Cinematic Realism and Cultural Education: Malaysian Studio Era Films through a Lukacsian Lens (1950s–1965)

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ABSTRACT

While global cinema has been extensively analysed for reflecting and critiquing social realities through the film realist perspective, insufficient attention has been given to how Malaysian studio-era films (1950–1965) of this era navigated ethical dilemmas, preserved cultural heritage and critiqued societal norms through the lens of cinematic realism framework such as Georg Lukacs' and educational philosophical principles. Although these films addressed themes of cultural identity and societal challenges during a time of cultural and political transition, existing studies often lack the theoretical grounding to connect their narrative strategies with cinematic realism within educational and cultural impacts. This research employs a qualitative exploratory approach to examine the intersection of cinematic realism, culture and education in iconic Malaysian films such as *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959), *Madu Tiga* (1964), *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963) and *Sri Mersing* (1961). Findings reveal that these films reflects the socio-political realities of mid-20th century Malaysia while embedding cultural values. The study concludes that these films not only preserved and celebrated cultural heritage but also served as tools for fostering cultural awareness. By blending storytelling with deeper educational philosophical engagement, Malaysian studio-era cinema demonstrated its transformative potential as a medium for cultural education, offering valuable insights into cultural identity and societal structures while inspiring collective reflection and cultural consciousness.

Keywords: Cinematic Realism; Cultural Education; Malaysian Studio Era; Georg Lukacs; Southeast Asia Cinema

INTRODUCTION

Long regarded as a powerful medium of cultural education, cinema offers a reflection of the dynamics that govern society but also plays an influential role in shaping—and critiquing—these cultural norms. Do not just represent cultural norms and traditions but instead tell their story to challenge the social fabric and amplify margin-based narratives. Capture the historical moments, social issues and diversity-ridden ethnicity through cinema, it becomes a bridge between local and global societies, something that phases out culture and analysis of it. One can recreate develop under an umbrella of freedom in cultural exploration and education. It allows local societies to think about who they as well as share their narratives with the world. At a time when geography and language is a barrier, cinema brings exchange and dialogue around a common experience of being human. It is education for and about the other, and it invites critical interrogation—and so the scale of its necessity stretches far beyond local to global."

This research draws on Georg Lukacs realist theories to explore cinema's two-fold role. For Lukacs, art reflects and critiques society, just as cinema does. His emphasis on revealing the deeper contradictions of

reality can tell us more about how cinema interrogates social, power relations. This is especially true of Malaysian cinema in the studio era (1950–1965) that illustrates the complex links between cultural representations and education. A medium for exploring cultural identities and social issues, it mirrors the country's rich mosaic of ethnicities, languages and histories. This research looks at how studio-era films from this time, such as *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959), *Madu Tiga* (1964), *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963) and *Sri Mersing* (1961), exist and reflect upon cultural and educational values. The study frames these films with the realist theory of Georg Lukacs so as to highlight their role in portraying reality and shaping cultural meaning. These theoretical frameworks offer different insights about how cinema reflects human experiences and these frameworks can inform cultural and educational discourses especially for the context of Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review for this paper is organised around two central themes: cinematic realism of Georg Lucas and education.

Georg Lukacs: Cinematic Realism and the Totality of Social Life

Cinematic realism, which is a theoretical and stylistic approach, attempts to reflect reality authentic and true in a way. It is still a touchstone in cinema, revered for its power to hold up a mirror to humanity and tackle pressing social and cultural issues. One of the leading figures in this discourse is Georg Lukacs, who, focusing on realism as a representation of the "totality" of social life, emphasise the interconnectedness of individual lives and broader societal structures.

Lukacs' realism calls for an art that goes beyond mere appearances, aiming to explore the underlying structures and contradictions that give shape to human experiences and society. As Ian Aitken emphasises in *Major Realist Film Theorists: A Critical Anthology* (2016), Lukacs ideas have been pivotal to realist film theory. The role of cinema as a medium uniquely capable of exploring these interdependencies is integral to his notion of totality, encapsulating the relationship between individual struggles and the forces of socio-economic change over time. *Cinematic Realism: Lukacs, Kracauer, and Theories of the Filmic Real* (2020), by Ian Aitken, returns again to Lukacs' theories. He examines how the unique way cinema synthesizes visual, auditory and narrative components makes it an especially effective medium for depicting complex social realities. Aitken believes that realist cinema needs to do more than simply reflect the lives of its characters on the surface but must reveal the historical and socio-economic forces that shape their lives. Realist films therefore offer a critique—by reflecting the totality of social life; by revealing the relations between ourselves and our conditions of existence; and by articulating forms of awareness and agency that can eventually contribute to change.

Further, Fredric Jameson elaborates Lukacs' propositions in *The Aesthetics of Totality: The Return of Georg Lukacs* (2020) demonstrating the relevance of totality as an analytical tool. Such fragmentation and individualism in late twentieth-century art-making is critiqued by Jameson, who suggests that totality is a corrective lens that allows cultural products to be positioned within larger socio-historical structures. Not only was Lukacs an important theorist of realism, but this perspective fits with Lukacs' conception of realism as uncovering systemic contradictions and highlighting the forces shaping society. Angelos Koutsourakis engages with closely related concepts in *Realism is to Think Historically: Overlapping Elements in Lukacsian and Brechtian Theories of Realism* (2016). He stresses the need for characters and events to be positioned within historical and socio-economic contexts, echoing Lukacs' insistence on the totality of social life. Characters are not individuals, and in realist films they are neither "isolated," nor are the characters truly complete beings, as Koutsourakis shows, because they are formed of their historical and cultural milieu. As such, realist cinema mirrors the sociohistorical forces that shape personal struggle in the tradition of social realism.

