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# Genre and Pleasure: The Case of Malay(sian) Romantic Comedy

Norman Yusoff

*Genres are often regarded as “tools for predicting and regulating the reception of text.”<sup>1</sup> Genres help audiences to become orientated, to navigate their way via the world of the film by reference to familiar features. The resurgence of romantic comedy in contemporary Malaysian cinema can be seen in the context of the pleasure that a genre film offers. By focusing upon the formal, structural and ideological characteristics of Malay(sian) romantic comedy, this essay attempts to explore what is at stake in the relations between genre and spectator pleasures.*

## Introduction

Of late, Malaysian cinema has witnessed a revival of romantic comedy which has gained an overwhelming response from the public.<sup>2</sup> In Malaysia, between the late 1970s and 1989, not only were a mere handful of romantic comedies produced, the term “romantic comedy” itself was hardly employed by both the makers and critics.<sup>3</sup> The fact that romance figures in the background or on the margins of many of the comedies (since the halcyon days of Studio Jalan Ampas) - either as an excuse or as an initial motivator for comic action - renders romantic comedy a problematic generic entity. The term “romantic comedy,” as Geoff King (2002) writes,<sup>4</sup> implies much more central and sustained focus upon the detail and texture of romance, romantic relationships and character, as both plot material and source of comedy, as well as entails a substantial integration of comedy and narrative. King further argues: “Defining romantic comedy as a clear-cut genre is difficult, because of the prevalence of both of its constituent terms in popular film. Comedy is widespread and takes many forms. Romance is an obligatory feature of most popular genres, if only at the level of subplot ... Many films include elements of both.” In a similar vein, Brian Henderson suggests that we might specify “comic about the romance” but nearly always at least some of the comedy concerns some of the romance.<sup>5</sup> However, definition, or delimitation, for romantic comedy, is difficult or impossible because many Malaysian films contain both romance and comedy.<sup>6</sup> Thus, in my discussion, my understanding of “romantic comedy” will rely upon some definitions postulated by those authors and critics who have written exhaustively on Hollywood romantic comedy.<sup>7</sup>

In the context of Malaysian cinema, the contemporary resurgence of the genre has actually been under way since the late 1990s; its resurgence is also believed to have echoed the proliferation of the genre in Hollywood in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup> There is no doubt that many of the romantic comedies have attempted to reflect local society, thereby distinguishing them from Hollywood romantic comedy. For instance, the most distinctive feature of our romantic comedy is that it blatantly spurns the delineation of sexual ideology which has become almost *de rigueur* in Hollywood romantic comedy. Furthermore, our romantic comedy is circumscribed to and centred around the establishment of heterosexual relationships, and thus does not negotiate a possibility of change in the future evolution of the genre.<sup>9</sup> Yet, Malay(sian) romantic comedy does not entail much modification in its basic forms, structures and conventions.<sup>10</sup> Take *Ali Setan* (Jins Shamsuddin, 1985), for instance: The film, like many other romantic comedies, ends with the reconciliation of

the central protagonists, Ali (Azmil Mustapha) and Asmidar (Fauziah Ahmad Daud) after working out the problems which have temporarily disrupted their happiness. Familiarity with the genre, and with popular Hollywood-style conventions more generally, enables the spectator to “infer” the film’s denouement. The spectator knows, with some certainty, that Ali and Asmidar are likely to end up in each other’s arms and thus can safely enjoy the build-up of “disruptions” typical of romantic comedy.

Since genres are often conceived of as “means of popular market segmentation,”<sup>11</sup> this essay attempts to examine the *usefulness* of the notion of genre by focusing upon Malay(sian) romantic comedy, particularly in relation to its formal and structural - as well as ideological - characteristics. In a way, my discussion seeks to investigate the reason for romantic comedy genre in Malaysia emerging as one of the popular genres amongst local moviegoers, specifically in the course of the pleasure it offers; this seems in tandem with spectator study which often concentrates on the consumption of films that are “popular” and are geared towards providing typical forms of cinematic pleasure. Nonetheless, this essay makes no claim towards being a comprehensive study of spectatorship; if there is such a propensity, it is merely to explore what is at stake in the relations between genre and spectator pleasures, which involves a set of expectations. This work should thus be seen as conceptual rather than empirical. Inevitably, this will lead to the other strand of my analysis as I also wish to offer a “preferred reading”<sup>12</sup> of the romantic comedies’ text as to examine how genre contributes to the cinema experience, particularly the extent to which the spectator loses himself/herself and becomes “sutured”<sup>13</sup> into the formal system of the film. As we understand, the need to create an “identity” for a film is imperative from the film industry’s position in having to sell a commodity. Spectators also require these “identities” so as to be able to identify what they are being offered, what expectations or “promises” a particular film like *Ali Setan* appears to contain, and in order to communicate with others about the film. These “promises” or systems of expectation that genres serve, as Steve Neale has expounded in his works,<sup>14</sup> provide the spectator with means of recognition and understanding.

