



**University of Salford
School of Arts and Media
PhD in Film Practice
Thesis**

**Busting taboos:
Using idiomatic and linguistic
subtleties in undressing questions
of sociocultural amorality
in Malaysian cinema**

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For my family

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would like to thank Erik Knudsen and Andrew Willis for their interest, wisdom, guidance and friendship throughout their course of supervising this project. My love and gratitude to my family, for their patience, tolerance and unconditional support. Thank you to all my colleagues and collaborators from both my medical and creative backgrounds, from Malaysia, UK, Finland and elsewhere, who have kept listening, wondering, and believing.

I began this journey in anger; about incorrigible human behaviour, our unfathomable social practices, my own fallibility, but mostly, about too many infants losing their lives for reasons unclear. I am very thankful to have come this far, but there are still things I need to understand.

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September 2014

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to investigate how sociocultural amorality has been portrayed in Malaysian films, and how can these taboos be alternatively portrayed cinematically to a Malaysian audience. Questions as to why Malaysian (mainstream) cinema is seemingly unable to produce films that connect with the Malaysian psyche and mirror its collective realities will be pitted against the notion that Malaysians themselves (as the primary audience) are not ready or unwilling to watch such films, and address the unattractive sides of their society onscreen. In order to investigate these questions, the work will experiment with alternative filmmaking techniques, film aesthetics and modes of representation that may depict taboos within a Malaysian context. It is envisaged that the findings of this research will lead to a more nuanced exploration of taboos within Malaysian cinema and Malaysian society. The approaches adopted by some Malaysian filmmakers in addressing difficult sociocultural issues in their work, *and* the locoregional challenges they faced in the process of making these films will be looked into in detail. These findings will then be compared with the filmmaking techniques used within a few unconventional non-Malaysian films which have dealt with taboos and difficult subject matters. The outcome of the analyses of both cohorts will then be utilised to inform practice - in this case the filmmaking portion of the work - and help shape the experimental feature film *Haruan: The Snakehead* which will form the majority of the final PhD submission. A parallel experiment of adopting an almost completely visual workflow using digital drawings - from the feature film's early ideation, narrative, previsualisation to all the stages of its production process - will also be carried out within the practice component of the study. Two taboos which have raised significant concern within the Malaysian society due to the increase in their reported prevalence will be specifically addressed - infanticide/baby abandonment and incestuous rape - and the possible connection between the two. In interrogating how taboos - within their various sociocultural denominations - have been portrayed in Malaysian Cinema over the years, it is important to ascertain what taboos in the Malaysian context actually are. More importantly, do these so-called Malaysian-specific taboos even exist?

HYPOTHESIS

Malaysian (mainstream) cinema does not appear to engage with the Malaysian psyche, as it makes little attempt to mirror the real-life narratives of its people or is unwilling to address its sociocultural issues and taboos.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How have taboos and difficult social issues been represented in Malaysian films? How can these taboos be alternatively and effectively represented within Malaysian cinema, to a Malaysian audience?

DEFINITIONS

Of terms:

Taboo

A social or religious custom prohibiting or forbidding discussion of a particular practice or forbidding association with a particular person, place, or thing.¹

In trying to define taboo, Freud (1919: 30) stated that:

For us the meaning of taboo branches off into two opposite directions. On the one hand it means to us sacred, consecrated: but on the other hand it means, uncanny, dangerous, forbidden, and unclean.

Freud (1919: 31) argued further that:

The taboo restrictions are different from religious or moral prohibitions. They are not traced to a commandment of a god but really they themselves impose their own prohibitions; they are differentiated from moral prohibitions by failing to be included in a system which declares abstinence in general to be necessary and gives reasons for this necessity. The taboo prohibitions lack all justification and are of unknown origin. Though incomprehensible to us they are taken as a matter of course by those who are under their dominance.

Amorality

Lacking a moral sense; unconcerned with the rightness or wrongness of something.

Amoral is distinct in meaning from immoral: while immoral means 'not conforming to accepted standards of morality', amoral implies 'not concerned with morality'.²

Idiom

- i) A group of words established by usage as having a meaning not deducible from those of the individual words.
- ii) A form of expression natural to a language, person, or group of people.
- iii) A characteristic mode of expression in music or art.³

Malaysian cinema

Malaysian cinema in this context refers mainly to the mainstream Malaysian film industry, which as the statistics below suggest (see Figure 1.), is modest even for a country with a population of only 28.3 million people (2010 statistics, from Malaysia 2011 Statistics Yearbook).⁴ Malaysia remains heavily reliant on imported content. For instance, in 2012, Malaysia has only 121 cinemas nationwide, 76 local features made and a total cinema attendance of 9.8 million. In contrast, within the same year, 1308 imported feature films were licensed for public viewing. Whilst this might be a straightforward case of demand outstripping supply and the global dominance of Hollywood, Bollywood and HongKongwood exports, some authors (White, 1996; Yeh, 2006; Hassan Abd Muthalib, 2007) also believe that this auto-rejection of one's cinema is a manifestation of a sense of inferiority of oneself and one's own culture. Some Malaysians feel that mainstream Malaysian cinema offer mainly commercial films which are ethnically and culturally non-representative (*ibid.*). To me, the popularity of imported foreign content reflects not only the intrinsic xenophilic nature of many Malaysians, but also their constant fear of self-reflection and introspection. Malaysian mainstream cinema remains an escapist window to share the presumed lives of others, rather than a mirror to see one's inner self in.

There is however an indication of steady growth within the industry, at least in the exhibition sector, as the number of cinemas has nearly doubled in 2012 (68 in 2006). Independent producers and films are only considered if they have been granted the FINAS Film Authentication Certificate, and hence the approval of the Malaysian Film Censorship Board, as this provides some measure of what is deemed acceptable for broadcast locally.

Local Feature Films Data 2010 – May 2013

LOCAL FILM*	2010	2011	2012	2013 (Jan-May)
No. of Films	39	49	76	30
Prod. Cost (Mil)	RM 55.61	RM 70.682	RM 123.49	RM 56.05
Gross Takings (Mil)	RM 85.85	RM 126.49	RM 97.29	RM 40.39
Admissions (Mil)	9.24	13.13	9.80	4.49
Average Prod. Cost (Mil)	RM 1.426	RM 1.442	RM 1.65	RM 1.87
Average Admissions (Mil)	0.237	0.268	0.129	0.15
Average Ticket Price	RM 9.291	RM 9.633	RM 9.93	RM 9.00
Average Ticket Collections (Mil)	RM 2.201	RM 2.581	RM 1.28	RM 1.35

Collection and Admission For All Local and Foreign Films In Cinema: 2006 – May 2013

Total / Year	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013 (Jan-May)
Admissions (mil)	27.69	33.55	43.85	44.13	54.30	59.50	56.90	23.927
Gross Takings (mil)	RM 234.98	RM 288.96	RM 380.72	RM 403.30	RM 518.16	RM 601.90	RM 607.73	RM 266.683
No. of Cinemas	68	76	91	93	100	107	121	124
No. of Screens	287	353	453	485	571	639	754	774
No. of Seats	66,822	78,496	92,642	101,165	110,424	120,941	138,838	141,471

Importation of Films (Issuance of FINAS Licences : 2006 - May 2013)

YEAR / TYPES OF FILMS	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013 (Jan-May)
Animation	155	7	3	15	433	1,757	838	293
Feature	3,213	3,228	2,004	3,809	9,793	6,915	1,308	402
Documentary	1,477	2,262	1,839	543	1,250	1,135	524	92
Game Show	69	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Entertainment	0	0	439	0	967	1,294	471	179
Commercial	691	727	700	805	1,166	1,396	1,689	676
Comedy	10	11	2	1	2	0	0	0
Education	6	4	0	0	42	42	48	12
Promotion	716	666	400	357	581	274	6	2
TV Reality	5	0	0	0	0	0	5	0
Sports	208	210	247	63	465	220	210	2
Trailer	916	907	726	400	545	513	411	123
Others	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	7,466	8,022	6,360	6,130	15,244	13,546	5,510	1,781

Figure 1. Statistics on the Malaysian Film Industry and Malaysian Cinema (adapted from the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia [FINAS] Official Website).⁵

Of concepts:

Malaysian psyche

I would like to revisit a previous work on the Malaysian film industry (Dalan, 2008: 4-5), as an introduction to the complexity of the Malaysian psyche:

In discussing the Malaysian film industry and the complexity of the Malaysian psyche, it is important to briefly look into its past. As an independent nation, Malaysia is relatively young, gaining its freedom from British colonial rule in August 1957. As a Federation, it is even younger, formed in 1963 with Sabah & Sarawak on the isle of Borneo and Singapore (Milne, 1964: 695). Singapore left the Federation of Malaysia in August 1965 (Norman Parmer, 1966: 111). Malaysia today is a multicultural and multiethnic country of 21.17 million people (2007 statistics).⁶ The Malaysian Population and Housing Census in 2000⁷ indicated that - of the comparable population of 21.89 million – 94.1% were Malaysians, of which 65.1% were *Bumiputras*,⁸ 26% were Chinese and 7.9% were of Indian ethnicity. It is noteworthy that, as it is situated in the heart of South East Asia within the Malay Archipelago (Wallace, 1863), the Malay Peninsula and its surroundings have been cosmopolitan since its Hindu times in the first millennium A.D., receiving Chinese, Indian and Arabic traders along the East-West maritime trade routes (O'Connor, 1978). The peninsula's strategic geography has given rise to prosperous harbour cities along the Straits of Melaka and consequently the Melaka Sultanate (circa 1400-1511) (Gullick, 1986: 822). The Portuguese (1511-1641), Dutch (1641-1825) and British periods ensue (*ibid.*), whose activities and social policies created what is now a deeply heterogeneous mix of people and ethnicities who had been historically, geographically and economically segregated along racial lines under colonial rule.

The result of centuries of this admixing of ethnicities, religions and cultures is a heady blend of heterogeneity almost unique to Malaysia. I would posit that, whilst positive and enriching, this diversity has also to some extent contributed towards a subliminal confusion of national identity amongst some Malaysians. I would go on further to suggest that this sense of ambiguity of one's own 'Malaysianness' may manifest itself in the society's apparent unwillingness to look at itself critically and dissect the causes of its social ills; not publicly, and certainly not onscreen. This subliminal crisis of national identity may also be the reason behind why some Malaysian Chinese filmmakers such as Tan Chui Mui (*Love Conquers All*, 2006) and James Lee (*The Beautiful Washing Machine*, 2004) produce

works which identify more with the Chinese language transnational cinema of Taiwan and Hong Kong, rather than with Malaysia's own 'national cinema'. (Raju, 2008: 71–72 in Higbee & Lim, 2010).

Verisimilitude

The appearance of being true or real.⁹

This concept will be discussed in further detail within the methodology section of the study, whereby questions of verisimilitude and 'believability' of the practice component arise in trying to construct a 'Malaysian universe' for the narrative within a theatrical and cinematic framework outside Malaysia (see pages 57-59, 100-102).

Simulacrum

- i) An image or representation of someone or something.
- ii) An unsatisfactory imitation or substitute.¹⁰

The details of how simulacra will be employed within the practice component of the study will be discussed in the methodology section (see pages 55-56, 79-85). The conscious decision about the designs of the simulacra used will be elaborated on - are these made to mimic reality (verisimilitude), or representations of the narrative's own realism?

Linguistic

Pertaining to language. In the context of this study, this term refers not only to 'the method of human communication, either spoken or written, consisting of the use of words in a structured and conventional way',¹¹ but also to the language of film, whereby physiological, psychological and ethnographical perception of imageries communicate variable meaning to an audience (Monaco, 2009: 169–249).

Transnational cinema

Higson (2000) argues that the concept of the nation, national identity and hence national cinema are limiting and consist of imagined parameters of people and geography. His proposed concept of the 'transnational' offers 'a subtler means of describing cultural and economic formations that are rarely contained by national boundaries.' (*ibid.*)

In my opinion, the film *Haruan: The Snakehead* would slot somewhere between these two categories; it is nationalistic as it speaks specifically about Malaysia and its social ills, using the Malay language (predominantly), traditional music and cultural imageries and aesthetics. It has transnational elements due to its multinational cast and crew (Malaysian, British and Finnish), its usage of languages other than Malay (English, Finnish and Arabic), its production locations (primarily in the UK, with some components of the film to be completed in Malaysia) and the usage of diasporic and native Malaysians in production locations outside Malaysia.

Diaspora and diasporic distance

- i) The dispersion or spread of any people from their original homeland.
- ii) People who have spread or been dispersed from their homeland.¹²

'Diasporic distance' in the context of this study refers to a psychological rather than a physical separation between a diasporic person and his or her country of origin. The feature length work *Haruan* explores this notion by trying to construct a cinematic *Malaysiana* outside Malaysia, purely from my own personal memories, experience and borrowed imageries. This distance is also an emotional one, as it reflects upon my feeling of detachment and disengagement from my homeland Malaysia as the study progresses towards its conclusion.

This sense of distance between a diasporic person and his or her homeland is evident throughout the process of making the film *Haruan*, and in my opinion has directly influenced my decisions on many aspects of the work. This point will be elaborated further within its own section in Appendix A.: A filmmaker's journey (see pages 119-121).

Abandoned Infants versus Discarded Infants

The National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Centre based in the University of California, Berkeley proposed different definitions to the terms 'abandoned infants' from 'discarded infants', based upon established terms used within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2001) definitions¹³ :

Abandoned Infants

Newborn children who are not medically cleared for hospital discharge, but who are unlikely to leave the hospital in the custody of their biological parents.

Discarded Infants

Newborn children who have been abandoned in public places, other than hospitals, without care or supervision.

Whilst many of the abandoned babies in Malaysia would fall under the 'discarded infants' category according to the American definitions, media reporting of these cases have consistently used the term 'baby abandonment' or 'baby dumping' to describe all the unfortunate infants involved.

1. INTRODUCTION

The image of myself which I try to create in my own mind in order that I may love myself is very different from the image which I try to create in the minds of others in order that they may love me.

Wystan Hugh Auden (1907-1973) in *Dyer's Hand* (1963) 'Hic et Ille' (Augarde, 1991: 14)



his research aims to investigate how sociocultural amorality and taboos have been portrayed in Malaysian cinema. Questions as to why Malaysian (mainstream) cinema is seemingly unable to produce films that connect with the Malaysian psyche and mirror its collective realities will be pitted against the notion that Malaysians themselves as the primary audience are not ready or unwilling to watch such films and

address the unattractive sides of their society onscreen. The two research questions which will be specifically addressed within the contextual and practice components of this study, respectively, are:

- i) How have taboos and difficult social issues been represented in Malaysian films?
- ii) How can these taboos be alternatively and effectively represented within Malaysian cinema, to a Malaysian audience?

The approaches adopted by some Malaysian filmmakers in addressing difficult sociocultural issues in their work, *and* the locoregional challenges they faced in the process of making these films will be looked into in detail. These findings will then be compared with the filmmaking techniques used within a few unconventional non-Malaysian films which have dealt with taboos and difficult subject matters. The outcome of the analyses of both cohorts will then be utilised to inform practice - in this case the filmmaking portion of the work - and help shape the experimental feature film *Haruan: The Snakehead* which will form the majority of the final PhD submission. A parallel experiment of adopting an almost completely visual workflow using digital drawings - from the feature film's early ideation, narrative, previsualisation to all the stages of its production process - will also be carried out within the practice component of the study.