Lukacs' framework is not only formal, but ideological, placing cinema as a field for social critique and education. These realist films challenge us as viewers to actively engage with narratives as reflections of

social structures, and to draw implications for systematic change. As Aitken points out, the unique capacity of cinema to integrate visual, auditory, and narrative elements enables it to represent the wholeness of social life more directly than other arts can. Through the work of scholars such as Aitken, Jameson and Koutsourakis, Lukacs' theories consistently pervade discussions of socially conscious filmmaking. His focus on the whole of social reality renders cinema a potent means for revealing the insufficiencies and contradictions of societal institutions, cultivating critical consciousness, and spurring social transformation. Realist cinema proves to be a crucial form for making sense of human life and conflicted societal reflections by showcasing the close interwoven nature of personal and social reality.

Education as a Cultural and Pedagogical Instrument

According to Sangeeta Pandey (2022), education is the "dynamic aspect of philosophy," a view that stems from Sharma's educational philosophy, among others such as Paulo Freire's notion of conscientiousness. Describing the link between education and philosophy as mutual, Pandey highlights how philosophy informs the overarching ideologies, while education reflects the manner of translating and integrating those ideologies. This idea meets Sharma's definition of education as a developing process that conditions not only the transference of knowledge but the practice of philosophical ideals. Pandey connects education with life's objectives, stating that education is practical and purposeful. Such a view resonates with Freire's concept of conscientisation, embedding education as a tool for personal and communal transformation. Integrating Freire's emphasis on critical consciousness and the ability to overthrow systems of oppression, Pandey expands the definition of education to include a process that is active, in motion.

Freire's (2021) critical pedagogy sees education as not only a cultural and pedagogical tool, but one that has the power either to uphold societal norms or to be used by individuals to resist these very norms. His dialogic attitude restate mentee that "freedom is an act of participation itself" (Gadamer, 2021), they do not accept oppressive systems, they co-create critical consciousness erects through an added relation with the other, empower each other, resist established power and knowledge regimes. Freire's suggestion to move the learner from passive recipient to an agent of social change also makes the assumption that such an evolution is easy to achieve when, in fact, marginalized people face physical, mental, and structural barriers that make this transformational process difficult. Further, Koji Tachibana (2012) *How Aristotle's Theory of Education Has Been Studied in Our Century Really* interesting insights of Aristotle claiming that education is not only about imparting knowledge but also about students learning to become the virtuous and intellectual citizens. Tachibana stresses that this focus on character education is increasingly relevant in today's conversations around holistic education.

Likewise, F. Tony Carusi and Tomasz Szkudlarek (2024) *Ontological Instrumentalism*, *the Autotelic, and the Impossible Identity of Education* navigate the philosophical foundations of education and confront the constraints of its purpose and identity. Rooting themselves in Aristotle's notions of *Practical Wisdom* (phronesis) and *The Common Good*, the authors maintain that education must support the development of practical wisdom—making ethical choices in complex situations—and the flourishing of both individuals and society. This dual focus on personal flourishing and the common good hearkens back to Aristotle's conception of education as preparation for civic life.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research design is chosen for exploring the intersection of cinema culture and education philosophy. This research design enables an intensive case study that looks at such potentiality of cinema as a cultural educational instrument, through an exploratory lens concentrating on Malaysian Cinema during the studio era 1950s-1965. By relying on Georg Lukacs's cinematic realism and the philosophy of education as its conceptual framework, this study explores the pedagogic openness for cinema in providing cultural heritage reading through the lens of dynamic philosophy and Aristotle's philosophy of Practical Wisdom and The Common Good.
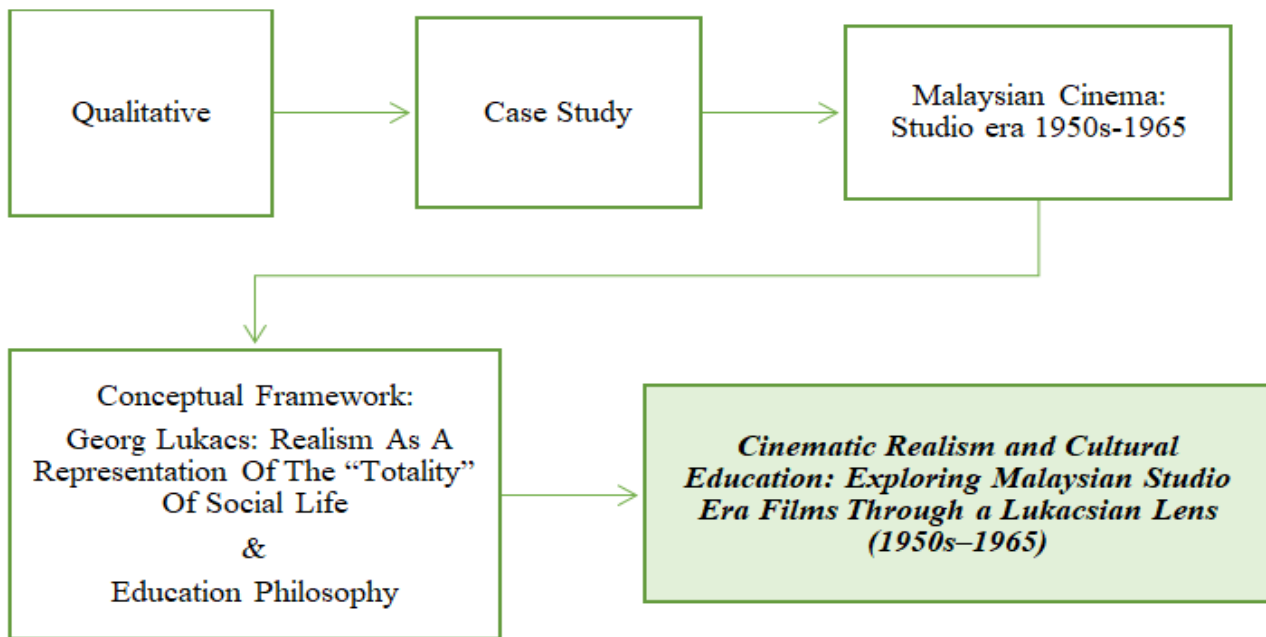
Figure 1: Qualitative Research Methodology: *Cinematic Realism and Cultural Education: Exploring Malaysian Studio Era Films Through a Lukacsian Lens (1950s–1965)*