## **Regimes of Verisimilitude**

In his discussion of dimensions of genre, Neale (2000) writes that these systems of expectation involve the concept of verisimilitude, a concept which focuses on spectator expectations and textual norms.<sup>15</sup> Negotiating the balance between different regimes of verisimilitude, as Neale has examined in his early work,<sup>16</sup> plays an important role in the relations established between spectators, genres and individual films. These relations can be particularly complex, and particularly weak in markedly non-verisimilitudinous genres. I would, therefore, examine this complication by looking into some examples from several films. *Cinta Kolestrol* (A. Razak Mohaideen, 2003), the recently successful romantic comedy, may illustrate this: the scene at the beginning of the film in which the female protagonist, Erra (Erra Fazira) clumsily gorges herself on some roasted chicken with her friends in a restaurant, can be questioned with regard to its rationale. I would contend, though, conspicuous food consumption normally depicted on screen invariably signals a “bad” or ridiculous woman. Thus, the scene establishes the female protagonist as an obese woman who disregards food control, and thereby, indicates that the character does lack, so to speak, the culturally pervasive defining feature of “femininity.” More prominently, the scene reinforces to set up initial contradiction - an essential element in romantic comedy - between the couple (Erra and Yusri) [This is the point to which I shall return in due course]. On a more intimate level, the scene (as the film itself) brings gender into the ideological account of the cinema apparatus. I shall argue

that at this stage, the pleasure the spectator consumes must emanate from his/her "identification" with the characters. Laura Mulvey (1975), in her seminal essay, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,"<sup>17</sup> argues that if the spectator is offered a male "subject" position, the female spectator must reflect the images back onto herself in an act of narcissism. As is the case of *Kolestrol*, the spectator will become aligned with the character Erra who is obese. By this, the spectator sees and feels part of the story through Erra; this is developed further, later, when we have more access to the POV and the subjectivity of the character Erra and, in the process, may form a particularly close bond, a sort of "identification" with Erra. This occurs at a later stage, for example, when Erra, the Ugly Duckling faces a predicament when her childhood fiance refuses to marry her because of her rotund figure; spectator emotion is thus intensified as we are dragged along to share and feel exactly what the character Erra does, especially during the scene in which Yusri ridicules and humiliates her in a restaurant. Since romantic comedy encompasses films that oscillate between dramatic and comic registers in their treatment of romantic relationships, strong allegiance with characters is a *necessary* element in the mix of spectator pleasures by means of maximising spectator empathy. In fact, empathy for characters is one of the primary means by which many films engage emotional response. Empathy also provides a moral compass for the viewer, a means of appraising situations according to their implications for favoured characters. Here, the pleasure is derived from "projection and identification."<sup>18</sup>

Another pleasure can be seen in light of the film being a "comedy." Thus, the character's performance in the scene which is imbued with elements of exaggeration and eccentricity can be considered "probable" in the film since such a comical element serves as a source of pleasure. Any form of comedy, as Geoff King asserts,<sup>19</sup> is often taken to be the epitome of light relief or "just entertainment" on film and does not need to comply with the conventional notions of "realism." In as much as this is the case, the regimes of verisimilitude, as Neale argues, vary from one genre to another as they involve rules, norms, and laws.<sup>20</sup> Each genre has its own particular conventions of verisimilitude, over and above those of mainstream narrative fiction as a whole. Such a "transgression," although allowing disruption of both cultural and fictional rules, does not seriously mar spectators' enjoyment (as mentioned it serves a source of pleasure in comedy) since they are bound to "suspension of disbelief."<sup>21</sup> Due to the fact that comedy is normally associated with its putative status as fiction and film as only a "mimesis," the spectator has to consider that he/she is watching a "film" rather than looking into a realistically constructed world. As Neale further puts it:

This mode of comedy plays on ... disjunctions between discourses, modes of dress, behaviour etc. in different classes or social groups as in the comedy of Frank Capra. In this type of comedy, the spectator is maintained in a continuous and undisturbed mode of belief, against which the modes of belief of the characters in the discourses they inhabit/employ are measured. Although it remains the case that the nature of the spectator's credulity, unquestioned as it may be, is such that a recognition of the fiction as fiction remains far more essential than in other fictional modes.<sup>22</sup>

Furthermore, comedy, as Neale and Krutnik note, is "a game played with transgression and familiarity: it sets up deviations from 'rules' and 'norms' in order to replace them."<sup>23</sup> Neale, discussing the idea of the 'new romance,' a term he refers to whilst describing contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy, suggests that the main features of the genre centre on the style, place and function of eccentricity and neurosis. In romantic comedy, Neale adds, eccentricity tends to remain a hallmark of either or both of the members of the couple.<sup>24</sup> In *Gila-Gila Pengantin* (Aziz M. Osman, 2003), for example, both the protagonists, Alia (Erra Fazira) and Johari (Norman Hakim)

are endowed with elements of eccentricity and neurosis: both suffer from the same sort of “phobia” about weddings due to their dreaded past incident, and this has refrained them from finding true love. I shall argue that the non-verisimilitudinous elements in those films do not invalidate their status as romantic comedies since “comedy” still constitutes the narrative in romantic comedy, albeit only occupying the secondary position. And at least, this “transgression” has set a clear demarcation between romantic comedy and romantic melodrama. As a matter of fact, the genre itself, is also believed to have been influenced by screwball comedy.<sup>25</sup> As is the case of Hollywood, I strongly believe that our romantic comedy also seems to hark back to those classical Malay comedies (notably directed by P.Ramlee) such as *Masam-Masam Manis* (1965), *Madu Tiga* (1964), *Tiga Abdul* (1964), and others of that ilk, which are heavily inscribed by screwball elements. Neale writes in his work pertaining to the influence of screwball comedy in romantic comedy:

Eccentricities, “playful” deviations from socio-cultural norms of behaviour, speech, action and dress, are, of course, fundamental to all forms of comedy, constituting, as they do, a major source of - and form of motivation for - comic effects. In the field of romantic comedy, eccentricity has perhaps been associated most with the screwball cycle.<sup>26</sup>