As Hassan Abd Muthalib (2007), a renowned Malaysian film scholar observes:

The [mainstream Malaysian] films have also been notable (until recently), for not reflecting the ethnic and cultural diversity of Malaysia in spite of the official promotion of the country internationally as *Malaysia, Truly Asia*. Dishing out clichéd, stereotypical, and uninnovative narratives and characters, many of these films somehow attain [local] box-office success, proof that they are popular with a certain segment of the cinema-going public. None of these films, however, has been invited to participate in international film festivals.

This phenomenon may be the result of production houses pandering to the demands of market forces within a small and relatively young film industry. As a Malaysian, I suspect that a more plausible explanation to this phenomenon of filmmakers taking the path of least resistance would be many Malaysian's unwillingness to see 'reality' and the unattractive sides of their society portrayed so publicly on film. The sheer complexity of its multiethnic society contributes towards 'diversity neuroses' pertaining to differing ethnicity, religion and moral codes. Whilst unifying values and common aspirations have helped to create an admirable *Malaysiana* with its heady mix of peoples and cultures, its convoluted historical journey creates what Yee I-Lan (2008) describes as a 'post-colonial schizophrenia', a term describing the confused ambivalence surrounding the post-colonial state of one's ethnicity versus one's 'Malaysianness'. My early research into the issues surrounding national identity and its reflection on Malaysian cinema via several discussions with Malaysian filmmakers and academics (Dalan, 2008: 6-7) has concluded that:

The lack of a single unifying 'Malaysian' identity as such means that it is almost impossible for a filmmaker to address deep humanistic issues within the society as a whole without seemingly championing or criticising a particular ethnic group's agenda or way of life. Whilst Malaysian films have become increasingly bolder in their style, execution, content and context, these 'diversity neuroses' have resulted in many content producers and filmmakers opting for the safer, commercially viable approach of producing shallow, 'sequel-driven teen comedies and melodramas' (van der Heide, 2006: 95) which portray an idealistic yet often unrealistic images of Malaysia and its inhabitants. Some contributors believe that Malaysians today *are* ready to see their real selves on film but do not feel that films that tell real Malaysian stories will be (a) popular enough to be commercially viable, and (b) legally allowed onto local cinemas and media network.

In defining taboos, for the purpose of this work I feel it is important to clarify what are a) Malaysian sociocultural taboos, and of these – b) which ones are maintained regardless, and which taboos are ‘perceived’ but are quietly downgraded to ‘undesirable norms’ due to modernity and the progressive degradation of society’s moral fabric. It would also be interesting to identify which of these taboos are c) in essence, ‘broadcast restrictions’ which are imposed upon Malaysian films by its national censorship board.

In investigating the hypothesis, I hope to confirm whether Malaysian cinema has had any real connection with its primary audience – the Malaysian public. This brings us to the first research question - as to how taboos have been represented in Malaysian cinema. In identifying Malaysian films which have dealt with difficult sociocultural taboos pertaining to race, religion, gender issues and sexuality – I would like to assess a) how have these issues been approached – visually and contextually, and b) how have these films been received - both by the Malaysian local authorities, and the Malaysian society as a whole.

The next phase of the study involves the detailed examination of several non-Malaysian films which have interrogated taboos cinematically. The modes of representation and aesthetics of these films will be analysed, and compared with the findings from the selected Malaysian films. The new knowledge garnered from both the Malaysian and non-Malaysian cohorts will then be applied to the practice component of the study - the experimental feature film *Haruan: The Snakehead* - in order to interrogate the second research question, pertaining to the development of an alternative and effective cinematic representation of taboos for a Malaysian audience.

The outcome of this research will hopefully facilitate both the Malaysian society and its filmmakers in their understanding of Malaysian cinema and – more importantly – shed a light on what they may not know about themselves. Are Malaysian filmmakers ready to make difficult taboo-busting films, and are the Malaysian audience ready to watch them?

2. MOTIVATION

Neonaticide is by no means a new phenomenon. This form of child murder has been documented among the peoples of Mesopotamia, Greece, and Rome, and among the Vikings, Irish Celts, Gauls, and Phoenicians. Justifications included illegitimacy, societal preference for males, childhood disability, population control, eugenics, religious beliefs and poverty.

(Meyer & Oberman, 2001)

The motivation for this study stems from my strong personal need as a Malaysian to try to understand, and to make sense of the possible reasonings behind the increasing incidence of baby abandonment in Malaysia. The Royal Malaysian Police statistics stipulate that between 2005 to January 2011, 517 'baby-dumping' cases were recorded.¹⁴ Of these, 287 babies were dead when they were found. There is no significant gender bias noted in these cases; 203 babies found were male, 164 were female whilst the gender of 150 babies were physically indeterminable due to tissue decomposition. As an anecdotal comparison, a 2001 report issued by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services suggested that 105 infants were discarded in 1997 (Drescher-Burke et al., 2004). Whilst crude, the similarity in the average annual incidence of baby abandonment is staggering to me, considering that Malaysia's population is only approximately 8% that of the U.S.¹⁵ Due to the complex and sensitive nature of the problem, reliable statistics on baby abandonment in any country are difficult to obtain, and should be analysed with caution as these are often based solely upon media reporting of the discarded infants found. However, these statistics do provide an indication of the scale of the problem. Many theories have been put forth as to why such an alarming rate of baby abandonment could occur within a morally conservative country such as Malaysia, where most of its population

prescribe to a religion (Islam being the choice of the Malay majority) or a set of moral values. The fear of society's reprisal at, and the stigma of bearing 'illegitimate' children out of wedlock remain the main religious and cultural taboos associated with the proposed primary cause of baby abandonment. The lack of reproductive health and sex education within the secondary school system (Razali, 2012), the strict illegality of abortion-by-choice and mental illness (Minter, 2012) are some of the other causes proposed. There are also suggestions that some of these abandoned babies are the by-product of the sex industry, rape and even incestuous rape (Syed Putra, 2010). I strongly feel that the issues as to why and how these 'unwanted' babies come about are completely separate from the questions as to why these newborn babies are disposed of. Whilst one would assume that baby abandonment by any human being would be an act of sheer desperation, I still struggle to come to terms with the apparent ease and frequency at which these infants are being discarded.

Baby abandonment is hardly an issue unique to Malaysia. In May 2013, the case of China's Baby 59 (Phillips, 2013), a newborn baby recovered alive from the the sewage pipes of a public lavatory caught the world's attention. According to the police report made by the mother, the baby "had 'accidentally' slipped into the toilet after she secretly gave birth inside a communal lavatory" (*ibid.*), and cited the lack of support from the baby's father as the reason for concealing her pregnancy and delivery. The Baby 59 scenario, and the reasonings given by its mother resonate with many of the cases within the Malaysian experience.

While the link between baby abandonment and incestuous rape is difficult to quantify, the cases of alleged incestuous child abuse (Singh, 2013) and rape (Gomez, 2012) in Malaysia have been extensively reported in the locoregional media.^{16,17,18} An anecdotal account of the possible reasoning behind incestuous rape via sources from the Department of Social Welfare (Hassan Abd Muthalib, 2013) suggests that some Malaysian men believe that their daughters are born out of their wives' infidelity, thus negating the sanctity of the father-daughter 'biological barrier' which is supposed to deter incest.

The final submission of the PhD would be a feature-length work called *Haruan: The Snakehead*, which aims to explore two specific *taboos* which – from the frequency of their reporting in Malaysian media – are endemic within the Malaysian society today: i. The abandonment or killing of newborn babies. ii. Incest and/or incestuous rape. One popular Malay idiom ties in rather well with both these issues:

Bagai haruan makan anak

Like the snakehead fish eating its young

The snakehead in this case refers to a person in a position of power who abuses his or her underlings. However, this well-known Malay idiomatic expression is more commonly used to describe an adult who abuses – physically or sexually – his or her own children, family members or persons under his or her care; this idiom is synonymous with incestuous rape. I am also using *Haruan: The Snakehead* as the working title of the film. As the idiom is so well recognised in Malaysia, a film bearing the name of this predatorial freshwater fish should give its subject matter away immediately to native speakers of the Malay language. This should be an experiment in itself: Would a film title which bears a word from a notoriously familiar idiom entice or shun an already cautious audience?

3. METHODOLOGY: CONTEXTUALISATION

The overview of the methodology of this study, for both its contextual and practice components, is outlined below in chronological order. The details of the methodology will be divided into two chapters; the contextual element of the study will be discussed first in this chapter (Chapter 3), whilst the methodology for the practice element of the work will be looked at in Chapter 4.

3.1 Investigating ‘Malaysian taboos’ through its cinema. Do taboos unique to Malaysia and its society even exist?

April - September 2011

- A. A review of three Malaysian films which have tried to address various forms of taboos and difficult sociocultural issues within the Malaysian society. The three films are:
- i) *Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang (Woman, Wife and Whore)* (U-Wei Hj Saari, 1993)
 - ii) *Anu dalam Botol (Penis in a Bottle)* (Khair Rahman, 2011)
 - iii) *Bunohan (Return to Murder)* (Dain Said, 2011)
- B. Three video interviews in Malaysia with filmmakers and academics about these three films specifically, and about Malaysian taboos in general. These video interviews, and pertinent clips from two of the films have been edited and compiled together into a single DVD format (See *Forbidden Views: Malaysian Taboos*, 2012).
- i) Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman (Producer) (*Anu dalam Botol*, 2011)
 - ii) U-Wei Hj Saari (Director) (*Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang*, 1993)
 - iii) Hassan Abdul Muthalib (Filmmaker, Animator, Film Academic)

- C. An analysis of the findings from the three video interviews above, regarding the existence and definition of taboos specific to the Malaysian society. An analysis into the modes of representation of the three Malaysian films, followed by self-reflection into possible alternative methods of portraying the taboos highlighted by these films.

3.2 Investigating taboos and unconventional aesthetics in non-Malaysian films. Formulating alternative modes of cinematic representation for Malaysian taboos.

September 2011 - October 2013

- A. A review of five non-Malaysian films which have utilised various forms of alternative cinematic representation in trying to deliver difficult stories and subject matters. Although the five films selected are disparate in their visual style, they bear similarities in their non-naturalistic approach to cinematic storytelling, such as 'on-stage' theatrical aesthetics and performances, the usage of simulacra as set design elements and their sense of 'constructedness'. These films are:

- i) *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920)
- ii) *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003)
- iii) *Our Hitler: A film from Germany* (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977)
- iv) *The Cook, The Thief, The Wife and Her Lover* (Peter Greenaway, 1989)
- v) *Moses und Aron* (Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, 1975)

- B. An analysis of the findings from the five non-Malaysian films above, looking particularly at their theatrical element and alternative aesthetics. Self-reflection into how the cinematic techniques used to deliver taboos in these films can be successfully adapted to Malaysian cinema.

C. Self-reflection (see Figure 2.) on the analyses and findings from both the Malaysian and non-Malaysian cohorts of films, as to how taboos can be represented in an alternative manner using the film medium, or a mixture of film and other media, in order to investigate the motivation behind the breaking of these taboos and the society's apparent apathy in addressing them. A formulation base on these findings will then be used to inform the practice component of the research, and implemented in the making of the film *Haruan: The Snakehead*.

Research: Bridging Context and Practice

Self-reflection

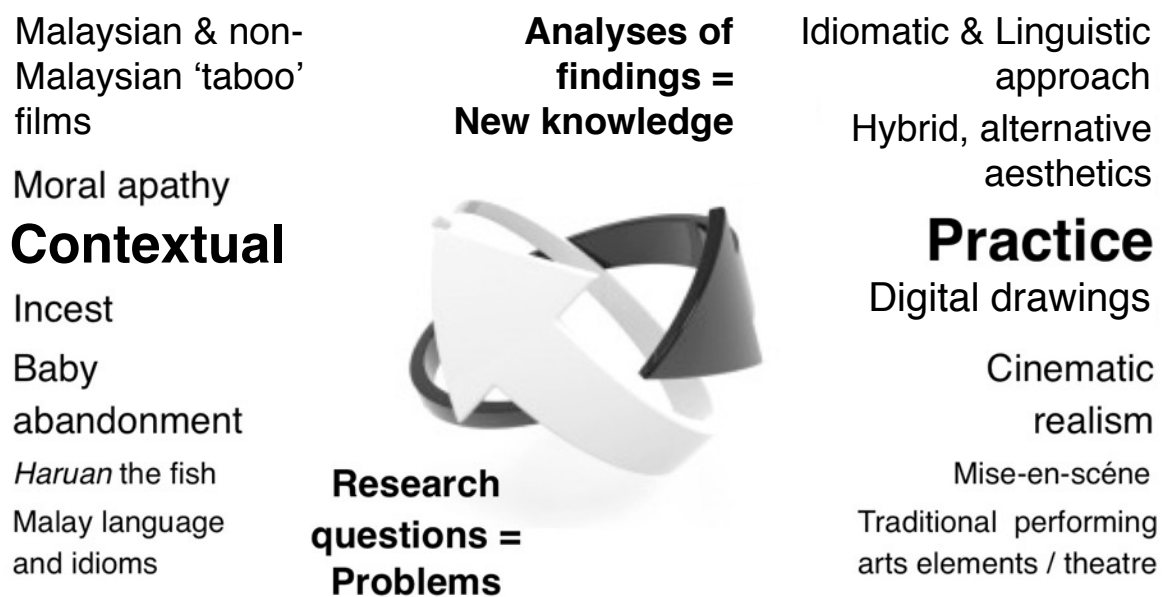


Figure 2. Diagram summarising the study and the interrelationship between film theory and film practice.

A parallel study into an alternative process of filmmaking, by experimenting with an almost completely visual workflow (using digital drawings made with several applications on an Apple iPad) throughout the whole production of the feature length work *Haruan: The Snakehead*. This aspect of the methodology will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

3.3 Three Malaysian films & three video interviews

Cakap siang pandang-pandang; Cakap malam dengar-dengar.
When you speak during the day, look around;
When you speak at night, listen out.

Malay proverb

At the commencement of this PhD in October 2010, I was convinced that there really *is* such a thing as a set of taboos unique to Malaysia and its heterogeneous society. I was keen to see how these taboos have manifested themselves - or not - in Malaysian cinema over the years. One year on (after two trips back to Malaysia and three video interviews with prominent figures within the Malaysian film industry), I have come to the realisation that perhaps this concept of a group of socio-cultural restrictions exclusive to a country is harder to delineate. Whilst it is relatively easier to identify Malaysian films that have attempted to portray contentious issues and subject matters, it is much harder to claim that the foci of these films are uniquely Malaysian.

Perhaps the question as to what Malaysian taboos really are should ideally be directed towards the members of the Malaysian Censorship Board - the gatekeepers to the sacred 'broadcast portal' of the Malaysian media - whose duty it is to safeguard the seemingly fragile collective diversity of the Malaysian psyche against anything that is deemed to be amoral, culturally aberrant, socially unpalatable or locally inappropriate. The complexity of the multiethnic dynamics of the Malaysian society, or what van der Heide describes as its 'tangled genealogy' (2006: 83) has resulted in a situation in which the society's sociocultural status quo is maintained above most issues, and certainly at the expense of public self-criticism and collective self-reflection.

The draconian rules of the Malaysian Censorship Board have forced many Malaysian filmmakers to choose the path of least resistance and conform to its strict requirements for the sake of getting their films shown in Malaysian cinemas. However, a few Malaysian filmmakers have remained steadfast in attempting to deliver their taboo-busting visions to the screen, knowing full well that it would not sit right with the broadcasting rules.