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

The Studio Era of Malaysian Cinema (1950s-1965). This formative period which spanned from the 1960s until the 1980s, was dominated by major studios such as Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris that produced films that were instrumental in shaping cultural identity, preserving heritage, and propagating national virtues and values.

Films such as *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959), *Madu Tiga* (1964), *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963)) and *Sri Mersing* (1961) dovetailed traditional values, moral lessons and Malay identity into the popular culture of the era. Not only did these films retell and preserve historical and oral traditions for the silver screen, they introduced them to outdoor audiences at home and abroad. Just as importantly, films made during this period often dealt with contemporary social issues and moral dilemmas that mirror the realities of Malay society at the time. It also contributed to the trend of incorporating themes of loyalty, justice, and communal harmony as cinema became a medium through which the audience were taught the significance of togetherness and commonalities within the context of their cultural ties. This discussion will focus on Georg Lukacs' ideas of realism, especially his idea of the realism that represents the "totality" of social life, in the context of the studio era of Malaysia cinema. It explores and reflects on how these films represent and convey social-historical complexities of their own time, highlighting cinema's potential as a medium for cultural preservation and education.

Pendekar Bujang Lapok (1959): A Cinematic Resistance to Colonial Oppression

Pendekar Bujang Lapok (1959) illustrates, through the cinematic realism of Georg Lukacs, the representation of the "totality" of social life, by detailing (its) cultural familiarity, social struggles and (roots) — and resistance — into its narrative. Set in a rural Malay world, the film is deeply grounded in the lived realities of its audience members, and the collective aspirations that both inform and haunt them. The main characters — three bachelors named Ramli, Ajis and Sudin — are portrayed as relatable but imperfect people who represent resistance to colonial oppression. Through the avatar of Ahmad Nisfu, who in his visual characterisation in white suit and hat, is a direct allegory to colonial might, the narrative serves as a socio-political commentary to question the colonial hegemonic structure.

Using humour as a weapon against the oppressive nature of colonialism, the *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* captures and paints that "realism" Lukacs describes as mirroring the structural or existential conditions of society. By populating a comedic framework with its own defiance against colonial authority, the work is an easily digestible yet contemplative examination of socio-political dynamics. Comedy provides a cathartic release to

audiences, a small moment of humour at their oppressors and undermining the legitimacy of colonial power. And this interplay of comedy and critique illustrates the totality of social life within the transitional phase Malaysia was facing, bringing together enjoyment and suggestions of socio-political tones underneath.

The democratisation of cinema exemplified by Lukacs proposes through the three main characters heroes Ramli, Ajis and Sudin in *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*. The trio of protagonists aren't traditional heroes, though; they're clumsy, uneducated and often self-interested. Yet their ultimate success, and particularly the rescue of Ros, serves to illustrate the willingness of ordinary men and women to step up to extraordinary challenges. This reflects Lukacs' ambition for cinema as a form that tends to the humanity of unglamorous ordinary individuals rather than waiting for the approach of the coveted unattainable figure. There's also a kind of cultural education, as our heroes take time out from fighting to learn *silat*, the style that they must fight in in order to learn from it. It is here we witnessed a democratised kind of heroism seen alongside a more cultural education kind too. It has been argued that *silat* — the act of learning and the search for this Malay martial art knowledge is more than mere physical exercise; it is a cultural apparatus that makes it possible for both local individuals and communities to reclaim control over themselves from colonial domination. The film's placement of the story demonstrates how cultural education can serve as a common thread that connects tradition and modernity, evidenced by the way it takes place in such a traditional space. This synthesis of martial arts praxis and a more expansive social critique embodies Lukacs' notion of cinema as enfolding the physical and moral and intellectual spheres of human life.

Other noteworthy aspects of *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* is the presence of a school teaching the Arabic alphabet, representing an educational intervention as an act of resistance towards the colonial system of knowledge and system of writing. Within the school, a space for empowerment, education becomes about taking back skills, culture, and resisting hegemony. In a rural Malay setting, the literacy school echoes the lived struggle of alleviating illiteracy and empowering marginalised communities during colonial and early post-colonial era In the real world. The protagonists' journey from illiteracy to gaining knowledge reflects the larger national development efforts that Malaysia undertook, highlighting the importance of education in self-determination and social progress.