## **Reconciliation of Oppositions**

Neale states in his more recent work,<sup>27</sup> that his earlier book in 1980 attempts to place more emphasis on difference, particularly on the different pleasures that different genres provide. Malay(sian) romantic comedies entail the potential source of pleasure in the form of reconciliation of oppositions. As is well-known, the central protagonists of romantic comedies are often established at the beginning as adversaries - either directly in conflict or as embodiments of different attributes, or both - whose differences are eventually reconciled. Aziz M.Osman’s *Femina* (1993), for instance, which deals with threats to patriarchal subjection of women, starts out blatantly “discursive,” directly depicting the contradictory characters (in terms of views and ideology) of the man and the woman. Both the protagonists, Tina (Erma Fatima), an editor of a fashion magazine and Pyan (Eman Manan), a minibus driver are portrayed with starkly different attributes from the beginning: Tina, who is rather, in many ways, “feminist,” vehemently promotes the idea of equality between the sexes and tries to break the monolith of patriarchal dominance; while Pyan resents her ideology and tries to change her extreme views. In the end, Tina succumbs to romantic longing where she and Pyan tie the knot. In *Kolestrol*, the protagonists, Yusri and Erra are apparently “different:” Yusri is a handsome, debonair overseas graduate while Erra is an overweight girl who lacks fashion sense. Their differences lead Yusri to initially reject her love, although they have been somehow “attached” since they were young. In *Adik Manja* (Othman Hafsham, 1980), a comedy that dwells seriously on the questions of gender and sexuality, both protagonists, Azmi (Dharma Harun AlRashid) and Sharina (Noor Kumalasari) are depicted as two different persons with clash personalities embracing different ideologies, although both are in the same profession. Initially, Sharina is portrayed as a rigid, conservative female pedagogue who refuses to let any man venture into her life. Nonetheless, at a later stage, she liberates herself and unleashes her repressed desire, after going through a make-over by donning more sexy, modern outfits and by putting on make-up. Thus, it behoves us to think that by endorsing the presence of romantic power and sexual attraction, she overcomes differences between her and the male protagonist (Azmi) and makes the eventual formation between them possible. Since the reconciliation in romantic comedy seems imaginary, and is often achieved through a “magical process,” “love” seems to appear at the last moment in those films, in the form of *deus ex machina*:

In *Ali Setan*, the relationship between Ali and Asmidar which has turned sour, is revitalised when Ali's father (Jins Shamsuddin) intervenes and helps them re-unite; in *Kolestrol*, although Yusri discovers that the actual Erra is still overweight (though spectators might have guessed otherwise) towards the end of the film, he finally accepts her as who she is. In this regard, heterosexual romantic love, as Neale and Krutnik suggest, figures as "magic force, for it defies rationality and cannot be argued with."<sup>28</sup>

The reconciliation of opposition offers a pleasure because it stems from the spectator's collective socio-cultural experience. Anthropologist Levi-Strauss suggests that popular cultural products can provide an imaginary way of dealing with real issues, often by the imaginary reconciliation of opposition faced by a particular culture or society.<sup>29</sup> Some genres, such as action and gangster films, celebrate "individualism" through the hero's goal, but in romantic comedy which deals with courtship and marriage, the central characters compromise their "individuality" in their eventual romantic formation and thus demonstrates their willingness to be integrated into the social community. Even *Gila-Gila Pengantin*, for all its apparent quirkiness and individuality, eventually manoeuvres its couple into an old-fashioned, "traditional" and ideologically conventional position. The yearning for social cohesion is even evident in family-oriented romantic comedies that deal with divorce issues such as *Talak* (Omar Rojik, 1984), *Oh Fatimah* (A.R.Badul, 1989) and *Suami, Isteri & ...* (Panshah, 1996). In *Talak*, the male protagonist (played by Dharma Harun AlRashid) divorces his spouse (Noreen Noor) with three *talak* (repudiations) and later insists to get her back. In this case, his spouse will have to marry someone else first before he can re-marry her. Complications arise when he hires a car jockey (Hamid Gurkha) to marry his beautiful ex-wife and the new husband refuses to release her. But after undergoing a series of tests and ordeals, the protagonist eventually manages to regain his happiness and reconcile with his wife. Along a similar vein, *Suami, Isteri & ...* depicts a husband (Rosyam Nor) who, after being separated from his wife (Lydiawati) for about five years, encounters her again. Their young son appears as a "driving force" in the romantic plot, attempting to reunite them and to resuscitate their relationship; in the end, the husband is able to re-constitute his family. In this respect, Neale says that genres possess their own individual identity while at the same time belonging to a larger generic, and cultural, system. He further explains that "audiences are able to engage in a form of 'cultural expression,' that their interests, beliefs, and values are able to find widespread, if indirect, articulation."<sup>30</sup>

## Difference *in* Repetition

Although repetition and sameness are seemingly primary features of genres, Neale has suggested that genres are, nevertheless, best understood as "processes." These processes may be dominated by repetition but they are also marked fundamentally by difference, variation and change.<sup>31</sup> Our fledgling film industry, just like Hollywood, so to speak, produces "artistic products" for a market, as well as for profit. Unlike "one-of-a-kind-item," our products have to be "different," otherwise audiences would not appear at the cinemas repetitively. Neale, discussing the aesthetic theories of genre as their starting point of repetition and variation, argues that:

The degree to which story patterns in genres are predictable, meanwhile, depends in part on what is meant by predictable. If "story pattern" is taken to refer to the shape of the story in its broadest sense, it is clear that ... and the happy resolutions of romantic comedies are generally requisite and therefore predictable. However, the paths to these climaxes and resolutions vary considerably.<sup>32</sup>