Between April and September 2011, three video interviews were conducted in Kuala Lumpur with three personalities within the Malaysian film industry (see *Forbidden Views: Malaysian Taboos*, 2012). The first of these interviews was with Raja Azmi Raja Sulaiman (Personal communication, 21 April 2011), whose most recent outing at the time is the



Figure 3. Trans-formed Ruby finds herself rejected by her lover after her ultimate sacrifice in Raja Azmi's *...Dalam Botol* (*...In a Bottle*) (Khir Rahman, 2011).

controversial *Anu Dalam Botol* (*Penis In a Bottle*, 2011), her self-proclaimed 'first Malaysian gay-themed film'. The film tells the story of Rubidin (Arja Lee), a transsexual man who is persuaded by his male lover to undergo gender reassignment surgery as a symbol of his commitment to the couple's relationship. After the surgery the new Rubidin, now Ruby, finds herself rejected by her lover, her family and the society as a whole. Dejected, Ruby leaves the city and goes back to her hometown to live with her parents, but is forced to become Rubidin again – at least in clothing and mannerism. In Rubidin's confused state he falls for his childhood sweetheart, up to the point where he agrees to marry her. The film comes to its climactic end with a traditional Malay wedding ceremony, where it is revealed whether Ruby or Rubidin wins out in the tussle for sexual identity.

Whilst undoubtedly taboo-busting visually and contextually, Raja Azmi's claim to be the first Malaysian filmmaker to explore the themes of homosexuality and transgenderism through cinema may be slightly grandiose. For instance, just over a decade before *Kaki Bakar* was released, Osman Ali presented his factual fiction *Bukak Api* (*Open Fire*, 2000), a brutally honest and visually uncompromising portrayal of the plight of transgender and transsexual sex workers in Malaysia's capital Kuala Lumpur in the wake of the HIV/AIDS crisis. In 2008, Poh Si Teng revisited the predicament of the Muslim transsexual sex workers in Malaysia in her award winning documentary *Pecah Lobang* (*Busted*). Several Malaysian short films over the years have also dealt with homosexuality within the Malaysian society, either surreptitiously, such as *Pangyau* (Amir Muhammad, 2002) or in an overtly fashion, as in the case of *Comolot* (Mohd Ikram Ismail, 2007) and *Chukang* (Shuhaimi Lua, 2010). Perhaps the distinction that Raja Azmi could claim ownership to with regards to her film is that *Anu Dalam Botol* is arguably the first gay-themed, taboo-busting feature-length fiction film which was actually shown in *mainstream* Malaysian cinemas (as opposed to the confines of closed screenings, film festivals and the internet) and was miraculously licensed for public viewing by the Malaysian Censorship Board without any cuts whatsoever.¹⁹ In Raja Azmi's opinion, the reason why *Anu Dalam Botol* survived to its exhibition stage unscathed was due to the fact that from the moment she mooted the idea behind the film, the concept and the early script of the film had been scrutinised and vetted by the local and regional Islamic councils – as well as the Malaysian Censorship Board. The contemporaneous censorship process during PreProduction meant that the end product – whilst free of deleted scenes – had been 'pre-sanitised' to conform to the Malaysian moral codes. Is this the *only* way for Malaysian filmmakers to bring taboo subject matters to the mainstream cinema screens?

When asked to define the taboos in Malaysian society and its cinema, Raja Azmi's answer was simple: 'Anything that is against the religion (Islam)' - naming extramarital sex, homosexuality, alcohol consumption and even cigarette smoking as examples of these prohibitions. However, she was also quick to mention that whilst these practices are deemed as sociocultural and religious taboos, they are also rife within today's Malaysian Muslim society. Perhaps this is the first inkling that *whilst Malaysian taboos are real entities which are mainly theistic in nature*, they are probably not as strictly adhered to by the society they are imposed upon as one would think, and are not too dissimilar to

religious prohibitions in some other countries – Muslim or otherwise. When Raja Azmi was asked whether she felt that there were any taboos in Malaysia that cross the ethnic and cultural boundaries within its richly diverse society, her response was a confident ‘No’. In her opinion, most of the taboos in Malaysia today are Islamic in nature, which therefore only apply to the predominantly Muslim Malay majority.

*Kelalaian sekali dalam hidup, membawa kemusnahan sepanjang hayat.
Apakah ini benar?*

A single carelessness in life leads to a lifetime of misery. Is this true?

Tagline from *Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang* (*Woman, Wife and Whore*, 1993)²⁰

U-Wei Hj Saari – the first Malaysian filmmaker invited to the Cannes Film Festival (Slater, 2009) with *Kaki Bakar* (*The Arsonist*, 1995) – certainly did not think that pre-censorship is the way forward for getting difficult issues across in film. In fact, when asked about what he felt Malaysian taboos in cinemas were - especially in the context of his explosive film *Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang* (*Woman, Wife and Whore*, 1993), U-Wei’s reply was simultaneously surprising and thought-provoking: ‘There are no such things as Malaysian taboos’ (Personal communication, 21 April 2011). The film, which was screened without three deleted scenes deemed too sexually explicit for the Malaysian public (van der Heide, 2006: 86) tells the story of a young woman called Zaleha (Sofia Jane), who – on the eve of her wedding to Amir (Nasir Bilal Khan) – elopes with her lover to a small Malaysia-Thailand border town. Amir tracks the errant couple down, kills her lover and sells Zaleha into prostitution, ironically as a punishment for her infidelity. Six months later, Amir takes Zaleha back to their village and into his life, but the changed Zaleha is no longer the demure and naïve Malay woman she used to be.

At its core, *Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang* explores the position of Malay women in society – or, more accurately – the Malay masculine standpoint of what this position should be, and the objectification of women by *some* Malay men. The film’s bleak tagline poses a somewhat nihilistic world view, yet it is unclear *what* the catastrophic mistake is that U-Wei

has alluded to in the film's tagline, and by whom: the woman Zaleha for being born into a male-centric society, the wife Zaleha for falling in love with the wrong man, or the whore Zaleha, for allowing Amir to share her with the world? Or, is it Amir who is erroneous all along, for wanting to claim absolute ownership of all the different facets of womanhood which belong to Zaleha?

It became clear to me as the interview progressed that U-Wei's denouncement of the existence of a set of taboos specific to Malaysia and its cinema was very much a commentary on his uncompromising approach to storytelling and filmmaking. U-Wei is



Figure 4. A monsoon tryst in a rubber plantation: One of the notorious scenes from *Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang* (Woman, Wife and Whore) (U-Wei Hj Saari, 1993).

unflinching in trying to remain true to his observational reality of the Malay characters within his films, and ultimately to the honesty of the stories themselves. In his deep personal need to tell the stories within his 'Malay universe', U-Wei stumbles upon many

features of his society which remain at loggerheads with Islamic teachings. For instance, he made a reference to the fact that historically many Malays have always identified with their pre-Islamic mysticisms and spiritual beliefs, to the point that 'Malayness' and mysticisms are sometimes inextricable. This was portrayed in *Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang* by Zaleha's desperate visit to a medicine woman in her village, in order to obtain a supernatural solution (in the form of *nasi kangkang* or straddled rice)²¹ to charm the increasingly violent Amir.

One would be presumptuous in thinking that whilst making the film U-Wei did not predict that his dissection of the Malay male psyche through this rural tale of infidelity, sexual discovery, violence and traditional witchcraftery would garner him 'friends' within the censorship board and the conservative Malaysian public. The truth is, the *auteur* in U-Wei does not acknowledge that these subject matters are indeed taboos, and therefore does not see potential audience reaction to his films as a hindrance to the sincere telling of his Malay stories. As U-Wei vehemently said in his interview, he 'would always strive to give the story whatever it needs'— even if it means exploring the profane and the forbidden. Is this stance of 'selective ignorance' of taboos the only Malaysian solution to grapple with contentious sociocultural issues cinematically?

I put forth this troubling question of Malaysian taboos to Hassan Abd Muthalib (Personal communication, 23 August 2011), a venerated Malaysian writer, filmmaker, pioneer animator and academic whose specialist subjects include semiotics and the history of Malay proto-cinema. In his opinion, the concept of taboos in Malaysian society and its cinema mainly refers to the pre-Islamic *adat* (customs) and traditional practices which traverse the gamut of Malaysian life. Whilst too numerous to mention, many of these practices are deeply problematic in the eyes of Islam as they often involve some form of association with or supplication to animistic 'supernatural entities', thus challenging the monotheistic core of the religion. Hassan reminisced about a Malaysian past whereby the admixing of occult *adat* with aspects of traditional Malay medicine, martial arts such as *Silat*²² and performing arts like *Makyong* (theatrical dance drama) (Madil, 2008) and *Wayang Kulit* (shadow puppetry) (Atkinson, 1998) were common place. These practices

were often heavily ritualistic, whereby the performers were bound by strict sets of rules and restrictions to preserve the sanctity of their art.

The intricacies of the old Malay culture and *adat* were beautifully depicted by Dain Said in his recent film *Bunohan (Return to Murder)*, (2011). The film premiered at the 2011 Toronto International Film Festival, and has garnered much acclaim amongst critics and audience alike, both in Malaysia and internationally. This visually stunning meditation on the dichotomous relationship between traditional *adat* and modernity tells the tale of three very different brothers, whose complex past and present lives intertwine in a heady mix of *Muay Thai* (Thai kickboxing), murderous mayhem and - according to some reviewers of the film -



Figure 5. *Muay Thai* and murders: An enthralling scene from *Bunohan (Return to Murder)* (Dain Said, 2011).

‘magical realism’ (Anderson, 2011). During a recent meeting with Hassan Abd Muthalib (Personal communication, 04 May 2012), he argued that the elements and events depicted in *Bunohan* are better described as *spiritual realism* (Murphy, 2009) rather than *magical realism*. Slemon (1988) describes magical realism as ‘an oxymoron, one that suggests a binary opposition between the representational code of realism and that,

roughly, of fantasy'. I feel that whilst *Bunohan* displays characters and elements which may be described as fantastical, for instance the crocodile/woman reincarnation of two of the brothers' deceased mother, there is no visible tension between the 'real' and the 'ethereal'. Dain Said's sympathetic depiction of the interactions between the two worlds are much more subtle, earthy and organic. I would therefore support Hassan's observation that *Bunohan*'s realism is not magical, but a spiritual one that transcends even the film characters themselves. In offering a plausible meaning for spiritual realism, Murphy (2009) argues that:

In many cases, it (spiritual realism) seeks to represent a sense of *ecological responsibility* to a referentially recognised material more-than-human world on the part of its characters and the need for the adoption of such a sensibility on the part of its readers. It articulates an alternative way of viewing reality and often promotes or defends alternative lifestyles, community formations, and economic practices. And, particularly when practiced by U.S. writers of colour, it is often represented as explicitly arising from a history and wisdom of inhabitation, either indigenous or native to place.

I would agree with Murphy on his argument, in that the three brothers depicted in *Bunohan* represent differing but distinctive viewpoints on mankind's close relationship with his ecological home. In an interview included with the *Bunohan* DVD, Dain Said refers to his perennial work on the relationship between man and his landscape or natural surroundings. This continuing passion is evident in *Bunohan*, from Charin Pengpanich's arresting low-light cinematography of coastal landscapes and mangrove swamps, to the narrative itself, connecting man to his historical, geographical and spiritual roots - reflecting Murphy's definition. I for one would be very keen to find out which of these aesthetic strategies Dain Said himself - as the writer and director - had intended for the delivery of this intricate film, and the reasonings behind his choice. I am also interested in the inspiration behind Dain's clever linguistic play with the title (and to a certain extent, the theme) of the film itself; whilst *Bunohan* is the name of a real village situated close to the Malaysia-Thailand border, it is also one of the Malay words for 'murder'. I hope to have the opportunity to meet up with Dain in the near future to get at least some of my questions about *Bunohan* answered, and to find out first hand as to what his thoughts are regarding the portrayal of taboos in Malaysian cinema. Is an alternative mode of cinematic

representation or narrative aesthetics the secret ingredient for making tabooistic films more palatable to the Malaysia audience?

Whilst these *pantang* or taboos govern the practitioners, within the past two decades many of these Malay *adat* have been branded as taboos themselves. Hassan felt that the younger generation of Malaysians have moved away from these *adat*, and many have become obsolete. Modernity, the rise of Islamic consciousness within the population and the enforcement of religious laws (Khoo, 2006: 4-5) had contributed further to their decline. However, from her study of contemporary Malaysian literature and cinema Khoo (*ibid.*) argues that:

...modernity facilitates the conscious and unconscious recuperation of *adat*, usually through a focus on sexuality or a return to forms of the archaic such as magic or traditional healing. This reclamation of *adat* is simultaneously a postcolonial or anti-imperialist strategy and a subversion of more restrictive notions of Islamic discourse that emerged since the 1980s. Middle-class Malay cultural producers struggle to reconcile their *adat* with resurgent forms of Islam and to enunciate their place and identity in global modernity, whether in literature or cinema. They discuss *adat*, try to reclaim, reconstruct, and reconstitute it in its various forms.

If many aspects of Malay *adat* are real taboos as opposed to 'cultural ground rules', then based on Khoo's findings one might be persuaded to conclude that Malaysian taboos *do* exist, and that Malaysia and its filmmakers have been trying to reconcile with their increasingly unpopular traditional customs. In my opinion, the first problem with this argument is that many of these restrictions are fairly esoteric, and mainly affect only the practitioners of the respective arts and their patrons. The second issue I have with the notion of *adat* as tabooistic is that the definition of the Malay *adat* is vast and is not just confined to the arts. The Malay *adat* used to govern every aspect of Malay life – from a mother's pregnancy and the birth of a child, to his or her coming of age, marriage and death. The Malay *adat* also used to dictate every facet of the society's etiquette, and the burden of its conformity was once immense, as prescribed by this sobering Malay idiom:

Biar mati anak, jangan mati adat

Let your children die, but *never* your *adat*

I cannot but wonder whether the subliminal misinterpretation of this idiom plays any part whatsoever in the alarmingly high rate of baby dumping in Malaysia. Is preserving the *adat* – in this case probably a family's reputation or the sanctity of marriage – really worth the price of a child's life?

Whilst the chilling demand for absolute commitment to *adat* is no longer a prominent feature of the Malaysian society, it has to be remembered that many features of *adat* – such as the reverential treatment of one's parents and the elderly – are positive and encouraged in Islam. I would not therefore consider the Malay *adat per se* as part of these so-called Malaysian taboos, rather they are a group of behavioural codes and rituals which may become religious prohibitions through their close association with animistic, mystical or occult practices.

3.4 Theatricality & hybrid aesthetics: Five non-Malaysian films

Certain subjects may no longer be taboo in cinema. But there are ways to treat them that still create shock.

Park Chan-wook (Zhang, 2013)

Even during the very early stages of my drawings for the Practice element of the work (which began initially with ink sketches on paper), I have always envisaged that the final feature-length film would have a strong theatrical component, certainly in its visual style, composition and set design. As the drawings evolve into more detailed, colourised imageries using various Apple iPad drawing applications (Penultimate ©²³, SketchBook Pro®²⁴ and Paper by FiftyThree ©²⁵) – from basic story panels as a narrative template (or a graphic novelette) for the film, to detailed sequential drawings to visualise key scenes within the work – it becomes clearer to me that the film should adopt elements from a theatre production. Various stages of the drawings will be used to develop a film/theatre/multimedia hybrid aesthetics to help realise a workable ‘Malaysian universe’ or ‘Malaysiana’ for the characters to populate. Perhaps there are several reasons for my decision to use a hybrid aesthetics for the film:

- (i) For this project, I would like to draw upon my previous experience of producing, directing and working with stage performers in several amateur theatre productions. These productions were cultural variety events which used theatrical dramatisation of Malaysian folklores as a vehicle to showcase Malaysian traditional dances and musical performances. In my opinion, a hybrid film/theatrical aesthetics with cultural leanings would help build the visual *Malaysiana* needed for the work. The experimental visual story panels of the narrative include imageries which would require the characters to sing, recite Malay poetry and perform short and seemingly impromptu traditional dance routines. Again, these elements would sit more comfortably within a theatrical environment rather than a conventional film setting.

