, the past emerges often as a mysterious figure or tale, and sometime as barbaric violence, especially towards female bodies.

Kuala Lumpur and the Digital Film Movement

After the start of the 21st century, many professional and non-professional filmmakers made digital works throughout Malaysia. Some examples include: Yasmin Ahmad, who started with advertisements and then television films and made many of her films in Johor; Linus Chung, a self-taught filmmaker and stop-motion animator, who made his first animation in Sarawak; in addition, many activist video bloggers who have used digital videos to articulate political and environmental issues in both urban and rural areas (J. Lim 520-22). While the trend of digital filmmaking has appeared in various places in Malaysia, the majority of the filmmakers who have become well known as the "indies" from the digital film movement of Malaysia started their practices in Kuala Lumpur. They include the three filmmakers who directed the three major examples in this

chapter: Muhammad, Lee, and Tan (G. C. Khoo, “Just-Do-It Yourself” 228-29; Z. Raju, “Independent Digital” 7; Cabagnot 140; Hernandez 229).²¹

There are numerous reasons why the digital filmmaking movement has emerged in Kuala Lumpur. First, the city has been the center of Malaysia’s commercial film industry since the 1960s (G. C. Khoo, “Urban Geography” 34). Because of this, traditional filmmaking facilities, such as production studios, post-production services, as well as official institutions (e.g. National Film Development Corporation Malaysia, FINAS), were already established in the Greater Klang Valley (G. C. Khoo, “Urban Geography 34).²² Furthermore, the government’s development plans enhanced the development of information and communication technology (ICT) around Kuala Lumpur. These plans resulted in the state’s technological project, the Multimedia Super Corridor, which included sectors such as the Multimedia University and the Multimedia Development Corporation, to be located in the Greater Klang Valley area (Bunnell and Nah 2450). All of this infrastructure assisted the emergence of digital cinema practices in Kuala Lumpur (Hernandez 225).

²¹ “*Indies*” refers to independent filmmaking. Specifically, it denotes low-budget digital filmmaking in Kuala Lumpur. Khoo defines *indies* as “the current independent filmmaking movement as being underground, low-budget, non-profit oriented, guerrilla filmmaking” in Malaysia (“Just-do-it-Yourself” 228). Nevertheless, this is not to say that all digital filmmakers in Malaysia fall into the group of *indies*. Rather, *indies* specifically describe the filmmakers who use digital technologies to make films that are not restricted by the existed commercial markets in Malaysia.

²² Great Klang Valley usually refers to the metropolitan area that is radiated from Kuala Lumpur, which is the center of the area. A newer term also indicates this area as The Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan Area (KLMA) (Barter 1).

Perhaps more important than the hardware technologies and infrastructure, the socio-political atmosphere of Kuala Lumpur has become inseparable from the subject matters of many these digital film productions. As Khoo Gaik-cheng argues, “these filmmakers are forced by their limited budgets to start small and begin from what they know best or simplest: observation and representation of everyday life” (“Just-do-it Yourself” 227-28). Since these filmmakers live in Kuala Lumpur, they interweave the films with their experiences as well as their critiques of the history, practices, and the power structures in the cityscape. Through many case studies, the following section shows how scholars evaluate how Kuala Lumpur’s city spaces are shaped by significant forces, including modernization, globalization, and Islamification. Some research further indicates that, the residents in Kuala Lumpur often cannot keep up with the constant changes of their surrounding, because these changes come too rapidly and too drastically (Baxstrom “Transforming Brickfields” 1-3; “Governmentality Begins as An Image” 69-71).

As the capital of Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur has been the focal city for many of the government’s modernization and globalization plans after Malaysia’s independence in 1957 (Morshidi 2217; Bunnell et al. 357; Bunnell and Nah 2447; Baxstrom “Governmentality Begins as an Image” 61-72). Starting from the National Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971 and the National Culture Policy (NCP) in 1972, the spirit of these plans in Kuala Lumpur were arguably more significant than the implementation of these plans countrywide. The plans were anchored in the core principles of accelerating modernization and enhancing economic conditions of the *bumiputera*, while maintaining

traditional moral values, especially through the cultivation of Islamic practices. For the city of Kuala Lumpur, where has significant number of ethnic Chinese and Indian populations, these plans are inevitable appealed more to the *bumiputera*. As a result, two of the major characteristics of Kuala Lumpur's transformation in the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century have been the development of megaprojects for making Kuala Lumpur a hyper-modernized global city, and the Islamification of the city space.

Hyper-modernization and Globalization through Megaprojects

A prominent theme throughout Kuala Lumpur's development has been building a "globalizing city" (Bunnell et al. 357) or a "world class city" (Yeoh, "The World Class City" 1-3). Two of the "urban megaprojects" for achieving such a goal were: The Kuala Lumpur City Center (KLCC) project and Kuala Lumpur Central business district (KL Sentral) project (Olds 17). Both plans promoted the slogan of "a city within a city," which indicated how multiple-mechanisms, such as residential, commercial, political, and financial facilities, were all included in the districts' conceptual designs (Bunnell, "View From Above" 1; Bunnell et al. 357; "Kuala Lumpur Sentral CBD"). And so, while both districts encompassed shopping malls, banks, administrative offices, hotels, and metro stations, KLCC also created a leisure center with tourist spots such as the Kuala Lumpur Aquarium within the park. KL Sentral district, with its advantage of being located in the hub of the transportation system, offers spectacular office buildings, mostly designed for business activities, as well as night-life for businessmen ("Kuala Lumpur Sentral CBD"). These megaprojects have not only drastically and rapidly changed significant areas of the

cityscape of Kuala Lumpur, but also generated several monuments that represent Malaysia's modernization. The Petronas Twin Towers in the center of KLCC district, for example, became the tallest buildings in the world from 1998 to 2004 and therefore one of the most well known icons for Malaysia.

Malay-Islamification of the City Space

In "Possession and Displacement in Kuala Lumpur's Ethnic Landscape," Andrew Willford points out: "The Malay-Islamisation of urban space in Malaysia has been and continues to be one of the chief aims of the Malaysian government" (100).

One of the ways the government sought to achieve the goal of Islamisation has been via the change in demography of ethnic groups in Kuala Lumpur. In order to transform the look of the city, since the state's independence, the government evicted many squatters who had lingered in the urban area since the colonial period. These evicted groups included Chinese and Indian settlers as well as the Orang Asli who were the minority indigenous people of West Malaysia (Yeoh, "Creolized Utopia" 109-112; Bunnell and Nah 2447). Under the NEP, the government further intended to alleviate the burdens of the poor population by increasing job opportunities (Siwar and Kasim 1528-29). At the same time, in order to shift Malays from working mostly in agriculture to non-agricultural, which eventually restructured the stereotypical class composition of ethnic segments, the NEP encouraged Malay urbanization. As a result, statistics showed that after the NEP was applied in the 1970s, the populations of Malays significantly grew in the Kuala Lumpur area (B. T. Khoo 50-51). In this way, the institutional planning not

only transformed the conditions of urban poverty but also the demography of ethnic groups in Kuala Lumpur.

Furthermore, many highly visible Islamic edifices were established in the city. The Masjid Negara (The National Mosque of Malaysia), which was built in the central area of Kuala Lumpur in 1965; Jabatan Kemajuan Islam Malaysia (JAKIM, Department of Islam Development Malaysia) was placed in the Islamic Center building, which was built next to the Masjid Negara in 1970 (“About Jakim” n.d.). In 1998, the Islamic Art Museum of Malaysia opened in the same area as well. Other than mosques and buildings for Islam-related organizations, many new skyscrapers were also designed with clear Islamic motifs in their architecture.²³ Given this aesthetic sensibility, the modernization and globalization of Kuala Lumpur has become a model for making a utopian land for Islamic modernity—Islam does not merely embody the official religion but also represents an important force that elevates Malaysia’s modernization (Willford 100; Raju “Multiple Islams” 55; Alatas 171-2).²⁴

Along this line of argument, Tim Bunnell, PA Barter, and S Morshidi describe the dramatic nature of Kuala Lumpur’s development (357). On one hand, the process was dramatic because of the large-scale physical transformation of the urban spaces. Yet, on

²³ One of the most outstanding examples is Dayabumi Complex. Yahya and Ibrahim illustrate that, “Dayabumi Complex is used as a commercial office building [and] is a major landmark in Kuala Lumpur. The construction of 35 floors of Dayabumi Complex commenced in 1982 and was completed in 1984.... [It is] one of the earliest skyscrapers in the city. It is located near the National Mosque, the Old Kuala Lumpur Railway Station and the Federal House at Jalan Sultan Hishamuddin. It was designed in a modern Islamic style. The facade of the tower is adorned with patterns of eight-pointed stars, and Islamic arches at the top and bottom of the tower” (6).

²⁴ While Islam is the official religion, the freedom of religion is in the constitution of Malaysia.

the other hand, such a transformation was also dramatic because the processes brought separation and exclusion, particularly to structures that were “unmodern” or “non-Islamic” (Willford 100). As a result, communities of ethnic Chinese, ethnic Indian (Tamil and Hindu), Orang Asli, as well as many underprivileged Malays often faced unpredictable displacement during these operations of urban innovation.²⁵ And so, there was an unbalanced nature to the modernization of Kuala Lumpur: while the government drew a picture of promising future for the city, many residents in the city began to lose the sense of what would happen to their daily experiences while living in Kuala Lumpur’s new urban spaces.

Urban Development Plans as “Virtual Objects”

In trying to grapple with how the institutional plans impacted on the residents’ daily lives and routines, Richard Baxstrom describes the developmental plans in Kuala Lumpur as “virtual objects”.²⁶ He states: “Plans in the context of governance and urban development gesture to ‘the future,’ but this gesture does not require ‘a future’ in order to function in a highly effective manner” (“Governmentality Begins as An Image” 61-4).

²⁵ The illustration of residents’ displacement can be found in research articles such as Khoo Boo-teik’s article “The Housing Market and The Housing Crisis in Urban Peninsular Malaysia,” Yeoh Seng-guan’s “Creolized Utopia: Squatter Colonies and the Post-Colonial City in Malaysia,” Tim Bunnell’s “Kampung Rules: Landscape and the Contested Government of Urban(e) Malayness,” Andrew Willford’s “Possession and Displacement in Kuala Lumpur’s Ethnic Landscape,” Richard Baxstrom’s “Every Governmentality Beings as Image: Institutional Planning in Kuala Lumpur”.

²⁶ Baxstrom borrows the term from Henri Bergson, and suggests that the development plans have generated visions that produce images for the future. The aggregation of these images lead to materialization, just as how Bergson’s metaphysic calls “matter [as] the aggregate of images” (22). Yet, before the materialization really happens, the development plans only appear as promises of “virtual objects”.

With this statement, Baxstrom highlights the problems in planning and executing what has been envisioned by the series of plans since the 1970s. He explains that these problems come from various governance issues such as mismanagement, corruption, and the ignorance of the daily practices of the existing communities (“Governmentality Begins as An Image” 61-4). Consequently, not only does the future described by the plans never quite arrive, but the past trajectories of the urban spaces can be easily demolished if they appear different from the targeted images. Such targeted images, for most megaprojects in Kuala Lumpur, refer to being modern and Islamic.

Baxstrom’s statements come from his fieldworks in researching the changes in Brickfields, a district near the newly constructed central station of Kuala Lumpur (KL Sentral). In his book, *Transforming Brickfields: Development and Governance in a Malaysian City*, he begins with an incident that occurred in Jalan Chan Ah Tong field in Brickfields. While the field was not registered in the City Hall of Kuala Lumpur (Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur, DBKL) as a public space for recreation, it functions daily as a park. The field has a long history as a place for the neighborhood youth to play soccer. Therefore, when the residents around the field woke up one day in the January 2002 and found half of the field paved in order to build a parking lot, the reaction was massive (1-2). Fortunately, the incident had a happy ending: the community protested and the supportive public opinion splashed in the news, so the neighborhood finally reclaimed the field. DBKL not only stopped the construction but also returned the field and made it an official public recreational area. Baxstrom notes that, according to his conversations with the residents of neighborhood, this kind of sudden construction happened often, and it

was rare for DBKL to react so quickly to protect the community (3). The neighborhood of Jalan Chan Ah Tong was fortunate to be able to fight for this space, which contains a sense of the community's history, and allowed the field to be a part their future.

Nevertheless, the incident showed how sudden construction could separate people from their everyday habits overnight. Sudden construction could literally cut a sense of the past trajectories off from the present space of a neighborhood.

Other than the new construction that disrupts citizens' daily patterns, many half-implemented plans also have made ruptures in the urban space in Kuala Lumpur. For example, another case in Baxstrom's research is Jalan-Jalan recreational park. It was an ambitious plan, which intended to renew the area around the new Tun Sambanthan monorail station in 2002, plus build a leisure park on the nearby bank of Klang River ("Governmentality Begins as An Image" 69-70). It turned out that only the Tun Sambanthan station was built, yet the promises of renewing the shabby apartments and cleaning the polluted Klang River around the area have never been delivered, not to mention the luxurious recreational park. With examples like Jalan Chan Ah Tong field and Jalan-Jalan recreational park, Baxstrom argues:

[T]he concrete effects of such plans for everyday people have often taken the form of ruptures that disorient the experience of urban living (at least temporarily), to the extent that people do not trust their own sense when inhabiting their own homes, neighborhoods, and communities. The net effect in social terms... has been that urban dwellers are often denied their *right to the city* through the aggressive, unanticipated, sudden moves by the state and its agents to

radically shape urban environments, seemingly without direct reference to known plans that would provide a mode of imagining future outcomes (“Governmentality Begins as An Image” 70).

In this sense, Baxstrom explains how the residents of Kuala Lumpur are caught in the present moment without the ability to picture their futures as belonging in this unpredictable fast-changing environment. Through the cases of Jalan Chan Ah Tong field and Jalan-Jalan recreational park, the government treats the past trajectories of the city spaces with ambivalent attitudes. How do the authorized agents decide what kind of past trajectories of the city spaces to keep or remove? In addition, because many plans failed to follow the promises and renew the “anachronistic” spaces, how does the city of Kuala Lumpur position its global and postmodern identities, especially, when the citizens constantly find themselves caught between new constructions of stunning postmodern architectures and old communities with no resource to mend their habitats? Therefore, the transformation of Kuala Lumpur has brought ruptures that disorient the residents’ present experience of urban living, not only because they cannot imagine their continued habitation into the future, but also because they often find their living experiences in the city spaces differ from the homogenous postmodern images that the government pictures for Kuala Lumpur.

All the demolition and construction lead the present urban living in Kuala Lumpur to a position of estrangement, a position neither expecting the future nor making sense the past. This statement, at first, may seem to oppose many philosophical views on how the past is never something finished, as Henri Bergson vividly describes that the past

“gnaws into the future” and “grows without ceasing” (173).²⁷ On the contrary, I argue that the diverse trajectories of the history(ies) of Kuala Lumpur do affect urban living in this postmodern city, and yet the mainstream narrative given to the capital city only depicts a homogenous vision catering to a highly modern Islamic city. This is precisely why the official, mainstream narrative of the city becomes unable to engage with anything considered alternative. So, when the past, which is unrecognized and undesired by the official narrative of the city, still exists and influences people’s daily experiences, people’s consciousness about this past comes out as subversive towards the authorities. In a similar sense, behaviors that seem backward and immoral do not disappear because of the progression of modernization and Islamification. The postmodern city space only becomes a complex container for the coexistence of multiple temporalities.

The filmmakers who started the digital film movement, with limited budgets, often began their filmmaking with subject matter inspired by their daily experiences (G. C. Khoo “Just-do-it Yourself” 228). During the early period of the movement in the 2000s, several independent film production companies established their bases in Kuala Lumpur. They include Doghouse73 Pictures (since 2001), Greenlight Pictures (since 2004), and Da Huang Pictures (since 2005), and all these production companies made digital short and feature films set in the urban and suburban areas of Kuala Lumpur.²⁸

²⁷ Henri Bergson writes in *Creative Evolution*: “For our duration is not merely one instant replacing another; if it were, there would never be anything but the present—no prolonging of the past into the actual, no evolution, no concrete duration. Duration is the continuous progress of the past which gnaws into the future and which swells as it advances. And as the past grows without ceasing, so also there is no limit to its preservation” (173).

²⁸ For examples, from Greenlight Pictures, there were Woo Ming-jin’s *It’s Possible Your Heart Cannot Be Broken* (2005) and Edmund Yeo’s *Chicken Rice Mysterys* (2008); From Da Huang

Among these films, the three examples discussed in the following section—*The Big Durian*, *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, and *Love Conquers All*—all engage with everyday experiences of living in Kuala Lumpur. The distinct conditions of Kuala Lumpur are at once caught in the present temporality framed by the official and mainstream narrative and affected by the past happenings ignored by this mainstream narrative. These three films present the 21st century Kuala Lumpur and render the diverse, strange, and unbalanced existences of the city's past.

Three Films about Kuala Lumpur from the Digital Film Movement

The following section starts with the analysis of Muhammad's first feature documentary, *The Big Durian* (2003). The documentary retraces many traumatic social and political incidents that have happened in Kuala Lumpur since Malaysia's independence. Yet, instead of intending to coherently reconstruct these unpleasant events of the city, *The Big Durian* shows there is no trustworthy narrative to this past, especially not the official one. Comparing citizen's memories of their personal experiences during the significant incidents to the news reports controlled by the government, *The Big Durian* challenges the mainstream narrative of the city and further argues that the state-dictated vision of Kuala Lumpur has made it a place without truth. In this way, Muhammad's *The Big Durian* appears as a confrontation towards the top-down ideological framework imprisoning the citizens' understanding regarding their own habitat. Furthermore, it asks the citizens to free themselves from such a confined and

Pictures, there was *Love Conquers All* (2006); From Doghouse 73, there was *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004).

collective definition of Kuala Lumpur through their participation in the social and political milieu of the city.

In contrast to Muhammad's works, *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004) by Lee and *Love Conquers All* (2006) by Tan addresses almost nothing about the historical context and political atmosphere of Kuala Lumpur. These two films narrate mystical and gloomy lives of the ethnic Chinese subjects in the urbanized and globalized Kuala Lumpur. By underscoring the protagonists' alienation in both films, these two filmmakers first engage with the impacts of hyper-capitalism and late modernity. Both films then take unexpected turns in the plots and reveal the barbaric and vicious sides of this postmodern city.

Wrestling with a Cage Framed by the Official Narrative: Amir Muhammad's The Big Durian (2003)

Although *The Big Durian* is a documentary, it starts with a staged monologue of a young female who was brought from Sabah by her uncle to work in Kuala Lumpur. In her monologue, she tells the audiences that she thought coming to Kuala Lumpur would make her free, but instead, she finds that Kuala Lumpur is like a cage. As the audience, we never know if the staged monologue tells a true story. Similarly, many interviewees in this documentary are actually famous actors and actresses, and so we never know if they act for their interviews or if they tell of true experiences of themselves or somebody else. Nevertheless, *The Big Durian* neither appears as a mockumentary nor pseudo-documentary. Since the film presents the reality of Kuala Lumpur as a framed cage that limits citizens' understanding about their city, it only appears "real" when people receive

a mixture of fake and honest information— as one of the interviewees comments in the film: “There’s always speculation in Malaysia because the truth never comes out.” With such an atmosphere, *The Big Durian* introduces and traces many past incidents that reflect the thorny social, political, and ethnic issues that the government fails to engage when they are busy constructing and narrating a global, postmodern, and Islamic Kuala Lumpur. In this respect, *The Big Durian* engages with the social and historical taboos and challenges the official narrative of Kuala Lumpur.

While *The Big Durian* investigates many past episodes in Kuala Lumpur, these episodes are all developed around one incident that happened more than a decade ago: On October 18, 1987, when a soldier, Private Adam, brought his M16, to downtown Kuala Lumpur in a district called Chow Kit, and started shooting. Although no media reported the situation at the time, the story of the shooting spread through the people over a matter of time. Through interviews, the film tries to reconstruct the atmosphere the morning after the incident happened. Several interviewees remember how they received phone calls from family members or friends, warning that something dangerous was happening in Chow Kit. These memories of this significant public incident show strong connections between what had happened in the city and its residents’ daily routines of the moment. They go on to describe that many schools were closed for three days while Private Adam was on the run; all city tours were cancelled during the time as well.

Apparently, the disruptions to people’s daily business in Kuala Lumpur were severe. However, *The Big Durian* further points out that, even though the capital city had stopped its regular operation for days, no one seemed to be able to recount what exactly

happened from the news at the time. Only in the reports issued after Private Adam surrendered to the army and the police did the government announce that the situation had been resolved, and that the killing had no relation to any ethnic conflict. The investigation of this 1987 incident represents the first time-space that triggers wonders in Kuala Lumpur in *The Big Durian*. Even though the citizens vividly remember the moment, the memories belong merely to the interviewees themselves and have never turned into a collective understanding of what threw their lives into chaos for days. Moreover, after putting the citizens' memories and the official statement side by side, *The Big Durian* shows that the fifteen years between the incident and the making of this documentary only further allowed the government and mainstream media to sway from the responsibility of explaining what happened.

The interviews about memories of the 1987 Private Adam incident are cross-edited with images of the streets and the landscape of the 21st century Kuala Lumpur. When Muhammad explains the incident in the voice over, we visually ride through the traffic in Kuala Lumpur in a car with no information as to which area it is. The audiences are left to wonder if these streets in the 2000s may or may not overlap with the spaces where the incident occurred in 1987. Meanwhile, Muhammad finds the exact locations where Private Adam stayed before the shooting in Chow Kit as well as the apartment complex in Kampung Baru where Adam was arrested. Muhammad even finds the hotel employee who checked Private Adam in the day before his shooting. Through these mixed edits, the recollection of the Private Adam incident blends into the new millennium city spaces. Such editing, instead of reconnecting this past incident to these

newly constructed urban spaces, continues to question how the citizens and their city make sense of this continuously renegotiated past.