Thus, in romantic comedy, the uniqueness of its convention is such that much scope is provided for the working of variation on the theme, without seriously destabilising the genre's structures and conventions. As I shall show, the spectator pleasure in consuming romantic comedy is also derived from another source of pleasure called "orientation and discovery;"<sup>33</sup> in other words, the spectator's pleasure is derived from his / her desire to know, to discover, and to be orientated. This is in accordance with cognitive film theory which has not explicitly taken up the issue of spectator pleasure, but it implicitly assumes a spectator fundamentally motivated by pleasures of orientation and discovery. David Bordwell and Edward Branigan, for example, write of the cognitive processes by which spectators comprehend film narratives; comprehension is itself implied to be the spectator's primary motivation. Bordwell gives an account of the types of spectator inferences cued by the film, and of the means by which it plays on our desire to know by suggesting outcomes, teasing us with alternative possibilities, and presenting surprises.<sup>34</sup> With regards to this, I would argue that (almost) all narratives, including romantic comedy, might be thought to involve the desire to know at least the outcome of the "complications" or "disruptions" made salient in the plot. Romantic comedy, therefore, can engage its spectators by being involved in processes of disclosure, discovery and confirmation; this includes a desire spectators possess for the film to end and thus "close" the uncertainty and anxiety which the narrative induces in them. *Kolestrol*, for example, plays throughout the spectator expectations, exploring the relationship between Erra, an obese girl and Yusri, the Prince Charming. As we can see, which way the romantic plot will be resolved is subject to a series of "disruption" (in the form of twists and turns) that appears throughout the film. *Kolestrol* differs from that of traditional romantic comedy when another character, Erra's cousin (played by the same actor) is introduced whereby the spectator starts to "infer" that she is the "real" Erra who has undergone treatment to lose her weight. This is revealed through an exposition in the narrative involving a scene in which Erra gives her father a phone call from abroad (Sweden), asserting that she is there to trim her figure. At this stage, we, spectators, are likely to "infer" that she will be transforming herself into a slim figure. Here, the process of disclosure compels the spectator to pique his/her curiosity and become orientated by means of the twist (and later the ending) rendered, which clearly rescinds his/her expectation.

This being the case, another point to which I would like to draw attention is the fabrication of romance in the more contemporary romantic comedies which is further signalled by their reliance upon deception scenarios.<sup>35</sup> Though these are not rare in the genre as a whole, scenarios of fabricated identity do seem to have increased prominence in the contemporary romantic comedies - and appear to be especially symptomatic of their aesthetic and ideological priorities. Besides *Kolestrol*, other contemporary films which rest upon such "deception scenarios" so as to fuel the romantic formation amongst the central protagonists are *Gila-Gila Pengantin*, *Soal Hati* (Othman Hafsham, 2000), *Laila Isabella* (Rashid Sibir, 2003), *Anak Mami The Movie* (A. Razak Mohaideen, 2002), to name a few. *Gila-Gila Pengantin* for example, concerns Johari, a dentist, who constructs a masquerade to realise his wishes; he is reluctant to meet up with Alia whom he knows through on-line chatting. Thus, when a blind date is arranged, he asks his brother-in-law, Borhan (Salleh Yaacob) to masquerade as him. For the next date, when he is willing to meet Alia, Alia herself refuses to go and asks her cousin, Wanda (Juliana Banos), instead, to masquerade as her; so both of them (Alia and Johari) do not meet. By this, the film places obstacles in the couple's path which keep them apart and prevent their mutual recognition of a compatibility. For the spectator, one of the key factors in establishing the expectation of the (marital) union is the familiarity of the form of romantic comedy. As spectators we have a privileged insight into the "truth" of the situation knowing, for example, that Alia and Johari will end up in each other's arms despite the circumstances which suggest to them the contrary. In *Kolestrol*, for example, such a deception scenario permits one of the most likely and central expectations established pointedly not realised,

as Yusri, in the end, chooses the “real,” overweight Erra instead. This goes against the usual conventions of the format, one of which is that “wrong” or less appropriate partners (in this case, the overweight Erra) should be overturned (as happens towards the end of many romantic comedies). Having said this, the presence of supporting characters in the form of “wrong partner” in romantic comedies further emphasises the significance of “repetition” and “sameness” that the genre often shares, apart from performing not only ideological functions, but also formal and structural ones. In *Ali Setan*, Ali’s wife, Latifah, and his rival, Jeff are the “wrong partner” characters that provide points of comparison with, and contrast to, one or other of the members of the couple. But, in *Kolestrol*, the obese Erra who seems to be the “wrong partner” for the male protagonist in the beginning happens to be the film’s female protagonist. In *Puteri Impian* (Aziz M. Osman, 1997), the male protagonist, Tengku Faizal (Hairy Othman) is the first right partner, then the wrong one for Nora (Amy Mastura) herself. And so on. It is therefore equally true to say that the wrong partner is a device, that there is an irreducible formal, as well as ideological component or aspect to his or her presence or absence. As Neale explains how such a device serves a pleasure:

Moreover, if this device performs ideological functions, it also performs formal and structural ones. The wrong partner is nearly always a source - and a butt - of jokes, gags and humour, of local comic effects. And whether as a rival for the hero or heroine, or as an embodiment ... of something blocking their formation as a couple, the wrong partner serves to complicate, and thus prolong, the narrative, thereby adding to its quota of suspense and helping to delay its resolution.<sup>36</sup>

Pertaining to this, the presence of “wrong partner” does serve one of the genre’s commonest and most characteristic devices so as to engage the spectator in the narrative strategy, as well as appears as an impetus to help reinforce, for example, scenarios of fabricated identity as discussed earlier.