The film situates its characters' individual stories within the larger socio-historical arc of post-colonial Malaysia. It portrays education — both formal literacy and cultural education — as central to the country's efforts to modernise even as it also preserves its heritage. Watching the characters engage in silat training in the pursuit of formal education serves to underscore the principle articulated by Lukacs that cinema is most properly a mirror of the totality of human life. The mechanics of this storytelling objectifies physical capabilities and thus demonstrates that strength does not qualify as the sole form of empowerment, since intellectual and ethical evolution are both prerequisites behind successful communities. In stitching humour, education and resistance into its narrative, *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* goes from being entertainment to one of cultural preservation and social critique. The education deprivation, colonial tyranny and socio-economic class dissections depicted in the films are in correlation to the real life situations of 1950-1965 local people. It also highlights the transformative power that education can be as a route to advancement and autonomy. This simultaneous vision adds supports for Lukacs' perspective of film as both an emissary to uncover collective soul and a rallying cry for the audience to wrestle with ethical and social imperatives, and a tableau in which to delight in the tenacity and visions of regular human people.

One of *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*'s most unique qualities, for a comedy, is its tackling of serious socio-political themes. Thus, comedy serves as a medium for cross-cultural understanding, for the audience partakes in a plate of chicken that is both funny and educational. The film's humour draws attention to the absurdities of colonial bureaucracy, the challenges of economic privation and the tensions between tradition and modernity. Exploring the painful and comical aspects of these positions, the audience is invited to critically consider their own socio-historical context and share a laugh with these common experiences.

The film's humour has a similarly resistant quality, quietly interrogating colonial structures and asserting the right to cultural self-determination. Pendekar Bujang Lapok thus counters the narratives of cultural inferiority propagated during the colonial era by portraying Malay identity in a positive and empowering light. This corresponds with Lukacs's understanding of realism as an ideological weapon; there will be made, by art,

contradictions of their time naked, so that social action may work toward a better future. And, at a stroke of cinematic realism in concert with Lukacs, *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* evokes the fusion of experience to assert the corollary of the concerns of the whole of human experience in our evaluation of life, an intertwining of personal grievances with this notion of erasure, with this collective process of change. The film captures the dreams, determination and wit of Malay society at a time of seismic transformation in its history and gives insight into the collective psyche of the community.

In conclusion *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959) exemplifies the principles of Lukacs' cinematic realism by revealing an ambivalent and humanistic representation of Malay social life. It embodies the socio-historical intricacies of colonial and post-colonial transitions, serving as a lens to examine the struggles, aspirations, and resilience of the community. Weaving humour, cultural education, and resistance into an intricate dialect, the film documents life in its totality, making it a potent cultural artifact and a technology for fostering collective identity during a transformative period in Malaysian history.

Satirical Totality: *Madu Tiga* (1964): Laughing in the Patriarchal Hegemonic Masculinity.

Read as Georg Lukacs' notion of a cinematic realism that transcends the real and captures the "totality" of social being, however, *Madu Tiga* (1964) offers a hegemonic masculine reading. Yet at the same time it functions within the limitations of its comedic genre, which hinders its potential for serious social critique. Although the narrative of the film is that of a middle-class man and his polygamous adventures, it ends up being so tongue-in-cheek that it masks, rather than interrogates the socio-cultural dynamics at work here. Read using hegemonic masculinity, *Madu Tiga* provides a cynical critique of Malay-Muslim patriarchal values and polygamous institutions, the result is a satirical yet problematic narrative. The film reveals the entrenched double standards and gendered power structures that are woven into the cultural fabric of its time. However, perhaps due to its comedic tone, the story inadvertently reinforces the same patriarchal values and male privileges it seeks to critique, portraying the manipulation of the Muslim patriarchal system through the lens of hegemonic masculinity's absurdity.

In this regards, Jamil as the protagonist actually depicts the ultimate man in a hegemonical masculinity theory. A Malay-Muslim culture that contributes a layer of legitimacy to notions of patriarchal authority, enacted through religious and cultural protocols. As middle-class man who with control over his father-in-law's wealth, Jamil has economic and social power — which he leverages to take on two more wives, this time without the family's knowledge. Instead of presenting Jamil as a flawed subject ripe for criticism, the *Madu Tiga* comically vindicates his duplicity as proof of his resourcefulness and charm. This legitimation and normalisation of male dominance cloaked in comedic absurdity shows how hegemonic masculinity is constructed, maintained and defended in the Malay-Muslim society. By reimagining Jamil as a "good husband," who ultimately makes good with his wives and his in-laws, the story glosses over the thorny ethical and emotional stakes of polygamy in favor of farce about the politics of male desire and control.

The film's framing narrative showcases the complicity of patriarchal forms in the solidifying of male supremacy. Jamil's father-in-law, a patriarchal authority figure in his own right, allows for and encourages Jamil to maintain this polygamy, echoing the notion that men's privileges are protected and perpetuated by men past." The three wives are, however, portrayed here as passive figures in this shakedown, their agency limited by their mutual ignorance of one another and their eventual acceptance of the arrangement. On one level, this representation hints at a broader cultural conversation in which women are invited to put family harmony and the mechanics of male power above their own agency. The wives' reconciliation and the blessing that they bestow because they share Jamil as a husband, is spun into a comic resolution. But it reflects back the way patriarchal norms — a manipulative model of womanhood that the film presents as such — stuff women into positions of subservience and self-sacrifice. Instead of subverting these norms, the film reinforces them, with the wives' greatest solidarity rendered a victory of group think over a mutual dereliction of duty in the face of institutionalised gender injustice.

Madu Tiga criticises the hypocrisy of the Malay-Muslim patriarchy whose religious justification of polygamy, touted as a vehicle for the preservation of justice and responsibility, is inverted to justify male selfishness. The movie views his lies and manipulation as comic larks, not moral shortcomings. Thus, depicting polygamy as a

cynical exploitation of hegemonic masculinity not just to exacerbate the gap between religion and reality in which men then take advances of religious law to state their own selfishness without facing consequences.