The shootings by Private Adam only function to provoke reflection on the multivocal understanding and expression of historical, social, and political pasts of Kuala Lumpur. First, the event of Private Adam's gun shooting immediately recalled the severe ethnic conflicts of May 13, 1969. Chow Kit, where Adam began the shooting, was also the site of the May 1969 conflict. Among the interviews Muhammad conducted, one was of a Chinese man who recalls the night of Private Adam's attack. He was still in his office, when he received a phone call from his wife regarding the potential dangers in Chow Kit. He looked out his window and found nobody was on the street, and immediately felt panic. An Indian homemaker, after receiving the news, rushed out to buy rice and bread to prepare for her family to stay home for weeks. The Chinese man's immediate-panic and the Indian lady's preparation for the upheaval all came from a deeper recollection of the dreadful ethnic conflicts during the May 1969. They both feared the incident was another ethnic riot, especially since 1987, like 1969, was another election year in Malaysia and the ethnic tension was high (G. C. Khoo "Urban Geography" 40). Although no interviewee in this film really lived through or remembered the time of May 1969, the ethnic conflicts affected their consciousness in 1987.

Muhammad continues to expand the reflections about the sensitive past of Kuala Lumpur. He introduces two other political episodes that also happened in 1987: the first a United Malay National Organization (UMNO) election campaign rally and the second,

Operation Lalang.²⁹ In tracing Private Adam's final hiding spot before he was arrested, Muhammad leads the audience to another district in Kuala Lumpur, Kampung Baru. Kampung Baru is not only an iconic district for Malays but also another location severely damaged in May 1969. It was also where UMNO, in 1987, planned to hold a pro-Malay nationalist rally for the election close to the dates of Private Adam's shootings. Because of the shooting, Muhammad narrates in voice over, "The nation stayed at home." Muhammad uses the word, "the nation," to mock the ethno-nationalist position of UMNO. Even though UMNO was the governing party at the time, instead of avoiding the ethnic conflicts that caused the national tragedy of May 1969, UMNO's rally for election stirred up the ethnic tension. The bits and pieces of memories, comments, and news reports about Private Adam, May of 1969, and UMNO's rally for election, are connected to the images of city spaces through editing, and we start to become aware of how these past events have never left the consciousness of Kuala Lumpur's citizens.

A core question that has become more and more significant in *The Big Durian* neither seeks asking the truth about Kuala Lumpur's sensitive past nor the solution for the ethnic conflicts; rather, it confronts how the government always dodges the controversial issues with over-simplified and unworthy resolutions. Along this theme, Muhammad

²⁹ UMNO has been the biggest political party in Malaysia. It stands for Malay nationalism and supports Malays' "special rights" in sectors such as "civil service appointments, military structure, along with policies for land, language, and religion" (Williamson 406). Then in 1960, not long after Malaysia's independence, the government enacted the Internal Security Act (ISA). ISA allow the government to execute preventive detention if the person might be "acting in any manner prejudicial to the security of Malaysia..." ("Internal Security Act 1960" 17). Operation Lalang was an example of the execution of the ISA in 1987, when the government arrested more than 100 people, who were activists, environmentalists, lawyers, and politicians, in the name of national security.

bluntly challenges the government and brings up another political action that also happened in 1987— Operation Lalang, which resulted in the arrest of more than a hundred people. These people included social and environmental activists, lawyers, and politicians from both the opposition and the governing party. These arrests were obvious political persecutions according to the interviews. They were the outcomes of fights between political powers. Therefore, when the interviewees of *The Big Durian*, who include an activist, a teacher, and a lawyer, talk about Operation Lalang, they all express their deep distrust towards the government.

Not all the citizens find the government untrustworthy. Muhammad asks the interviewees to read the government's statements from the newspapers while investigating the social atmosphere of 1987 Kuala Lumpur. Many interviewees bluntly smirked at these reports and implied that the government controlled the information in these reports. Yet, many interviewees, on the contrary, applauded Malaysia as a harmonious and peaceful nation. When they read the statements in the newspaper, there was no sign of questioning the content. Finding very different stories, perspectives, and speculations on the same incident, *The Big Durian* shows no single coherent narrative can illustrate entirely what had happened in Kuala Lumpur in 1987. In the beginning of 21st century Kuala Lumpur, there are still significant splits among how people make sense of these past happenings. On one side of the split, the government draws its official illustration and broadcasts it through the public media it controls. Whether adhering or not the government's version of history, the citizens practice their daily lives in Kuala Lumpur with their own views of the city.

Muhammad obviously finds different angles that do not follow the official narrative of the city. From the May 13th riot in 1969 to Private Adam's shooting and Operation Lalang in 1987, *The Big Durian* highlights the memories that have been left outside of the official narrative. These memories, as well as the locations where these historical incidents happened, remind the audience that ethnic conflicts and unjust political persecutions continue to weigh on the collective consciousness of many Kuala Lumpur's citizens. At the same time, with a vivid imagination of Kuala Lumpur being (or to become) a postmodern Islamic city, the authorities do not only avoid engaging these unsolved issues but also build a barrier to exclude these issues. Muhammad has never explained exactly why the documentary is named "The Big Durian." Yet, I imagine, the unsettling past of Kuala Lumpur could be understood as a big thorny durian that is left outside of the frame made by the government's ideological and physical constructions of the city. While it is not difficult for the citizens to sense the strong smell of the durian, they are separated from it.

In the end, Muhammad's investigations on the past incidents do not aim to rewrite the history of Kuala Lumpur. They aim to show the taboos as well as the irony in the present-time Kuala Lumpur. In this aspect, *The Big Durian* is really about the new millennium Kuala Lumpur, the Kuala Lumpur where we are lingering on the streets with Muhammad's camera. It asks us to see how the people living among these streets individually and collectively engage with their city that is full of speculations and political suspicions. Yet, we only see such engagement through individual memories, and cannot find a sense of collective agreement from their recollections. This may be why

Dennis Lim marks *The Big Durian* as “a wry, impertinent love letter to the Malaysian people that won’t excuse them their apathy” (32). *The Big Durian* ends with a monologue from the same young female worker who speaks in the opening monologue. She describes the moment when she witnessed Private Adam’s gun shootings in Chow Kit. On Private Adam’s face she saw freedom. The freedom that Muhammad advocates through *The Big Durian* may not be as extreme as the shooting, yet this ending underlines that the opportunity for freedom may only come from passionate revolts against the illegitimate authorities.

In 2003, *The Big Durian* became the first Malaysian film shown at the Sundance Film Festival. This news was reported in many newspapers in Malaysia. However, because of the sensitive political criticism, the film itself was banned in Malaysia. In the next five years, Muhammad kept active and made *The Last Communist* (2006) and *Village People Radio Show* (2007). Both are documentaries about subjects who have lived in the disbanded Chinese communist groups after the Malayan Emergency.³⁰ The Film Censorship Board banned both these films as well. In 2009, Muhammad released another documentary dealing with the ethnic politics in Kuala Lumpur called *Malaysian Gods*. With a focus on subjects of the Reformasi movement in 1998, the Hindu Rights Action Force (HINDRAF) rally in 2007, and the lives of Indian (especially Tamil) communities in Kuala Lumpur, Muhammad once again engages with the anti-

³⁰ The Malayan Emergency refers to the condition during the twelve-year war between the communist guerrilla (groups) and the government (both colonial and postcolonial governments) from 1948 to 1960.

government taboos in Kuala Lumpur. He, therefore, keeps pushing the audience to pay attention to the ethnic and political milieu of Kuala Lumpur.³¹ ³²

In the following section, I continue by examining the other two significant narrative films born from the digital movement: *The Beautiful Washing Machine* by Lee and *Love Conquers All* by Tan. While both films also take the on subject matter of the lives of people in the early 21st century Kuala Lumpur, these movies are very different from Muhammad's documentaries. The two narrative films are made by Chinese-Malaysian filmmakers, and both keep a distance from commenting on the government's political agenda for Kuala Lumpur. While the titles of the two films "*The Beautiful Washing Machine*" and "*Love Conquers All*" seemingly suggest they tell romantic stories about Kuala Lumpur, these two films depict the alienated urban Chinese in Kuala Lumpur. Furthermore, both films show the dark sides of postmodern Kuala Lumpur and lead the audience to see uncomfortable brutality through mysterious happenings.

³¹ Reformasi was a protest movement in 1998. It was initiated by a political conflict between Anwar Ibrahim and Mahathir Mohammed when Mahathir sacked Anwar's position to become Deputy Prime Minister. Yet, the protests in Reformasi movement had also demanded a wide spectrum of civil and political rights by various civil society organizations (Miles and Croucher 419-20).

³² Asha Rathina Pandi (2014) reports about Hindu Right Action Force (HINDRAF) rally and writes: "On 25 November 2007, the world witnessed a historic protest rally in Malaysia. To demand equal rights as citizens, the Hindu Rights Action Force (Hindral) - a coalition made up of 48 Indian NCOs - called a demonstration. Defying a court order denying a permit for a peaceful assembly, about 10,000 to 30,000 protestors took to the streets of Kuala Lumpur" (73).

Urban Chinese Subjectivity in New Millennium Kuala Lumpur: James Lee's The Beautiful Washing Machine (2004) and Tan Chui-mui's Love Conquers All (2006)

Many of the major players in Malaysia's digital films movement are Chinese-Malaysians. Lee and Tan are two of the most active Chinese-Malaysian filmmakers based in Kuala Lumpur. Instead of making films that emphasize being ethnic Chinese and, therefore, confronting the political and historical discourses emphasizing the Muslim Malay representation in most of mass media, scholars argue how Lee and Tan's films depict Chinese-Malaysians in Kuala Lumpur as alienated subjects in a globalized and hyper-modernized milieu (G. C. Khoo "Smoking, Eating, Desire" 122; Raju "Mahua Cinema" 74).

This argument is similar to Fredric Jameson's claim that the issue of ethnic identity in Edward Yang's *The Terrorizers* (1986) is neither about Chinese nor Taiwanese identity but rather about the psychic representations of urban residents during the processes of urbanization and modernization (120). Jameson states that "[t]his lends its (*Terrorizer's*) 'diagnosis' a kind of globality, if not a universality, which is evidently what has made Yang's critics uncomfortable" (120). *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All* also deliver an unsettling feeling towards the processes of globalization in Kuala Lumpur. The psychic states that Jameson describes resonate with how G. C. Khoo analyzes Lee and Tan's films as phenomena of cosmopolitanism and suggests they attempt to re-construct identity through "not-too-distant past" and "their fast-changing spaces of belonging" ("Just-Do-It-(Yourself)" 241). Nevertheless, this argument only makes partial sense to me.

First, I ask whether the idea of cosmopolitanism disconnects Lee and Tan from their ethnic Chinese identity. As Aihwa Ong points out in *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, “Chinese capitalism” has, for a long time, intertwined overseas Chinese with the operation and globalization of capital. The characteristics of being cosmopolitan and transnational might actually reflect the images of an urban Chinese who lives in a global city such as Kuala Lumpur (7). In this respect, ironically, when Lee and Tan seek to construct a seemingly rootless identity from their contemporary experiences of living in Kuala Lumpur, the representations in their films actually belong to Chinese-Malaysian rather than any other major ethnic groups in Kuala Lumpur. Secondly, both *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All* do not solely focus on the postmodern and global sides of Kuala Lumpur. On the contrary, in both storylines, the main characters are dragged into the dark and dangerous corners of the city. These corners appear as anachronistic spaces that should not belong to a supposedly civilized and modernized world. In there, people act backward and barbaric; especially in how they treat females as merely sexual objects for pleasure and money.

Given these thoughts, I find that even though *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All* tell fictional stories, the Kuala Lumpur in both films appears not so different from the Kuala Lumpur Muhammad documents in *The Big Durian*. Both fictional films also depict the 21st century Kuala Lumpur ruptured from its past. The new millennium city here begins to be defined by the global narrative of capitalism, which homogenizes the time and space of Kuala Lumpur to synchronize it to all the hyper-modernized cities around the world. The history and tradition of Chinese immigrants in

Malaysia, therefore, becomes irrelevant to these urban Chinese characters when they operate according to the global capitalistic system. Similar to what Muhammad points out in *The Big Durian*, the past neither finishes nor vanishes. The past also comes back to haunt in *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All*. It haunts through mystic happenings in the plots. To urban characters whom become alienated living in the hyper-modernized system, these mystic happenings arrive not only unexpectedly but also unpleasantly. They end up bringing horror and punishment to the protagonists.

The Beautiful Washing Machine

The Beautiful Washing Machine begins with the protagonist, a bachelor, shopping for a washing machine in a supermarket, a superstore where one cannot only buy foods and household goods but also general merchandise including things such as clothes and electronics. The bachelor ignores the clerk's suggestion on the new models and picks an old, used washing machine. For the next few days, the bachelor is troubled by the malfunction of the washing machine, yet he cannot find a way to fix it because all the related companies have stopped servicing the outdated model. During the day, the bachelor works in a postmodern-looking office. Everyday he moves between the office, the supermarket, and his apartment. Just separated from his girlfriend, the bachelor becomes a loner whose only activity, outside of his job and home, is shopping in the supermarket. We see him wandering among this modernized and globalized space with sharply outlined shelves of products.

One night, the bachelor sees an advertisement for a bottle of tomato chicken sauce on television. In the dim living room of his apartment, the bachelor becomes mesmerized

by the commercial. He goes to the supermarket the next day and looks for the sauce. In order to complete the task of making the tomato chicken using the recipe from the commercial, he calls the phone number from the advertisement while shopping in the market. When the lady from the customers service pries to learn if he is cooking for his girlfriend, he first pretends he has a girlfriend but soon loses his patience. All he wants is to complete the purchase inspired by the commercial. The bachelor feels uncomfortable and annoyed by this unanticipated social interaction. How the bachelor immediately adapts and then continuously follows the information offered by television broadcast suggests the bachelor is a part of consumerist operation of this city.

In this way, Lee introduces the bachelor as a robotic and alienated subject who operates under the mechanism of a postmodern city. He shows him under the pale fluorescent lights in the office, surround by massive amount of products in the supermarket and also alone eating in front of the television. Through these shots, we take time to look at how the bachelor is not only estranged from a sense of intimate community but also from his basic human feelings of happiness and sorrow. His alienation also places him in a trapped condition. This trapped condition specifically addresses the urban experience of hyper-capitalism.

If the film continued investigating the psychic state of the bachelor through his alienated urban living, we could conclude that *The Beautiful Washing Machine* is merely a criticism of postmodern capitalism. However, a mysterious turn soon happens to the bachelor and drastically changes the focus of the film: One night, the bachelor hears strange sounds in his apartment and finds a strange woman eating noodles beside the old

washing machine he brought. She leans closely against the washing machine as if she came out of the washing machine, or she actually embodies the washing machine. The bachelor promises to let her stay with the agreement that the woman has to do house work, such as wash clothes, clean the apartment, and cook food. The appearance of the mysterious woman drastically changes the characteristics of the bachelor. He begins showing human desires. It becomes obvious that Lee makes the mysterious woman a body to be looked at with voyeuristic pleasure, and the bachelor is the one to perform the gaze. The bachelor even buys her a summer dress and high heels so she can be more objectified. While the bachelor does flirt with her, instead of having sex with the woman, he takes the woman to prostitute her for money. In front of a line of ATM machines, he sells the woman to another man. This shocking and backward gender politic between the bachelor and the mysterious woman is revealed in contrast to the hyper-modern city we are introduced to earlier. In the end, the woman escapes from the sex deal, and, in retaliation, the man and his gang beat the bachelor on the street.

The mysterious woman continues to be treated poorly even after she leaves the bachelor. The woman accidentally meets an old man who later takes her into his big suburban house. In this house, the woman continues to be seen merely as a sexual object, especially by the husband of the old man's daughter. At one point, the husband even rapes her. The old man's daughter also feels threatened by the woman and is hostile to her. All the horrible abuse toward the woman makes me ask: Why is this woman punished for no obvious reason? She has never looked back to the male gaze, or desired

any material enjoyment, or expressed any curiosity.³³ If we consider her initial connection to the old washing machine, does the title of the film “The Beautiful Washing Machine” ironically indicate that it is her beauty that makes her a sexual target? In particular, Lee is clearly playing with the stereotypical motifs in the horror genre and intentionally objectifying her female body with an exaggerated amount of male gazes in the film. In this respect, what does the mysterious origin and sexually abused body of the woman actually represent?

The woman’s close connection to the old washing machine may offer some leads to answer these questions. The unfixable and unusable “beautiful” washing machine is an anachronistic object in the postmodern world. It carries a sense of the past; a past that is now deemed irrelevant. The unknown woman, who is attached to the washing machine, appears to be a part of this irrelevant past. The stereotypical representations of the objectified female body— being household labor and a sex object— emphasize how this past is uncivil. The appearance of the washing machine as well as the abused woman, therefore, redefines the postmodern Kuala Lumpur introduced through the life of the bachelor in the first half of the film. It suggests Kuala Lumpur has never transformed into a city of total postmodernity, and perhaps no city ever does. No matter how globalized and urbanized Kuala Lumpur becomes, the past, either beautiful or irrelevant, always lingers in the city.

³³ Linda Williams in her article “When The Woman Looks” argues that when a woman shows her desires through looking in a film, the female character often receives punishments (61-5).

In this regard, I argue that *The Beautiful Washing Machine* more than comments on the alienated urban Chinese subjects in the postmodern and globalized city, it further shows anxieties towards a patriarchy past that comes with the Chinese heritage. Such anxieties agrees with G. C. Khoo's argument, which points out the cosmopolitan qualities of the Chinese-Malaysian filmmakers and their productions in the digital film movement. Yet, through *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, their cosmopolitan qualities do not necessarily suggest a standpoint of getting rid of their ethnic Chinese identities. Rather, their films criticize the gender roles in traditional Chinese culture, and imagine a Chinese-Malaysian identity that may be incompatible to the long tradition and history of Chinese identity.

Love Conquers All

Directed by female director Tan, *Love Conquers All* describes a different encounter between a female protagonist, Ping, and Kuala Lumpur. As the title suggests, the film tells a love story between Ping, a new comer to Kuala Lumpur, and John, a hoodlum in the city. Similar to the irony in the title of *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, Ping's love to John eventually drives her to a dreadful situation. The film opens with a long take of Ping sitting on a bus next to an old man who is an ethnic Indian. He asks to change seats with her because he has too much luggage. After struggling to move his bags, the old man finally settles down but then starts crying. Ping looks briefly at him and asks nothing. Unlike the old Indian man, Ping carries very little baggage. In this opening scene, we see Ping's carefree attitude in contrast to the emotional Indian man, who still hangs on to what he is leaving behind.

The bus travels from Ping's countryside hometown to Kuala Lumpur. In Kuala Lumpur, Ping stays with a family who owns a roadside stand. In this new environment, by employing relatively slow-paced editing, we take time to see how Ping interacts with and observes the city around her. Meanwhile, she keeps in daily contact with her hometown and calls her parents and boyfriend back home. Compared to the pale fluorescent lighting spaces and the urbanity that the bachelor belongs to in *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, Ping experiences other parts of Kuala Lumpur—the parts that belong to the working class and the outdoor streets. Here, she runs into John who soon starts pursuing her enthusiastically. John has a car and is therefore able to provide mobility for Ping to move around Kuala Lumpur, especially at night. One day, mostly against Ping's will, John forcefully takes her for a long car ride. They drive until the gas runs out and find themselves in a *kampung* (a traditional Malay village) outside of Kuala Lumpur. They are served a meal in a house hosted by a Malay family. In this *kampung*, Ping and John share an intimate day together. From the Indian man on the bus to the Malay family in the *kampung*, Ping encounters sentiments of nostalgia through people from different ethnicities. Both scenes are emotional and effective. However, in terms of Ping's relationships to her homeland, we only see her talking to her parents or boyfriend on a public phone. This method of representation implies how urban context gradually dilutes Ping's connection to her biological roots and how she observes emotions and lifestyles from strangers.

With John, Ping becomes more and more distant from her past trajectories in her countryside home and gradually acclimates to the city lifestyle as well as John's lifestyle.

During a late-night supper, Ping and John run into John's cousin, Gary. John reveals to Ping that Gary makes pretty girls fall in love with him and then scams these girls into making money for him through prostitution. Later in the film, we find that John's description foreshadows and predetermines what happens to Ping in the rest of the movie. The fully unveiled ending of the film deprives Ping of her subjectivity and autonomy because her fate is wholly described and determined at the moment when John explains the plot. In this way, Ping fails to be the explorer of the city, and becomes not so different from the bachelor in *The Beautiful Washing Machine*. One night, John shows up all beaten up and tells Ping that he is in trouble. A couple days later, John disappears. Ping finds Gary instead. Gary tells her that John needs money to get out of trouble, and he knows how to make quick money. As what John described during the dinner, Gary arranges to prostitute her for money. In the next scene, we first see Ping slowly strips naked in front of a middle-age man, and then it cuts to Ping sitting in Gary's car with her bruised face sticking out of the window. Once again, similar to what happens in *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, we see that Ping becomes an abused female body. In *Love Conquers All*, she is abused because she falls in love.