## Wish-fulfillment Resolution

Since the desired closure of romantic comedy appears in the form of “reconciliation of oppositions” where initial oppositions are finally overcome, many Malay(sian) romantic comedies provide the spectator with the promise of a happy, wish-fulfillment ending. The happy ending is, indeed, a convention of much comedy in film and elsewhere, and a vital component of the classical (Hollywood) romantic comedy. In *Ali Setan*, when Ali’s father discovers about Jeff’s and Latifah’s devious plan to disrupt Ali’s and Asmidar’s happiness, he and Asmidar go in search of Ali in order to re-unite them after a period of separation. Once they find Ali’s whereabouts, Asmidar goes on to confront him and they are finally able to restore their happiness. *Kolestrol* works pretty similar in providing the spectator with a happy ending. The initial opposition between Erra and Yusri are finally overcome when Yusri realises his mistakes and confronts Erra after rejecting and humiliating her before. Although the concept of love itself is the ultimate *raison d’etre* of the genre, the disavowal of institution of marriage has been the “alternative” culmination of romance as prefigured in a couple of films such as *Cikgu Sayang* (Z. Lokman, 1983) and *Puteri Impian* (Aziz M. Osman, 1997) [except for these two, I cannot think of any other local romantic comedies which have “disavowed” the idea of romantic possibilities. Be that as it may, many local romantic comedies even present the happy ending in a rather equivocal manner; although they depict the “reconciliation of oppositions” between the protagonists, I would argue that they do not explicitly



feature a wedding as the culmination of the characters' love]. The concept of love itself, as I shall contend, has undergone crucial changes in our culture; amongst the salient social changes which have somehow impinged on the concept of love are growing divorce rates, single parenting, the rise of the "highly-educated/working" woman, *inter alia*.<sup>37</sup> In *Cikgu Sayang*, a sultry urban teacher, Idayu (Suhana Yahya) who serves to teach illiterate adults on an island falls in love with one of her students (Mokhtaruddin). Their relationship comes to an end when she is asked to leave the island, considering she has accomplished in carrying out her task. Here, as we can see, the character Idayu, like many other modern women, gives up romantic longing for career satisfaction. Though *Cikgu Sayang* still abides by the "precepts" of romantic love, the film presents romance as a longed-for impossibility by eschewing the notion of happy, wish-fulfillment resolution. In contradistinction, *Femina*, which echoes the rise of the working woman and operates within the dominant forms of gender construction in terms of women's social role, presents romance as a realisable ideal, negating its main concern about gender inequality. As a matter of fact, though, the film rather advocates the idea of feminism from a male point-of-view (Aziz M. Osman himself is the film's director and screenwriter). While *Puteri Impian*, as is the case of *Cikgu Sayang*, does not negotiate the idea of "reconciliation of oppositions" as the film ends rather ambiguously; Nora (Amy Mastura), a proletariat, refuses to accept Tengku Faizal, an aristocrat, as her soulmate due to differences in social status, family background and personality. The film, which clearly conforms to fairy-tale archetype by representing a rags-to-riches Cinderella fantasy, does not imply any kind of affinity between the central protagonists, though; yet, it still attempts to please and entertain by making, in many ways, the impossible possible and by attempting to authorise the magic of the heterosexual couple. Though the film does not negotiate any "magical" resolution, at least, the spectator can engage in the "magical" transformation experienced by the Cinderella-like protagonist, Nora, whose dreams have been partly materialised. Nora, a factory worker, is at least able to live temporarily in luxury as experienced by an actual princess, as she desires, when she garners a top prize in a TV game show. By not showing love can triumph over all manner of obstructions and over all kinds of differences, the film attempts to highlight the impossibilities of fantasy upon which romantic comedy in general usually rests.

According to psychoanalytic film theory, the exchange between spectator and film produces a subject who lacks and hence desires, and on the other hand, objects that will apparently satisfy those desires (Psychoanalytic film theory tends to relate narrative pleasures to repressed wishes and unconscious desires; for example, the Oedipal scenario has been claimed to lie at the heart of all narratives).<sup>38</sup> But it does so in specific ways. In the case of romance (romance indeed does not deny that there is a lack, but it claims that it can be made good), the constitution of subject typically takes the form of an identification with a character who is lacking - Erra, as discussed earlier in *Kolestrol*; Nora in *Puteri Impian*. Spectators identify not solely with idealised figures, but with those who lack, and they do so in order to have fantasy organise desire. At the same time an object is constituted, Yusri for Erra (in *Kolestrol*), Tengku Faizal for Nora (in *Puteri Impian*), that will apparently make good the lack.<sup>39</sup> For example, in *Kolestrol*, Yusri, who is initially arrogant and recalcitrant due to his attempt in contravening the pact made between his and Erra's parents, learns a lesson when his obstinacy leads to his father's demise. He is then transformed by Erra (through Erra's cousin) into a decent human being who is able to accept fate and to fulfill his father's wishes, while she (Erra) eventually acquires from him romantic love which is notably absent from her life as an obese lady, and which the film's moral economy makes evident that someone as fundamentally nice as her deserves. In a way, these films succeed in bridging the contradiction faced by the spectator who is no longer able to believe in romance (especially in films so beset with implausibility and inconsistency), yet at the same time wishes to do so. Nevertheless, presenting the impossibility of romance does not mean that the fantasy that underlies the relationship is ruined

along with it. It, too, is preserved, but once again only - and precisely - because the relationship itself seems ephemeral (the way the ending works here is very similar to the way "unhappy" endings often work in the romantic drama).<sup>40</sup> What seems unique about this ending is that, like the film *Puteri Impian* as a whole, it both draws on and works to reveal the contradictions between elements which are not only pivotal to romantic comedy, but which most romantic comedies strive to render compatible one with another. Here, though, these elements, like the members of the couple (Nora and Tengku Faizal), have finally to part, because their continued relationship is rendered - and shown to be - impossible.<sup>41</sup> I would further argue that the impossibility of romance (as presented by the "unhappy" ending) seems to signify the notion of "difference" or "variation," which marks genres as processes, as I discussed earlier in relation to Neale's explication.