By exposing the absurdities of the lengths Jamil goes to keep his secret, the film implicitly critiques the performative nature of morality in patriarchal systems. But the critique is undercut by the film's resolution, which exonerates Jamil — and rewards him with a harmonious, polygamous household. In mirroring this cycle, *Madu Tiga* actively embodies the hypocrisy it claims to poke fun at, ultimately conforming to the status quo it should interrogate. While *Madu Tiga* uses humour to satirise the absurdities of Jamil's situation, it ultimately endorses the patriarchal values it aims to critique. The comedy tone plays down the ethical and emotional complexity of polygamy, leaving it a trail of misunderstandings and reconciled marriages. Not only does this approach trivialise the realities of women in polygamous-relationships, it normalises the dishonesty and domination of men as an acceptable even entertaining part of the social life.

This happy ending, in which Jamil lives happily ever after with his three wives, now also supported by his uncritical in-laws, is an ironic ending and an example of the limitations on the film's engagement with social reality. For Lukacs, the notion of totality demands the revelation of the contradictions of society as well as exposing the forces of change or oppression. Even so, this illusion of harmony redeems the narrative of their contradictions that have been presented, which in *Madu Tiga* are justified through the erasure of inherent power dynamics and moral quandaries surrounding them. The women's reconciliation with Jamil and one another is positioned as inevitable, implying that patriarchal norms are not just resilient, but also natural and desirable. From a Lukacsian standpoint, this setup forecloses the possibility of a dialectical critique of the social formations that make Jamil's behaviour possible. Whereas the gender dynamics of polygamy and male privilege offer a wealth of understanding and discussion, the film quickly takes those characteristics and reduces them to comedic plot devices, thus refusing to unearth the serious implications those elements have on gender relations and social justice at large. By ending the narrative with a comedic and conciliatory conclusion, *Madu Tiga* opts to sidestep a confrontation with the systemic inequities it portrays, and instead upholds the status quo.

Jamil as a charming but morally ambiguous character reflects how Malay-Muslim society normalises hegemonic masculinity. With the encouragement of the obsessed patriarchal figures in his life, his father-in-law and his assistant, he knows how to exploit religious and cultural mores for his own benefit, revealing how obviously patriarchies are collective enterprises. Yet instead of critiquing these dynamics, the film satirises them in a way that in the end reaffirms their legitimacy. Jamil's wives' complicities bears out the deep-suitedness of patriarchal values. Their eventual embrace of polygamy, presented as an act of familial cohesion, illustrates how society conditions women to sacrifice fairness and independence for the sake of cohesion and obedience. In this way, from a Lukacsian perspective, this dynamic cannot access the totality of social life because it silences the wives as they engage with this emotional and ethical complexity. Rather, their coming together is shown as an unambiguous comedic inevitability that glosses over the implications for gender inequality and systemic oppression.

While, *Madu Tiga* does use satire as a means to pierce at the inherent absurdities of Jamil's predicament, but its humorous tone defuses the possibility of a critical engagement with the broader socio-cultural realities it depicts. Lukacs holds that realism identifies the dialectical tensions contained within art, but the humour of the film mocks this tension and turns it into a spectacle rather than a political critique. The happy ending specifically, shows the limitations of satire as an instrument of social critique. The film's resolve by comedic and harmonious closure functions as a means of reinforcing patrilineal norms and dividends, offering both the readers an opportunity to resolve the tension in their head between satirical critiques and their concrete existence as an artifact that preserves the values of male privilege. And this duality speaks to a more wide-ranging cultural reluctance to challenge hegemonic masculinity and its ramifications for social justice — implying that the film's satire, much like the values it attempts to lampoon is borne out of a patriarchal society.

Ultimately speaking, *Madu Tiga* contains a cynical but complicit critique of hegemonic masculinity and Malay-Muslim patriarchy, revealing the contradictions and hypocrisies of polygamy, and yet reaffirming the structures that sustain it. The film's satirical impulse and comic ending obscure the ethical and emotional messiness of its subject matter, dulling the force of its social critique. Under Lukacs' lens, the lack of a

dialectical critique leaves the film far short of the kind of realism needed to portray the totality of social life. *Madu Tiga*, then, is a cultural artifact that mirrors the patriarchal, middle-class values of a time period that lends itself well to a reading of the resiliency of these values even while providing an affirmation of their invulnerability. The duality of critique and complicit consumption embeds *Madu Tiga* within —and *Madu Tiga* both reflects and perpetuates — the cultural dynamics of its era. While a satire of hegemonic masculinity and polygamy, it falls short of challenging the patriarchal values it showcases, which takes its audience on a ride of entertainment but not transformation, in a way that leads to reproductive organs on screen but fails to dismantle reproductivity as an institution.

Feudalism, Patriarchy and the Totality of Social Life: *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963)

Seen through the lens of the cinematic realism of Georg Lukacs *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963) illustrate an interesting interconnectedness of the personal, cultural and socio-political in a feudal Malay society. As Lukacs in addition to introducing the true concept of cinematic realism, points out, the interpretation and performance of the action of an isolated individual cannot be presented in isolation, for such an actor's actions are always shaped and shaped by much more generality. In *Chuchu Datok Merah*, the characters, relationships and plot points are intricately woven into the cultural mores, class stratifications and gender dynamics of its setting, creating a narrative that is at once superficial yet deeply entrenched in the complexities of its social world of *Chuchu Datok Merah* story.