John's description of Gary's scams implies Ping is not the first one to fall into the trap, and pretty women's bodies are repetitively abused in this fictional Kuala Lumpur of *Love Conquers All*. In this way, the vulgar gender representations within the postmodern city are portrayed in both *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All*. How John, in *Love Conquers All*, suddenly changes from a lover to a scammer is a riddle. Just like we never know why the mystic woman suddenly appears in *The Beautiful Washing*

Machine. Both turns in the film plots are unexplainable and presented as mysterious happenings. This reminds me of Bliss Lim's statement on the fantastic cinema made in postcolonial Philippines. He states, "supernatural accounts are at once fraught with historical inscription and insinuate the limits of homogeneous national-historical time"(99). When unexplainable turns happen in both films and lead to sexual abuse on female bodies, the savageness is seemingly anachronistic, yet actually occur in the postmodern-day Kuala Lumpur. The insinuation of a continuous undercurrent of violence also challenges the modern and morale narrative that the government evokes with regard to Kuala Lumpur.

As a result, I further argue that these abused female bodies function in two dimensions in *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All*: First, the sex scenes that show abuse towards the mysterious woman and Ping's naked body intentionally violate the Islamic morale the Malaysian government uses to construct the censorship rules for all public media. These scenes sexualizing female bodies appear as a gesture of noncompliance with both Islamic morality and the law. Not surprisingly, neither film has ever been released through any channel under the censorship radar. Without public screening in Malaysia, both films were released on DVDs in Malaysia. In this way, the violation to the state-defined Islamic morality and censorship laws further seeks to present morality with divergent value systems.

Secondly, because the presentation of this brutal behavior towards the female body is purely negative, in contrast to how the citizens' memories in *The Big Durian* are cherished as an enduring past of Kuala Lumpur, these cruel behaviors are addressed as

something that should stop. In particular, in all the abusive scenes, as an audience we never only see the female body. Instead, we are constantly put in the position of seeing the vulgar man who performs the assault as well. This way of framing and presentation makes it difficult for the spectator to identify with the male gaze. Therefore, it allows the female body to be different from the objectified female in many classic horror films (for example, the screaming face in the bathroom scene in Alfred Hitchcock's *Psycho*). The mysterious woman and Ping have never been put in the position to be objectified or sexualized through the gaze of the spectator. Rather, the spectator sees the complete abusive actions, and so these abusive scenes actually make us uncomfortable. This way of presentation indicates that these anachronistic actions are unwanted savageness, and, therefore, it projects the urge to throw away the past. Such an attitude, in a sense, insinuates that the construction of a Chinese-Malaysian identity in Kuala Lumpur may take the past trajectories as something negative as well.

In summary, Amir Muhammad's documentaries directly tackle the long-time political and social issues absent in discussions or engagement by general public. *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All* show dramatic and mystical narration depicting Chinese-Malaysian's encounters with the urban context of Kuala Lumpur. All three films construct Kuala Lumpur with its present and past at the same time. The three films show an unbalance between people's daily lives in the contemporary society of Kuala Lumpur and how that is simultaneously affected by the city's past. Such unbalanced feelings come from the tension between the surface and beneath. On the surface, the capital city (as well as Malaysia in general) is moving forward to match a

vision of being an equal and modernized society. Underneath, however, as in *The Big Durian*, people's memories about the unsolved past are not forgotten. This unsolved past continuously affects people's social interactions and contradicts the progressive vision the government envisions for the society. While the process of globalization has shaped Kuala Lumpur with postmodern spaces, *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All* first ponder how urban Chinese-Malaysians are alienated in the city and have gradually lost their individuality. Then, through presenting brutal behaviors in the city, they struggle to find a distinct way to understand their Chinese-Malaysian identity.

Conclusion

Lim Teng-ngiom asserts that the physical space might be a metaphor or representation of cultural and political meanings, yet only people's everyday activities exist concretely (159). People's activities provide tangible content describing and defining the spaces in Kuala Lumpur, yet not vice versa. T. N. Lim writes: "[C]ulture and social structure are time determined and not space determined, where space is determined by culture and social structures"(159). While governmental innovations in Kuala Lumpur and the influences from globalization have changed the physical appearance of the city, the actual impacts are effective through *time* rather than *space*. Physical constructions do not determine the meaning of the space; they only produce spaces. Time, however, processes people's activities and interactions inside these artificially shaped spaces, and these activities and interactions eventually determine the psychic interiors of these spaces. In the early 21st century Kuala Lumpur, citizens are shown that, with the protection of Islamic practices, a time of postmodernity and globalization has arrived in

the form of new megaprojects and spectacular architecture. Yet, people's experiences, memories, and even imaginations about their past trajectories constantly contest this homogeneous time of national modernity.

The question, therefore, becomes, how does anyone describe these conflicts between the present and the past? Henri Lefebvre reminds us: "The actions of social practice are expressible but not explicable through discourse: they are precisely acted—and not read..."(222). And so, any attempt to directly conceptualize a "true" past in contrast to the current urban activities in Kuala Lumpur is not possible. Without literal illustration, through documentary and fictional narrative films, Amir, Lee, and Tan find their ways to collect, as well as imagine, evidence of the existing past. These films provide a way of understanding the current urban experience not limited by the official narrative, which only speaks in the tense of modern time.

While most of the works remain as independent productions and therefore seem to appear marginal compared to those in the mainstream market in Malaysia, these digital movies grasp the attention of the international film festival circuits. Similar to how *The Big Durian* became the first Malaysian film to play at the Sundance Film Festival in United States, both *The Beautiful Washing Machine* and *Love Conquers All* were widely screened in numerous international film festivals (imdb.com).³⁴ Given limited visibility in the domestic market, these works establish a certain impression of Malaysian cinema on the international platform as well as a certain impression of the capital city itself. Such an

³⁴ For *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, please see: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0407568/releaseinfo?ref=tt_dt_dt; for *Love Conquers All*, please see: http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0877347/releaseinfo?ref=tt_dt_dt.

impression, however, touches the sensitive question regarding what is it that Malaysia's cultural identity actually conveys. In the next chapter, I further discuss the effects that digital films bring to the long-term subjects of national identity and ethnic relationships in Malaysia.



Figure 2. The constant constructions in Kuala Lumpur. Shot in KL Central (Kuala Lumpur Central Station) in 2010 by the author.

CHAPTER 4: THE PRESENT THAT REVISES THE PAST: THREE SHORT VIDEO COMPILATIONS

Around the 2010s, even though Malaysia has become independent for more than a half of a century, the residues from the colonial power continue affect ethnic relationships in the society. Before the British colonial government ended their occupation in Malaya in 1957, they participated in putting into place three primary political parties representing the three major ethnic groups in the colony: the indigenous as well as majority Malays, and two significant minorities, Chinese and Indians. The intention behind this setup was to allow each main ethnicity in the area to have a political representative in the independent government of Malaysia. Nevertheless, for the people in Malaya, this system not only recognized but also emphasized and reified the divisions between ethnicities. Assigning a political party to each ethnic group also resulted in the three groups constantly fighting for resources based on the ethnic divisions (Fenton 137; Noor 2–3). After independence, the May 13th riot in 1969 elevated the tension between Malays and Chinese. The riot further drove the Malaysian state to both secure and privilege Muslim Malays' political and economic power. All these historical factors fed continual conflicts, distrusts, and misunderstandings between ethnic groups. They affected how people from different ethnic backgrounds comprehended their identities as a part of the Malaysian population.

This chapter introduces and examines three short video compilations made around 2010: *15 Malaysia*, produced by Pete Teo in 2009; *Letters from the South*, produced by Tan Chui-mui in 2013; and *3 Doors of Horror*, a project produced by James Lee and

annually released since 2013. These three compilation projects show varied foci in considering the subjects of ethnicity and identity in Malaysia. They narrate the subjects with a collection of short films in mixed genres, so each project includes multiple points of view which serve to re-examine, re-articulate, and even re-invent the dialogues about ethnicity and identity in Malaysia. In this sense, the collections of short films in these compilations function as what Hayden White conceptualizes as “historiographies,” which comprises fictional artistic texts. While mostly fictional narrative shorts, they share similarities with historical narratives from historians because they too are “invented as found” (H. White 192). Historians focus on describing what is found, and filmmakers focus on creating narrative for what is found; yet both give revisions to the historical subject through their distinct perspectives. In the case of *15 Malaysia*, *Letters from the South*, and *3 Doors of Horror*, these films focus on different topics of ethnic relationships, the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia and Malaysia’s filmmaking practices. All three attempt to re-write and re-create the historical narratives of these subjects through their productions and practices.

One of the main narratives these projects contest and intend to revise is the one constructed by the government. In the 1970s, the state of Malaysia announced the National Cultural Policy (NCP), and it asserted the indigenous (Malay) culture and Islam as the keystones for the national culture. The renaissance of the postcolonial state of Malaysia, in this sense, emancipated the native communities and stressed their cultural differences from the British colonial power. In such a context, however, the NCP inevitably excluded a significant number of immigrants who arrived both before or

during the colonial era, such as Chinese and Indians, from the configuration of Malaysia's national culture. Yet, while these minorities have played significant roles in society before and since Malaysia's independence, the ethno-nationalist imagination of Malaysia has become problematic. In 1991, *Bangsa Malaysia*, which depicts Malaysian identity as belonging to "all colors and creeds" (Mohamad "Malaysian: The Way Forward"), was introduced. Nevertheless, the narration of *Bangsa Malaysia*, instead of being welcome for its multicultural vision, has generated much debate (Gabriel 351). Some people argue that the Malay-Muslim culture should still be the core of the national identity of Malaysia as the NCP dictates, while others contend the cultures of significant minorities (such as Chinese and Indians) should be included as an essential part of Malaysian identity.

One of the debates directly involved film productions in Malaysia. The success of two independent films—Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* (2004) and its sequel, *Gubra* (2006)—ignited the debate. Both films tell the love story between a Malay schoolgirl and a hoodlum-like Chinese boy. In 2006, a public forum organized by the Ministry of Information and broadcast on public television openly denounced the two films as "corrupters of culture." They claimed that the films insulted dominant Malay Muslim values (Al Amin 1–2; Yusoff 248). This debate caused by Ahmad's popular films could be seen as a prelude that put the issues of ethnicity, religion, and culture at the forefront of films made in Malaysia. Independent filmmakers showed each other support because of these attacks (G. C. Khoo, "Taking Liberties" 200). One way to support each other was by coming together and making creative works that continued to challenge the ethno-

nationalist domination of Malaysian media. In this aspect, they consciously started exploring new possibilities for creating new narratives that altered the dominant construction of ethnic representations in Malaysian films and videos.

This chapter first briefly reviews the debate on *Sepet* and *Gubra*. The debate underlines disagreements on how movies made in Malaysia should be seen as ideological presentations of the nation. It also simplifies the historical struggles over racial oppressions during both colonial and postcolonial Malaya, and positions ethnic and identity issues within the dichotomous structure of either ethno-nationalism or equalitarian multiculturalism. Ahmad, Amir Muhammad, James Lee, and Tan Chui-mui's films in the 2000s all avoid such a narrow dichotomy and create sophisticated narratives reflecting the complicities of related subjects. Yet, their auteurist films also carry strong personal viewpoints through their styles and narratives. This quality marks the different approach between the films I discussed in the previous chapter and the three compilations discussed in this chapter. *15 Malaysia*, *Letters from the South*, and *3 Doors of Horror* are collections of short videos made by multiple filmmakers. The collaborative nature of these productions allows the project to express diverse viewpoints and thereby offer numerous ways in which to approach a realistically complex depiction for comprehending ethnicity and identity in contemporary Malaysian society.

The first example is a compilation of fifteen videos, *15 Malaysia*. As a follow-up project to a popular music video, *Here in My Home* (2008), which promotes multicultural unity in Malaysia, *15 Malaysia* reexamines this utopian vision of multicultural society in Malaysia. The fifteen short videos tell stories about how people from different ethnicities

in Malaysia often misunderstand and distrust each other and sometimes even hold contempt toward one another for no particular reason. By pointing out ironies in Malaysian society, these short videos not only challenge the historically dominant agendas of either pro-Malay or utopian multicultural Malaysia, but they also generate new narratives and sentiments for Malaysians that reflect ethnic relationships in their daily encounters.

The second example, *Letters from the South*, takes a very different approach to tackle the subject of identity in Malaysia. The main subject of *Letters from the South* is the Chinese Diaspora. This project explores ethnic Chinese cultural identity both in Malaysia and in several other Southeast Asian countries. Produced by Tan, a Chinese Malaysian filmmaker, the project includes six shorts made by six ethnic Chinese filmmakers from Southeast Asian countries. These short videos stress the relationship between ethnic Chinese and their current living environments rather than expressions of diasporic sentimentality for the motherland of mainland China. Thus, the desire to seek connections to their current location takes the place of any nostalgia for the so-called “motherland.” In this section, I suggest that the six shorts show that many existing subjects in Chinese Diaspora studies, such as the enduring Chinese cultural values and the transnational economic positions, have become inadequate (Nonini and Ong 6–7). These shorts add to the discussion on how ethnic Chinese characters inhabit their local spaces context.

Finally, *3 Doors of Horror* is a web series that functions as a cultural product influenced by global commercial films. The project, with limited resources, holds value

in providing filmmaking opportunities for young Malaysian filmmakers. It appears as a part of an ambition to build a better filmmaking environment for future Malaysian cinema. *3 Doors of Horror* is also a project that carries strong Chinese characteristics because it is always released before the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival, which happens every July based on the Chinese lunar calendar. Yet, instead of being pan-Chinese movie products, the web series stress its Malaysian nationality. Therefore, I argue that, just like *15 Malaysia* and *Letters from the South*, *3 Doors of Horror* belongs to an artistic production that intends to revise certain existing historical narratives. The narrative, in this case, is the practices of Malaysian commercial filmmaking.

The Debate on *Sepet* and *Gubra*

Sepet tells a love story between Orked, a Malay Muslim girl, and Jason, a Chinese Malaysian boy. In *Sepet*, Orked meets Jason because of her obsession with popular Chinese films, and he sells unlicensed VCDs of these films as a street vendor. They grow fond of each other and, naturally, start dating. Although the families of both sides do not forbid them from seeing each other, the film delicately insinuates existing cultural differences and social tensions from their living spaces and social circles.

Later in the film, when Jason's ex-girlfriend shows up and claims that she is pregnant, Jason decides to leave Orked and hide from her. With a broken heart, Orked receives a scholarship and is ready to study abroad. Before Orked departs, Jason finds out that his ex-girlfriend lied about the pregnancy, so he rides his scooter to chase after Orked at the airport. He has a severe accident on the way and we see his body on the ground, surrounded by blood. The director, Ahmad, leaves the ending open: In the final scene,

Orked receives a phone call from Jason. He tells her that he will wait for her. With the inconclusive ending in *Sepet*, the spirit of love between Orked and Jason is left to continue to develop in *Sepet*'s sequel film, *Gubra* (2006).

Sepet does not really tell a forbidden story as interracial marriage does happen in Malaysia. Ahmad is married to a Chinese designer and film producer, Tan Yew-leong, so the love story between Orked and Jason could be inspired by her own experiences living in Malaysia. Yet, the commercial and critical successes of *Sepet* and *Gubra* provoked conservative Muslim authorities. They targeted their criticisms on the independent film community in Malaysia. As G. C. Khoo describes that:

The more immediate causes for sensitivity in the independent film community were a series of events that began in April [2006] against independent filmmakers' films and activities supporting the indie film community. Foremost was the provocative television debate "*Sepet* and *Gubra*: Cultural Corruptors?" ("*Sepet* dan *Gubra*: Pencemar Budaya?") which attacked liberal Malay Muslim independent filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad's films in the weekly television forum, *Fenomena Seni*, on the government-run television station RTM1 ("Taking Liberties" 200).

Norman Yusoff recalls the hostile comments from the panel, which called some of the movie scenes "unrealistic, unnecessary and likely to 'corrupt' perceived stable Malay culture" (248). The interracial romance between Orked and Jason, which became widely known after the film's commercial success, was also questioned for negatively influencing viewers (Al Amin 9; Beh 35). These aggressive public comments towards

Sepet and *Gubra*, however, did not intimidate independent filmmakers into making conservative movies that followed the ideologies imposed by nationalists and fundamentalists. On the contrary, many “indies” along with artists from various areas, in addition to showing their support for Ahmad, grouped together and made a music video, *Here in My Home*, to promote multicultural unity of Malaysia.

Pete Teo, a musician and an actor, wrote a song, “Here in My Home,” and invited directors Ahmad and Ho Yuhang to direct the music video. Teo named the project “Malaysian Artists for Unity,” and gathered many Malaysian artists, performers, and celebrities to participate pro gratis in the music video. They intended to use the music video to deliver an anti-racism message (Peteteo.com).³⁵ The lyrics start in English:

Hold on, brother hold on.
 The road is long. We’re on stony ground.
 But I’m strong, and you ain’t heavy.
 Oh there’s a misspoken truth that lies.
 Colors don’t bind, oh no.
 What do they know? They speak falsely.
 Here in my home,
 I’ll tell you what its all about.
 There’s just one hope here in my heart,
 one love undivided.

³⁵ See <http://www.peteteo.com/weblog/?p=530>

That's what it's all about.

Please won't you fall in one by one by one with me?

Teo attempted to call for sincere unity among ethnic groups by addressing the disagreements among them with the line “colors don't bind, oh no,” then wishing for an “undivided” home (nation). In this same vein, the song also includes a rap section performed by Malay, Chinese, and Tamil rappers in their native languages. The music video was an instant hit. It has been widely propagated through radio stations, and many students sing it in schools because of the peaceful and harmonious messages the music video tries to deliver (Teo in Glentzer [houstonchronicle.com](http://www.houstonchronicle.com)).

Re-writing Narratives of Ethnic Relationships in Malaysia: *15 Malaysia* (2009)

After the success of “Here in My Home,” many corporations asked Teo to make more videos regarding the subject of Malaysia's unity (G. C. Khoo, “From Second Cinema to Third Cinema” 197). With the sponsorship of a relatively small company, Teo invited many young rising filmmakers, animators, celebrities, and even politicians to join in the making of *15 Malaysia* (Teo in Glentzer [houstonchronicle.com](http://www.houstonchronicle.com)).³⁶ Fifteen short digital videos made by fifteen filmmakers comprise the project. These fifteen videos include shorts of narratives, documentaries, experimental films, and animations. The filmmakers also come from Malay, Chinese, and Indian backgrounds. This was the aim of Teo, the producer: to intentionally incorporate filmmakers from the three major ethnic

³⁶ Teo describes that after talking to the telco P1, which was the smallest among all the companies that interested in making video similar to *Here in My Home*, P1 sponsored the project of *15 Malaysia* (in Glentzer <http://www.houstonchronicle.com/entertainment/arts-theater/article/Pete-Teo-shines-a-light-on-issues-through-film-6021005.php>).

groups in Malaysia. Compared to “Here in My Home’s” utopian attitude, the videos in 15 Malaysia appear more critical and more artistic when they transform the long-term ethnic conflicts, misunderstandings, and tensions in Malaysian society into narrative shorts. The fifteen videos recreate the perplexed ethnic relationships through fictional storytelling in different genres of comedy, drama, and science fiction.

The first, and perhaps the most prominent, genre among the fifteen videos is comedy. Ho’s *Potong Saga*, Liew Seng-tat’s *Halal*, Woo Ming-jin’s *Slovak Sling*, and Benji Lim and Bahir Yeusuff’s *Meter*, all find ironies in ethnocentric nationalism and harmonious multiculturalism and turn these ironies into laugh-out-loud plots. These shorts become satires that exaggerate how Malaysians in one ethnicity misunderstand other ethnicities in social, cultural, and economic activities.

Ho’s *Potong Saga* describes a young male Chinese Malaysian’s attempts to qualify himself as *bumiputera* (indigenous Malay) so he can open an account in an Islamic bank. In order to be considered Malay, he is told that he needs to have a circumcision. After experiencing intense pain from the circumcision surgery, he goes to the bank and finds that all he needed to cut was his long hair. By depicting the young man’s ridiculous journey, *Potong Saga* makes fun of the pro-*bumiputera* policies and the separation of ethnic groups.

Liew’s *Halal* also finds laughter from differences between Malay and Chinese. It presents an over-the-top explanation of how to prepare *halal* meat.³⁷ *Halal* includes

³⁷ Nick Eardley explains that “Halal is Arabic for permissible. Halal food is that which adheres to Islamic law, as defined in the Koran. The Islamic form of slaughtering animals or poultry,

obnoxious impersonations of all Malays, Chinese, and Indians, and ends with all the funny-looking characters singing together happily. While such an ending seemingly echoes a harmonious multiethnic Malaysia, the silly acts and hysterical appearances of the actors contest a great nationalist image of the utopian Malaysia. Halal instead depicts this collective entity as a geeky unity.

Other than reflecting the gaps and false impressions between ethnic groups, Woo's *Slovak Sling* builds the comedy on awkward and uncomfortable moments in a culture of bribery in Malaysia. Lim and Yeusuff's *Meter* casts the head of the United Malays National Organization Youth (UMNO Youth), Khairy Jamaluddin, as a taxi driver. Jamaluddin passionately converses with his patrons and expresses what he thinks the nation needs. Namewee, a real-life controversial Chinese Malaysian pop singer who often satirizes ethnic relations in Malaysia, acts as the last patron in the film.³⁸ Jamaluddin and Namewee stand for the opposite political views in Malaysia. They do not exchange many words on the road, yet after Namewee comments on the scimitar key chain that Jamaluddin hangs in the taxi, Jamaluddin gives Namewee a couple for his friends. These four shorts do more than reflect the daily encounters between people from

dhabiha, involves killing through a cut to the jugular vein, carotid artery and windpipe. Animals must be alive and healthy at the time of slaughter and all blood is drained from the carcass. During the process, a Muslim will recite a dedication, know as tasmiya or shahada" (<http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-27324224>).