## Conclusion

In spite of the resilience of the genre's basic structure, Malay(sian) romantic comedies elucidate that the question at stake in romantic comedy is not "sexual" (as posed by many Hollywood romantic comedies); it can rather be interpreted as an assertion or a reconstitution of the "values" of "traditional" heterosexual romance. Furthermore, their ideological specificity - in virtue of its attempt to accentuate the primacy of heterosexual romance - lay precisely in an engagement with the notion of matrimony as the culmination of love. I shall thus propose that Malay(sian) romantic comedy should concentrate more on its mediation of key issues in contemporary Malaysian society - for instance, how the infiltration of modernisation (or Westernisation) in Malaysia has impinged upon the idealisation of "traditional" heterosexual romance - so as to distinguish itself from the Hollywood ones and to ensure its survival in the future. In any case, as I have demonstrated throughout my discussion, the pleasure Malay(sian) romantic comedy offers is multiple and varied, be it the pleasure of story (narrative) or the pleasure of projection and identification - all appear in the form of feel-good fantasy expectations and securities, legitimated by a degree of apparent complexity and cultural verisimilitude. Through the (nearly) magical resolution that romantic comedy offers, spectators are said to be "interpellated,"<sup>42</sup> as they are allowed to transform the "real" world they live in into something much more "controllable," where imaginary solutions can be offered for real problems. Having said this, the imaginative work of the spectator can be said to involve a "complicity" with the genre, engaging with it through an acceptance of the ways in which it works. In this regard, Neale has demonstrated that the concept of genre has, to some extent, served as a means to link one's film industrial practices and its output to its spectators and to the socio-cultural contexts within which its films are produced and consumed. As Neale posits in his works, and as those films discussed demonstrate effectively, as I hope I have indicated, genre is, by all means, "difference *in* repetition."<sup>43</sup> Neale further argues that a genre text is not static, that it takes the normative codes of genre and "re-works them, extends them, or transforms them altogether."<sup>44</sup> This is the type of work encapsulated by Malay(sian) romantic comedies: the pleasure which those films offer, for example, is seemingly predictable and fulfilling, whilst weaving just enough heterogeneity and variation to make each of them different from the previous encounters which the spectator has had with other romantic comedies.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Sarah Berry, "Genre" in Tob Miller and Robert Slam (eds.), *A Companion to Film Theory*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999).

<sup>2</sup> Between 2000 and 2003, the only romantic comedies that failed at the box office were Shuhaimi Baba's *Mimpi Moon* (grossed RM554,619.56) and Along Kamaluddin's *Sara* (grossed RM176,080.00). In 2003 alone, the most profitable film was a romantic comedy, A. Razak Mohaideen's *Cinta Kolesterol* which collected RM3.82 million. In that year also, *Gila-Gila Pengantin* (Aziz M.Osman), *Laila Isabella* (Rashid Sibir) and *Mr.Cinderella 2* (Din CJ) - all of which are romantic comedies were commercially successful (Source: <http://www.finas.gov.my/>); As yet, in 2004, until this essay is written, another romantic comedy, *Kuliah Cinta* (A.Razak Mohaideen) has gained a phenomenal success when it collected RM2.5 million after 10 days of its release (*The Malay Mail*, 16 February 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, during those days, many local films were not precisely classified according to their genres. For instance, *Ali Setan* (Jins Shamsuddin, 1985) was branded as "*Sebuah Filem Remaja*" (A Teen Movie); to be more precise, I shall propose that it rather be classified as "teen-oriented romantic comedy." In more extreme cases, as I remember, *Detik 12 Malam* (S.Sudarmaji, 1980) was touted as "Malaysia's first suspense-thriller" whilst *Anita Dunia Ajaib* (Omar H.M.Said, 1981) as "Malaysia's first science-fiction;" in fact - as conspicuously rendered by both films narrative strategies and iconographies - the former is a bona fide melodrama/woman's film while the latter is a horror. Such a misconception must have stemmed from the lack of understanding of the notion of genre amongst their makers. In the late 70s and early 80s, some of the films that fit the romantic comedy notion are *Anak Tunggal* (M.Osman, 1979), *Tuan Badol* (Jamil Sulong, 1979), *Adik Manja* (Othman Hafsham, 1980), *Bertunang* (M.Amin, 1982), *Manis-Manis Sayang* (M.Amin, 1983), *Cikgu Sayang* (Z.Lokman, 1983), *Pagar-Pagar Cinta* (A.R.Badul, 1984), *Talak* (Omar Rojik, 1984), *Ali Setan* (Jins Shamsuddin, 1985), *Ali Setan 2* (Yassin Salleh, 1985), *Kepala Angin* (Azmil Mustapha, 1987), *Keluarga 99* (A.R.Badul, 1987), *Marah-Marah Sayang* (Johari Ibrahim, 1987), *Tak Kisahlah Beb* (Aziz Satar, 1989), and *Oh Fatimah* (A.R.Badul, 1989). On the other hand, it can be argued, though, that those films featuring A.R.Badol and Mr.Os as their main actors can also be classified as "comedian comedy" (as is the case of Hollywood comedies featuring Steve Martin, Jim Carrey, Robin William, and many more).

<sup>4</sup> Geoff King, *Film Comedy*, (London: Wallflower, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> Brian Henderson, "Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-tough or Impossible?," *Film Quarterly*, vol. 31, no.4 (Summer 1978), 12.

<sup>6</sup> It is true that many Malaysian films contain both romance and comedy. There are many comedies that cannot be classified as "romantic comedy," although they contain romantic elements, for their central plots are not embodied in romantic relationships. This sort of comedy encompasses films such as *Prebet Lapok* (Aziz Satar, 1980), *Da Di Du* (Aziz Satar, 1981), *Penyamun Tarbus* (Aziz Satar, 1981), *Si Luncai* (Omar Rojik, 1981), *Sikit Punya Gila* (Raja Ismail, 1982), *Aku Yang Berhormat* (Raja Ismail, 1983), *Mekanik* (Othman Hafsham, 1983), *Tujuh Biang Keladi* (Aziz Satar, 1985), *Bujang Lapok Kembali Daa...* (Aziz Satar, 1985), *Bujang Selamat* (Z.Lokman, 1986), *Bas Konduktor* (Z.Lokman, 1986), *Balik Kampung* (Zainal Othman, 1986), *Mr.Os* (A.R.Badul, 1987), *Kembar Siam* (A.R.Badul, 1988), *Ujang* (Othman Hafsham, 1988), *Awang Spanar* (Z.Lokman, 1989), *Pening-*

*Pening Lalat* (A.R.Badul, 1990), *Konstabel Mamat* (Z.Lokman, 1993), *OK: Orang Kampung Otak Kimia* (Aziz Satar, 1990), *Mami Jarum* (A.Razak Mohaideen, 2003), *Jutawan Fakir* (A.Razak Mohaideen, 2003), and many more.