The feudal milieu of *Chuchu Datok Merah* offers a complex tableau in which all aspects of social existence can be, as Lukacs imagines, examined. Awang Janggut, the hero, personifies the tensions between personal dignity and systemic deprivation, serving as the archetype of men ensnared in inflexible class structures. Awang's resistance to working for the wealthy Hassan reflects his refusal to submit to subjugation, a refusal tied to his identity as a descendant of Datok Merah, a warrior of renown. But that same pride sets him apart — his refusal to submit leaves him financially impotent." An example of Lukacs' idea of totality can be seen in the way the film interweaves Awang's personal choices with the larger forces of social structure that restrict him. The feudal unconscious of this bond, signified by Hassan's benefaction and status, becomes internalised, imprinted on characters like Awang where a sense of self-worth is tied to genealogy instead of economic or social standing. This dialectical interplay of individual freedom and structural coercion is what maintains the "totality" of the film's message.

The film's portrayal of gender roles also reinvigorates how *Chuchu Datok Merah* engages with a sociality that is total. Wan Kuntum, Awang's wife, epitomises the ideal, loyal, self-sacrificing spouse, reflecting expectations of women in a patriarchal society. Kuntum is unfazed though, as she bears the mistreatment and neglect of Awang because it is culturally expected of women to persevere amidst hardship in the name of familial harmony. But the film also critiques these norms through its depiction of Kuntum's suffering. Awang and Long Daik's eventual victimising of her, speaks to the tragic outcome of these intersecting patriarchal authority and feudal power dynamics as well as personal pride. From a Lukacsian vantage, Kuntum's plight isn't an individual tragedy but a symptom of the systemic inequities that characterise the social fabric of her world. Her passive endurance, and eventual demise reflect the ways women's lives are shaped and constrained by the larger socio-cultural structures of the times they live in.

In fact, the representation of the totality in the movie is even expanded with the incorporation of traditional Malay cultural beliefs — mostly the supernatural. Kuntum's poison, hidden in "herbs" as is endemic in legal ministry palaces, reflects cultural practices, but also personal revenge, and how weaponized belief systems can be within feudal political struggles. Although the supernatural elements of supernatural are minimal, they've been made to mimic the cultural environment of the time period, in which spiritual practices and traditional medicine were embedded in everyday life. Through a Lukacsian lens, these beliefs make visible the ways that the cultural beliefs are entangled with and affect the socio-economic and interpersonal relations of the characters. The supernatural thus serves not as an isolated, "other," but as a device or a mode of power and retribution, working seamlessly into the overall representation of the social totality.

A marker of Lukacs' realism is causality, for everything that occurs is connected, and leads inexorably to what is to come. *Chuchu Datok Merah* is thus predicated on a kind of factual inevitability, an inflexibility that relates individual agency to sweeping structures. Awang's pride and disdain toward Kuntum create

disharmony at home, which makes Kuntum an easy target of Long Daik's evil design. The sad conclusion, with Kuntum's death, isn't just an outcome of personal failings but a manifestation of systemic and cultural forces at work affecting the characters' lives. The ending also reflects the cycle of oppression and tragedy of the know-feudal system the film presents. Awang's downfall, both personal and symbolic, represents the broader consequences of pride, systemic inequality and cultural norms. In a Lukacsian sense, this inevitability emphasizes the "totality" of narrative, in which the personal is inextricably linked to a societal context.

Although *Chuchu Datok Merah* succeeds in depicting the interconnectedness of social, cultural, and economic forces, its critique of these systems is implicit as opposed to explicit. The film vividly conveys the stifling nature of feudal hierarchies and patriarchal norms but never questions their legitimacy. Awang's pride, Kuntum's suffering, and the feudal power dynamics are framed as quasi-infinite forces within the social landscape, so inevitable in their place that they are presented as inevitable features of the peasantry, as characters in a broader cultural resignation to structures of this sort across all of the classes. The specificity of the film's personal tragedy, rather than a critique of systems of oppression, all but locks the task of engaging with Lukacs' conception of realism as a method of moral exposure and social change. Still, its value is as a cultural artifact: a window into the socio-cultural dynamics of its time and the manners in which the totality of social life molds individual life.

In brief, as for cinematic realism, *Chuchu Datok Merah* is reflective of the manifestation of the "totality" of social life which takes into account the nexus of individual agency, ideological frameworks and material conditions — this is particularly so of the feudal Malay society. "The film's arc contains the movements of personal and societal forces at play, where pride, patriarchy, and feudal hierarchies determine human equation." Although subtle in its critique of these systems, the film is a striking reframing of the cultural/structural inequities of its time, subject to Lukacs' view of realism as a way of charting the complexity of social reality.

Totality of Social Life: Alienation and Marginalisation in *Sri Mersing* (1961)

Georg Lukacs' theory of cinematic realism serves as a useful framework through which to unpack *Sri Mersing* (1961) as a film that gestures to the "totality" of social life, or a defining feature of Lukacsian realism. For Lukacs, realism in literature and cinema does not simply present what exists; it aims to illustrate the underlying structures of class and the contradictions of social relations, as well as the historical forces informing each individual. Seen through that perspective, *Sri Mersing* functions as a narrative microcosm of social and cultural tensions in 1960s Malay society, highlighting the dynamic between an individual's agency and the powers of structure. In Sri Mersing, the village represents a kind of microcosm of 1960s Malay society, with its strict hierarchies, communal solidarity and moral codes. Lukacs' realism values setting as the representation of the totality of social relations, and the village embodies not only the collective ethos but also the contradictions of its time. Authoritarianism and politicized morality strain social bonds and construe a hierarchy of morality, where condemnation arrives only following the cutting up, after the denunciation, a suit of clothes made to be worn by the powerless, proceeds in the world.