³⁸ Tan Chong Yew introduces Namewee as: "Wee Meng Chee, better known as Namewee, is a controversial Malaysian rapper whose music has courted trouble with the Malaysian government... [Namewee's music] constitutes a critique of Malaysia's social realities, and it challenges the BN ruling coalition's political discourses, particularly UMNO's ideology of Ketuanan Melayu (Malay hegemony)"(21).

different ethnic backgrounds in Malaysia. In these comedy shorts, they depict the absurdities of many misunderstandings that are built over time among ethnic groups.

Another major genre among the fifteen short videos is drama. The shorts in this category include Ahmad's *Chocolate*, Desmong Ng's *Son*, and Linus Lim's *House*. These three shorts amplify the emotional moments in people's daily interactions. Ahmad's *Chocolate*, for example, depicts the interaction between a Chinese boy working in his family-owned grocery shop and a Malay girl who walks into the store to buy batteries. The short video begins with the mother shouting at the boy because he refuses to study abroad. In the video, we only see the Chinese boy, who is naked from the waste up, and we hear the mother yell in Mandarin, "There is no place for people like *us* here... This place is only for people like *them*." During the argument, Sharifah Amani, who acted as Orked in Ahmad's controversial film *Sepet*, walks into the shop wearing a *hijab* (head covering). The Chinese boy goes out to tend to her. Then, the film shows an intimate moment between them: the Malay girl feels shy when she sees him without a shirt on and the young boy is distracted by this young pretty Malay girl. He mistakenly takes out a bottle instead of the batteries that she asked to buy.

However, the boy's mother continues yelling at him because he spends too much time interacting with this Malay customer. The mother's hostility towards the Malays apparently affects the boy; the fond feelings suddenly diminish when the girl tries to buy a twenty-cent chocolate in addition to the batteries but only has fifteen cents. He yells at her, "Don't buy the thing if you don't have the money." The girl apologizes and leaves with the batteries. The boy has a moment of regret, so he attempts to go after her with the

chocolate, yet he ends up being called back by his mother and leaves the chocolate on the counter.

Within the four-minute video, Ahmad delicately comments on the ethnic relationships to show how the bias and gaps between Chinese and Malays are passed from the older generation to the younger one. The bias affects the innocent first impression between two human beings and complicates their interactions with prejudices generated by layers of historical, social, and cultural backgrounds.

Ng's *Son* and Lim's *House* also tell dramatic stories, and they advocate for mutual affection instead of hatred between people of different ethnicities. These dramatic shorts create narratives that overshadow the cold divisions between ethnicities with heartwarming plots. In this way, they also narrate interracial relationships with morale values attached and, therefore, become convincing in promoting what is the "better way" to treat each other in Malaysia. This better way appears in contrast to the stereotypical impressions and interactions of different ethnicities held and practices over generations. Thus, the three shorts generate engaging narratives of ethnic interactions and revise the previous unappealing narratives.

The third genre in the compilation of *15 Malaysia* is science fiction. The two shorts in this genre are Lee's *Gerhana* and Tan's *One Future*. Both shorts are set in an uncertain time and space, yet they metaphorically criticize the operations of the current Malaysian government. They create a world in extreme circumstances and imply these circumstances are outcomes from how the government drives society in Malaysia.

Gerhana (“Eclipse”) depicts a rich-looking couple in an indoor space. They must learn what happens in the outside world through news on the television, because a spreading virus prevents them from going outside. We hear the news report various happenings: a tree called “Democracy” has been chopped down, the problems regarding water management, and a governmental official accused of drunkenness during work. In the broadcast, the official statements repeat that everything is under control and no one needs to worry. Nevertheless, the woman still shows concern and asks the man when people will eventually live harmoniously, peacefully, and happily. The man, following the official statement, calms the woman by restating that everything will be just fine. *Gerhana* implies that the government utilizes mass media to reduce any concern about important political, health, and environmental problems.

At the end of *Gerhana*, the authorized voice in the broadcast suggests that women should not let their boyfriends take intimate photos of them and yet the man immediately takes a photo of the woman in her sleep with his cell phone. This plot further shows the dysfunctional relationship between the people and the authorities. Someone may be aware of the significance of certain social issues and many people may distrust official statements. Yet, people tend to react to these issues by simply ignoring them. Such a dysfunctional relationship pessimistically implies that—even if the nation state operates in a false manner and even if such a false manner would affect people’s daily practices—nobody cares.

Tan’s *One Future* appears even more straightforward than *Gerhana* in criticizing the government. Inspired by Chris Marker’s experimental sci-fi short, *La Jetée* (1962),

One Future comprises black-and-white still pictures in combination with a voiceover narrating the story in a colorless futuristic world (Kawin 15). *La Jetée* imagines a disastrous time in post-war Paris, where a man is captured in a camp for an experiment. The experiment intends to resolve the present struggles by finding answers in the past and the future, so they send the man to dream the past and the future. Through his journey, we see different phases of society in the past, present, and future.

Like *La Jetée*, *One Future* begins with still images of residents from various ethnic backgrounds in city spaces. The narrator in *One Future* speaks, “The future. Life is perfect. Everyone has a job...from the government. Everyone has a house... from the government. The government loves everyone. It takes care of everyone. We have real integration.” Such a narration corresponds to the rhetoric in many institutional plans in which the Malaysian government continuously portrays the nation’s future as harmonious, multiethnic, and integrated. However, the robotic voice of the narrator brings doubts to his words on the perfect life. Soon, the doubts are confirmed by further description, “Everyone is assigned a new family everyday. We are one at last,” the narrator concludes. From this point on, it becomes clear that *One Future* implies a situation where the government takes its dominance over people’s lives to the extreme.

Similar to the world depicted in *La Jetée*, *One Future* also imagines social changes in a totalitarian society. The situation depicted in *One Future* is the result of Malaysia’s social experiment. It imagines the future of Malaysia when many policies in current society continue to evolve. The government makes its “One Malaysia” slogan literally come true. It also elevates the rules for censorship and fully bans people from

speaking. The fictional world in *One Future*, in this way, insinuates the continual accumulation of governmental power over time. Together with *Gerhana*, both shorts show the extreme circumstances are buildups from people's political indifferences in the past and the present.

From rethinking quotidian encounters between ethnic groups to considering the relationships between people and state power, *15 Malaysia* appears to be more than just a project that promotes multiethnic unity. While many shorts in the compilation still express the patriotic desire for a utopian unity (such as *Lumpur* by Kamai Sabran and *Rojak!* by Suleiman Brothers), the compilation exemplifies freedom in both interpreting and criticizing what it means to be an integrated Malaysia. In addition, the collaborative nature of the compilation allows the project to explore different narratives to apply to the nation. A common theme among all the narratives in the shorts: on the subject of ethnic relationships, that is, what has been constructed either by the government or by historical contingents is unsatisfactory, if not fully, false. Therefore, the shorts in *15 Malaysia* make fun of existing constructions within comedic narratives, replace the constructions within dramatic moments, and alert us to the dangers of the constructions with science fiction imaginations.

By sharing all fifteen videos free of charge on the project's website, the site received fourteen million visitors in the first six days. The site was so busy that the operator had to upgrade its bandwidth and renew a couple of servers (Mayer 59). As a result, Teo calls *15 Malaysia* a viral campaign, stating "[T]he dissemination of these videos was not entirely up to us. It was up to the country really... You can't dictate a viral

campaign. People like it, people viral it. People don't like it, people won't share it"

(Salter meldmagazine.com).³⁹

The attention that *15 Malaysia* received was not limited to Malaysia. Internet distribution opened this short video project to viewers around the globe. Meanwhile, various international film festivals screened *15 Malaysia*, which was packaged together and run as a feature-length film, including the Pusan International Film Festival 2009, Taipei's Golden Horse Film Festival 2009, the International Film Festival Rotterdam 2010, and the Pompidou Center in Paris in 2010. *15 Malaysia* continues to expand its viewership inside and outside of Malaysia, as well as on the Internet and in theaters.⁴⁰

The success of *15 Malaysia* reveals that audiences inside and outside Malaysia have been interested in movies that provide diverse perspectives on the complicated multi-ethnic experiences in Malaysia. On one hand, such demands come from the gap between the government's NCP and the actual living conditions as discussed in the previous chapters. On the other hand, the liberal thinking that has circulated with modernization and globalization also impacts how people envision ethnic relationships in their society. Opinions from commentators on official platforms, such as the film critic Akmal Abdullah and the scholar Asiah Sarji, who privilege Muslim Malay and assert that Muslim Malay should be the only signature of Malaysia's national culture, do not represent all voices in Muslim Malay communities (Sarji 143). They belong to a

³⁹ See <http://www.meldmagazine.com.au/2011/09/15-malaysia/>

⁴⁰ For example, after the project had been released for six years, *15 Malaysia* was screened in University of Florida Performance Arts Center (Phillip Center) on Jan. 27, 2015 (Gainesville.com).

relatively radical and fundamentalist Muslim Malay view, while many Muslim Malays are more moderate. Ahmad is herself a Muslim and G. C. Khoo calls her a liberal Islamic filmmaker (“The Politics of Love” 53).

In this sense, multiple versions of Islam are practiced in modern Malaysian society (Raju “Multiple Islams” 56). Under these contexts, the short videos in *15 Malaysia* capture contemporary thinking and revise understandings regarding Malaysia’s ethnic relationships from a time, when the British colonizers identified ethnic divisions in Malaya and when the postcolonial government built the national culture solely on the Muslim Malay identity. The narratives of the contemporary thinking in this collection of mixed short videos, therefore, could be imagined as re-writings of the historical subject of ethnic relationships in Malaysia.

Another collaborative project started after 2010 called *Letters from the South* (2013) also revisited a long-term social phenomenon: the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia. The Chinese Malaysian producer of the project, Tan, lived in Beijing in the early 2010s. From there, she invited ethnic Chinese filmmakers from Singapore, Thailand, Myanmar, and Malaysia to make six shorts regarding their contemporary takes on being ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian countries.

Reworking the Identities of Ethnic Chinese in Contemporary Southeast Asia: *Letters from the South* (2013)

Letters from the South comprises six short films, including Aditya Assarat’s *Now Now Now*, Royston Tan’s *Popiah*, Midi Z’s *Burial Cloth*, Sun Koh’s *Singapore Panda*, Tan Chui-mui’s *A Night in Malacca*, and Tsai Ming-liang’s *Walking on Water*. Tan

invited five ethnic Chinese filmmakers from various Southeast Asian regions to collaborate in this project: Assarat is from Thailand; Royston Tan and Sun are from Singapore; Tan is from Malaysia; and Midi Z is originally from Myanmar and Tsai is originally from Malaysia even though both are based in Taiwan now. The idea of the Chinese Diaspora has been changed over of the long history of migration and settlement as well as by the real experiences of new generations in ethnic Chinese communities in Southeast Asia. In addition, many second or third-generation Chinese immigrants in Southeast Asia moved again to another country, just as Midi Z and Tsai moved from Myanmar and Malaysia to Taiwan. These statuses complicate what it means to be Chinese Diaspora in the 21st century. The six shorts in the compilation of *Letters from the South* take these developing conditions and revise how ethnic Chinese reconsider and reinvent their identities in Southeast Asia.

The six shorts in *Letters from the South* have been released through international film festival circuits and the Internet. In both distribution channels, the distributors contextualize the project as inspired by the concept of the Chinese Diaspora and promote the compilation accordingly. Mosquito Film Distribution, the theatrical distributor, suggests that: “*Letters from the South* is a collection of six short films about the topic of the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia. Each film is presented as a letter representing the filmmaker’s feelings and emotions toward their original homeland, China” (Mosquito Films mosquitofilmsdistribution.com).⁴¹ The Internet releaser, ifeng.com, titles the

⁴¹See <http://mosquitofilmsdistribution.com/letters-from-the-south/>

compilation as “Homeland and Diaspora” (“原鄉與離散” ifeng.com).⁴² With such rhetoric, the subject matter of the project seemingly addresses sentimentalities towards mainland China. However, looking into the narrative content and the aesthetic styles of the six shorts, it is clear they go beyond ethnic identity and the desire to return to China.

The phenomena of Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia, besides being a part of the history of Chinese immigrants, interweave to demonstrate the repellent between ethnic Chinese and indigenous majorities in Southeast Asian countries since the colonial period. Many researchers in the field of “oversea Chinese” investigate the Chinese communist forces in Southeast Asian region, and many researchers in this field also describe capitalist Chinese in the region. Both communist and capitalist Chinese groups have appeared as threats to the newly independent state of Southeast Asian countries as well as to the prosperity of indigenous majorities in these nations (Skinner 138; Nonini and Ong 8-9). As a result, studies further find significant understandings how ethnic Chinese communities, who experienced the exclusion in the host nation while they sought for their self-interests in Southeast Asia, remain closely social, cultural, and economic connections to the authorities in mainland China (Wang 4; Skinner 137; Nonini and Ong 8; Kuhn 368).

Nevertheless, the more recent discussions on ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia rework the foci of the studies of “oversea Chinese.” Instead of framing Chinese subjectivities and communities in Southeast Asia as “oversea Chinese,” they see the

⁴²See <http://v.ifeng.com/program/yingshi/yxyls/#2>

individuals and the groups as “Chinese living overseas,” or “minority groups who happen to be Chinese” in Southeast Asian countries (Nonini and Ong 9; Hirschman 30).⁴³ The compilation of *Letters from the South* translates these transitions in the field of “oversea Chinese” (or “Chinese living overseas”) with video works of various styles and genres.

The six short videos in *Letters from the South* do show how the Chinese subjectivities remain loyal to their relationships to the people as well as the idea of mainland China. However, the narratives and filmic styles of the six shorts all question whether these connections automatically identify these Chinese’s sense of belongings, especially in the contemporary context. In this aspect, these shorts present various layers when they revisit the idea of the Chinese Diaspora and re-position it to the current societies in Southeast Asia. The following section breaks the discussions of the six shorts into three groups: 1) *Singapore Panda*, *Popiah*, and *Now Now Now*. 2) *A Night in Malacca*, and 3) *Walking on Water* and *Burial Cloth*.

Singapore Panda, *Popiah*, and *Now Now Now* are three narrative shorts that tell stories about ethnic Chinese’s diasporic feelings in the contemporary societies in Singapore and Thailand. They describe Chinese identity through the characters’ social and cultural connections to China.

Singapore Panda sets the story in a changing moment when a company from China buys a Mandarin-speaking radio station in Singapore. The new owner assigns two hosts to the station, Ah-soon and Ah-hua, to produce a radio drama featuring a panda.

⁴³ Nonini and Ong describe the changes in the field of “Oversea Chinese” as: “... [It] is a regressive move come full circle: from ‘oversea Chinese’ (huaqiao in Mandarin) back to “Chinese living overseas” (haiwai huaren)” (9).

Ah-soon and Ah-hua, therefore, tell a story about a panda moving south and trying to live with the indigenous monkeys in this new land. The panda encounters many struggles, from acclimating to the food, weather, and language to making new friends. Finally, the panda settles into this new land. When the panda travels back to his original homeland, he misses his monkey friends and cannot wait to go back to where he feels at home.

The story of this radio drama clearly relates to the lives of Ah-soon and Ah-hua in terms of how they have become accustomed to this southern land of Singapore. They eat all kinds of food, including *momochacha*, a Malay dessert; *roti pasta*, a Indian-influenced flatbread adapted as local food in Singapore and Malaysia; and *nasi briyani*, a dish from India that can be found on the Arab Street in Singapore. In addition, they have become multilingual. Ah-soon and Ah-hua mostly speak in Mandarin, yet terms from Cantonese, Fujianese, Malay, and English often mix in their daily conversations. To Ah-soon and Ah-hua, their sense of belonging has become embodied by this blend of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and English elements. Thus, the representative of the company from China, who supposedly stands for Ah-soon and Ah-hua's original roots, appears foreign instead.

The panda is a metaphorical symbol for ethnic Chinese immigrants, as "Singapore pandas" face their unique experiences of the Chinese Diaspora in Singapore. The categories of national and ethnic qualities are reformed through daily activities, such as the foods people eat and the languages people speak. When members of Chinese, Malay, Indian, and Western communities interact on a daily basis in Singapore, they continuously reinvent themselves and their subcultures. Therefore, *Singapore Panda* problematizes the idea of the Chinese Diaspora based on how Ah-soon and Ah-hua

immerse themselves in these constant exchanges of diverse cultures. Essential qualities of Chinese ethnicity no longer sufficiently describe their identity.

Compared to *Singapore Panda*, which deals with the Chinese characters from an older generation in Singapore, both *Popiah* and *Now Now Now* try to capture how young ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian countries digest their “near and far” connections to China. *Popiah* starts with a father and his son getting into a fight before their annual family gathering. The fight is triggered by the process of making *popiah*, a kind of thin bread, which is the main ingredient in one of their family dishes. The father insists on making it from scratch as his father always did; the son finds the process redundant because the market sells ready-made *popiah*. Their argument reflects the choice to either keep tradition or change with the world. *Popiah* ends on a note of nostalgia: the son eventually understands his father and, therefore, carries on the tradition.

Now Now Now, on the contrary, expresses no nostalgia towards China; rather, it wonders how immigrating (or not) to Thailand has changed the lives of two young girls who are cousins. Mumu, a young photographer from China, presents her work at her cousin Paula’s school in Thailand. Mumu’s work takes elements from her grandparents’ generation and remakes those elements with contemporary textures and perspectives. Mumu’s grandfather was the brother of Paula’s grandfather. Originally, between the brothers, it was Mumu’s grandfather who was going to seek possible business opportunities in Thailand. Because he was sick right before departure, Paula’s grandfather went to Thailand instead. Mumu describes to Paula’s classmates that her and Paula’s lives would be switched if her grandfather did not get sick during that critical

time. In this way, Mumu's photography, with old elements and new perspectives resonating with the family stories, articulates the period between the two girls' grandparents' generation and their own generation.

Unlike the father and son in *Popiah*, there is no character from the older generation and no clear sentimentality toward the past in *Now Now Now*. There are uncertainties from Paula, though. As an unsettled teenager, Paula cannot help comparing herself to Mumu, who appears artistic, out-going, and pretty. The comparisons mark not only the different life courses of two girls but also underline the different social, cultural, and economic developments between Thailand and China across a period of three generations.

Singapore Panda, *Popiah*, and *Now Now Now* all are well-structured narrative short films. The segments of the plots as well as the mise-en-scène are delicately designed to deliver intentional meanings. The negotiation among cultural elements in the Mandarin radio station in Singapore, the conflicts between father and son before and during the family gathering, and the jealous moments between two sisters on a college campus—all these setups illustrate the subject of cultural identities and the relationships between China and Southeast Asia. In this kind of structure, identities become sets of elements described by language, food, and birth location. Therefore, these three narrative shorts do not radically change the discussions on the idea of Chinese Diaspora in contemporary Southeast Asia, because they simply change the old sets of diasporic qualities for new sets.

The second group includes only one video, *A Night in Malacca*, which takes an artistic approach to explore what diaspora has meant to ethnic Chinese in the past and in the present. In this experimental and personal video essay made by Tan, she re-imagines the consciousness and sentimentality of an exiled Chinese writer, Yu Dai-Fu (郁達夫), when he escaped from China to Malacca in Malaya during World War II. Yu's essays written during his exile inspired Tan, and *A Night in Malacca* attempts to re-create his delirious feelings triggered by drifting in a strange land. Tan puts herself in such diasporic sentimentalities, but ends up wondering whether such a longing for the motherland has gone with the passing of time. With an experimental style, the consciousness visualized in *A Night in Malacca* is rather obscure. Tan's words are mingled with the writings of Yu, as though they are having a conversation.

A Night in Malacca begins with the text, "In the night, you always fail to sleep. Flashes of thoughts cannot stop." Soon, it cuts to a montage of seemingly random images. Tan appears as a part of the montage. She walks on the street and becomes distorted due to the rough movements of the camera. In text on a black background, she describes herself as a foreigner looking for someone to converse with as she wanders around a foreign place. We gradually figure out that all the images are shot in a place that she visited. The place is Malacca in Malaysia, and the person that she finds to talk to is Yu, who visited Malacca more than half a century ago.⁴⁴

⁴⁴ Yu went to Southeast Asia during the late 1930s when war began between China and Japan. In the 1940s when Japan occupied Singapore and many areas in Indonesia, he was further in the condition of exile and lingered in places among Indonesia, Singapore, and Malaysia.

Yu wrote a travelogue depicting the city and his visit. Crossing half a century, Tan converses with Yu through their writings. Tan's words and Yu's quotes from the travelogue interact with each other via the editing of texts on the screen. Based on this conversation that folds two periods of time together, Tan, in the end, writes, "Homeland is not space but time. Homeland is a past that we cannot go back to."

In *A Night in Malacca*, the conversation between Tan and Yu is surreal, and the interaction among the fictional characters in the video is surreal, too. The short brings the audience to dive into this surreal consciousness of an exiled traveler. The random and shaky images of Malacca describe Yu's dizzy feelings living in the tropical south, far away from home.⁴⁵ With such a dreamy tone, *A Night in Malacca* does not offer any conclusion of what is diaspora or what is homeland. Rather, it renders an imagination of the mental state of anyone who left the homeland. Then, we are further left wondering whether the homeland might be forever gone.

This personal video essay critically challenges the notion of the Chinese Diaspora. In particular, Tan is one of the few Chinese Malaysian filmmakers who had re-located to Beijing to work on filmmaking.⁴⁶ Her awareness of how "motherland" is a mirage comes from her revision of the diasporic sentimentalities from the literature to her present life.