<sup>7</sup> Amongst the authors who have written extensively on Hollywood romantic comedy are: Steve Neale ("The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today," *Screen*, vol.33, no.3, [1992]); Neale and Frank Krutnik ("*The comedy of the sexes*," in *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, [London: Routledge, 1990]); Peter William Evans and Celestino Deleyto [eds.] (*Terms of Endearment: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1980s and 1990s*, [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press,1998]); Brian Henderson ("Romantic Comedy Today: Semi-Tough or Impossible"); Frank Krutnik ("Conforming Passions?: Contemporary Romantic Comedy," in Steve Neale [ed.] *Genre and Contemporary Hollywood*, [London: British Film Institute, 2002]).

<sup>8</sup> Amongst the romantic comedies produced since the late 1990s are *Puteri Impian* (Aziz M.Osman, 1997), *Sate* (Z.Lokman, 1997), *Puteri Impian 2* (Aziz M.Osman, 1998), *Soal Hati* (Othman Hafsham, 1999), *Mimpi Moon* (Shuhaimi Baba, 2000), *Sara* (Along Kamaluddin, 2001), *Anak Mami The Movie* (A.Razak Mohaideen, 2002), *Mr.Cinderella* (Ahmad Idham, 2002), and many more. Whilst Hollywood has produced many romantic comedies in the 1990s, after the enormous success of *When Harry Met Sarry* (Rob Reiner, 1989) which has necessitated a proliferation of the genre, ranging from *Pretty Woman* (Garry Marshall, 1990) to *My Best Friend's Wedding* (P.J.Hogan, 1997); for further information, see Krutnik's insightful essay, "Conforming Passions?: Contemporary Romantic Comedy," in Neale (ed.), *Genre and Hollywood*, 130-147.

<sup>9</sup> For example, *Cinta Kolesterol* differs from that of Hollywood romantic comedy in the sense that it features the couple (central protagonists) meeting under parental supervision and as a consequence of the custom of arranged marriage; this seldom or almost never happens in contemporary Hollywood romantic comedy. In terms of the delineation of sexual ideology, many of Hollywood romantic comedies contain instances of "sexually explicit" representation and points at which "the sexual question" (or sexual questions) are openly stated, engaging with the issues of "sexual dialectic" in the era of "the new self." Of late, Hollywood romantic comedy has gone further to embark on the representation of queer or homosexual romance.

<sup>10</sup> This is quite true since the term "romantic comedy" itself originates from Hollywood (where it itself is often traced back to the beginnings of the genre in the European Renaissance). It is the fact that many Malay(sian) films have adopted or, at least, have paralleled the conventional order of Hollywood genres. Thus, many of our romantic comedies have been indissolubly influenced by the Hollywood ones.

<sup>11</sup> Sarah Berry, "Genre," 25.

<sup>12</sup> Cultural studies has provided useful alternative approaches to the question of how we respond to media messages. In particular, the terms "preferred," "oppositional" and "negotiated" proved valuable. A "preferred reading" of a media text is one in which the spectator takes the intended meaning, finding it relatively easy to align with the messages and attitudes of those who created the text. This is because most often a "preferred" response will be associated with pleasure, if only the pleasure of reassurance that comes from the comfortable and familiar; for further discussion, see J. Mayne, *Cinema and Spectatorship* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>13</sup> The term “suture” means, literally, to stitch up (from the medical term for stitching up a cut or wound). In film theory the system of suture has come to mean, in its simplest sense, to stitch the spectator into the filmic text. As a critical concept it was introduced into film studies by theorists, starting with Jean-Pierre Oudart (1977), and was based on studies in child psychoanalysis conducted by Jacques Lacan in the 1960s; see Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>14</sup> Steve Neale, *Genre*, (London: British Film Institute, 1980); Neale, “Questions of genre,” *Screen*, vol.31, no.1 (1990); Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, (London: Routledge, 2000).

<sup>15</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 32.

<sup>16</sup> Neale, *Genre*, 7-16.

<sup>17</sup> Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* vol.16, no.13 (1975). Mulvey’s essay gave an interesting account of the viewing process activated by the classic Hollywood text based upon Freudian psychoanalysis and its reformulation by Jacques Lacan. It focused particularly on the subject position offered to the spectator. In as much as she identified the dominant discourse as the camera itself and that the camera’s way of seeing the world, in the points of view offered, was masculine rather than feminine, she was able to propose the idea that the subject position offered to the spectator is male. The subject - the one who does the looking is male. The “object” of the look is woman. This raised very significant issues. First, it brought gender into the ideological account of cinema apparatus and subject. Second, it raised the extremely challenging question - if the spectator is offered a male “subject” position, what is the female spectator doing if not allowing herself to become “male” for the duration of the film? One answer is that she engages in a masochistic over-identification with the women characters on screen; another that she reflects the images back onto herself in an act of narcissism.