- (ii) The nuances of a stage performance may be more forgiving, and would allow for a more flexible platform to express exaggerated, choreographed expressions and emotions without necessarily appearing 'unnatural'. Despite not having a live audience (or a stage, per se), I hope to tap into this 'live performance' atmosphere and try to replicate its stage-acting aesthetics in front of a camera.
- (iii) The constructed, non-naturalistic look of the props and sets which utilise mixed materials, crafted simulacra, multimedia installations, projected drawings and simple animations would potentially look less out of place on a theatre stage compared to a conventional film set.
- (iv) The use of Expressionistic strategies and subtle suggestions of ideas and emotions through imageries, lighting, set and prop designs, along with point-of-view camera work to reflect the emotional and psychological states of characters would sit very well within a theatrical setting, and may be better suited at delivering challenging subject matters to a cinema audience.

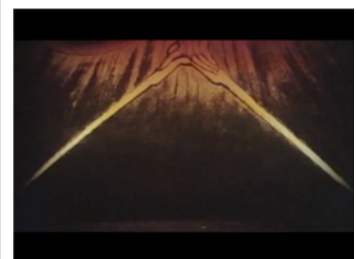
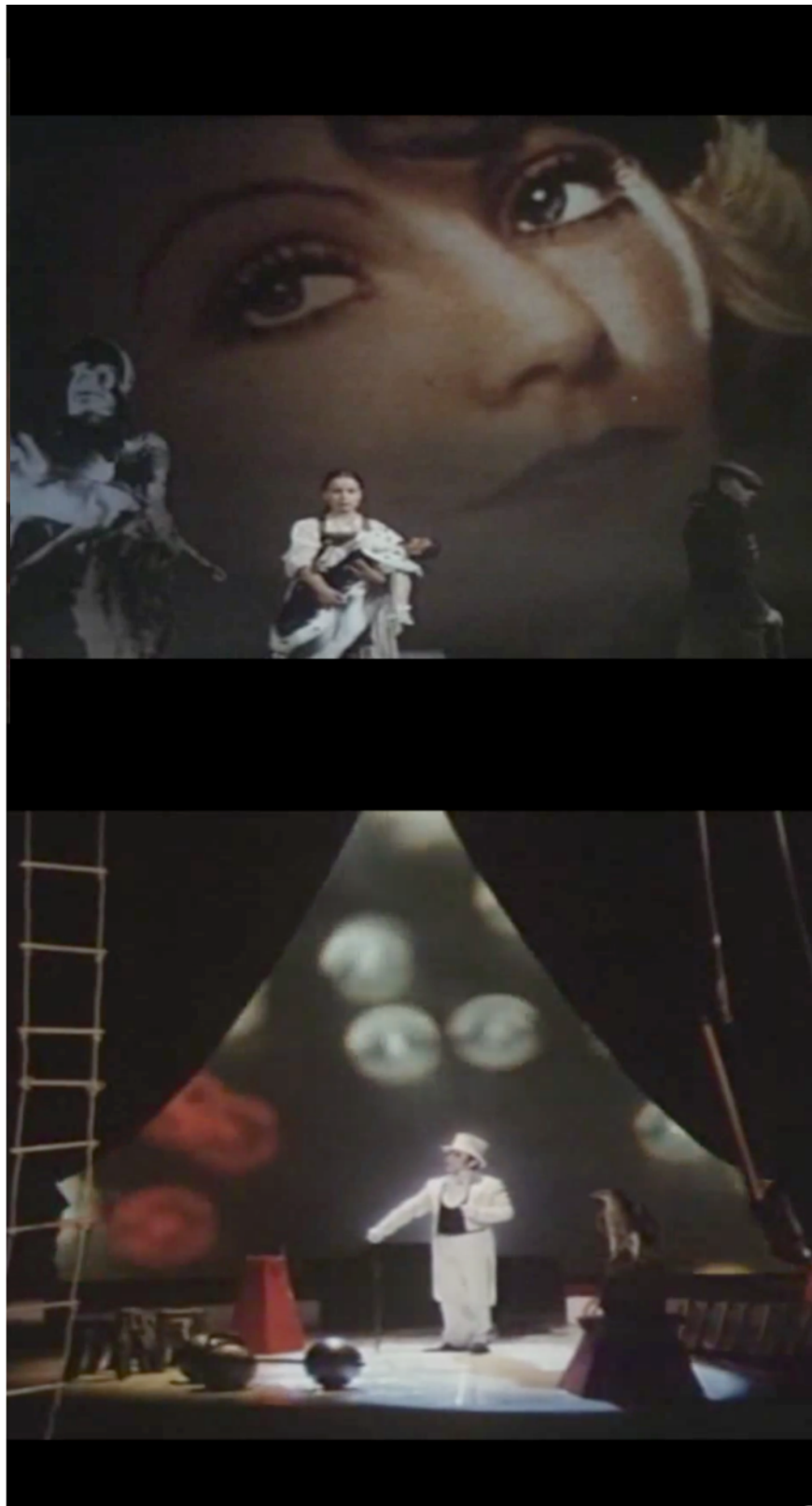
For the next phase of the contextual methodology of the research, five non-Malaysian films which have exploited this mix of film and theatre aesthetics to deliver difficult imageries and ideas have been chosen to be looked at in detail. Whilst the three Malaysian films discussed in the previous section have dealt with taboos using alternative realisms (mystical, magical or spiritual), the aesthetics of the films themselves remain naturalistic. These five non-Malaysian films are selected not only because of their challenging subject matters, but more so due to their bold experimentation with cinema aesthetics. In attempting to devise an alternative method to cinematically depict taboos to a Malaysian audience, it is perhaps prudent to explore techniques within cinema aesthetics which are not commonly used in mainstream Malaysian films. The five non-Malaysian films are:



The Cabinet of Dr Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920)
Germany : 78 mins.

Figure 6.

(a) *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920). A silent German Expressionism piece which experiments with painted shadows, distorted perspectives and expressionistic set designs to enhance the nightmarish world of Dr Caligari and his somnambulist subject Cesare.



Our Hitler: A film from Germany (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977)
Germany : 442 mins.

Figure 8.

(c)*Our Hitler: A film from Germany* (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977) is a brazenly complex mix of theatrical, operatic and variety performances, rear-projected imageries, numerous simulacra, puppetry and multimedia pastiche as a vehicle to dissect a society's troubled past.



The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover (Peter Greenaway, 1989)
France/Netherlands/UK : 124 mins.

Figure 9.

(d) *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Peter Greenaway, 1989) is unabashedly theatrical, from the opening of the red velvet curtains at the beginning of the film, to their closing at its end. The expressionistic use of colours in the set designs, costumes and lighting schemes makes the idea of modern-day cannibalism almost palatable.



Moses und Aron (Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, 1975)
Austria/France/Germany/Italy : 107 mins.

Figure 10.

(e) *Moses und Aron* (Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, 1975) is a cinematic adaptation of Schönberg's Biblical opera of the two prophets. Whilst shot mainly outdoors, Schönberg's operatic score and the acting style of the performers manage to lend a strong theatricality to the work.

In *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (1920), Robert Wiene and his team have managed to create a mesmerising twilight world without the benefit of colours, spoken words, music or sound effects. The expressionistic sets populated by dark painted shadows, creepy tendrils, distorted furniture items, curvy doors and windows, coupled with the Escheresque²⁶ perspectives within the stage-design landscapes amplify the



Figure 11. The terrifying shadowy murderer in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920).

unsettling, otherworldly feel throughout the film, enhancing Cesare's menace. The film's groundbreaking aesthetics and visual style, for instance its use of shadows to depict the actions of its characters (famously of Cesare murdering his victims - see Figure 11.), would be repeatedly referenced by many early German and American films of the 1920s and 1930s such as *The Golem* (Carl Boese & Paul Wegener,

1920), *Nosferatu* (F.W. Murnau, 1922), *Metropolis* (Fritz Lang, 1927), *Frankenstein* (James Whale, 1931) and more recent homages and remakes such as *Dracula* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1992), *Dr Caligari* (Stephen Sayadian, 1989) and *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (David Lee Fisher, 2005)²⁷. The iconic images and characters from the film have been emulated and even replicated in many films, sometimes literally, as in the case of Syberberg's *Our Hitler: A film from Germany* (1978) - where cut-out figures of Cesare and Dr Caligari littered the framed stage (see Figure 12.).



Figure 12. Homages to Cesare and Dr Caligari in *Our Hitler: A film from Germany* (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1998).

Lars von Trier's 2003 offering *Dogville* is a formalist, almost rigid experiment in storytelling, combining film and theatre aesthetics without once hiding the fact that the whole film was shot on a large stage. In fact, the onstage aesthetics are flaunted throughout the film; from the opening God's eye view showing the whole chalk-drawn floor plan of the small town of Dogville, to the buildings with invisible walls, doors and windows - physical boundaries which are only seen, acknowledged and respected by the actors themselves (see Figure 13.). The usage of high-angle views and crane shots compliments the voice-over retelling of the unfolding events by an unseen narrator to create a voyeuristic, dollhouse effect which is somewhat premonitory and has, in my opinion, a distancing effect on the audience. The stark, monochrome

backdrop which flips between black and white to signify night and day further adds artificiality to the setting of the whole film. Each of these elements of the film - the minimalistic set design, observatory camera angles and cautionary off-camera verbal

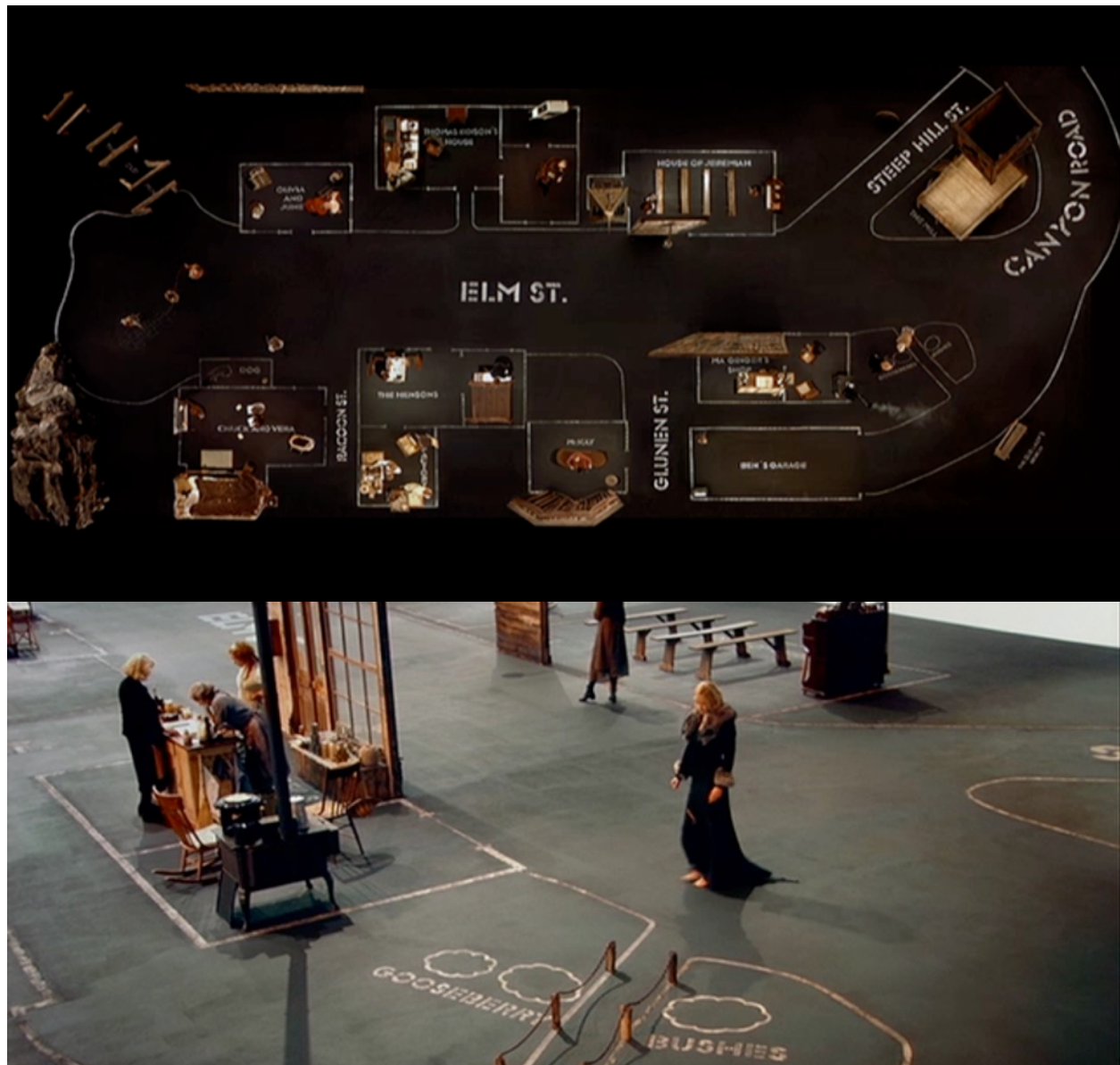


Figure 13. Detached sound and vision: Scenes from Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003).

storytelling - creates within the work a profound Brechtian self-awareness, or *Verfremdungseffekt*²⁸ which constantly reminds the audience that they are watching a stage, or *staged* performance. These Brechtian dramatic techniques would certainly be worth experimenting with, and might provide a way of getting taboos through to the Malaysian audience.

Our Hitler, A film from Germany (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977) is a larger-than-life exploration into the post-Hitler psyche of Germany and its people. In trying to make sense of such a colossal subject matter on film in 7 hours and 22 minutes, Syberberg has opted to use the stage as a storytelling canvas, onto which he paints a mixture of



Figure 14. Depth of meaning: Syberberg layers his visual space using *mise-en-scène*, cinematography and rear projections in *Our Hitler, A film from Germany* (1977).

complex allegorical, fantastical, mythical and occasionally Biblical imageries using actors, simulacraic props, lighting and rear projections of still and moving images. As Susan Sontag²⁹ states in her review of the film (Sontag, 1980):

Convinced that there is a morally (and aesthetically) correct way for a filmmaker to confront Nazism, Syberberg can make no use of any of the stylistic conventions of fiction that pass for realism.

Sontag postulates further that:

The film is not designed to meet a standard of information but claims to address a (hypothetical) therapeutic ideal. Syberberg repeatedly says that his film is addressed to the German “inability to mourn,” that it undertakes “the work of the mourning” (Trauerarbeit) (*ibid.*).

It is inevitable to me that Syberberg’s daring attempt to use the film medium to take on Hitler as an event in world history *and* as a healing process for the German people would result in extreme unconventionality. Despite the seemingly random mix of dramatic strategies within his frame, there exists a sense of organised chaos. Syberberg’s careful manipulation of the film’s *mise-en-scène*, or ‘all the compositional elements within a frame’ (Mariano et al., 2002) and cinematography techniques is evident throughout the chaptered scenes. He uses deep focus³⁰ and deep space³¹ throughout many scenes of the film to make judicious use of the foreground, background and layers in between, along with rear projection as a stage backdrop (or occasional main frame) to create spatial depth within his frame composition (*ibid.*). In using deep focus, Syberberg confers equal importance and neutrality to each object and layer within his frames, thus inviting the audience themselves to cast judgment and impart their own meaning to the work. Despite using many cinematography techniques to establish the work as a film (as opposed to a filmed theatre performance), Syberberg does not shy away from theatre aesthetics, sometimes down to clichéd details such as circular spot lighting of the main actor onstage (See the bottom panel of Figure 14.). I am particularly interested in how Syberberg uses spatial composition and rear projection onstage, as the film *Haruan* will attempt to use these elements to create its *Malaysiana*.