⁴⁵ Yu writes: "毫無躊躇，飄飄然駛入了南海的熱帶圈內，如醉如痴，如在一個連續的夢遊病裡，渾渾然過去的日子，好像是很久很久了，又好像是有一日一夜的樣子。實在是，在長年如盛夏，四季不分明的南洋過活，記憶力只會一天一天的衰弱下去，尤其是關於時日年歲的記憶，尤其是當踏上了一定的程序工作之後的精神勞動者的記憶。"

⁴⁶ During the early 2010s, Tan moved to China to participate a documentary project, *Yulu* (2010), produced by Jia Zhang-ke. She directed one of the segments in the documentary anthology. She then moved back to Malaysia around 2013.

The third group includes Midi Z's *Burial Cloth* and Tsai's *Walking on the Water*.

After Tan questions whether China as the motherland for ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia is an illusion, the narratives in *Burial Cloth* and *Walking on the Water* focus on being in the lands of Southeast Asia. These two shorts are each a segment of a bigger project. *Burial Cloth* comes from a segment in Midi Z's feature film *Ice Poison* (2014), and *Walking on the Water* is a part of Tsai's *Walker* series. From the two shorts and the full projects, we see long gazes in observing ethnic Chinese's lives in Southeast Asia. They shift the depiction of the Chinese Diaspora from people who desire the old land to people who live in their current land.

Both Midi Z and Tsai grew up in Southeast Asia but then left for Taiwan.⁴⁷ The lands they go back to to shoot are Lashio in Myanmar and Kuching in Malaysia. Their second immigrant conditions complicate how the understanding of the Chinese Diaspora typically addresses the homeland of mainland China.

⁴⁷ Tsai, whose work has been part of and won many significant awards in film festivals around the world, including Cannes, Venice, and Berlin, was born in Kuching, Malaysia. He moved to Taiwan when he was twenty years old and studied drama and cinema at the Chinese Culture University in Taipei (Tobias avclub.com). Tsai had been a filmmaker based in Taiwan for more than three decades when he shot *Walking on the Water* in Kuching, where he spent all his childhood and teen years. Midi Z was born in Lashio, a small town in Myanmar close to the border of China. He lived in the town until he was sixteen years old and then moved to Taiwan (Lee opinion.cw.com). *Burial Clothes* was released when Midi Z was about thirty-two years old, which means he had lived half of his life in Myanmar and half in Taiwan. Different from Tsai, who made many films in Taiwan before he traveled back to shoot in Malaysia, after the student era, Midi Z made all his films back in Myanmar. Wai-Hung Chang describes Midi Z's films by stating "home coming is made possible first by departure" (hkindieff.hk). With Myanmar's distinct political atmosphere⁴⁷, Midi Z had to leave and learn how to make films in Taiwan, and therefore he is greatly influenced by many Taiwanese auteurs, such as Hou Hsiao Hsien and Edward Yang (Chang par. 1-4). Yet, the substance of his work is at "home," which is not in Mainland China because of his Chinese heritage but in Myanmar because of his home experiences.

Burial Cloth has a relatively simple plot in comparison to the three narrative shorts discussed previously. It starts in an afternoon with a long shot showing the main character, Sunmei, arriving in the noisy downtown of Lashio, Myanmar. She negotiates with a motorcycle taxi and rushes home. The motorcycle drives across the city of Lashio and gradually leaves for a countryside area. Sunmei arrives home, which is a straw house. She has brought her dying grandfather his burial clothes, which she retrieved in Yunnan, a Chinese province right across the border with Myanmar and also where her grandfather comes from originally. Wearing burial clothes before passing away is the tradition in the family. In this way, the descendants can find their ancestors when they pass to the other world.

Sunmei catches the moment before her grandfather departs. Yet, instead of clothes, Sunmei has only managed to bring back a bag of dust and shattered fabrics. She explains that during the Cultural Revolution in China, practicing traditional customs could bring trouble, so the family in Yunnan hid the clothes and, therefore, buried them under the family's gravestone. After decades, the clothes became dust. Sunmei and her parents quickly lay the dust and shattered fabrics on her grandfather's body. He soon passes away. That night, Sunmei goes to a shop in the village and calls her brother who is overseas in Taiwan. She attempts to break the news while her brother informs her that he just bought a pair of shoes for their grandfather. She fails to tell him the news and the call disconnects. *Burial Cloth* ends with Sunmei in tears in front of the shop.

In *Burial Cloth*, the tradition of the Chinese family dwindles with the death of the grandfather. At first glance, it may seem that *Burial Cloth* depicts the sentimentality and

longing for the original roots in mainland China, because Sunmei urgently retrieves the clothes from the grandfather's homeland to follow the cultural tradition. Likewise, before the grandfather passes away, he mumbles about going back to Yunnan. However, the longing appears as a bag of dust. This bag of dust may be important for the family, but, at the same time, appears all shattered. In the end, when Sunmei breaks into tears after the phone call with her brother, her sadness becomes complicated: she is not only crying for the grandfather's death but also for the reality of how struggles ruthlessly tear her family apart.

Burial Cloth comes from a segment in Midi Z's feature film *Ice Poison* (2014).

Ice Poison consists of long shots and slow-paced editing. These techniques force the audience to pay attention to the milieu and closely observe the characters in such an environment. With this style, *Ice Poison* does not lead audiences to care for the characters' cultural identities as do *Singapore Panda*, *Popiah*, and *Now Now Now*. Instead, it focuses on the relationships between the characters and their surrounding. Such relationships show the economic struggles of people living in Myanmar. In *Ice Poison*, a prominent subject matter of wrestling for survival in Myanmar's socio-economic milieu overshadows the characters' consciousness about their ethnic Chinese identity.

Rebekah Brammer describes *Ice Poison* as documentary-like in "the way that the filmmaker weaves various socio-economic and sociopolitical issues facing Myanmar into the plot" (76). She credits this to "the use of camera angles and framing not normally associated with fictional drama; and the creation of a factual tone or mood through the film's visual elements, sound and acting style" (Brammer 76). Brammer's description

responds to the plot and style of *Burial Cloth*, and positions the short as it is actually about how the lives of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia are greatly affected by the socio-economic they live in. The depiction of people's realistic living experiences tangle with, and to a degree, overwhelms their attachments to any traditional identity. In other words, the collective struggles of people in certain times and spaces re-shape their sense of belonging. Capturing such experiences with suitable film techniques, *Ice Poison*, as well as *Burial Cloth*, imagine an identity that particularly belongs to the people who have lived and strived in Lashio.

Walking on the Water is also a part of another bigger project: Tsai's *Walker* series. This series has been presented through multiple mediums, including video installation, theater, painting, and cinema. Xuanzang (玄奘), a monk who took a long walking journey to the west (India) during the Tang Dynasty, is the inspiration of the series (Chen filmcomment.com).⁴⁸ Tsai's long-time working partner, Lee Kang-sheng, mimics Xuanzang by not only wearing a red rope as a monk but also strolling extremely slowly. The act is presented in the forms of live theater and four short videos. The first video of the series is called *The Walker*, where Lee slowly walks through the busy streets of Hong Kong. *Walking on the Water* is the second video, where the monk walks around a seven-floor complex area in Kuching, Malaysia. In the third one, *Journey to the West*,

⁴⁸ Tsai explains: "The reason why I wanted to do something like the *Walker* series is rooted in my obsession with the idea of [7th-century monk] Xuanzang, and the characteristics of the time he lived. There was no car, no train, no airplane, and no cell phone. He just walked. He is Xuanzang. He cannot walk fast, or walk slow. He can just walk forward" (Chen filmcomment.com).

the monk slowly moves through the streets of Marseille, France. Finally, in *No No Sleep*, the monk strolls through the streets of Tokyo at night.

The seven-floor complex in *Walking on the Water* is where Tsai grew up until he was fifteen years old. Other than detailed shots of the spaces, the daily activities of Tsai's neighbors, childhood friends, and relatives in the old home together comprise this short. Every shot, inside or outside of the complex, expresses Tsai's memories of the place where he spent his young years. In this respect, the nostalgic sentimentality is significant. Even though the sentimentality does not address mainland China, the short expresses deep affection for one's original land.

Nevertheless, when we see *Walking on the Water* in the larger context of the *Walker* series, it would be problematic to simply interpret the short with reminiscent sentimentality. In the *Walker* series, the body of the monk threads together the spaces he strolls through. In the case of *Walking on the Water*, the slow walk of the monk is presented through long takes of daily spaces, including living rooms, kitchens, alleyways, and a bus station outside of the complex. The monk always walks outdoors. When we are positioned to gaze at the daily activities of people in the apartments, we also spot the monk's eye-catching red rope passing by the windows. The red-rope monk connects these spaces while we take time to observe the spaces and look at people going about their daily activities in these spaces.

The monk in the *Walker* series is related to Tsai's interests in the story of Xuanzang and Buddhism. The walk of Xuanzang to the west was motivated by his devotion to Buddhism. Tsai adores the relationship built between the path and the walker

in the story of Xuanzang. To elaborate this point, he resists the fast-paced experiences in modern society, which include the ones offered by commercial films (Eng entropymag.org).⁴⁹

The *Walker* series shows extreme slowness of the monk's body movement and the editing pace. Such slowness strongly requires to the audience to patiently absorb the images and the sounds. Instead of understanding these works with their narratives, the shorts in the *Walker* series, as many previous films by Tsai, are described as meditation-like (Carew 58).

This meditative quality, I argue, contests the subject of nostalgia in *Walking on the Water*— although the location and Tsai's personal attachment to the place remain significant, the spectator's meditative experience bridges the spaces to the spectator with or without acknowledging Tsai's personal relationship to the place. It sets a perspective to endlessly wonder about what we see and hear in the spaces rather than define them through any solid information. Thus, while the seven-floor complex may trigger Tsai's emotions of his origin, we, as the audience, follow the slow movement of the monk and develop our explorations to these familiar or unfamiliar spaces.

In a sense, Tsai turns his nostalgia experiences to an open text, and therefore, every viewing of *Walking on the Water* itself could be a revision of the interpretation of ethnic Chinese's experiences living in the complex in Kuching, Malaysia. When we see *Burial Cloth* and *Walking on the Water* under the framework of *Letters from the South*, it is easy to label them as artistic works that deal with the subject of the Chinese Diaspora

⁴⁹ See <http://entropymag.org/slowness-as-an-act-of-rebellion-on-tsai-ming-liangs-walker/>

simply in terms of its nostalgic sentimentalities. However, viewing *Burial Cloth* and *Walking on the Water* in another light, we reach more open and extended understandings, not only in the content of both films but also other existing social conditions that further update the discourse of the Chinese Diaspora.

“Chinese Diaspora” is a sociological term addressing both an historical and an on-going phenomenon. The six shorts in *Letters from the South* revisit the concept of the Chinese Diaspora with both new evidence about the phenomenon and new perspectives from which to read the evidence. Therefore, they re-write the depiction of the Chinese Diaspora in various ways. First, by using classic narrative structure, *Singapore Panda*, *Popiah*, and *Now Now Now* find new connections between ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asia and their sense of identity through cultural elements from their everyday lives. Second, by conversing with a past exiled traveler, *A Night in Malacca* finds uncertainty in the idea of *homeland*. Finally, by observing the socio-economic struggles and daily activities in Southeast Asia, *Burial Cloth* and *Walking on the Water* express that while the idea of origin persists, the spaces in which people interact are present. These interactions continue to generate new meanings as well as change old definitions of the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia.

This new read of the Chinese Diaspora can be compared to how James Clifford notes the diasporic experiences of Black British as “ways to stay and be different” (308). He further describes that “this strong difference, this sense of being a ‘people’ with historical roots and destinies outside the time/space of the host nation, is not separatist” (Clifford 311). Ethnic Chinese have stayed in the so-called “host nation” with their

cultural uniqueness for generations Southeast Asian. Their differences have interacted with the time/space of the host nation for generations too. In this aspect, I further expand on Clifford's statement and argue not only that ethnic Chinese's historical roots do not separate the ethnic group from their host nation, but their cultural and social experiences also participate in configuring the national identity of the host nation. This mixture of diverse experiences infinitely re-conceptualizes the meaning of the Chinese Diaspora in contemporary Southeast Asia. The third compilation project, *3 Doors of Horror*, discussed in the following section, is an example of how movies with strong Chinese characteristics integrate and then start new methods of filmmaking practices in Malaysia.

Reviving Malaysian Commercial Cinema via New Media: *3 Doors of Horror* Series

3 Doors of Horror is a web series. Starting in 2013 and every year before the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival, Lee invites three young filmmakers in Malaysia to each make one short horror film. Different from *15 Malaysia* and *Letters from the South*, the political subjects such as ethnic relationships and cultural identity do not appear important for the project of *3 Doors of Horror*. Instead, the producer, Lee, has an ambition to make entertaining and popular visuals so that movies made in Malaysia can attract both local and global audiences. He approaches this goal with short film productions. In an interview, Lee stresses the importance of short films in the current filmmaking environment in Malaysia. He believes that producing short films provides

necessary practice for young Malaysian filmmakers, and making short films really underlines their distinct talent (Koay storyboard.com).⁵⁰

With these beliefs and limited resources, the *3 Doors of Horror* series offer a stage for upcoming filmmakers in Malaysia to gain production experiences as well as to showcase their capabilities. In this way, *3 Doors of Horror* has very different natures from the compilations of *15 Malaysia* and *Letters from the South*. Yet, I argue that the commonality between *3 Doors of Horror* and the two other compilations is that it also presents a new perspective that revises a long-term subject in Malaysia: commercial filmmaking practices in Malaysia. *3 Door of Horror* represents a gesture to revive the existing commercial filmmaking practices in Malaysia by following the trend of new media landscape in the new global order.

The three shorts in each year's project are released on the first day of the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival via free Internet sites, such as youtube.com and viddsee.com. They also later feature as one compilation and tour around the film festival circuit mainly in the Southeast Asian region. In the past three years, the project has offered an annual platform for young Malaysian independent filmmakers. In its debut year of 2013, the three segments included *I Miss U 2* directed by Leroy Low, *Floating Sun* by Edmund Yeo, and *Horror Mission* by Ng Ken Kin. All three had experience in directing short

⁵⁰ This does not suggest that Lee thinks that making short films is the stepping stone for producing feature films. Rather, in the interview, he points out that many young filmmakers attempt to make feature films very early in their careers, and these works are often considered failures either at the box office or in reviews. He thinks the failure may be from lack of experience in building up solid skills through the making of short films before jumping into creating feature films.

films yet had not yet made feature films. Among the three, Yeo became a good example that affirms Lee's thoughts on the importance of making short films before a feature film. He made eight shorts films between 2008 and the production of *Floating Sun* in 2013. As a young, yet experienced, filmmaker, the project of *3 Doors of Horror* extended his portfolio. Afterward, Yeo made his debut feature film, *Rivers of Exploding Durian* (2014), which received widespread appreciation and invitations to many international film festivals, including Tokyo International Film Festival and International Film Festival Rotterdam.

3 Doors of Horror inevitably links to Chinese identity because of its connection with the Chinese Hungry Ghost Festival. In addition, all the directors of the series are ethnic Chinese and most of the shorts are in Mandarin. Yet, Lee does not frame the project as movies for ethnic Chinese communities. He shows efforts to reach beyond Chinese filmmakers and audiences. In the production teams, the crew and cast are often multi-ethnic. In the 2014 series, one of the three shorts, *Turn Over*, was in Malay and English. In the 2015 series, *Phyu Phyu* was made completely in the Malay language and most of the cast were Malays. The project shows an eagerness in offering opportunities for all Malaysian film practitioners rather than specific ethnic groups. The use of English, Chinese, and Malay languages also shows the project's ambition in attracting Malaysian audiences from various cultural backgrounds.

In a sense, *3 Doors of Horror* stands for a belief that that Chinese content is not necessarily for Chinese Malaysians only; likewise then, Malay content does not have to be made by only Malay filmmakers. Although this attitude may appear as Chinese

centrism, such a belief indicates differences in independent filmmaking in Malaysia between the 2000s and 2010s. In the 2000s, Chinese Malaysian filmmakers' Chinese-language films were viewed as specific ethnic and cultural representations of the minority group in Malaysia. Yet, in the 2010s, filmmakers became convinced that Malaysian audiences could possibly receive Malaysian movies made with a certain cultural background that differs from where the audience comes from. The domination of commercial films from Hollywood proves this. With projects like *3 Doors of Horror*, Lee promotes that the cross-boundary qualities of Malaysian commercial films have to come from "well production," which is defined by experienced filmmaking and attractive narrative.

Lee's visions in building a more professional and, therefore, better environment for Malaysia's commercial cinema frame the project of *3 Doors of Horror* as a patriotic project. It intends to complement the filmmaking environment in Malaysia, so the artistic and technical qualities of movies made in Malaysia can be successful commercially and critically. Lee's ambition in attracting cross-cultural audiences also echoes the neoliberal trend of selling and consuming cultural products across national boundaries. In this sense, the making of the *3 Doors of Horror* series embodies a process influenced by several contemporary forces. These forces lead to revisions of the existing filmmaking practices in Malaysia.

Conclusion

The disagreements on Malaysia's national identity indicate a long-term negotiation between ethno-nationalism and multiculturalism. The debates between the

1971 NCP and the 1991 Bangsa Nation show how such disagreements exist among the political powers. Then, the criticism and defense of Ahmad's *Sepet and Gubra* further show how this long-term disagreement reflects unresolved problems that affect the society at various levels.

This chapter suggests that the three video compilations, *15 Malaysia*, *Letters from the South*, and *3 Doors of Horror*, revise the disagreement by re-writing and reinventing new narratives and practices the constructions of ethnicity and identity in Malaysia. They configure new narratives to the subjects of ethnicity and identity so the answers to these issues become more appropriately reflecting the current living experiences of Malaysians. The collaborative nature of the compilations and the mixed genres in the compilations multiply the viewpoints to give these historical and on-going problems more realistic responses. These responses further seek to alter the fallacious divisions of ethnicities, the outdated definition of the Chinese Diaspora, and the deficiencies in filmmaking practices in Malaysia.



Figure 3. A still shot of the shooting set of *Floating Sun* (one of the three segments in 2013's *3 Doors of Horror*). Shot by the author.

CHAPTER 5: AN ALTERNATE SPIRIT: KUALA LUMPUR EXPERIMENTAL FILM, VIDEO AND MUSIC FESTIVAL (KLEX)

When this dissertation argues for alternative digital movies to be recognized as a meaningful representative of Malaysian national cinema, one of the key reasons is to determine how these digital productions actually connect with Malaysian society. In the previous chapters, the film examples show such connections through their diegetic contents. In this chapter, by investigating Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival (KLEX), I argue that digital film cultures do not merely render observations and imaginations of contemporary Malaysian society through their narrative contents but further generate new communal experiences within society.

In 2010, a group of Malaysian artists and scholars collectively announced the launch of “Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film and Video Festival.”⁵¹ The festival advisor during its inaugural year, Tomonari Nishikawa, describes how the festival “will introduce a broad range of experimental films and videos... it intends to ask them (Malaysian audiences) to define what experimental cinema would mean in the Malaysian context” (177). In its second year, this film festival began to feature elements of audio-visual performances. Since then, these audio-visual performances have become inseparable from the festival. Therefore, the festival later changed the name into “Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video and Music Festival.” KLEX introduces artistic and economic

⁵¹ The group included Malayaisn experiemtnal filmmakers and musicians, Kok Siew-wai, Au Sow-Yee, Yong Yandsen, and Goh Lee-Kwang, a Malaysian artist and scholar of conceptual arts, Yap Sau-Bin, and a Japanese filmmaker and researcher on experimental cinema in Southeast Asia, Tomonari Nishikawa. The festival later changes the name to Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival in 2015. The initial of the festival maintains to be KLEX.

qualities established from American-European experimental visual and audio arts to Malaysia. These encounters between the experimental arts and Malaysia, as the encounters between experimental arts and many other Southeast Asia regions, generate their own distinct exploratory discourses in creating, screening, and performing arts. This chapter examines these innovative practices in order to help explain how KLEX appears as a new and alternative cinematic experience in Malaysia. By investigating the relationships between KLEX and the collaborated art spaces in Kuala Lumpur, the chapter further discusses how this cinematic practice enters and affects the formation of social experiences in postmodern Malaysia.

This chapter is divided into three parts tackling the three essential elements: “experimental,” “Kuala Lumpur,” and “a film, video and music festival.” They together compose the title of “Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video and Music Festival.” In the first part, *With an Experimental Spirit, KLEX as a New Cinematic Practice in Kuala Lumpur*, I describe how KLEX introduces a distinct type of film practice not seen previously in Kuala Lumpur. Such a novelty is realized because KLEX’s experimental fashion rejects the customs of utilizing film/video works as a tool for reproducing economic or ideological goals.

The second part, *Cross-disciplinary Activities, Local Artist-Run Spaces, and Global Participation*, starts with unpacking KLEX’s interdisciplinary qualities. Through hosting both experimental film/video screenings and audio-visual performances before starting KLEX, the founder and director of KLEX, Kok Siew-wai, and her partners, gained a lot of experiences in practicing and exhibiting experimental arts in Kuala

Lumpur. With various artist-run spaces, together they have gradually built local networks for holding screenings and performances featuring both Malaysian and international artists. Among the experimental art practices in Kuala Lumpur, KLEX becomes a significant brand operating on both local and global platforms, and so global participation appears important for KLEX as well.

Finally, the third section of this chapter, *Alternative Public Sphere and New Relationships between Cinema and Spectators*, further investigates how KLEX, as a festival, forms an alternative public sphere in Kuala Lumpur. With scholarly discussions of the film festival's relationships to the public sphere, this section suggests that the alternative public sphere KLEX forms is anchored on participants' experiences and responses to the pieces and performances in the three-day event. Instead of only understanding KLEX as a platform for alternative artistic practices in Kuala Lumpur, or as an extension of the experimental cinematic landscape in Southeast Asia, KLEX also functions as a gathering for exploring and reimagining the social experiences of living in Kuala Lumpur.