<sup>18</sup> Murray Smith has described what he calls the “structure of sympathy” presented by the film. That structure consists of (1) our recognition of the emotional experience of the characters, (2) a structure of alignment (consisting of spatial attachment, subjective access, and perceptual alignment), and (3) allegiance, or in other words, our moral and ideological evaluation of characters. This analysis accounts for the fact that empathy seems to be partly automatic, based on the “emotional contagion” that occurs with the recognition of emotions in others (in this case, in characters). But empathy also depends on assessment and appraisal, determined in part by the perceptual experience the film creates and by our moral and ideological evaluation of the character; see Murray Smith, *Engaging Characters: Fiction and Emotional Response in the Cinema*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995).

<sup>19</sup> King, *Film Comedy*, 2. King, in the introduction of his book, suggests that any form of comedy should not be taken seriously.

<sup>20</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 32.

<sup>21</sup> The term “suspension of disbelief” is employed by Neale whilst discussing at length the concept of anti-verisimilitude in his early work, *Genre*, 40. Neale writes: “The convention of anti-verisimilitude means that ‘suspension of disbelief,’ merely a misleading term for the splitting of belief is actually integrated into the diegesis as a condition of the inherent narrative structure. It is not only the audience which has to suspend disbelief, it is also the character of the detective, the agent of the

process of investigation and representative of the viewer in the diegesis, guiding the reading of the 'events.' But the twist lies, so to speak, in the fact that whereas the fictional detective suspends disbelief in order to discover the truth 'behind' the appearance, the spectator suspends disbelief in order to confirm the illusion, that is to say, the illusion of the fiction itself."

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>23</sup> Neale and Krutnik (eds.), "the comedy of the sexes," in *Popular Film and Television Comedy*, 149.

<sup>24</sup> Neale, "The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today," 294.

<sup>25</sup> "Screwball comedy" is a film *genre*, introduced in the 1930s in America and popular up to the 1950s, characterised by zany lovers, often from different social classes. The plots are often absurdly improbable and have a tendency to veer out of control. These movies usually feature slapstick comedy scenes, aggressive and charming heroines, and an assortment of outlandish secondary characters.

<sup>26</sup> Neale, "The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today," 290.

<sup>27</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 227.

<sup>28</sup> Neale and Krutnik, "the comedy of the sexes," 145.

<sup>29</sup> Levi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," in *Structural Anthropology*, (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 55.

<sup>30</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 221-225.

<sup>31</sup> Neale, "Questions of Genre," 56.

<sup>32</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 209.

<sup>33</sup> Carl Plantinga, in his essay on movie pleasures, delineates five sources of spectator pleasure in film; there are (1) orientation and discovery, (2) visceral experience, (3) empathy and character identification, (4) narrational structuring, and (5) reflexive criticism and appreciation; see his essay, "Movie Pleasures and the Spectator's Experience: Toward a Cognitive Approach," in *Film and Philosophy*, vol II (1995), 3-19.

<sup>34</sup> David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 40-47; see also Edward Branigan, *Narrative Comprehension and Film* (New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>35</sup> Of this point, I am indebted to Krutnik's insightful essay, "Conforming Passions?: Contemporary Romantic Comedy."

<sup>36</sup> Neale, "The Big romance or Something Wild?: romantic comedy today," 288.

<sup>37</sup> In fact, in Malaysia, the institution of marriage or the concept of "traditional" love has been affected by changing social norms and values. Phua Kai Lit, in her research, "What's Ahead for

Malaysia? Current Challenges and Emerging Trends,” writes: “Population growth has slowed down in Malaysia as the people begin to marry at older ages, have children later in their marriages and also have fewer children per family. People marry later and postpone having children because they spend more years in school nowadays and also because they wish to spend more time on building up their careers. This is especially true of women who are highly educated;” for in-depth discussion, see <http://phuakl.tripod.com/eTHOUGHT/whats.html>.

<sup>38</sup> According to Lacan, the recasting of the concept of the Other has profound implications for the relations between the sexes ... Sexual relation exists therefore only in the imaginary and only insofar as each pretends to be what will make good the lack in the Other. Any semblance of sexual rapport thus hinges on the phallus, the pretence that the *objet a* exists in a form capable of making good the lack: the man must appear to have it, the woman must engage in the masquerade that she is it. Consequently, for both the man and the woman, Lacan can say, loving is giving what they do not have; and the manifestations of it “are entirely propelled into comedy;” see Jacques Lacan, “God and the *jouissance* of the Woman,” trans. Jacqueline Rose, in Juliet Mitchell and Jacqueline Rose (eds.), *Feminine Sexuality*, (London: Macmillan, 1982).

<sup>39</sup> In practice, of course, the spectator’s identification are multiple and fractured, they are not circumscribed to any one character onscreen. As in Freud’s analysis of the fantasy “a child is being beaten,” the spectator is able to switch identifications in the course of a narrative; for further discussion, see Robert Lapsley and Michael Westlake, “From *Casablanca* to *Pretty Woman*: the politics of romance,” *Screen*, 33:1 (Spring 1992).

<sup>40</sup> See Neale, “Melodrama and tears,” *Screen*, vol.27, no.6, (1986), 20-22.

<sup>41</sup> In regard to this point, I employ the idea explicated by Neale in his essay, “The Big romance or Something Wild,” 229.

<sup>42</sup> The word “interpellate” was brought into film studies from the writings of the French philosopher Louis Althusser, himself influenced by the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan. Althusser argued that we are all “subjects” of ideology through the ways in which we are interpellated or positioned into society by its structures and systems. The spectator is similarly interpellated into the film, is similarly the “subject” of its largely invisible or taken-for-granted operations. Arguably, interpellation is both one of the basic pleasures of the movie experience and one of the most obvious ways in which popular narrative realist cinema can be said to have ideological effects; see Susan Hayward, *Cinema Studies: The Key Concepts*.

<sup>43</sup> Neale, *Genre and Hollywood*, 221-222.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 225.

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