Peter Greenaway's background as a painter is apparent in his work *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (1989). Greenaway's remarkable eye for colour and composition results in a visually stunning and artistically pleasing film with a strong theatrical flair. The film setting is again stage-like, complete with red velvet curtains



Figure 15. Men in stylish red uniforms reveal Greenaway's 'masterpiece' to the audience.

which are drawn open by two ushers clad in red bespoke costumes as the film begins (see Figure 15.). The uniforms and the rest of the wardrobe for the film are designed by the French fashion designer Jean-Paul Gaultier,³² which explains why some of the costume pieces are reminiscent of those (by Gaultier) from another aesthetically pleasing film *The Fifth Element* (Luc Besson, 1997). This mesmerising blend of art, film and high fashion manages to make extreme violence, murder, infidelity and the consumption of cooked human flesh almost palatable and strangely pretty. Greenaway's passion for 17th Century Dutch paintings (Stratton, 2010) is reflected in his recurrent use of red, black and white in the film's costumes, props and lighting schemes - the three main colours of Franz Hals's *Banquet of the Officers of the St. George Militia* (1616) - which also adorns a wall of the banquet hall (see the bottom panel of Figure 16.). The expressionistic use of red lighting to compliment the red hues used in props and costumes sets the overall tone of the film and its characters, signifying lust, passion, greed, gluttony, blood and death. Greenaway's play with colours is certainly inspiring. For the film, I plan to use some of my own coloured

digital drawings from the story panels as part of the actual backdrops and rear projections. A few of the main characters will also be colourised to reflect their changing emotions and intentions.



Figure 16. Film imitates art through Greenaway's use of colours.

Moses und Aron (Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, 1975) is a film adaptation of an unfinished opera by the Austrian composer and painter, Arnold Schönberg.³³ Set mainly outdoors on desolate locations in Italy and Egypt (Theophrastus, 2011), the film is not immediately theatrical visually, certainly not in the manner of an onstage performance. The subtle yet powerful sense of theatricality comes from Schönberg's operatic score and the operatic renditions, choreography and the acting styles of the film's cast. As the Biblical tale unfolds, the operatic score and aesthetics dominate, rendering the work increasingly theatrical. As the statue of the Golden Calf



Figure 17. The Golden Calf on The Altar in *Moses und Aron* (Straub & Huillet, 1975).

is presented to the people onto the altar, the work is transform into a filmed operatic performance outdoors, as opposed to a film adaptation of an opera. Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet exploit the use of cinematography techniques, combined with diegetic and non-diegetic sounds (Mariano et al., 2002) (and perhaps internal diegetic³⁴ sounds?) derived from Schönberg's score to create 'divine ambiguity' with excellent effect (see Figure 18.).



Figure 18. Communion with God?

By using a left posterior over-the-shoulder camera angle, the audience can barely see the character's face. As he begins his recitation, his voice (or so we assume, as we can only see one corner of his mouth) mingles with the voices within the operatic score, thus creating a sense of diegetic ambiguity: Who is talking? And, to whom?

In my opinion, what these five non-Malaysian films have in common are alternative, cross-platform, non-conventional realisms with hybrid aesthetics that bewilder and distract their audience, thus allowing subliminal delivery of challenging subject matters. However, experimentations with cinematic forms and film aesthetics approaches such as these may also run the risk of completely alienating an audience, beyond a point which even Brecht may have intended with his dramatic techniques.

3.5 Contextual Research findings

What is morality in any given time or place? It is what the majority then and there happen to like, and immorality is what they dislike.

Alfred North Whitehead (1861-1947) in *Dialogues* (1954) 30 Aug. 1941
(Augarde, 1991: 226)

At the completion of the contextual component of this study, several conclusions can be made about Malaysian taboos. Based upon the three interviews in Malaysia (*Forbidden Views: Malaysian Taboos*, 2012), I would like to posit that:

1. There are no specific set of taboos unique to Malaysia, its people or its cinemas. There are, however, Malaysian expressions and flavours of universal taboos. There also exist various forms of customs and behavioural codes (*adat resam*) which are race-specific and religion-specific; these are not what I would consider taboos for the purpose of this study.
2. Taboos in Malaysia (and hence its cinema) are very closely-linked with religious prohibitions. Whilst Islamic rules are not imposed upon non-Muslims, Islam forms the ethical framework for the Muslim majority and informs the basic moral sensibilities of the country as a whole.
3. Whilst the religious taboos themselves may not be strictly adhered to, the *fear of being exposed as non-observers* of these taboos is perhaps an even greater taboo in itself. I would propose that perhaps the *real* taboo within the Malaysian society and its cinema is the taboo of *showing* or *declaring* that *one or more of these religious taboos are being broken*.
4. It is my opinion that one of the biggest Malaysian fears is *overt non-conformity*, or rather - the fear of being seen, revealed or labelled as *a non-conformist*.

From the three Malaysian films reviewed for their portrayal of taboos (see excerpts from two of these films in *Forbidden Views: Malaysian Taboos*, 2012), it can be deduced that:

1. All three films portray 'religious taboos': In *Perempuan, Isteri & Jalang* (*Woman, Wife & Whore*) - Murder, premarital sex, adultery, prostitution, witchcraft; In *Anu Dalam Botol* (*Penis in a Bottle*) - Homosexuality, transgenderism, gender reassignment surgery; In *Bunohan* (*Return to Murder*) - Murder, animistic rituals, spiritual healing.
2. All three films are live action, fiction narratives. One film - *Bunohan* uses non-linear narrative and an alternative realism - either magical or spiritual realism, depending on the viewer's ethnographical background.
3. All three films highlight scenes depicting traditional Malay culture and rural life. Both *Perempuan, Isteri & Jalang* and *Anu dalam Botol* feature religious customs and cultural rites & rituals (both have a wedding & a funeral, one opens with a wedding, the other ends with one). *Bunohan* showcases many traditional Malaysian/Thai martial arts and performing arts elements.

These contextual research findings directly address the first research question, as to how taboos and difficult social issues have been represented in Malaysian films. From the five non-Malaysian films reviewed for their alternative cinema aesthetics, I have devised several experimental strategies designed to interrogate the second research question, as to how Malaysia taboos can be alternatively represented cinematically, through their implementation in the film *Haruan: The Snakehead*. These strategies, summarised in Figure 19. (see page 51), include the use of a non-naturalistic, cinematic-theatrical hybrid aesthetics and realism, simulacraic constructedness and imageries of traditional Malaysian/South East Asian performing arts elements, all delivered within a framework of Malay linguistic and visual idioms. I would also like to posit at this point that the two main ideas behinds these strategies to cinematically deliver taboos to a Malaysian audience are (1) Familiarity: Identification with the imageries and sounds (Verisimilitude: traditional elements, performing arts, martial arts, music, mise-en-scène), and (2) Substitution: Replacing difficult or unpalatable imageries, ideas, characters or actions with simulacra to provide a buffer of psychological distance for an audience.

4. METHODOLOGY: PRACTICE

September 2011 - August 2014

Practice strategies

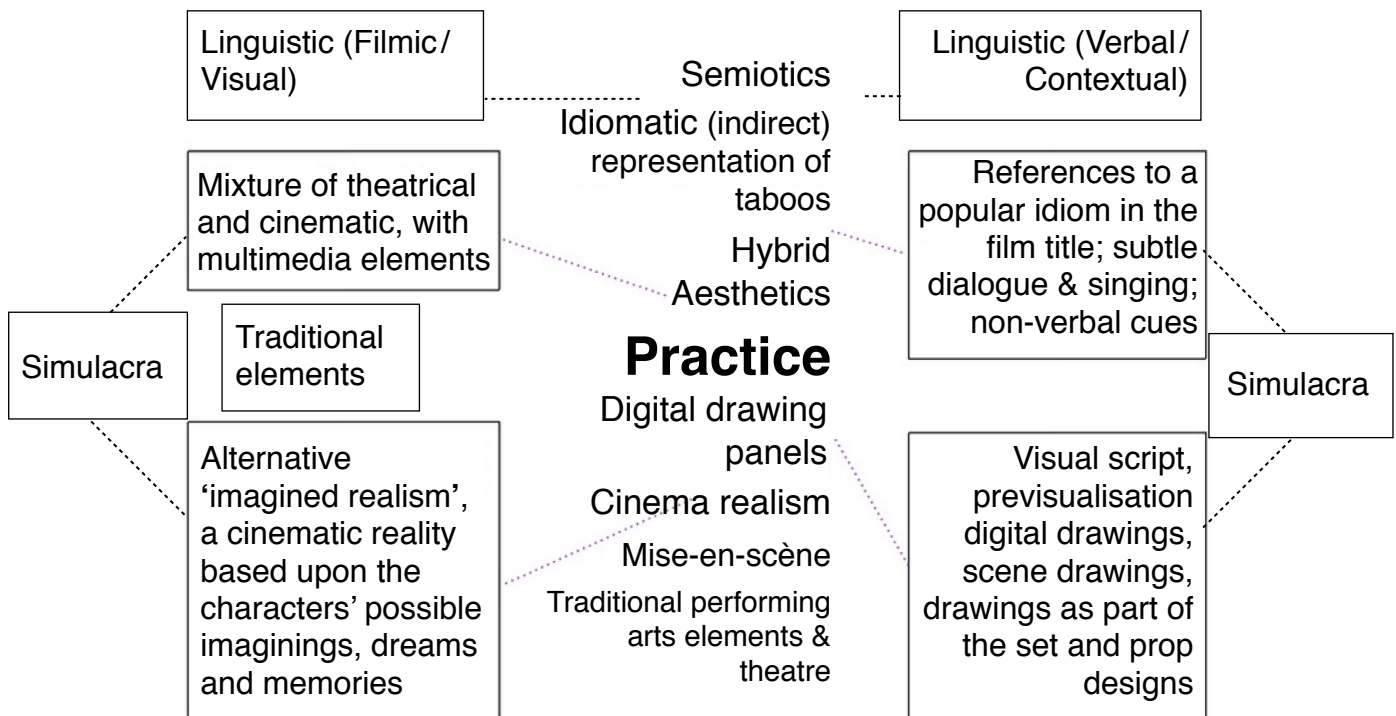


Figure 19. Methodological strategies for the Practice component of the study - the film *Haruan: The Snakehead*, as derived from the Contextual research outcomes. Note how the use of simulacra are relevant to many aspects of these strategies.

Several methodological strategies for the practice component of the research have been formulated, based upon the analyses of the findings from the two cohorts of Malaysian and non-Malaysian films reviewed. These strategies will be discussed in this chapter, and will also be reflected upon in detail in Chapter 6, with regards to *how* they are actually implemented in the completed feature-length film *Haruan: The Snakehead*.

4.1 *Haruan*: The creature of idioms

I have chosen the word *Haruan* as the title of the film due to its immediate association - for Malay speakers - with the idiom relating it to either a creature which devours its young, or an incestuous rapist. The snakehead fish or *haruan* itself – without the heavy idiomatic nominal associations – is an equally fascinating subject matter to explore. Paleontological evidence and fossil records indicate that the ancestors of the snakehead family of fish have been around for at least 50 million years (early Eocene Epoch) (Roe, 1991). The *haruans* of the *channa striata* family have been around in South East Asia from around 2 to 5 million years ago (from Pliocene to Miocene Epoch), with early fossils found in Central Java (Courtenay & Williams, 2004). It has a suprabranchial apparatus (*ibid.*) which allows it to ‘breathe’ air and survive on land for several days, provided its skin is moist. The snakehead has the ability to burrow itself in mud during drought conditions and ‘crawl’ on the ground in search of a body of water when the rain returns.

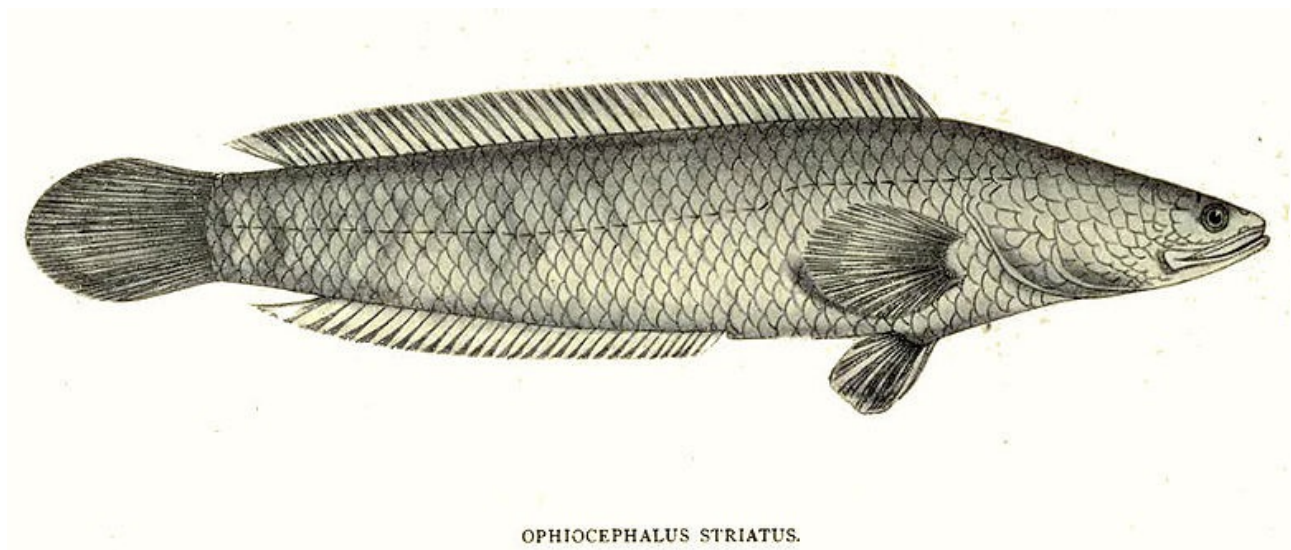


Figure 20. *Channa (Ophiocephalus) striatus* (Thomas, 1897).

There are 26 species of *channa* in Asia and 3 species of *parachanna* in Africa (*ibid.*). The adult males of some snakehead species are mouthbrooders, but *channa striatus* is not one of these. However, it is a voracious predator, which has been observed to devour its

own species, even its own young, when food is scarce (*ibid.*). As most Malay idioms are derived from daily observations of the local flora and fauna, perhaps there *is* some truth in the allegation that the snakehead or *haruan* occasionally eats its young.

From the depths of Malay folklore (there are at least two important Malay idioms dedicated to this food fish) to recent articles in international scientific journals (e.g. Snakeheads are seen as worrisome, foreign super-predators which are wiping out entire species of native freshwater organisms) (New Scientist, 2008), this fish is far from ordinary.