With an Experimental Spirit, KLEX as a New Cinematic Practice in Kuala Lumpur

Along with the emergence of independent digital film productions in Malaysia, various kinds of film cultures not previously active in the Malaysian film scene began blooming. In 2003, a film festival dedicated to documentary films, The Freedom Film Festival, was launched. KL Eco Film Festival, devoted to environmental issues, began in 2008. These film festivals take clear positions in recognizing social issues through exhibiting films that engage with these issues. Among these various types of festivals,

KLEX constructs a distinct stage by specifically showcasing experimental films, a special cinematic genre that challenges, subverts, and reinvents the shape of cinema. Since the first festival in October 2010, because of how experimental cinema constantly challenges its own form, the organizers continuously reflect on the indispensable elements for KLEX: What is the experimental spirit of KLEX?

In the core structure of the festival, we see that the curatorial team threads the programs with abstract and open themes, such as “Deframed” (2012), “Metamorphosis” (2013), “First Time” (2014), and “Pulse” (2015).⁵² With these open themes, KLEX practices to articulate its experimental characteristics in various conceptual imaginations. This openness makes KLEX function differently from most film festivals in Kuala Lumpur. To analyze what defines KLEX as a new practice in Kuala Lumpur, I first review the uniqueness of the experimental cinema genre. By following Jean-François Lyotard’s arguments on how experimental cinema does not assert economic and political profits, I begin the discussion with how the distinct practices of experimental cinema endeavors to keep itself from seeking certain “useful purpose.”

Practices of Experimental Cinema vs. Useful Purposes

When I state experimental films often keep cautious distance from having useful purposes, I do not intend to claim the practices of experimental cinema engage no practical issues. On the contrary, experimental films often carry political intentions and relate to real world issues in their own diverse styles. Nevertheless, the usefulness of an

⁵² More detail information regarding each topic please see the archive section in <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/>

experimental film rarely appears as concrete values, such as economic profits and political influences. Throughout film history, these useful values affected how a film should look and sound, and the audiences adjust to the film techniques successfully supplying these values. Lyotard argues film productions have become uniform due to repetition in the use of similar techniques. The cinematography department, Lyotard points out, and the movement of cinematic imagery, has gradually become a repetitive form. The judgment regarding what a “good” and “professional” cinema is bound by the formulas of manipulating a film’s cinematography (352-3). Thus, Lyotard further writes, “[C]inema movement generally follows the figure of return, that is, of the repetition and propagation of sameness” (358). Lyotard suggests the concept of *acinema*, which usually refers to underground and experimental films. Different from commercial or educational productions, experimental film follows a very different mode of production and exhibition, and is often disconnected from either capitalist or political motivation controlled by established institutions.

One of the most prominent useful purposes of conventional cinema is its capacity for making financial profits. David Curtis illustrates that after the first five years of the invention of cinema (1895-1900), unlike still photography, cinematography became the collection of technologies and products controlled by large companies (7).⁵³ With the

⁵³ Curtis, in his 1971’s book *Experimental Cinema*, writes “In cinematography the early patent holders saw film’s greatest potential as theatrical art form, and did their best to centralize and limit production to an appropriate theatrical format... [they] enforced the world-wide reorganization of their sole license on all movie production and exhibition equipment. Through this attempt monopoly failed, it stimulated the growth of large ‘invulnerable companies’ which replaced the smaller independent production units and eventually led to the adoption of block booking and the circuit release of chains of cinema” (7).

resources of technical innovations, capital investment, and exhibition outlets, these companies produced films under the “professional” formats and rules. These formats and rules make cinema to develop “as a mass culture at the point of consumption while maintaining an extreme elitism at the point of production” (Le Grice “Temporary Economy” 185). Thus, studios produce films aimed at formulating general viewers’ taste and, at the same time, to meeting audiences’ expectations. Therefore, the production guarantees the film will return profits. Developing at the margins of such a film history centralized by capitalist agents, experimental films represents the negation of such domination.⁵⁴ As Stan Brakhage calls for “Filmmakers DISunite!,” experimental filmmakers continuously have proposed an open form for the film medium (204). In a similar sense, Curtis describes these filmmakers as “the true amateur” who has more freedom to experiment with the medium (7). The term *amateur* does not put the filmmakers in a lower hierarchical position; rather it points out how these film-artists consciously stand outside the industrial economy (Small 18; Curtis 7).

Without the quality of being economically productive, it is difficult for experimental filmmakers to explore ways to exhibit their works. Commercial cinema venues are usually unavailable for these unprofitable screenings. To gain visibility, experimental filmmakers have collaborated with each other since the 1960s to distribute their films. Jonas Mekas started the idea and became one of the founders of The Film-Makers’ Cooperative in New York in 1962. Until this day, the cooperative continues to

⁵⁴ Le Grice in his 1980’s article “Towards Temporary Economy” points out that “two aspects of theoretical statements on avant-garde cinema: 1) the negation of dominant cinema, and 2) propositions for the form of its alternative or replacement. (185)

archive, distribute, and restore experimental films. It also pays a significant portion of the film rental fee back to the filmmakers. Canyon Cinema in California (founded in 1967) and Light Cone in Paris (founded in 1982) followed this model (Hammen 21).

Instead of pushing their works toward commercial distribution, these groups collaborate with contemporary art venues including film festivals, museums, and galleries. Although the collaboration does not guarantee a sustainable life for the filmmakers, their works gain a platform. Such western trajectories of experimental films' production and exhibition inevitably influence the experimental cultures in the non-western world. In the case of KLEX, many core founders of the festival, such as Kok Siew-wai, Au Sow-yee, and Tomonari Nashikawa, were experimental filmmakers who worked with each other to start the festival. In addition, all three practiced and studied experimental arts in the United States. They observed and learned from the practices of western experimental film communities.⁵⁵

Distinct Qualities of Experimental Cinema in Southeast Asia

While the western experiences of making and distributing experimental films did influence the formation of KLEX, the free spirits of experimental films retain the possibilities of creating site-specific phenomena. Few regions in Southeast Asia have an extended history in producing and exhibiting experimental film and video pieces.

⁵⁵ Kok Siew-wai received her B.A. in Media Study at University at Buffalo, and M.F.A. in Electronic Integrated Arts at Alfred University. Tomonari Nishikawa studied cinema and philosophy in Binghamton University in New York, and is currently teaching in Cinema Department in Binghamton University. Au Sow-yee graduated from the San Francisco Art Institute and is currently studying New Media Arts in Taipei National University of the Arts (Taiwan).

Activities related to experimental films can often only be found in metropolitan areas. Jakarta, the capital of Indonesia, appears as one of the first cities in the region to have local artists producing experimental films (Chong 2). The making of experimental films in Jakarta can be dated back to the 1970s, when the film and art programs in Jakarta Institution of Arts (Institut Kesenian Jakarta) started making experimental pieces. Yet, a more visible scene of experimental works did not become active until the 1990s when video equipment became more popular and accessible (Chong 3). Unlike how experimental film artists in the U.S. and Europe started experimenting with moving images, by using celluloid and therefore anchored their works with this specific material, experimental filmmakers in Jakarta did not get hung up on the use of film. They, instead, have utilized any accessible technology. Chong Chan-Fui describes how “Overall, experimental film making in Indonesia can best be defined not as a technique but rather a belief. It follows the spirit of perpetually redefining what a moving image should entail” (3). Based on such a belief, the experimental film scene is interwoven with its own distinct characteristics in Indonesia.

In 1997 the Bangkok Experimental Film Festival (BEFF) was founded. BEFF showcased not only current experimental films from Thailand and all over the world but also pure archival footage they intentionally collected from multiple countries’ archives in Southeast Asia. The diverse materials screened at BEFF created a different body of experimental films that loosened the traditional western definition of experimental cinema. David Teh writes:

[T]here is a big difference between what self-consciously calls itself

‘experimental film’ in Europe or America and what may be called ‘experimental

film' in a place like Thailand, where there are fewer art institutions and support organizations, fewer boundaries around and between art forms, and less articulated funding criteria and government policy. Not only will we not apologize for our permissive approach to the categories of visual culture, but we embrace the fluidity of these boundaries which so few Thai artists care to police. (311-312)

The development of experimental films in Jakarta and Bangkok show that, from production to exhibition, when the imagination of “experimental films” blooms in Southeast Asian countries, it has to be nourished according to the distinct context it encounters. The context does relate to the economic resources of the area. However, these resources do not come from existing film industry but rather from cultural and educational institutions. These institutions provide accessibility to technologies as well as financial and physical supports.

In the case of KLEX, the operation outside of the industrial economy does not differentiate it from other film festivals in Malaysia. Because digital technologies provide a much more accessible environment for all types of filmmakers, many non-commercial film/video productions contribute to diverse social purposes. Both the aforementioned Freedom Film Festival (FFF) and KL Eco Film Festival (KLEFF) in Malaysia operate as non-profit organizations and work with independent filmmakers in order to highlight social justice issues and ecological problems. Both festivals have specific missions. By

devoting their festival to document social issues, FFF aims to showcase human rights films and further hopes to understand and eventually solve these issues in society.⁵⁶

Similarly, in the “History of KLEFF” section on KLEFF’s website, it shows the aim of their festival is to “inspire people to keep the common goal of an environmentally sustainable future in mind.”⁵⁷ FFF and KLEFF contribute to Malaysia’s film cultures with productive goals: they both expect, through film screenings, they can raise social and environmental awareness and further lead to a better world. In this aspect, while FFF and KLEFF do not aim for economic profits, they screen specific types of films for determined purposes. This quality differentiates FFF and KLEFF from KLEX, because the experimental characteristics of KLEX allow the purpose of KLEX to remain undetermined.

KLEX and Its Experimental Spirit

When we look into the films showcased in KLEX in the past years, social and political conditions underline substantial contexts for many of them, especially productions from local filmmakers (for example, Lim Chee-yong’s *Lulai* (2014), Andrew Stiff’s *Kampung Hakka* (2014), TS Kwan’s *Female* (2013), Eng Long Wong’s *Heritage* (2013) and *Mist* (2012)). In this aspect, KLEX has never excluded the potential that, by showing their films, the festival participates in Malaysia’s social/political evolution. However, because of the distinct aesthetic styles, these pieces are open for multiple interpretations and, therefore, are not merely defined as social-issue films. Through

⁵⁶ See <http://freedomfilmfest.komas.org/our-mission/>

⁵⁷ See <http://kleff.my/>.

showcasing these films, KLEX relates to the social/political environment in an open manner: It operates as a platform for wide-range artistic expressions and participates in the city's social and political atmosphere. Insisting to operate outside of industrial economy, KLEX does adapt many qualities of experimental cinema from the American-European traditions. Meanwhile, KLEX's team shapes its own practices according to Kuala Lumpur as well as Malaysia's distinct context.

Similar to many existing experimental film festivals around the world, KLEX provides an exhibition platform in Southeast Asia for productions coming from individual filmmakers. The team of curators calls for submissions annually and asks for no submission fee to allow more artists to submit their works. In the past five years, KLEX's open programs have collected works from visual artists who screened their works in many film festivals and art exhibitions. For example, after Taiki Sakpisit's film *The Age of Anxiety* (2013) was shown in KLEX 2013, it was further screened in Poland, France, and Korea; Peter Lichter, whose works have been exhibited in venues in New York, Seoul, and Paris, screened his work *No Signal Detected* (2013) in KLEX's 2014 program titled "Learning to Fly."⁵⁸ Moreover, before Adrienne Marcus Raja's *Soli* (2013) was screened in KLEX 2014, it was first shown in the imagineNATIVE Film + Media Arts Festival in Toronto, Canada.⁵⁹ Other than established visual artists and filmmakers, students in film or art majors also submitted and screened their works in KLEX. For example, in KLEX 2014, the program included Hoi Ting Yeung's *What Day Is Today*

⁵⁸ See http://www.taikisakpisit.com/p/about_7.html; <http://lichterpeter.blogspot.com/> and <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2014/programme-i-learning-to-fly/>

⁵⁹ See <http://www.adriennemarcusraja.com/?/about/>

(2012), Kalila Snow Jan's *For Peace, Paradox* (2013), and Winston Liew Kher Cheng's *The Light of Memory* (2013).⁶⁰ In this way, KLEX constantly works with film-artists who practice in the spirit of experimental cinema as they circulate their works outside of industrial economy.

Without clear and promotable purposes (economically or socially) to frame the festival, KLEX's team seeks sustainable support to organize and host their annual events. Similar to the initiation of experimental filmmaking and exhibition in Jakarta and Bangkok, KLEX has grown in proportion to funding they obtain around Kuala Lumpur. In an interview with the director of KLEX, Kok, she says that KLEX first sought international art funds, in particular from the Goethe-Institute. Goethe-Institute is a German cultural institution that supports events on sociopolitical topics and avant-garde art worldwide since the 1960s, and it has a Malaysia branch in Kuala Lumpur. After KLEX launched in Kuala Lumpur in 2010, Goethe-Institute Malaysia soon joined with KLEX. They have granted funds for this experimental film festival since 2011. Like many experimental artists, Kok also works as a teacher in the creative media program in Multimedia University, a private university in Malaysia. She accesses equipment, such as digital projectors, for KLEX's film screenings. In addition, some students who took her class work as volunteers for the events. She also brings KLEX programs to tour local colleges and at times recruiting student volunteers through these initiatives. In addition, various non-governmental art institutions, funding organizations, and educational organizations support KLEX. These diverse resources separate KLEX from other existing

⁶⁰ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2014/programme-iii-the-familiar-strange/>

art events that receive funds from the government and commercial companies. KLEX survives by the support of private art funding, such as Krishen Jit ASTRO Fund, and of private donors as well as a minimal admission charge at its events (Kok).

Finally, collaborations between KLEX and experimental film events/festivals in other cities are also increasing. Inside the Southeast Asian region, KLEX has begun to work with BEFF. Since 2012, BEFF and KLEX have invited curators from each other's festival to present programs.⁶¹ In August 2015, KLEX's program *Impermanence* was shown in ARKIPEL Jakarta Documentary and Experimental Film Festival. Outside the Southeast Asian region, KLEX's programs have traveled to Hong Kong, Korea, USA, France, Germany, and Belgium.⁶² These collaborations complicate KLEX and add new components from global networks to the layers of KLEX. With international art grants, local funds, accessibility to exhibition equipment, and global networks, KLEX operates more than by just introducing experimental cinema to Kuala Lumpur as stated in their initial intentions. KLEX has developed an on-going relationship between Kuala Lumpur and international experimental cinema.

In summary, Lyotard describes how the making of *acinema* is similar to lighting a match without using fire to heat or cook, but only by watching (351). The action of lighting a match presents nothing more than inviting the curiosity to experience the spark

⁶¹ In 2012, BEFF invited Kok to curate a special programme featuring KLEX works for their sixth festival. Please see: <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/2012/01/6th-bangkok-experimental-film-festival/> In 2013 and 2014, KLEX invited one of BEFF's curators, Wiwat Lertwiwatwongsa, to showcase a Thai guest programme in KLEX. Please see: <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2013/guest-programme/thai-guest/> and <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2014/thai-guest-programme/>

⁶² See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/about/>

of the fire. From the vantage point of the European-American tradition, experimental cinema embodies such an “nonproductive” desire. Filmmakers often searches for answering a fundamental question—what is film? —in particular through reflecting on the medium of celluloid itself. However, as Teh argues, in Southeast Asia, no one polices the definition of experimental cinema as people do in the western world (311). Whether to retain or reject conventional values of film medium does not necessary define the practices of experimental films in Southeast Asia.

To KLEX, when the team introduces the genre to Kuala Lumpur and incorporates the annual event within the socio-economic conditions of this postmodern and financially and technically resourceful city, it becomes possible for KLEX to operate with greater supports. Yet, seizing all the opportunities and collaborations to expand the event also brings negotiations that may challenge the experimental characteristics of KLEX. Therefore, KLEX’s team carefully selects its funding sources and cautiously reviews their current practices and cautiously imagines their future directions. To hold KLEX’s experimental ground may alienate some citizens because the screenings’ abstract and non-narrative forms usually make it difficult to attract general audiences. Without narrating clear social and cultural missions, KLEX is also easily targeted as indifferent to the practical and critical issues. Yet, KLEX retains open and avoids identifying with any one-dimensional social function. Since such an attitude has not been seen in Kuala Lumpur previously, and KLEX plants a new practice for the cinematic scene in Kuala Lumpur and in Malaysia in general.

To further argue how KLEX embodies a new practice in Kuala Lumpur, I ask: What does this new practice include? How does this practice relate to the city of Kuala Lumpur? In the following section, I show how KLEX brings cross-disciplinary exhibitions and performances to Kuala Lumpur. It also cultivates the relationships between Kuala Lumpur and experimental arts through closely collaborating with local artist-run spaces. Finally, the global networks KLEX generates over time help make Kuala Lumpur to become an important hub for artists around the world to screen and perform their works. Through screening programs outside Malaysia, KLEX also places Kuala Lumpur's distinct locality on to the global platform.

Cross-Disciplinary Activities, Local Artist-Run Spaces, and Global Participation

In this section, I turn to the second essential element of KLEX: Kuala Lumpur. While KLEX introduces experimental film/video screenings to Kuala Lumpur, the clashes between the experimental spirit and this hyper-global city generate a distinct cultural scene. This experimental art scene has been a flexible platform that transformed according to actions from the local cultural agents and responses from the cultural environment of Kuala Lumpur. With various collaborations among experimental artists who utilize different kinds of media, KLEX connects film screenings with multiple types of performances. Instead of official institutions or organizations, venues run by local artists host almost all these cross-disciplinary activities programmed by KLEX. In other words, these activities happen in contemporary Kuala Lumpur due to the tight relationships between KLEX and local venues and artists. These activities further grow their connections to larger global networks of experimental films and performances. The

platform of KLEX allows experimental film programs and audiovisual performers around the world to come to Kuala Lumpur. KLEX also brings programs to festivals outside of Malaysia. In this way, KLEX embodies an event in Kuala Lumpur that contains global dynamics.

Cross-disciplinary Activities

Since 2011, the second year of KLEX, the festival began including audio-visual performances as a part of the core structure of the festival. This is not an abrupt move on the part of the director, Kok, because, in addition to being a video artist, Kok has also been an improvisational vocal artist since she was a student in Buffalo, New York.⁶³ Moreover, another important co-founder of KLEX, Yong Yandsen, a saxophone, clarinet, and flute player who started as a rock musician during the 1990s, has been actively collaborating with many artists and musicians to perform improvisational music. Both Kok and Yong are the co-founders of Studio in Chares Kuala Lumpur (SiCKL), where experimental musicians and artists perform/screen their works. SiCKL has hosted screenings and performances actively between 2006 and 2010. Both Kok and Yong are also members of Experimental Musician and Artist Co-Operative Malaysia (EMACM). In a sense, KLEX could be seen as a continuation from the experimental music and art scene built by SiCKL and EMACM.⁶⁴ Although the first year of KLEX (2010) concentrated only on film/video screenings, Kok and Yong's long-time connections to

⁶³ See Youtube for a video (by Kiji Tambata) based on Kok's performance named 'the movement - another name of music' at Deep Listening Space, Kingston, NY in 2004.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T04bT4D5x0A>

⁶⁴ See <http://emacm.blogspot.com/>

various musicians and audio-visual artists naturally led them to organize audio-visual performances for KLEX.

As well as a cross-discipline festival for both visual and aural works, KLEX also provides a site for artists to meet and further collaborate with each other. For the past five years, KLEX's Kok and Yong have continuously invited and collaborated with various musicians and artists from inside and outside of Malaysia. Local artists such as Goh Lee Kwang, a sound and new media artist who uses multiple kinds of media in his work, has been performing in KLEX with Wong Eng Leong, a visual artist and a painter, since 2012.⁶⁵ *HKPT*, an electro-acoustic-noise duo of Azzief and Sudarshan, who had previously played in SiCKL's events, performed their highly energetic noise show for KLEX in 2012 and 2014.⁶⁶ From outside Malaysia, *Black Zenith*, a duo of electronic-synthesized audio-visual performance, Brian O'Reilly and Darren Morre, have traveled from Singapore every year since 2011 to perform in KLEX. Since 2012, the two members of *Black Zenith* further collaborated with Yong and made *Game of Patience*. They comprise a trio who combine several genres, such as free jazz, electronic music, and free improvisation, into their performances.⁶⁷

Other than the established duo or trio groups, individual artists often re-team with each other in KLEX's performances. For example, in 2013, Wong Eng Leong performed with Koji Asano, a Japanese artist who travels around the world with his live laptop

⁶⁵ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2012/av-performance/>

⁶⁶ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2012/av-performance/> ; <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2013/av-performance/> ; and <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2014/audio-visual-performances/>

⁶⁷ See <http://www.black-zenith.com/>; and <http://www.gameofpatience.com/>

performances. Kok, as an improvisational vocal musician, performed with Yong and Syed Kamran Ali from Singapore in 2014.⁶⁸ To further elaborate on collaborations among cross-disciplinary artists, Yong worked with a video from KLEX's screening program. He played with the projection of an experimental video piece, *Memory and Ritual in Frame Difference* (Bernagozzi, 2012), as a part of his improvisational sax performances.⁶⁹ In this way, KLEX created cross-discipline opportunities between filmmakers and musicians to imagine and develop their projects.