The protagonist, Damaq, is a Lukacsian "typical individual," representing the larger socio-historical conditions of her time. His status as an immigrant trying to assimilate into a new village society renders him an outsider, wading through entrenched power structures and cultural hierarchies. Damaq's integrity and decency, meanwhile, are a counterpoint to the duplicity of Awang Sulung, whose lies drive Damaq from the village. This duality mirrors the greater class and social strife in the village, where the haves are making the guilt-ridden villagers doubt how they view the outsiders to remain powerful. Damaq's experiences also shine a light on the alienation of the marginalised in a tightly knit rural society and his exclusion is a reminder of how hard it is to move beyond existing prejudice. The Damaq of Lukacsian terms is not a passive victim; his struggles are the very essence of the conflict between ethical individualism and the crushing weight of social conventions.

Sri Mersing excels in dramatising such tensions; for Lukacs, the dramatisation of the contradictions in a social system is the essence of realism. Damaq and Awang Sulung's enmity represents more than a personal dispute; their competition serves as an allegory for mounting social bifurcation. Awang's vilifying of Damaq echoes the way that social norms and moral codifications are used to maintain existing hierarchies of power. The

powerlessness of the village as a microcosm of the community to step up and defend this innocent man against defamation reveals the fragility of communal ideals and morals in the face of potential individual self-interest. This one juxtaposition helps illustrate the pervasive societal hypocrisy of a culture that claims to value justice and truth. As sacred ideals, then to let vigilance and resolve slip when those values are challenged. Pak Malau, Sri's father is the conscience of the story. His eventual discovery of Awang's treachery, and his bid to convince Damaq to stay, are signs of moral awakening and the restoration of proper order. But Pak Malau's failure to stop Damaq from leaving exposes the limitations of personal defiance against established systems. This dynamism speaks to Lukacs' focus on the "complex interplay" of individual and aggregate agency. The thing is, as much as Pak Malau and the likes of him tap into systemic injustices recognition and fight against it, they can't be a match to systemic inertia that social norms and the collective silence gatekeeps. This tension extends the entirety of the social world depicted in the film, the tension between moral clarity and practical impotence.

The character of Sri — represents an object of male competition and a symbol of frailty, within a patriarchal formation. Initially the victim of Awang, but eventually saved by her father, her status as a passive victim and an active player in her own fate exemplifies the duality to her as a character driven by necessity. Sri's disappearance catalyses the unmasking of Awang's treachery, but her role is obscured by the male-centric narrative of Damaq's exile and moral victory. From a Lukacsian reading, one might understand Sri's character as a product of the structural oppression of women in traditional Malay society, such that it is a conflict between men that ultimately resolves any exigent need in her life. This illustration deepens the film's social totality, reflecting how interconnected systems of both power and gender inequality affect the contours of single (or double) lives.

Since Damaq must leave the village to preserve his sanity, his escape can be viewed as a kind of exile, one that mirrors what Georg Lukacs calls the alienation of the individual whose civilized sensibilities cannot meet the demands of their social environment. But his moral resilience and refusal to retaliate against injustice make him an uplifting figure of ethical triumph. This resolution is in accord with Lukacs' belief that realism should not only reproduce social contradictions but should also suggest their potential for transformation, if only through individual acts of integrity.

Overall, *Sri Mersing* manages to present the kind of cinematic realism that Lukacs praises through its multilayered plot and diverse character interactions, creating the whole form of social life within one historical time period. All in all, the film's treatment of power, morality, and alienation speaks to a wider conflict that the Malay society was grappling with by the 1960s, and resonates with Lukacs(1923) assertion of the importance to the dialectic between the individual and the society. Through its depiction of these oppositions and strains, Sri Mersing is both an engaging story and a profound commentary on the systems that regulate human life.

Malaysian Cinema of the Studio Era (1950–1965): A Philosophical Perspective on Cultural Education

Education as a restless philosophical process transcends the mere diffusion of knowledge; it involves critical reflection, moral reasoning, and the development of a shared cultural identity. During that studio period can be one of strong tools for this way of philosophical engagement as it remains space of cultural heritage and a shared experience of being human.

Films such as *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959), *Madu Tiga* (1964), *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963) and *Sri Mersing* (1961) demonstrate how cinema demonstrates Aristotle's phronesis (practical wisdom) and the common good. As well to promote the socio-cultural dynamics while reflecting the problems of individual and society as a whole. Pendekar Bujang Lapok uses humour as pedagogical tool, critiquing colonial bureaucracies, financial struggle and the battle between custom and modernity. Like so, the film that uses satirical approach to engage people also meets the requisites of Aristotle's phronesis, generates a social critical consciousness on the socio-historical condition of Malay society in that era. This tactic of humour is a kind of resistance. Whereby colonial discourses of cultural backwardness are subverted and the Malay identity is reasserted. Threaded throughout the film is a sense of unity and resilience and it manages to educate us measurably without falling into the trap of being overly didactic entertainment; it exemplifies Georg Lukacs' theory of cinematic realism where the totality of social life is described in a transformative fashion.

Madu Tiga, on the other hand, navigates the difficult of polygamous marriage within the confines of Malay-Muslim patriarchy, using satire to shed light on contradictions and hypocrisies. Yet in much of the stand-up, the comedic framing makes deeper moral and ethical reflection difficult, and it had a limited ability to inspire engagement with systemic issues. Although the film instills middle-class and patriarchal values, it fortifies those norms instead of dismantling them, an opportunity it had to align squarely with Aristotle's phronesis. Yet, in many ways, *Madu Tiga* acts less like a product of its time, than as an entry point into understanding the socio-cultural context of its time, while also demonstrating the frustrations involved in seeking satire as a medium of systemic critique.