In Chinese traditional medicine, the flesh of the common snakehead – *Channa striatus* or *Ophiocephalus striatus* (see Figure 20.) is thought to have magical healing properties when consumed. The scientific basis behind the healing properties contained in the flesh of the snakehead has also been looked into scientifically in wound healing research (Baei & Sheikh, 1999), and has sparked considerable commercial interest within Malaysia and the surrounding regions in food supplements, pills and potions which contain extracts of the fish. Research has also shown that the white, meaty flesh of the snakehead contains high levels of nutrients such as arachidonic acid, essential amino acids (Gam et al., 2005) (namely arginine, glycine, histidine, glutamic acid, fatty acids, albumin and zinc (Mustafa et al., 2012), all of which contribute towards wound healing. The legitimacy of claims of its alleged ability to improve scar appearance, cure a myriad of illnesses and slow down the process of ageing cannot be verified at present. In recent times snakeheads have received considerable international interest and notoriety, mainly for their indiscriminate predatorial behaviour, their alarming ability to survive for long periods without water and migrate across land masses to adjoining bodies of water. Dubbed the ‘walking fish’ (Dart, 2002), the snakeheads have garnered an almost mythical ‘super-monster’ status, appearing in wildlife documentaries (*Fishzilla: Snakehead Invasion*; Salvatore Vecchio, 2007) and genre films, such as *Frankenfish* (Mark A.Z. Dippé, 2004), *Swarm of the Snakehead* (Frank Lama, 2006), *Night of the Snakehead Fish* (Richard A. Lester, 2003) and *Snakehead Terror* (Paul Ziller, 2004). A native of Asia and Africa, this remarkable family of fish have been banned from being kept as pets in the UK, North America and Australia (see page 121).

The snakehead may be called by many different names and may be perceived differently in various parts of the world, but it has certainly also found its way into the hearts and minds of many cultures. I feel that exploring the many facets of this well-known yet often misunderstood fish within the Malaysian context – be it zoological, pharmaceutical or linguistic with local cultural connotations – might just allow a filmmaker to gently delve into forbidden waters.

There are obvious challenges in making a film in the UK which has a banned South East Asian predatory fish as one of its main characters. The initial idea for the Malaysian version of the film is to have a live young *haruan* in a medium-sized bowl for the 10-year old boy character to carry around with him. This too, has its limitations, for instance: a)The medium-sized bowl half-filled with water can be too heavy for the boy to carry around. b)Young *haruans* can be lively; they can easily jump out of the bowl and can be generally difficult to handle. c)Live animals can cease to be alive mid-shoot. The film will require several live *haruans* throughout its production. d)Live *haruans* will need feeding, looking after, gentle handling and might not take directions despite all the care and attention. On the other hand, a live *haruan* will look, move and behave unlike any affordable animation or computer-generated model can ever simulate for the film.

Since that the live *haruan* option has been completely taken away from the film, I have had to devise an affordable, practical alternative that would work for the production. As I have alluded to under the section ‘Diaspora and the reality of distance’ (see Appendix A., pages 119-121), the UK version of the film *Haruan* is - in many aspects - a completely different film compared with its originally intended Malaysian version. The biggest challenges due to this change in which the film is produced are the representation of the fish itself, and the construction of the film’s Malaysian universe as a whole. This leads me to the my decision to experiment with the use of simulacra (in the form of crafted objects and rear-projected digital drawings) to represent not only the fish *Haruan* but as substitutes for props, set elements, concepts, characters and even characters’ thoughts and emotions.



4.2 Simulacra as illusory replacements for depicting taboos

Whilst not intending to launch into a lengthy philosophical debate on simulacra, I would still wish to highlight Gilles Deleuze's definition of what a simulacrum is (Massumi, 1987), which has guided my thinking on how to design *Haruan*'s replacement(s) for the film:

The terms copy and model bind us to the world of representation and objective (re)production. A copy, no matter how many times removed, authentic or fake, is defined by the presence or absence of internal, essential relations of resemblance to a model. The simulacrum, on the other hand, bears only an external and deceptive resemblance to a putative model. The process of its production, its inner dynamism, is entirely different from that of its supposed model; its resemblance to it is merely a surface effect, an illusion.

I would like to posit that these illusory simulacra 'shells' described by Deleuze may offer a filmmaker with strategies to cinematically reenact scenes unthinkable and forbidden, in the forms of drawings, props, set design elements and even character replacements. The illusory appearance of these simulacra may provide a buffer zone, or psychological distance between an audience and challenging imageries, thus allowing for improved acceptance of difficult subject matters.

My initial idea for the UK replacement of the live *haruan* is that of a *papier mâché* simulacrum, my 'Deleuzian deception' of the *Haruan* character in the film (see Figure 21.). It will still live in a fish bowl, suspended by a fine nylon thread from a stick or wire which lies across the mouth of the bowl. It is what it is, a *papier mâché* simulacrum of a snakehead. What it is not is a copy or model of this fish. It will be painted to match the colours of a *channa striatus*, so as not to be mistaken for another fish, but a lifelike replica it will not be. It will not be doing many things a live *haruan* does, such as swim in water, eat most things, breathe on land. But this *haruan* might still heal you. It might also be an even better companion for the boy Ikan; it will be a patient listener and a light, clean and well-behaved pet. Unlike most live *haruans*, this particular one you can have a conversation with, even if it is in a language not known to you, and audible only in your head. It is but an illusion of the real thing, but whose illusion? And for whom?

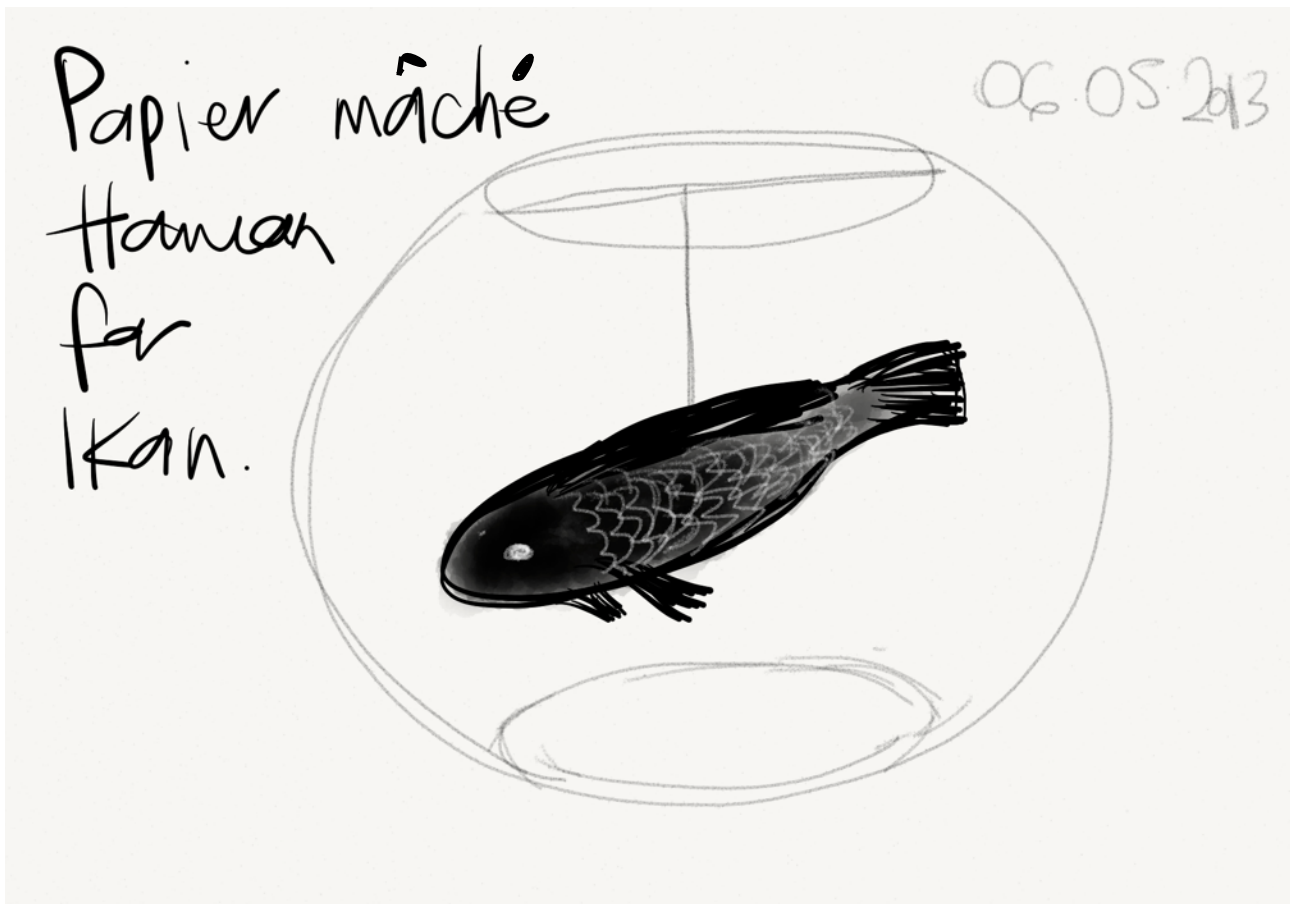


Figure 21. Another *Haruan*: A proposed simulacrum. (06 May 2013)

As the development of the film *Haruan: The Snakehead* progresses, this simulacrum of the live *channa striatus* evolves morphologically and conceptually into multiple versions of simulacra crafted from different materials. All these versions of the *Haruan* simulacra will be looked at in Chapter 6 (see pages 79-85), whereby their use within the film will be further discussed.

4.3 Hybrid aesthetics: A blend of theatre and cinema

Set designs, screens & rear projections

In trying to construct a rural *Malaysian* environment inside a small studio, I have chosen to mix on-stage aesthetics and rear projections of both my drawings from the story panels, the scene-by-scene drawings, stand-alone video clips, simple animations and stills drawn specifically as backdrops for the scenes. I will be using either one, two or three screens, depending on the needs of a scene.

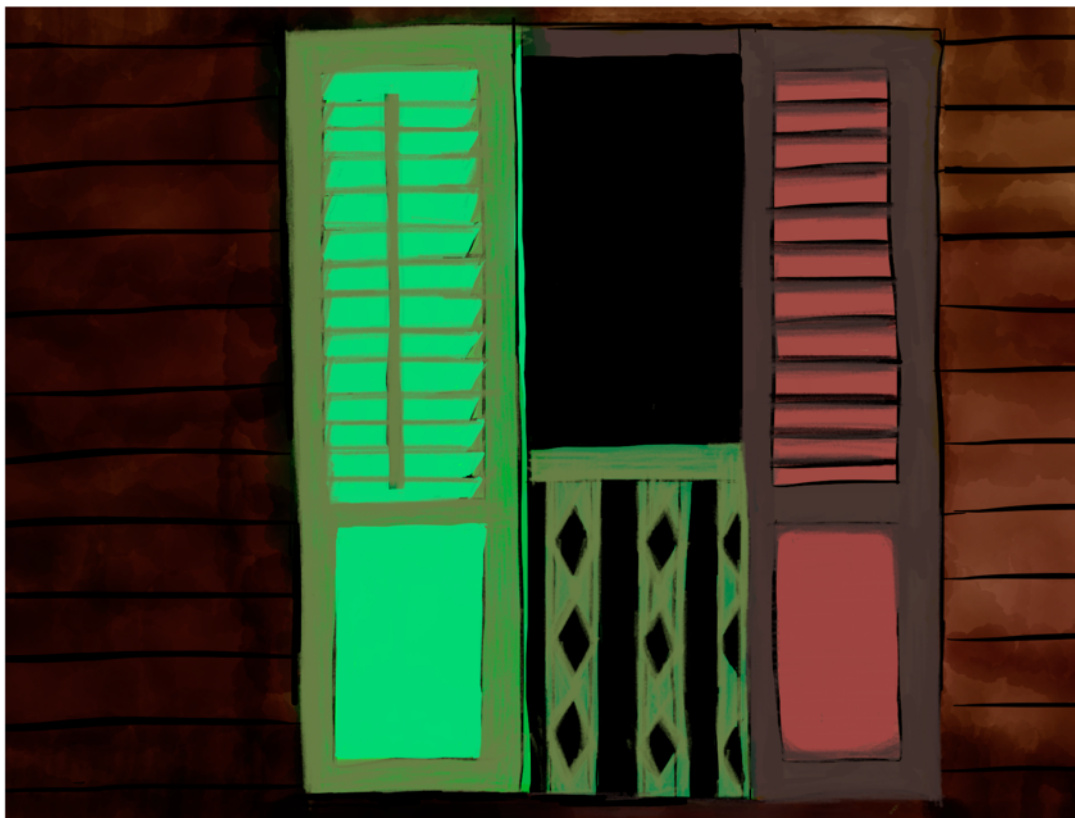


Figure 22. One, two or three screens for rear projections (May 2013). See the bottom right panel for possible arrangement permutations.

depending on the needs of a scene. The outer 2 panels can be arranged to either act as walls, or as a long combined screen for backdrop projections. Some of the panels will be used as static backdrops, with digital drawings from an iPad projected onto them (see

Figure 22.). These static 'walls' can be used as either the main backdrop, or as one of the side panels. Blocks of strong, solid colours will also be occasionally projected onto these screens to reflect the mood of a character or a scene.

Simple items of furniture will be used to complete an interior space. Whilst not actually being shot onstage, I hope to create enough of the hybrid theatre/film/multimedia aesthetics to maintain the constructed artificiality of the film's Malaysian universe. In my



H.A.R.U.A.N

Interior/exterior kampung house
background - June 2013

Figure 23. The drawn exterior of a Malay *kampung* house will be used as a static projection, either as a rear panel or one of the side screens.

opinion, the measure of the verisimilitude of a film universe is not gauged by its closeness to conventional realism, but by its ability to be consistently truthful to itself in maintaining whichever 'alternative realism' it wishes to adopt.

Locations

Most of the scenes in this film will be shot on location, indoors, at a studio in Manchester city centre. There are three to five distinctive areas within the studio which will be set up accordingly for the different scenes. There are also some larger communal spaces just



Figure 24. The studio.

outside the main studio (see the bottom right panel of Figure 24.) which may be utilised for the shoot. There will be at least one outdoor scene which will be shot locally, after all the indoor scenes have been completed.

The studio that is finally selected for the project is a near-perfect location for this dark, broody tale. Set within a period, textile mill building - possibly Victorian, the place offers ample, visibly old and rustic wooden interior spaces which can be worked with to resemble the interiors of a *kampung* (village) house in Malaysia.

Traditional elements : Shadow puppetry (*Wayang kulit*)

The theme of using screens as surfaces to project imageries and shadows to aid storytelling is versatile enough to support the introduction of other traditional South East Asian elements to the film. I have always been interested in the richness and diversity of the South East Asian traditional performing arts, and have tried to incorporate elements of



Figure 25. A *Wayang Kulit* (Shadow puppetry) character (Susanto, 2011).

their unique blend of verbal and visual storytelling into my body of work. The hybrid aesthetics of this project would allow me to experiment further with these cultural elements, such as the *Wayang Kulit* (Shadow puppetry)(see Figure 25.). The use of screens and rear projections would tie in well with *Wayang Kulit* and its intricately silhouetted motifs; I might even consider using *Wayang Kulit* as a character, if this is technically viable.