As the collaborations among the groups and individual artists become more and more frequent, KLEX has further extended its reach by starting Serious Play Improv Lab (SPIL) in May 2014.⁷⁰ Instead of being an annual event as KLEX, SPIL puts on music or audio-visual performances every month. In addition to being a platform for local and reoccurring artists in Kuala Lumpur's experimental music scene, SPIL regularly invites and hosts musicians and artists from around the globe.⁷¹ Because SPIL generates a lively scene of experimental music and audio-visual performances, aural content has become equally important as visual content for KLEX. Live experimental sound/music performances, therefore, have become one of the signature features of KLEX. Therefore, KLEX has officially changed its name from "Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film and Video Festival" to "Kuala Lumpur Film, Video and Music Festival" since 2015.

⁶⁸ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2013/av-performance/> ; and <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2014/audio-visual-performances/>

⁶⁹ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2014/audio-visual-performances/>

⁷⁰ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/spil/>

⁷¹ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/spil/spil-2014/> and <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/spil/spil-2015/>

The cultural agents' personal and social connections organically lead KLEX to become a cross-disciplinary festival. This transformation may come from some essential qualities shared by experimental cinema and audio-visual performance. One of the core qualities of both forms is how they intend to provoke sensorial reaction from the audiences instead of laying out a narrative. Reviewing Lyotard's concept of *acinema*, Ashley Woodward notes: "Experimental cinema allows movements which escape narrative structure and are able to transmit intensities to the bodies of the audience on the basis of their sensorial qualities. Lyotard sees this as so far from what typically passes as cinema that he calls it 'acinema'" (142). Elaborating further, Woodward finds that the narrative structure often serves to garner economic profits. This is why every image in a commercial cinema has to follow rules in order to be productive and useful, and every image has a narrative bridge to each other in the film. On the contrary, images in an experimental cinema, or *acinema*, "are allowed the status of a sacrifice: they portray a movement which is simply allowed to exist in and of itself, to transmit its sensorial intensities to the viewer and to be enjoyed as a useless, sterile expenditure..." (142). This quality of experimental cinema shares a similarity to the core of audio-visual performances. As Grayson Cooke describes:

[W]ith a work of audio-visual performance, it is the senses that are at the core of the work. Live media performance is premised on the potential for contiguity between the audio and visual senses—and perhaps that is where we have to locate sense if we are to make it. Most explicitly, what live audio-visual performance works seek to do is precisely to 'make a new sense'... (203).

Both experimental cinema and audio-visual performance not only seek for sensorial reaction from their audience, but both forms also avoid falling in the circle of reproduction. In this respect, an experimental film/video screening or an audio-visual performance is not necessary an artistic object used to reproduce a reality or represent anything else. Rather, they are similar to actual and first-hand experiences composed together by all the participants in the moment.

Experimental cinema and audio-visual performances' effects on the senses add another layer of cross-discipline characteristics to KLEX. Examining the senses stimulated by audio-visual works, Mitchell Whitelaw describes the phenomena generated by cross-modal media through a neurological phenomenon, *synesthesia*. It describes that stimulation from one cognitive pathway can lead to automatic and involuntary experiences in a secondary cognitive pathway (259). Audio-visual performances create digital synesthesia by customizing analogue equipment that generates automatically synchronized audio and visual stimulation. Thus, the performance itself operates as synesthetic experiences. One of KLEX's regular guests, *Black Zenith* works with analog modular synthesizers. While the duo manipulates the synthesizers and fills the performance space with various kinds of noise, these sounds at the same time generate live moving images.⁷² Many experimental videos in KLEX's screenings also construct experiences of synesthesia. Jason Bernagozzi's *Memory and Ritual in Frame Difference* and Debora Bernagozzi's *Green Clouds Temple* (2012), for examples, manipulate sounds and images recorded from famous tourist spots in Malaysia. They generate mixed

⁷² See *Black Zenith*'s biography on the website. <http://black-zenith.tumblr.com/post/14558958004>

sensations that stimulate the audience both visually and aurally.

All the cross-discipline activities in KLEX are highly interrelated through the personal and social connections built around participants of local experimental arts. Exploring sensory possibilities, experimental film/video as well as audio-visual installation and performances include audience involvement. The relationships between artistic object/performance and its audience become ambivalent. This ambivalence challenges the conventional processes of creating artworks. Instead of completing an artwork and presenting to the audiences, the creation of experimental arts and performances now happen during the collaboration with other artists in communication with the audience on the spot. Because of the unique qualities, a public space that allows such activity becomes crucial for the development of this experimental art scene. In the case of Kuala Lumpur, besides creating art, many artists also open their own venues together. These venues are intended for creating and exhibiting their own art pieces, and they are also used to host shows for international artists. By operating galleries or live music venues, a scene of experimental art is established through both the artistic productions and through the happenings around these productions. Artists, curators, audiences, and all the participants together create these happenings and are affected by these happenings.

Artist-run Spaces

The core founders of KLEX, Kok and Yong, started presenting experimental film and music in Kuala Lumpur through SiCKL. These experiences allowed them to create a network and later connect to various artist-run spaces when they hosted KLEX's

screenings, installations, and performances. From 2010 to 2013, the first four years of the festival, KLEX's events happened in The Annexe, a gallery located on the periphery of Central Market, which is one of the most popular tourist spots in Kuala Lumpur. From 2008 to 2014, The Annexe had become one of the go-to places for art events in Kuala Lumpur. Khee Teik Pang, a photographer, writer, actor, art critic, and activist, and Goh Lee Kwang, a sound and new media artist, run The Annexe.⁷³ As mentioned, Goh has had close ties to KLEX. He was the technical manager of The Annexe and assisted all the setting for KLEX in 2010. Moreover, since 2012, Goh has been one of the regular performers in KLEX. Other than being the hosting space for KLEX, The Annexe was the home for Arts for Grabs, a monthly art gathering where writers, musicians, filmmakers, and artists brought their works to the venue to sell or exhibit.⁷⁴ The Annexe, therefore, as a space of multitasking for various media, perfectly served KLEX.

In November 2014, I went to Kuala Lumpur and participated the festival as one of the volunteer. Due to the closing of The Annexe, KLEX moved and began their fifth year in Lostgens and Findars, both artist-run spaces. Lostgens and Findars are located in the same apartment building, one block away from Petaling Street.⁷⁵ Lostgens is on the third floor and Findars is on the fourth. For KLEX 2014, all the film screenings happened in Lostgens during the afternoons while an installation art was exhibited in Findars. After dinnertime, the participants moved up one level and joined the audio-visual performances

⁷³ See https://www.facebook.com/pg/annexegallery/about/?ref=page_internal

⁷⁴ See https://www.facebook.com/pg/artforgrabs/about/?ref=page_internal

⁷⁵ Petaling Street is known as the chinatown of Kuala Lumpur.

in Findars. These events in the building symbolically illustrate KLEX as a structure for cross-discipline activities.

Lostgens, an abbreviation for Lost Generation Space, was founded by a group of Kuala Lumpur's local artists in 2004. More than hosting art exhibitions, film screenings, and live music performances, Lostgens also offer spaces for lectures on art and philosophy. The founders of Lostgens described the space as a place that "...managed to take on a certain quietness and edginess that comes from being off the beaten track".⁷⁶ While Lostgens offer a platform for pioneer exhibition and discussion on arts and culture, this white-wall space with partially wood floors also serves the art communities with a tender and elegant temperament. When KLEX team hosted the opening reception in Lostgens in 2014, with a big plate of homemade rice noodles and many familiar faces from Kuala Lumpur's art communities, the cutting-edge and the experimental spirit of KLEX was mixed with heartfelt feelings of new and old friends coming together. Lostgens weaves the space's distinct warm quality into the atmosphere of KLEX.

Findars, in contrast, appears young and provocative. Started in early 2008 by a group of local artists, Findars is defined as "the unbounded cultivation of self-exploration in arts".⁷⁷ Other than the efforts to connect local and global art communities, the founders of Findars (many graduated from art institutions recently) also celebrate individualities through their artwork and activities. Aside from the bar area, decorated with graffiti and paintings, the rest of the venue looks unfurnished and therefore projects an attitude of

⁷⁶ See <http://lostgenerationspace.blogspot.com/>

⁷⁷ See <http://findarskl.wix.com/findars#!about-us/c66t>

rawness and risk-taking. When audio-visual performances take place in Findars, KLEX seemingly mutates into a different animal. The mutation is not only affected by the loud and noisy performance styles, but also comes from the different energies formed in Findars' space.

From The Annexe to Lostgens and Findars, KLEX connects to local artists' communities. Because these artist-run spaces are located nearby Kuala Lumpur's popular tourist spots, the participation is not limited to local residents. SPIL, KLEX, Lostgens, and Findars all have invited international artists to perform. All these Malaysian and non-Malaysian participants (the performers or the audiences) help define these artist-run spaces with their work as what Saskia Sassen calls "locally scaled practices and conditions articulated with global dynamics" (3). KLEX exemplifies Sassen's depiction with its close connection and collaboration to these venues.

Global Participation

Since 2011, KLEX's events have expanded from inside to outside of Malaysia. Kok started to curate a special version of KLEX to be shown in Squeaky Wheel Buffalo Media Resources in Buffalo, NY, USA, and then Bangkok Experimental Film Festival in 2012. In 2013, KLEX programs further traveled to Médiathèque François-Mitterrand in France, Campo Victoria in Belgium, and Sung Kyung Kwan University in Seoul, Korea. In 2014, Kok continued to select video works from previous KLEX screenings, three collections to date, to be shown outside of Malaysia. The first happened in early March of 2014 in Buffalo, NY, where Hallwalls Contemporary Art Center showed *Tropical Seasonings*. The second titled *Sun Shower* then screened the same year, in April, at the

Asian Experimental Festival in Hong Kong. Thirdly, in July 2014, *Sun Shower* was shown at the Ilmin Museum of Art in Seoul. Another program *Home Portrait* was presented at SAIL, Moonji Cultural Institute.

All these events show that KLEX operates outside of Malaysia as a global and mobile site. KLEX integrates and rearticulates the experimental arts from global phenomena with their practices in Kuala Lumpur. It then introduces their local programs back to the global platform. This process of reshaping and reporting folds local and global context together, or we can argue that local and global appear not as dichotomy anymore. When KLEX hosts screenings in the United States, France, Belgium, Hong Kong, and Korea, it enriches both global and local dimensions of its practices.

Alternative Public Sphere and New Relationships between Cinema and Spectators

KLEX could be understood as a kind of social cultivation because what KLEX presents seeds new practices to the exiting artistic landscape in Kuala Lumpur. Such cultivation does not come from reproducing European-American experimental film or music traditions and replacing them in Kuala Lumpur; rather the cultivation derives from first-hand encounters made possible by KLEX's screenings and performances. In a sense, the new dimension KLEX brought to Kuala Lumpur is the forming of an alternative public sphere, through the screenings and performances of experimental pieces, that the local audiences had rarely experienced. This alternative public sphere is shaped by how KLEX's team designs the festival and how the participants interact with[in] the sphere.

Film Festivals and Public Sphere

Every film festival functions as a part of the public sphere. Jürgen Habermas explains: “By ‘the public sphere’ we mean first of all a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed” (49). From Habermas’ illustration on the evolution of the public sphere in liberal and democratic societies, we see that the state authority is not a part of the public sphere. Practices and opinions formed in the public sphere even often the force politic reform.⁷⁸ Following Habermas’ concept of the public sphere, Cindy Hing-Yuk Wong describes film festivals as a public sphere. She compares film festivals to the nineteenth-century bourgeois public sphere such as salons, coffee house, and book clubs, and suggests that a film festival can form a space for generating ideas and discussions (12). However, not all film festivals operate in a similar scale and manner. Wong defines different types of film festivals: First, there are the “A”-level film festivals, such as Cannes, Berlin, and Venice in Europe, Sundance in the United States, Tokyo, Shanghai, and Pusan in East Asia. These prominent festivals attract agents from throughout the film industry. In some respects, these festivals are business oriented, but also they play a central role in defining the main progression in the history of cinema. Second, there are small festivals that “are genre- or issue-oriented in ways interwoven with needs and issues of particular localities...These festivals are vital parts of local filmic, artistic, and sociocultural worlds. They parallel (and sometimes

⁷⁸ Habermas writes: “The public sphere as a sphere which mediates between society and state, in which the public organizes itself as the bearer or public opinion, accords with the principle of the public sphere—that principle of public information which once had to be fought for against the arcane policies of monarchies and which since that time has made possible the democratic control of state activities” (50).

participate in) other arts and music festivals that create cultural cachet for cities and states” (Wong 13). Film festivals with human rights, ecological issues, or LGBT themes, which bloom in many cities, are significant examples of these genre/issue-oriented festivals. In Malaysia, the previously mentioned Kuala Lumpur Eco Film Festival and Freedom Film Festival, also fall into this category. These small-scale festivals serve specifically for activist groups, and may differ from, or even work against, the dominant public opinion and government ideology. They generate an alternative kind of public sphere, which can be described as what Michael Warner calls *counterpublics*.⁷⁹

The activities of small-scale film festivals echo the way many scholars recognize the abstract and fragmented forms of the public sphere in contemporary societies, and therefore challenge Habermas’ description of the public sphere. Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge argue that one type of counter-publicity is proletarian publicity. The concept of proletarian publicity represents a counter-concept of bourgeois publicity (17). Negt and Kluge explain how the discourse of public sphere is highly ideological (Hansen 203). The public that Habermas describes is the opinion-forming group. This group represents “a dimension of their consciousness” and eventually “a real expression of fundamental social needs” (Negt and Kluge 17). Therefore, when Habermas refers to the bourgeois public sphere and/or the industrial-commercial oriented public, their opinions and needs orient towards constituting a capitalist society. This situation leaves

⁷⁹ In Michael Warner’s book *Publics and Counterpublics*, he defines: “Counterpublics are, by definition, formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion. Mass publics and counterpublics, in other words, are both damaged forms of publicness...” (63).

many different groups to demand representation of their social needs and resisting the hegemonic public sphere dominated by the bourgeois. Along a similar line, Nancy Fraser further states the existence and importance of the competing public spheres in contrast to the dominant masculine bourgeois (58). By defining many of these competing communities as *subaltern counterpublics*, Fraser reconstructs the late-capitalist societies as consisting of a multiplicity of publics, and therefore better illustrates the inequality among different segments within such societies (60).

Small festivals develop platforms for expressing various social, political, and cultural experiences, and, thereby, diversify the dimensions and identities within society. By examining the mechanisms of these festivals, instead of focusing on the content of films they screen, scholars shift their attention to the issue of spectatorship. For example, reflecting on the experience of organizing the Women's Film Festival in Seoul in 1996, Soyong Kim discusses how film festivals form strategic sites for spectators who desire and recognize their political identities. In the case of Women's Film Festival in Seoul, it has become an intersection for not only identities related to feminist movement, but also identities of gay, sub-culture youth, and class as well as Korean national identity (80). With the on-going revision of the concept of public sphere and the blooming of a diversity of film festivals, Wong provides further examination of issue-oriented film festivals. She finds that these issue-oriented film festivals generate alternative ideas and constantly re-conceptualize how these issues relate to the local as well as global societies. For example, her reviews of the development of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals point to the transition of how LGBT films became a significant part of mainstream film festivals

as well as popular theatrical markets. Such a transition raises the questions of how alternative film festivals cope with mainstream film exhibition circuits, and therefore expand film festivals as “sites of change and exchange” (188-189).

The examples above embody the conjuncture of complex social forces. They also show how the spheres these forces form remain flexible. These issue-oriented film festivals anchor with clear themes and, sometimes, explicit missions. The spectators, who attend to these festivals, are usually conscious of the relationship between their identities and the themes. The discourse in the public sphere, as a result, is built upon an alternative yet graspable dimension. However, when we examine an experimental film festival, such as KLEX, which does not cater to specific political and social issues, how do we locate the dimensions of the alternative public sphere it forms? How do we describe the public sphere KLEX offers to the film scene in Kuala Lumpur?

Joshua Gamson’s article “The Organization Shaping of Collective Identity: The Case of Lesbian and Gay Film Festivals in New York” interestingly tackles the subtle differences and interrelations between an experimental and a non-experimental film festival, and offers insight into the effects of an experimental film festival.

Comparing two film festivals focusing on LGBT cultures, the New York Lesbian and Gay Experimental Film Festival (NYLGEFF, aka. Mix Festival) and New York Lesbian and Gay Film Festival (New Film Festival), Gamson labels the two festivals’ politics as liberationist versus assimilationist. The Mix Festival screens experimental works challenging, subverting, and reimagining queer identities. It “embraces the ambiguity of racial and gender boundaries”. The New Festival, however, “represents

multicultural pluralism”, reclaims the heritage of LGBT identities, and aims to elevate the visibility of LGBT experiences (233-235).⁸⁰ Gamson’s descriptions of both festivals lead to an analysis of how a film festival’s organizational strategies shape the collective identities in different ways. In conclusion, Gamson writes:

In telling the story of these two New York film festivals, my primary purpose has been to bring the discussion of collective identity into contact with organizational analysis. Between the “top-down” structural imposition and the “bottom-up” voluntaristic construction of collective identities sit their organizational bodies, filtering identity formulations. They do their filtering quite strategically, if often without conscious intent, as they attempt pressures of their resource environment. (257-258)

Without targeting any specific political identity, KLEX includes work dealing with social-political issues. Similar to how Mix Film Festival explores and reimagines the collective consciousness of a social identity, KLEX’s programs embrace ambiguity and therefore operate with forces from various directions. From the organizational perspective, such an ambiguity is realized by the non-narrative design of the KLEX as well as the diverse forms of the film/video works and audio-visual performances KLEX presents. Consequently, KLEX opens the construction of the public sphere to both “top-down” organizational forces and “bottom-up” participant reception. In this sense, the following section unpacks the dimensions the alternative public sphere KLEX forms

⁸⁰ The New York Experimental Lesbian and Gay Film Festival changed their name to Mix Film Festival starting from 1994.

through both the non-narrative design of KLEX and the openness of experimental pieces that invite participants' reception and interpretation.

KLEX as an Alternative Public Sphere

Every year the curatorial team of KLEX stitches together programs with a conceptual thread among the works. In 2012, KLEX announced the theme of the year, "Deframe". In 2014, for their fifth annual festival, they titled the year as "The First Time". The theme is conceptual, abstract, and open. Then, on the KLEX webpage, for 2014's it writes:

Do you remember...

... the first word that you uttered?

... the first image of an unforgettable dream?

... the first time you were on the verge of losing faith?

... the first bold decision that you made?

... and your very first beautiful surprise?

... From the unknown to the known, from the stillness to the movement, there is a transition from the blank slate to its first impression. There is a singular courageous act that drives us to new experiences. Leaving the comforts of the explained and stepping into the sometimes awkward footing of the experimentation. As we lift our feet and make that first step, a new space appears. We crawl, walk, run, then dance, spin, fly. The first step is innocent, imaginative

and full of energy. The movement becomes endless like the flow and rhythm of our breaths. The first time is birth, and the first time is rebirth.⁸¹

This description, with a tone that is soft, poetic, and sentimental, works as the prologue for the festival's three open programs. Under the main theme, "The First Time", the three programs are: *Learning to Fly*, *Awe*, and *The Familiar Strange*.

While the curator team frames the programs with an abstract theme, no further explanation is given to link programs with the main theme of the year. In the same way, no illustration is given to describe how the film and video works fit into each program. This is not to say that the curatorial team loosely or even randomly organizes these works and titles. On the contrary, if you look closely, the titles of the programs echo the description of the theme in an indirect manner. For instances, I imagine the program titled *Awe* as a reaction to "the first beautiful surprise" narrated above. *Learning to Fly* is in conversation with the description of "left our feet and make the first step." Finally, *The Familiar Strange* reflects the words of "from the unknown to the known, from the stillness to the movement." However, without articulating these likely connections, blank spaces are left here and there in the construction of KLEX. These blank spaces insure that the festival not fall into a rigid cause/effect or signifier/signified structure and therefore shape the organization of the festival with a non-narrative manner.

The non-narrative manner functions beyond an organizational style and defines KLEX's screenings and performances as a social environment for the participants to encounter the films and performances that are abstract and unfamiliar. In this sense,

⁸¹ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2014/the-first-time/>

KLEX's events themselves are an "external reality", which do not represent or symbolize anything else. KLEX is the alternative public sphere. It is not a descriptive text for the sphere, nor is it the carrier or substitution for any sociopolitical issue. So, instead of analyzing the organizational strategies of KLEX and treating KLEX as an object of study, we need to investigate the effects KLEX's events generate. Clashing to Kuala Lumpur's prominent social, cultural, and political surroundings, KLEX brings variations to the city. Without a clear foothold in any ideological discourse, KLEX becomes an alternative sphere inside Kuala Lumpur.