Through *Chuchu Datok Merah* illustrates the interconnections of feudal hierarchies, patriarchal standards and individual life and struggle in ways that show the "totality" of social life imagined by Lukacs. While the film provides a moving depiction of the cultural lineage of a Malay society, it only implicitly questions oppression, alluding to cultural submission rather than subverting static systems. Although this subtle integral engagement with moral and ethical dilemmas opens space for a reflective mode, it hinders its transformative educational potential by not calling a higher good toward it. Still, the film's a documentary snapshot of Malay cultural history and the socio-political plight facing the country at the time. *Sri Mersing*, another layered narrative of isolation, authority, and ethic through Damaq's experiences. His strategic non-revelatory response to injustice is not limited to moral fortitude and moral triumph. But an ethic of Aristotle's phronesis, Lukacs' transformative realism. By demonstrating the conflicting struggle between individual virtue and the endless wave of group hegemony, the film encourages critical thought towards the socio-cultural conflicts of 60's Malay society. Its depiction of Damaq's moral conviction means that society could be different, and that makes it the deepest commentary on justice, part of a debased social order, and fortitude.

Collectively, these films highlight cinema's vital status as a philosophical medium for nurturing cultural awareness and critical engagement. Although each of those films occupies a space in the dialogue of cultural heritage and socio-political challenges, their treatment can vary based on depth, transformative potential (narrative style) and the other objectives they seek. *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* and *Sri Mersing* sit more comfortably with Aristotle's phronesis and the common good, tempering its cultural critique with moral reasoning. By contrast, *Madu Tiga* and *Chuchu Datok Merah* explore and represents unlocking and potential of cinema for systemic critique as their implicit or comedic framing forecloses a deeper exploration of oppressive systems. Though with their differences, all four films are cultural artifacts that capture and reflect on the socio-historical conditions of Malay society in a transitional moment. These films not only tell the stories of the people, but by diving into the individual struggles and those of society. They prove that cinema is an effective means for education, inspiration, and a more accurate portrayal of your cultural heritage where cinephile meets philosophy.

The Malay cinema of the studio era is perhaps a dynamic philosophical medium, inciting awareness of its palimpsestic heritage as it retains the ability to interrogate the moral and socio-political maze of the period. Films like *Pendekar Bujang Lapok, Madu Tiga, Chuchu Datok Merah* and *Sri Mersing* expose the interrelationship between the struggles of the individual and the structure in the society, thus enabling us to understand more about the cultural identity and historical perspective of the Malay society. Categorically critiquing, and cultural educating with different perspectives, observable space of these films fellowship is that cinema is a tool on the axis of entertainment and culture education.

CONCLUSION

The era of Malaysian studio (1950s–1965) was a transformative moment in the nation's cultural and artistic history, during which cinema took shape as a vibrant medium for preserving heritage, educating audiences and critiquing societal norms. In this golden age, huge production studio like Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris produced cinemas cultural customs and socio-political realities to viewers beyond Malaysia's vast coastline. It was not just an age of entertainment; it was an era when cinema served as a means of representing and providing a voice for the values, struggles and aspirations of Malaysian society.

Pendekar Bujang Lapok (1959), *Madu Tiga* (1964), *Chuchu Datok Merah* (1963) and *Sri Mersing*(1961) cultural embedded narratives that entertain just as much as they do thought-provoking themes of cultural values of societal issues. Embodied Aristotle's ethical virtue of phronesis (practical wisdom) and the concept

of the common good itself in which the acts of individuals and collectively lead to social flourishing. These four films employ narrative structures that are cultural educational exploring themes of justice, communal harmony, loyalty and the struggle against oppression, these films exemplify Aristotle's concept of phronesis (practical wisdom). His conception of the common good, that a good state or system or government should benefit both people and humanity.

These films further underscore education in the widest sense of the word — that is cultural education that occurs outside the confines of the classroom through Georg Lukacs' thesis on cinematic realism. The films of the studio era showcase the transformative power of cinema in shaping cultural awareness and collective consciousness for audiences both near and far, intertwining entertainment with deeper philosophical engagement that resonates throughout Malaysian culture in both eras. These films illustrate the ability of storytelling to educate and empower, and serve as vessels to preserve culture at a pivotal moment in Malaysian history.

RESEARCH CONTRIBUTION

Research Contribution in the Field of Cinema, Culture, and Education

This study highlights the multifaceted role of Malay cinema during the studio era as a philosophical medium that bridges cultural heritage and social critique. The films of this period demonstrate the unique capacity of cinema to serve not only as a repository for preserving and celebrating cultural identity but also as a platform for inspiring critical reflection on dilemmas and societal challenges. By seamlessly integrating entertainment with profound philosophical engagement these films underscore the transformative potential of cinema in shaping cultural awareness and fostering collective consciousness. Through storytelling, these films provided a means of education, empowerment, and cultural preservation during Malaysian history. Their narratives exemplify how cinema can function as a tool for moral and intellectual discourse, transcending mere entertainment to leave a lasting impact on audiences both within Malaysia and beyond. This contribution emphasises the enduring power of cinematic storytelling to influence societal values and cultural memory, showcasing its significance as an educational and cultural force in the evolution of both, Malaysian cinema and Southeast Asia Cinema.

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