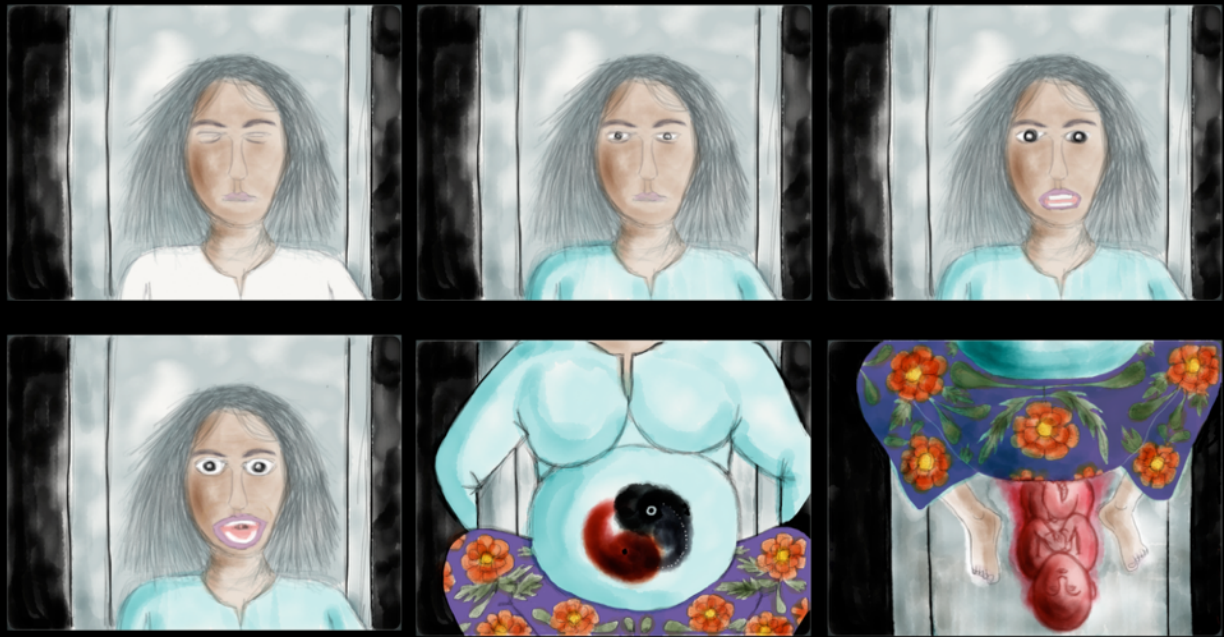
4.4 Digital drawings and the visual workflow: An alternative filmmaking process

Apart from using digital drawings as simulacraic elements within the film *Haruan*, I am also using digital drawings and imageries as a parallel study into an alternative process of filmmaking. This is carried out by experimenting with an almost completely visual workflow, using digital drawings made using various applications on an Apple iPad throughout the entire process of producing the feature-length film. Early concept sketches during the ideation of the narrative form visual story panels or an almost entirely visual 'script' for the work. These digital drawings are then reworked into detailed scene-by-scene drawings, which will be used not only as a previsualisation and communication aid between cast, crew members and collaborators of the film, but also as stand alone Production elements which will appear in the completed film itself. These elements may be seen in the form of rear-projected backdrops, set design components or as Goes-Before-Optics (GOBO) lighting effects. Some of these digital drawings will also be inserted directly into the film during Post Production, as still images or simple animations.

I have always been interested in finding a method to faithfully reproduce and communicate complex thoughts, concepts and ideas throughout a collaborative creative process such as filmmaking. In many films, drawings are often used during ideation and conceptualisation, as previsualisation tools and as PreProduction storyboards. Whilst the usage of drawings is neither new nor unique in filmmaking, their usage throughout the *entire* creative journey - every step of the process from ideation to Post Production - remains unusual. I would be keen to find out how effectively my ideas about the film *Haruan* can be relayed to and shared with my cast, crew and collaborators through my drawings. I would also be interested to investigate how the drawings which are used during the Production and Post Production phases (which are therefore visible in the finished film) can be utilised to communicate with the audience.



Figure 26. *Haruan* : Salomah's Nightmare • Initial sketches. Ink on paper (September 2011).



Salomah's Nightmare • Prologue Scene Drawings
September - December 2012

H•A•R•U•A•N



Salomah's Nightmare • Prologue Scene Drawings
September - December 2012

H•A•R•U•A•N



Figure 28. *Haruan* Scene Drawings • Digital sketches using the Paper53 © Application for iPad as a proposed animated opening sequence for the film (2012-2013).

Since the beginning of the research process, I have experimented with using visual means to externalise my ideas and imageries for the film. I initially started with ink sketches on paper (Figure 26.), which I then scanned and edited on an iPad. When I discovered drawing applications on the iPad which could take over the workflow, I switched to these, so much so that I have not needed to use any sketches on paper for the work since the end of 2011. As the ideation process can be random and may occur at an unpredictable time and place (mostly from dreams), having an intuitive, touch-screen device which will store all your doodles and sketches in one location has been very useful for the work. The early digital drawings evolve into a 129-page graphic novelette (Figure 27.; see also Appendix C. - pages 131-196), which acts as the narrative base and provide 'story panels' for the film, instead of a conventional textual script. From these panels, more detailed drawings are then developed to visualise the 'essence' of each scene (Figure 28.).

As the narrative centres around issues of infanticide/baby abandonment and incestuous rape, I feel that the central girl/daughter/mother/woman character should open the film, with a terrifying, recurring nightmare that preoccupies her thoughts: one in which she awakens to find herself heavily pregnant and in labour, lying in a dark, unknown space and strapped to a machinery, which has a running conveyor belt attached to it. The sterile, mechanical world she finds herself in is cold and uncaring; whilst she sees images of people going about their daily chores outside a large window, nobody seems to hear her cries and screams, and nobody seems to care. As the baby is delivered it drifts away from her on the conveyor belt, whereby its umbilical cord is mechanically severed to allow it to travel along its journey into the unknown.

The opening sequence is self-reflexive towards the ideation process, as the whole opening sequence is birthed from a dream - though not necessarily of my being in labour, more the fear of loss and fear of the unknown. The recurring nightmare is self-reflexive for the central character, as in reality she is also affected by similarly recurring past events. Finally, the opening sequence is hopefully self-reflexive for the Malaysian audience, as a recurring problem that will not go away. The fish *Haruan* is introduced within the darkness of the baby's fall, as a subtle, idiomatic and linguistic vehicle alluding to incestuous rape and baby abandonment. Please see Appendix B. (page 129-130) for a synopsis of the film.

5. *Haruan: The Snakehead* (2014)



Sambalmee Productions Ltd
Malaysia • UK • Finland Collaboration
In Malay, English, Finnish and Arabic
72 minutes

Adakah perbuatan keji sentiasa beroleh keburukan?

Do bad deeds always beget badness?

Tagline from *Haruan: The Snakehead* (2014)

Haruan: The Snakehead (2014) is an experimental feature-length fiction film (See the DVD of the film, submitted with the written thesis). It is a story about a 10-year old boy, who lives with his sister Salomah, his stepfather Deris and his beloved pet *Haruan* the snakehead fish.

Haruan: The Snakehead forms the practice component of the PhD. The film itself is a direct interrogation of the second (and main) research question, in that it is an exploration of alternative cinematic methods to tell challenging stories to a Malaysian audience. *Haruan* attempts to deal with relevant taboos which have seen significant increase in their prevalence in modern Malaysian society within the the past 10 years - infanticide/baby abandonment and incestuous rape, and the possible connection between the two.

The PreProduction process of the film began in September 2012. The obstacles encountered in trying to produce a live action film which deals with these taboos in Malaysia are discussed in detail under the section 'A Filmmaker's Journey' in Appendix A . (see page 119). These challenges have influenced several core decisions regarding the film, from its final Production country (the UK), down to the actual form of the film and its aesthetics (experimental, non-naturalistic theatre/film hybrid). Principal Photography began at the end of October 2013 and was completed by mid November 2013. The Post Production work on *Haruan: The Snakehead* was completed in August 2014.

The film *Haruan: The Snakehead* is born out of the collaborative efforts of individuals from three countries - Malaysia, the UK and Finland. Whilst the dialogue is mainly in Malay and English, Finnish and Arabic are also used by some characters in the film.

6. REFLECTIONS

6.1 *Haruan* : A reflection on five non-Malaysian films

In trying to interrogate the issues of infanticide/baby abandonment and its connection with incestuous rape cinematically, the five non-Malaysian films which have been discussed under the contextual methodology section will now be compared with the film *Haruan: The Snakehead*. Whilst stylistically disparate, these five films commonly share a sense of theatrical ‘hybrid aesthetics’ and staged constructedness:

- 1) *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Robert Wiene, 1920)
- 2) *Dogville* (Lars von Trier, 2003)
- 3) *Our Hitler: A film from Germany* (Hans-Jürgen Syberberg, 1977)
- 4) *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* (Peter Greenaway, 1989)
- 5) *Moses und Aron* (Jean-Marie Straub & Danièle Huillet, 1975)

All of these five films have exploited various visual and aural techniques to deliver their difficult stories and challenging subject matters. A few of these methods have been employed in the film *Haruan: The Snakehead*, to recreate the ‘sensory distractions’ that - in my opinion - these five non-Malaysian films have successfully achieved.

Simulated inhumanity

Whilst all the five films mentioned exhibit many elements of a stage performance, Syberberg's film on Hitler is perhaps the one which is most blatant in its usage of simulacraic props to tell its harrowing story. In many scenes in his film, Syberberg littered the stage with mannequins or their body parts in various human positions and predicaments to portray the depth of human depravity during Hitler's reign. Despite the



Figure 29. Disembodied mannequins and human atrocities in Syberberg's *Our Hitler, A film from Germany*.



Figure 30. A mother's nightmarish childbirth in *Haruan: The Snakehead*.

obvious artificiality of the props and characters (or perhaps *because* of this, which allowed Syberberg the freedom to objectify and experiment with his fake supporting cast), *Our Hitler: A film from Germany* has managed to successfully conjure many disturbing imageries from the annals of human history.

For the film *Haruan*, the decision to use anatomically correct baby dolls instead of potentially more 'realistic' looking computer-generated graphics or superimposed imageries is a deliberate one. A tangible simulacrum helps the actors to physically and emotionally interact with the story, and hence the film. I would posit that these emphatic actors-simulacra interactions may help an audience 'see' the imagined reality of the actors' situation, thus overriding the artificial appearance of the simulacra themselves. For instance, a scene involving a baby doll representing a human infant may appear more disturbing to an audience as they would need to resort to their own personal experience, memory and imagined reality to make sense of what they see onscreen.

Shadows, screens and projections

The use of shadow puppetry and shadow play as a mode of visual storytelling has been employed by several cultures from as early as 400 B.C.³⁵ In the Malaysian context, Hassan Muthalib (2013) has suggested that the Malay shadow play or *Wayang Kulit*,



Figure 31. A production still from *Haruan: The Snakehead*, showing the use of screens, rear projection and shadow imageries, and Inset: The scene above, as seen in the opening sequence of the completed film.

along with other performance-based, traditional visual arts formed part of the precursors of modern cinema in the South East Asian region, predating its arrival (circa 1895) by a few hundred years. The multiple screen aesthetics for the film *Haruan: The Snakehead* - be it shadow puppetry or rear projection of drawn imageries - has been chosen in an attempt to visually and emotionally evoke the 'live theatre' feel and the subtle, familiar nuances of these traditional cultural performances. The familiarity of these traditional imageries would hopefully resonate with the film's intended Malaysian audience and help them to identify with the film and its characters.

Instead of the 3-screen system originally planned in PreProduction, only two screens were used. Each screen was made from a thin, fire-retardant, light-coloured material which was stretched across a rectangular wooden frame. These screens were used either as:

A) Surfaces for 'shadow projections'

The screens were first used in the opening sequence of the film, where the boy Ikan is seen poised before a rear-projected, shadow image of a female *Wayang Kulit* character, as he is joined by an adult *haruan* suspended on strings (see Figure 31.). Ikan is playing with a *Wayang Kulit* himself. The imagery suggests that Ikan is a *Tok Dalang*, or the storyteller/puppet master of a shadow play performance, which ties in with Ikan's role as the storyteller/narrator of the film. However, as the camera travels towards the shadow on the screen, it is suggested that the female figure is static, perhaps not controlled by Ikan, perhaps watching over him instead. As the camera travels towards the figure's eyes, and deeper into her proverbial soul, the story unfolds with her recurrent nightmarish visions.

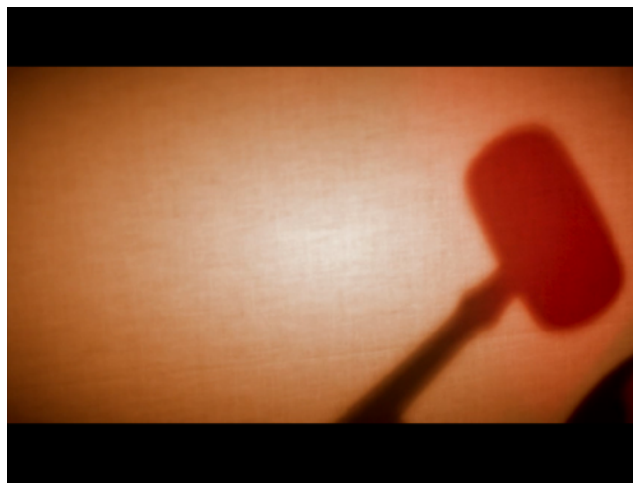


Figure 32. Shadowy murders. Scenes from *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* (Left) and *Haruan: The Snakehead* (Right) showing the use of shadows to depict a character's actions.

The screens in this instance not only act as a surface for the static rear-projection of the female shadow figure, but also as an idiomatic representation of a storytelling canvas or the cinema screen itself. Shadow projection - this time dynamic shadow from Deris - is used again later on in the film (see Figure 32.). I have chosen to intersperse Deris's act of killing with a shadow segment of his raising hand, wielding his weapon of choice for the deed. Unlike the notorious murder scene in *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, where the whole



Figure 33. Screen aesthetics 1: In *Haruan: The Snakehead*, rear projections are used to depict a character (Djahat, Left) and a character's emotions (Deris's hate, Right).



Figure 34. Screen aesthetics 2: Rear projections are also used in *Haruan: The Snakehead* as static backdrops, such as wooden shutters and windows - from production drawings (Left) to their actual appearance in the film (Right).

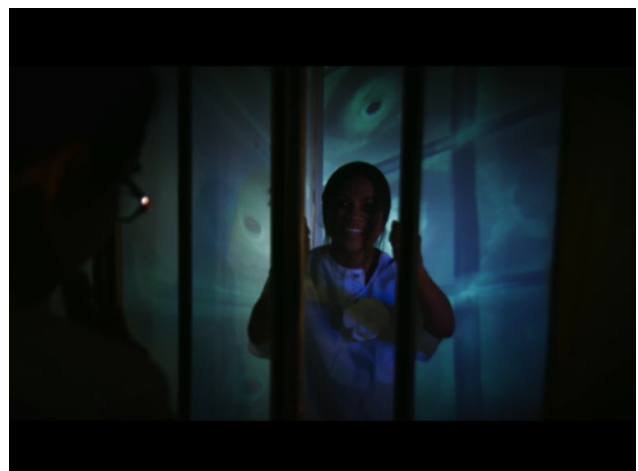


Figure 35. Screen aesthetics 3: Rear-projection backdrops are exploited to emulate perspective view and depth of space: from a column-lined corridor in *Our Hitler: A film from Germany* (Left) to the padded walls of an asylum cell in *Haruan: The Snakehead* (Right).

act was shown to the audience through the perpetrator's shadowy actions on the wall, I have used shadow projection only as an adjunct to heighten the tension of the scene, as opposed to its whole substitution. I have also used non-diegetic sound to replace the actual moment of murder, without showing what is happening to the victim.