This is not to say that KLEX is not involved in any social and political conversation. On the contrary, under the abstract framework, many works in the festival show rich connections to social and political issues. For instance, relating to the subject of human rights, Chee Yong Lim's *Lulai* (2014) documents sounds and images from the lives of a group of Bajau Laut and Bajau Darat people from Mabul Island. Although these people have been living on and near the sea since the time of the Sulu Sultanate that ruled the area during the fifteenth century to early twenty century, their citizenship has been problematic since the inception of an independent Federation of Malaysia in 1957. The group of people live on boats and travel along the coast of Mabul Island. They are described as "stateless people" and therefore not included in the world population statistics (Ali 156).⁸² Lim shows how the Bajau Laut and Bajau Darat people receive no

⁸² See Ismail Ali "Since Birth Till Death, What Is Their Status: A Case Study of The Sea Bajau in Pulau Mabul Semporna". He explains "Although [Federation of Malaysia] has gained independence for 47 years (1963-2010), there is still a question on the status of citizenship such as the citizenship of the Sea Bajau or Pala'u who has exist since the Sulu Sultanate reign and now most of them reside on boats along the coast and island of Sabah. In conjunction with this

medical and health attention and may vanish in the next decade. In KLEX's 2013 open program, reflecting gender issues in Malaysia, TS Kwan's *Female* (2013) traces the roles of females through a series of metamorphic images.⁸³ In 2014's program, Mark Chapman's *Trans* intimately captures the emotional and physical transformation of Kali, and portrays gender politics through a personal testimony. Moreover, in a KLEX special program, *Tropical Seasoning*, which was shown in the United States and Vietnam, many works addressed significant political and historical events.⁸⁴ For example, Eng Long Wong's *Mist* (2012) re-renders images recorded from the demonstration of Bersih 2.0, and Taiki Sakpisit's *A Ripped Volcano* (2014) revisits spaces where traumatic historical incidents happened and recalls the repressed collective memories through present gazes at these spaces. All these works encode rich social, historical, and political context.

Although many of the works in the KLEX programs underline notable social and political subjects, these works offer no straightforward narrative. Rather, they disrupt, subvert, and reinvent the subjects they address. While Lim's *Lulai* records glimpses of the Bajau people's lives, he confesses that there seems nothing that his efforts can do for the group. He can only record and spread the sounds and images of Bajau people's situation and life style. In this respect, in contrast to informing the spectator about desperate conditions of people, in *Lulai*, all the images and sounds are chopped, divided and manipulated. After a brief introduction of Bajau people's status, as spectators, we

reality... [they] are still living on boats and are categorized as the stateless people in Pulau Mabul" (156).

⁸³ See <http://www.klexfilmfest.com/klex-2013/open-programme/>

⁸⁴ KLEX's program *Tropical Seasonings* was screened in Goethe-Institut Hanoi on May, 17th, 2015.

simply receive an intense mixture of audio-visual stimulation. For the six and a half minutes, it seems these sounds and images are screaming at the audience. Similarly, TS Kwan's *Female* and Mark Chapman's *Trans* give no straightforward statement. While the subject of gender politics appears an important undercurrent for both video works, they maintain a sense of individuality and appear personal and subjective. Through the dissolving images in both videos, the character of the female in *Female* and Kali in *Trans* could be a metaphor for broader issues. Yet, since the images are often blurry, rough, and uncertain, they seem to suggest that neither of these two works attempts to make conclusions for these issues. Different from *Lulai*, *Female*, and *Trans*'s highly manipulated images, Taiki Sakpisit's *A Ripped Volcano* is composed of long and repetitive gazes towards historical spaces in Thailand. Adadol Ingawanij describes *A Ripped Volcano* as "... 'de-creation': a repetition that refuse to reproduce, as accomplished facts, the monarchical image of national sovereignty" (46). With the long and motionless gazes of eerie spaces of dense past, *A Ripped Volcano* tells no story of these past happenings yet forms meaning through long takes and slow motion style.

One similarity among these films is that the techniques used are as meaningful as the audio and visual contents they present. Instead of making these audio-visual materials into storyline, and reproduce an imitation of reality that leads to linear interpretation, the techniques used suggest a formation of new realities. These experimental films interpret the sound and image via the decisions of chopping, dissolving, or gazing at the aural and visual material. The apparatuses substitute the narrative, and these works become mechanisms that construct realities. Lyotard describes when the work is composed

thoroughly by its sophisticated design of devices, "...[the] work(s) must not be taken as symptoms symbolically expressing a concealed discourse, but as attempts to state perspectives of reality" ("Unconscious" 98).⁸⁵ Not all of the works screened in KLEX are non-narrative, and not all of the non-narrative films screened in KLEX manifest ideas through manipulating conventional techniques. However, for those works that focus on sociopolitical subjects, almost all of them avoid linear storytelling and reinvent another abstract and undefined version of the subjects. Because the impossibility in defining these experimental pieces, what is at stake in unpacking KLEX is much more than discussing and positioning the film/video works screened. The distinct style of these experimental film/video pieces has to combine with the effects and the intercommunication between these pieces and the audience reception during the screenings. Only in this way, we could understand how KLEX defines and forms an alternative public sphere in Kuala Lumpur.

Conclusion

When Lyotard illustrates the idea of *acinema*, he suggests that, instead of embodying the desire to represent a close version of reality, films with an experimental spirit reflect and manipulate the desire of creating reality ("Acinema" 358). Experimental films and videos in KLEX interact with their audiences with these perceptual and manipulated realities. With a distinct organizational style as well as interdisciplinary artworks and performances, KLEX's events open participants to develop further context for their collective or individual viewing and listening experiences. As spectators, while we do see pieces from multiple nationalities in each program, kind of these pieces do not

⁸⁵ The example Lyotard uses is Michael Snow's *La Region Centrale* (1971).

prompt the audience to imagine them as the only product of a certain national cinema. Rather, each screening provides a piece of fragmented sensation that may or may not correlate with a broader social and political context. In this respect, KLEX sets up occasions for the participants to tackle essential relationships between moving images and their experience of living. Drawing such a conceptual impression for each year's festival affects how the screenings are presented to their audiences as well as how the participants interact within the events. In this sense, KLEX has become a social experience rather than simply an exhibition. KLEX, as a result, is itself a reality, a reality composed of open and ambiguous structures. The films, videos and performances shown in this reality recreate new prospects for the participants to experience their social interactions in Kuala Lumpur.



Figure 4. During a screening in Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival in 2015. Shot by the author

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION

This dissertation discusses the productions and practices of independent digital films emerging in the beginning of the 21st century Malaysia. As small-scale, alternative, diverse, and marginal as they are, this dissertation states that these independent digital movies are significant in the constitution of Malaysia's national cinema. To support this statement, this dissertation shows how diverse productions of short videos, feature-length films, documentaries, and experimental films enabled by the emergence of digital filmmaking engage with the unique conditions of Malaysian society. Through Amir Muhammad's experimental video essays in Chapter 2, I first introduce the unconventional aesthetic and narrative styles of these alternative digital productions, which differentiate them from the movies previously made in Malaysia. By positioning these short pieces in the evolution of what has been considered Malaysia's national cinema, Muhammad's video essays stand out as insightful observations and critical commentaries on the ethnic and religious relationships inside Malaysia. In Chapter 3, I show how Muhammad's feature documentary and James Lee and Tan Chui-mui's narrative films challenge the homogenous depiction of late modernity by which the government defines the capital city, Kuala Lumpur. Their films present and imagine how the "premodern" past lingers in the new millennium Kuala Lumpur, and therefore re-interpret citizens' urban experiences living in the newly constructed urban spaces of Kuala Lumpur. In Chapter 4, I introduce three short films compilations produced by filmmaking collaborations: *15 Malaysia* (2009), *Letters from the South* (2013), and *3 Doors of Horror* (2013)(2014)(2015). These collaborative projects challenge the

collective mentality of Malaysian authorities who attempt to configure the national culture and identity of Malaysia and reinvent the historical problems in regard to ethnic relationships. Finally, in Chapter 5, I argue that the Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival (KLEX) has added new cultural practices to the social realities of Kuala Lumpur. All these engagements make their productions and practices a reflection of the unique national experience of living in Malaysia.

Moreover, I ask if such uniqueness can be recognized and captured by film presentations, or are these film productions and practices actually characteristics aligned with building the nation in its ongoing postcolonial constitution. This is not to say that filmmakers are able to “make reality” in their artistic creations. Rather, these productions offer diverse perspectives to both reflect the existing national society of Malaysia and invent the society that they imagine the nation might become. The capability of inventing new perspectives in their films becomes particularly significant, because the diverse visions of the nation in their movies then appear as contesting the policies, ideologies, and historical narratives that the government has applied along the on-going changes of the Malaysian society.

In many chapters, I point out how the government of Malaysia has sought to modernize and Islamize the postcolonial nation and institute the Malayness as the prominent national identity. From its inception, the newly independent nation-state implemented a development plan with clear goals: The nation needs to be constantly alert to the influences of western capitalism and western moral values while staying competitive in the worldwide economic system. At the same time, development plans

have attempted to improve indigenous Malays' socioeconomic conditions. Influenced by the 1970's Islamic revivalism, Malaysia's government has also integrated Islamic practices into the political system and believes these practices can lead the nation to become a highly modern society based in strong religious beliefs and values. These goals indicate how the government of Malaysia maneuvers among the global trends of cultural influences, economic development, and religious practices in its postcolonial period, and, thereby, forges its problematic path towards globalization.

Nevertheless, this blue print of the Malaysian government underestimates the complicated and diverse past of Malaysia. Building the nation according to this blue print becomes an ideological project that forces the population to imagine a one-dimensional evolution of their society. Such artificial and forceful constructions inevitably frustrate people who have different memories and understandings of the diverse historical trajectories in Malaya. To the non-indigenous minorities, such as ethnic Chinese and Indians, their trajectories from the pioneer immigrants to the present day Chinese and Indian Malaysians appear unrecognizable or secondary during this configuration of Malaysian national identity. These ignored pasts not only affect the ethnic communities' sense of belonging but also impact the ethnic relationships that people encounter in their daily social experiences. In this way, the state guides people in Malaysia to automatically recognize "us" in contrast to "others" in the terms of each other's ethnicity. The differentiation among ethnicities makes people's social experiences constantly contest the government's patriotic slogans, which declare Malaysians as one.

When the movement of digital filmmaking emerged in Malaysia around 2000, beyond being an outcome of the invention and popularization of digital technologies, filmmakers began to create productions that were inspired by the contemporary social and political milieu in Malaysia. When independent filmmakers, including Yasmin Ahmad, Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui-mui, Pete Teo, Ho Yuhang, Woo Min-jing, Liew Seng-tat, Kok Siew-wai and Azharr Rudin produced documentary, narrative, short, and experimental films, their works offered diverse perspectives on understanding and imagining the national society of Malaysia. Their films critically commented on the social and politic conditions of Malaysia. For example, we see Ahmad romantically tied the sensitive issues of inter-ethnic and inter-religion relationships to a story of puppy love between a Chinese boy and a Muslim Malay girl in *Sepet* (2004). We also see Muhammad sharply and sarcastically presented political and social irony in Malaysia in his documentary films, *The Big Durian* (2003) and *Malaysian Gods* (2008). Lee and Tan, in addition, imagined the identity of urban Chinese Malaysian in their narrative features. They also collaborated with Pete Teo, Ho Yuhang, and many other young Malaysian filmmakers in the short-film compilation, *15 Malaysia*. Through this collaboration, they intended to rearticulate the ethnic representation in Malaysian cinema, and further asked what constitute Malaysia's national identity.

The diverse and free expression of social issues, political conflicts, ethnic relationships, and gender representations in these productions, nevertheless, often violates the strict censorship in Malaysia. As a result, most of the productions from this independent film community started circulating in international film festivals outside of

Malaysia or via the Internet. In this way, many independent digital films that engage in capturing the nuances of Malaysian national society can only be distributed on global platforms outside of the nation. This paradoxical condition becomes even more ironic after some of the independent films start to be shown or given awards in prestigious film festivals. Media in Malaysia not only reported but also celebrated these independent films' successes as national achievements. Lee, therefore, even made a movie with an opening scene dedicated to this ironic situation. *Breathing in Mud (Bernafas Dalam Lumpur, 2008)* opens with a taxi driver looking at his patron and wondering where he saw him before. He then remembers that the patron has appeared in the newspaper as an award-winning documentary director. The patron is Amir Muhammad. However, when the taxi driver inquires where he could see the documentary, Muhammad replies that the documentary is banned in Malaysia.

The international circulation of these independent films has another paradoxical effect—they become the ones known as “Malaysian cinema” outside of Malaysia. Muhammad, Ahmad, Lee, Tan, and Liew’s movies constantly appeared in major international film festivals in the early 2000s, so scholars and film critics began to analyze how their films present new aesthetic styles and offer different narratives to capture realistic experiences in the early 21st century Malaysia. They even categorized these films as the Malaysian New Wave (Nishikawa 173; Raju 7; M. Ahmad 163; Chaiworaporn 262). Meanwhile, other than Ahmad whose films were released in the movie theaters and successful in the box offices in the domestic market, almost all of the independent filmmakers in this category have remained as outsiders and stayed marginal

in Malaysian film market. They continue to be unseen as well as unrecognized by most Malaysian moviegoers.

This situation of “representing national cinema yet only in an international context” is more than paradoxical. It actually shows that, under the specific social and historical circumstances, the new aesthetic and narrative styles of independent film productions are competing with the previous category of Malaysian national cinema. This contests the configuration of Malaysian national agency. I borrow this point from Chris Berry’s 1998 article “If China Can Say No, Can China Make Movies? Or, Do Movies Make China? Rethinking National Cinema and National Agency.” In this article, he focuses on Chinese cinema and points out that “China” cannot make movies, but people who participate in this constitution of “China,” operate as national agents and produce movies that signify “China” as a “socially and historically contingent collective entity” (131). Therefore, he concludes, “It is not so much China that makes movies, but movies that help to make China” (131). This dissertation implies a similar conclusion— when these independent digital films engage in social and historical circumstances in Malaysia, they are both reflecting and making Malaysian national society and identity.

In summary, this dissertation addresses that alternative digital movies make three visible contributions in signifying the collective entity of Malaysia. First, they re-configure the understanding of time, in particular in the postmodern Kuala Lumpur. In my research on the social and historical backgrounds of Kuala Lumpur, on the one hand, I find some people arguing that Kuala Lumpur is constantly changing. On the other hand, I also come upon people claiming that many things in Kuala Lumpur never change. The

contrast between “constantly changing” and “never changing” reflects a sense of new verses old, trendy verses outdated, and modern verses traditional. All these comparisons are time-related, and could be visualized as a collision of multiple temporalities. Films such as *The Big Durian*, *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, and *Love Conquers All* drive us to imagine the society inhabiting both past and present, and further connect Kuala Lumpur’s social and political milieu to these time-related statuses. Yet, instead of presenting these statuses as a linear relationship from one polar to another, through citizens’ memories in *The Big Durian*, an old washing machine in *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, and the recurrent happenings of a past tale in *Love Conquers All*, these films place what supposedly belongs to the past in contemporary city spaces of Kuala Lumpur. These films visualize what Bliss Cua Lim calls “immiscible time” and propose that Kuala Lumpur, the iconic postmodern city of Malaysia, is actually comprised by both modern and premodern temporalities (12).

By visualizing that Kuala Lumpur contains both postmodern and premodern qualities, these films materialize the debates, negotiations, and splits between the government and the population of Kuala Lumpur, when they imagine, narrate, and experience the city. With signifiers of multiple temporalities, these films suggest that positioning the national society in a particular place on the spectrum of time is not possible. The seemingly time-related statuses of the city and the nation in general, therefore, do not evolve through one synchronized trajectory. Instead, they often tangle, fold, and overlap in an unanticipated manner.

Through the artistic presentations in films, we can see and feel the continuous existence of the past, and so, through diverse representations, films can also rearticulate what we have been told about the past. In other words, films can remake the interpretation of national history and reconsider the national ideologies that are given to the people. To Malaysia's independent filmmaking community, which is comprised by a significant amount of Chinese Malaysian filmmakers in the 2000s' digital film movement, the issues regarding ethnic relationships and the position of Chinese Malaysians are prominent. Therefore, the re-articulation of ethnic relationships in Malaysia and the reconsideration of Chinese Malaysian identity embodies the second contribution that these alternative digital films make. They make this contribution by proposing their visions of a collective identity of Malaysia.

While Lee's *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, Tan's *Love Conquers All*, and many productions by young independent Chinese Malaysian filmmakers all depict Chinese Malaysian subjects, Pete Teo's 2009 compilation project, *15 Malaysia* is specifically dedicated to reconfiguring the ethnic representation in Malaysian movies. *15 Malaysia* reveals how the presentation of Chinese Malaysians transforms from an unsettled sense of belonging to a confident statement of Chinese Malaysians' Malaysian identity. Another compilation project produced by Tan in 2013, *Letters from the South*, further investigates the social experiences of ethnic Chinese in Southeast Asian countries. Instead of showing an ethnic Chinese longing for the so-called "homeland," the six short films in *Letters from the South* are grounded in the social realities of ethnic Chinese characters' daily lives in Southeast Asia. Rather than focusing on Chinese subjects, the

collaborative nature of the two compilations allows the full project to express the theme of ethnic relationships in Malaysia or the Chinese Diaspora in Southeast Asia through multiple points of view from diverse filmmakers. Since the topics of ethnic relationships and Chinese identity both have a long history in Malaysia and the Southeast Asian region, when *15 Malaysia* and *Letters from the South* offer mixed depictions and interpretations of these issues, they provide revisions to the dominant understanding of these historical subjects. In a way, the two projects could be seen as historiographies that investigate the historical problems of ethnic relationships and Chinese Malaysian identity with new and varied narratives. The two projects, therefore, help to reconfigure what being Chinese Malaysian or being a different ethnicity means in Malaysia.

Instead of offering presentations and perspectives constituting the imagination of Malaysia's national society, the third contribution made by the Malaysian alternative independent films is a new cultural practice that operates in the national society. The digital filmmaking scene discussed in this dissertation was started as a community. The productions of *The Big Durian*, *The Beautiful Washing Machine*, and *Love Conquers All* may each carry a strong personal style from the director. In the credits of these movies, we see the names of many other filmmakers in the crew listed as working as cinematographer, editor, assistant director, and producer. This method of making digital films, on the one hand, reflects the limited resources these young "indies" have at their disposal. On the other hand, it shows how these filmmakers adopted new strategies to operate a film industry belonging to their generation. In addition, since 2010, the Kuala Lumpur Experimental Film, Video, and Music Festival (KLEX) introduced in Chapter 5

generates an alternative public sphere in the annual three-day festival. The experimental spirit of KLEX presents qualities that are unseen in the capitalist city of Kuala Lumpur. By exhibiting abstract, open, and diverse experimental films and audio-visual performances, the events at KLEX allow the participants to freely explore and re-imagining their social experiences in Kuala Lumpur.

In the past couple years, Malaysia continues to be a place that both never changes and constantly changes. A missing airplane, Malaysia Airlines Flight 370 (MH370), in 2014 once again showed that the government of Malaysia still could not get a handle on how to deal with a national-scale tragedy. In addition, endless protests have not been able to shake the positions of government officials who are accused of corruption. These are the things that have not changed in Malaysia. However, there are visible changes happening in the filmmaking and exhibiting environment in Malaysia. First, after being active in the 2000s, the digital film movement is now considered to have concluded. Other than Ahmad who passed away at a young age of fifty-one in 2009, the main filmmakers in this movement keep producing creative works in various forms after the 2000s. Muhammad and Tan both published literary works; Lee produced theater plays. In the 2010s, while they still worked on film projects, such as Tan producing *Letters from the South* and Lee producing *3 Doors of Horror*, we do not see tight collaborations among these main players anymore. The digital filmmaking community that formed the movement in the early 2000s has temporarily spread in order to individually seek new opportunities.

Although the movement is considered passed, the main filmmakers in the movement earned both experiences and reputations from it. With these professional qualities, in 2015, Tan founded Next New Wave as a collaborative institution for educating and supporting both new and established independent filmmakers in Malaysia (nextnewwave.com).⁸⁶ With more support from the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia (FINAS) than before, Next New Wave holds workshops on digital filmmaking and storytelling. It also functions as a hub in Malaysia to invite established filmmakers from the Southeast Asian region to present their works and share their experiences ([facebook/pg/nextnewwave](https://www.facebook.com/pg/nextnewwave)).⁸⁷ Like KLEX, Next New Wave creates an alternative public sphere for independent digital movies and attempts to elevate the practices of digital filmmaking. Like KLEX, it is creating a new social reality in Malaysia. Yet, unlike KLEX, Next New Wave constantly collaborates and negotiates with FINAS, a government department. While KLEX continues to avoid any possible censorship and restrictions from the authorities, and, therefore, stays away from official funding and resources, Kok Siew-wai and Yong Yandsen, the two founders of KLEX, keep active. KLEX's monthly event, Serious Play Improve Lab (SPIL), has marked Kuala Lumpur as one of the best locations for experimental and improvisational musicians to collaborate and perform in the Southeast Asian region. With their own methods, both KLEX and Next New Wave offer alternative practices and experiences for their participants in Malaysia.

⁸⁶ See <http://www.nextnewwave.com.my/about/>

⁸⁷ See https://www.facebook.com/pg/nextnewwave/about/?ref=page_internal

Some changes have also occurred in the mainstream film culture in Malaysia in the past few years. Liew Seng-tat, one of the main players in the digital film movement, won 2015's Best Film and Best Director in Malaysia Film Festival Awards (Filem Festival Malaysia, FFM) with his Malay-language comedy feature, *Men Who Save The World* (*Lelaki Harapan Dunia*, 2014). Liew represents the mutation from an "indie" to a qualified commercial film director. Moreover, *Jagat* (2015), a Tamil-language film won the Best Film Award in 2016's FFM. It was the first time for a non-Malay-language film to win the biggest award in FFM. All these little changes reflect the contributions from the alternative digital film productions and practices to the mainstream film culture in Malaysia.

In conclusion, when the concept of nation remains meaningful and effective in this era of globalization, the governmental power and the popular view of the nation could not be the only forces that configure the nation. The collective entity of a nation is always heterogeneous. In the case of Malaysia's national cinema, even though the alternative digital movies are emerged from underground and often presented by minorities, they contribute to offer diverse perspectives in illustrating and imagining Malaysia. The label of Malaysian national cinema, therefore, becomes not important as a category, rather, the term gains meaning in indicating how movies interrelate and interact with people and the national society of Malaysia.

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