B) Surfaces to project a character or a character's emotions

Static rear projections have also been deployed in *Haruan: The Snakehead* to declare the physical presence of a character within a scene, or to express a character's emotions or state of mind. Djahat manifests itself in several forms in the film, but on two occasions it is portrayed as a fish-like creature with long *Wayang Kulit*-like upper limbs (see Figure 33., Left panel). In one of these sequences, the static projection of Djahat is strategically placed within the *mise-en-scène*, to appear to interact with an opening door to Salomah's bedroom as Deris approaches his sleeping stepdaughter. This simple interaction between the 2D projected digital image of Djahat and the live-action world around it - in my opinion - grounds Djahat to the film's universe and enhances its presence as a 'real' character.

2D static screen projections have also been used in *Haruan: The Snakehead* to imply a character's emotions. For instance, in a scene where Deris is torn between grief from the recent loss of his wife and anger for his impaired sight, one of the screens which forms a physical wall behind him displays an expressionistic digital image from the film's PreProduction graphic novelette to mirror his emotions (see Figure 33., Right panel).

C) Physical walls & static backdrops.

During the PreProduction stages of the film, the Production team and I have had many discussions about trying to emulate the 'on-stage' look and feel of a theatrical performance or the sense of watching a live performance. All of the five films referenced display these elements in their visual style, but *Dogville*, *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* and *Our Hitler, A Film from Germany* display these features prominently. For *Haruan: The Snakehead*, the theatrical feel of the film is achieved via the film's *mise-en-scène* and the performance style of the actors. The screens are utilised to display digital drawings of interior features of a wooden *kampung* house such as a window with louvred wooden shutters and carved

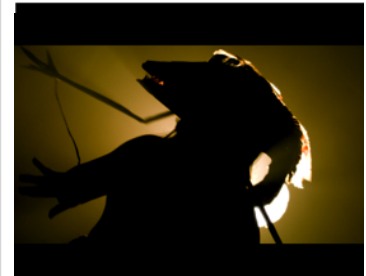
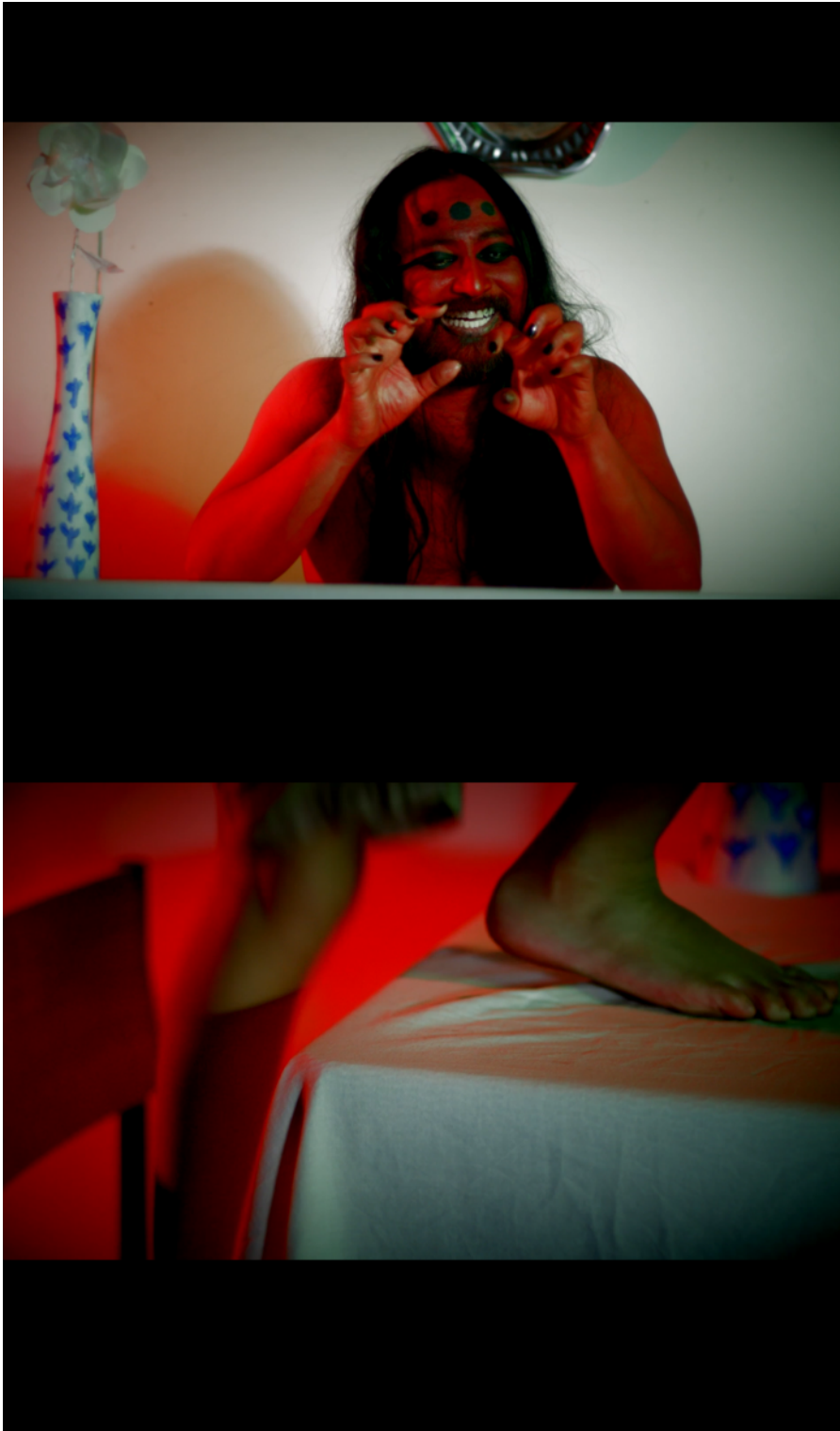
wooden railings (see Figure 34., Left and Right panels). The screen projections are also employed to create an illusion of space and designated spatial confines within the set. Whilst Syberberg's film uses a large rear-projected backdrop to give a sense of perspective and depth to the set (see Figure 35., Left panel), *Haruan* uses the screens and digital projections to emulate physical walls (and hence the resulting space), such as the padded walls of Salomah's asylum cell (see Figure 35., Right panel).

Colours

Right from the early drawing stages of *Haruan: The Snakehead*'s graphic novelette, I have always been conscious of the fact that the film should match the digital drawings in their strong, expressionistic imageries and vibrant, almost gaudy colourings of its characters and diegetic universe (see Figure 36.). Of all the five non-Malaysian films, Greenaway's *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife and Her Lover* is arguably the most colourful, with dominant use of red in its colour palette. *Haruan: The Snakehead*'s dimly-lit world also has a strong red presence, along with blue and green to create contrast and visual tension within its imageries. The colour schemes for each scene are achieved using light filters, GOBO effects via digital projections from an iPad or physical colouring of the set elements, prop items or the characters themselves.

In creating and 'monsterising' the Deris character, I have used the changes in his skin colour to reflect the changes in his personality and his character's journey throughout the narrative. Deris begins his narrative journey being his 'normal' skin colour, then turning blue with the death of his wife. As Deris's story unfolds, he turns half-blue and half-red as grief and hate begin to consume him. The visual contrast between blue and red also highlights the duality of his character as he pines for his dead wife and harbours desires for his stepdaughter. This split is also enhanced using on-screen text and titles which are added during Post Production.

Instead of using costumes or Post Production techniques to colour Deris, I have chosen to body paint him for several reasons. First, I have found that the time-consuming process of colouring Deris has helped the actor get into character and has enhanced his



Haruan: The Snakehead (Razli Dalan, 2014)
UK/Malaysia : 72 mins.

Figure 36. Colour coordination: *Haruan: The Snakehead* has a predominantly red colour palette, along with blue, green and warm earthy tones. Throughout the film, Deris's skin colour changes from normal skin colouring (light brown), to half-blue and half-red, to red and finally back to normal skin colouring, to denote his character's journey. The expressionistic look of the film is mainly achieved using body paint and coloured lighting.

performance, as he could physically ‘see’ himself transform into his coloured alter ego. A painted Deris on set has also helped the performance of the other actors who needed to react to his physical appearance. Second, body-painted characters evoke a certain



Figure 37. Red-faced rogues: Ornately crafted, colourful characters from a Malaysian shadow puppetry or *Wayang Kulit* performance. Note the red ogre-like character on the right side of the screen. Inset Left: The painted face of a Beijing Opera performer. Inset Right: Red Deris from *Haruan: The Snakehead*.

generic ‘Asian traditional theatrical and operatic’ look to the film. Many characters in stories derived from Asian folklore and mythology are portrayed as coloured beings, such as those of the South East Asian *Wayang Kulit* performances from the Indian *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* epics (see Figure 37.), and the face-painted roles³⁶ from a Beijing Chinese opera (see Figure 37., Inset).

Non-diegetic sounds and psychological detachment

In *Moses und Aron*, Straub and Huillet use non-diegetic dialogue and music in a scene which depicts the prophet Moses communicating with God. The camera angle (posterior oblique, from behind Moses's left shoulder) is such that only one corner of Moses's mouth



Figure 38. Moses communing with God in *Moses und Aron*.



Figure 39. Deris seeking God's forgiveness in *Haruan: The Snakehead*.

is visible when he speaks; his facial features and expressions can hardly be seen by the audience (see Figure 38.). As the scene progresses, Moses's speech is joined by multiple



Figure 40. PreProduction drawings for Deris's repentance scene in *Haruan: The Snakehead*.



Figure 41. Djahat's rear-projected shadow reminding Deris of his past deeds.

voices from Schoenberg's operatic chorus, whilst we still only see part of Moses's face onscreen. This creates a disarming sense of detachment between the speaker and his speech, and adds a somewhat supernatural feel to the scene and enhances its intensity.

This sense of audio-visual detachment is recreated in a scene in *Haruan: The Snakehead*, when Deris repents for his sins and seeks forgiveness from God. In this scene, Deris's face is deliberately hidden from the audience's view as he communes with God; whilst the voice reciting a prayer in Arabic sounds like his, one cannot be entirely sure that it is actually Deris who is praying (see Figure 39.). In the following sequence, as Deris prostrates himself to God, a rear-projected image of Djahat appears on the back wall (see Figure 41.). A voice similar to Djahat's can then be heard, but the audience can only see a static 2D image of Djahat, whilst Deris's face remains hidden in his position of prostration. This creates a sense of uncertainty as to the source and nature of these voices, and adds further ambiguity to the realism and perspective we are watching the scene from.

6.2 *Haruan*: An idiomatic and linguistic representation of Malaysian taboos

Semiotics & Simulacra

Semiotics, according to its founder - the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure, is 'a science which studies the role of signs as part of social life' and 'would form part of social psychology, and hence of general psychology' (Chandler, 1994). It is a very broad discipline with numerous branches, of which linguistics is one. At its core, Saussurean semiotics is centred upon a sign being divided into a 'signifier'/'signified' axis - the signifier being the form of a sign, and the signified its represented concept (*ibid.*). Another proponent of semiotics is Charles Sanders Peirce, an American philosopher whose early works on signs involve classifying it into Icons, Symbols and Indexes, depending on its relationship with its intended meaning (Etherington-Wright & Doughty, 2011: 69). Iconic refers to something which closely resembles its intended meaning, for instance a face and a portrait. (*ibid.*) Symbolic relationships bear no obvious physical similarities; these are arbitrary associations which need to be learnt, such as that of a country and its national emblem (Chandler, 1994). Indexical connections have direct physical or causal links between a signifier and its signified, for instance - natural signs like dark clouds and a downpour of rain (*ibid.*)

The Malay language, and its literature are rich and enriched with parables, poems, *pantun*³⁷ (a form of Malay poetry; Heer, 2006) and *peribahasa* (idioms). Many of these Malay forms of poetry are 'rhetorical tropes' (or figures of speech) which have been designed for persuasive discourse (Chandler, 1994). Due to the subtle, gentle nature of the language, its poetic forms have been used for centuries as masked devices to cajole, charm, chide and criticise. Malay idioms or *peribahasa* have been developed orally throughout generations via astute observations of nature, particularly by humanising the behaviour of the local Malaysian flora and fauna.

I believe that the Malay *adat*'s emphasis on impeccable manners and decorum have promoted the proliferation of these linguistic forms, whereby *kiasan* or metaphors - tropes 'in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable'³⁸ - have been inextricably embedded into the language to maintain politeness *regardless* of the context or situation in which it is used. I would like to posit at this point that whilst this 'politeness regardless' nature of the language and its society immediately appears as a significant obstacle in expressing taboos (and also possibly one of the reasons why issues such as infanticide are increasing in incidence unchecked), this cultural affinity towards 'the assumed and the implied' may also offer a possible route into the Malaysian psyche.

From the moment the project was conceived at the end of 2010, I have always been conscious of the fact that the word '*Haruan*' as a signifier, and the taboo it signifies would be central to the film through the popular Malay idiom describing the fish's behaviour. At this juncture, *Haruan*, as a word, is both an idiomatic and a linguistic (literary) tool to describe both incestuous rape - for Malay speakers who are familiar with the idiom, AND the snakehead fish - for those Malay speakers unfamiliar with the idiom, or as a literal translation for those who do not understand Malay. This would be the first ethnographical split, along purely (literary) idiomatic and linguistic lines. But one cannot and should not extricate the visual imagery that the name *Haruan* conjures. From the perspective of the film, this visual signifier of *Haruan* the fish is what I find most intriguing, in terms of its ambiguity and potential for visual, psychological and ethnographical manipulation.



Figure 42. The 'real' *Haruan*, Snakehead or *Channa striatus*³⁹.

Let us now consider the surface appearance of the fish. We can assume that some Malaysians (and non-Malaysians) may have seen a real-life *Haruan*, or at least a photograph of the *Channa striatus* species of the snakehead fish (see Figure 42.). We can therefore also assume that many of the potential members of the audience would not have had prior knowledge of *Haruan*'s actual appearance, thus their perception of *Haruan*'s morphology and surface appearance would be influenced almost solely by the many versions of *Haruan*'s simulacra in the film. I would consider this assumption of viewer's perception as the second ethnographical split, this time along the presence or absence of visual memory of the *Haruan* fish within the audience population. In the film *Haruan: The*

Figure 43. Examples of *Haruan*'s many simulacra in *Haruan: The Snakehead*.

A	Plasticine models of young <i>Haruans</i> in a 'claymation' sequence, slithering up a staircase in the opening scene.
B	A string-puppet of a mixed-media adult <i>Haruan</i> joining <i>Ikan</i> the storyteller.
C	A mixed-media, silhouetted <i>Haruan</i> in a glass bowl.
D	A digital drawing of <i>Haruan</i> in its embryonic stage (black), next to its 'human twin' (reddish-brown).
E	A floating, shadowy <i>Haruan</i> as a dream creature watching over <i>Ikan</i> during <i>Haruan</i> 's lullaby.
F	A painted adult <i>Haruan</i> on the front cover of the <i>Tome of Haruan</i> .
G	A digital drawing of <i>Haruan</i> at the end of the opening sequence, floating along <i>Ikan</i> 's eyeline, obscuring (or dominating?) the boy's view.
H	An embryo through the female <i>Wayang Kulit</i> 's eyes in the opening sequence. Though indeterminate in nature, its dark colouring suggests that it is probably that of the fish <i>Haruan</i> .
I	A more detailed, mixed-media, black version of the adult <i>Haruan</i> , in a bowl.
J	A digital drawing of a cooked, chopped-up <i>Haruan</i> in a dish, as seen through Deris's eyes.
K	A school of string-puppet, mixed-media <i>Haruans</i> swimming in the ether.
L	A close-up of the talking <i>Haruan</i> during one of its conversations with <i>Ikan</i> .
M	A mixed-media, white version of an adult <i>Haruan</i> in a bowl, amongst Salomah's other earthly possessions.

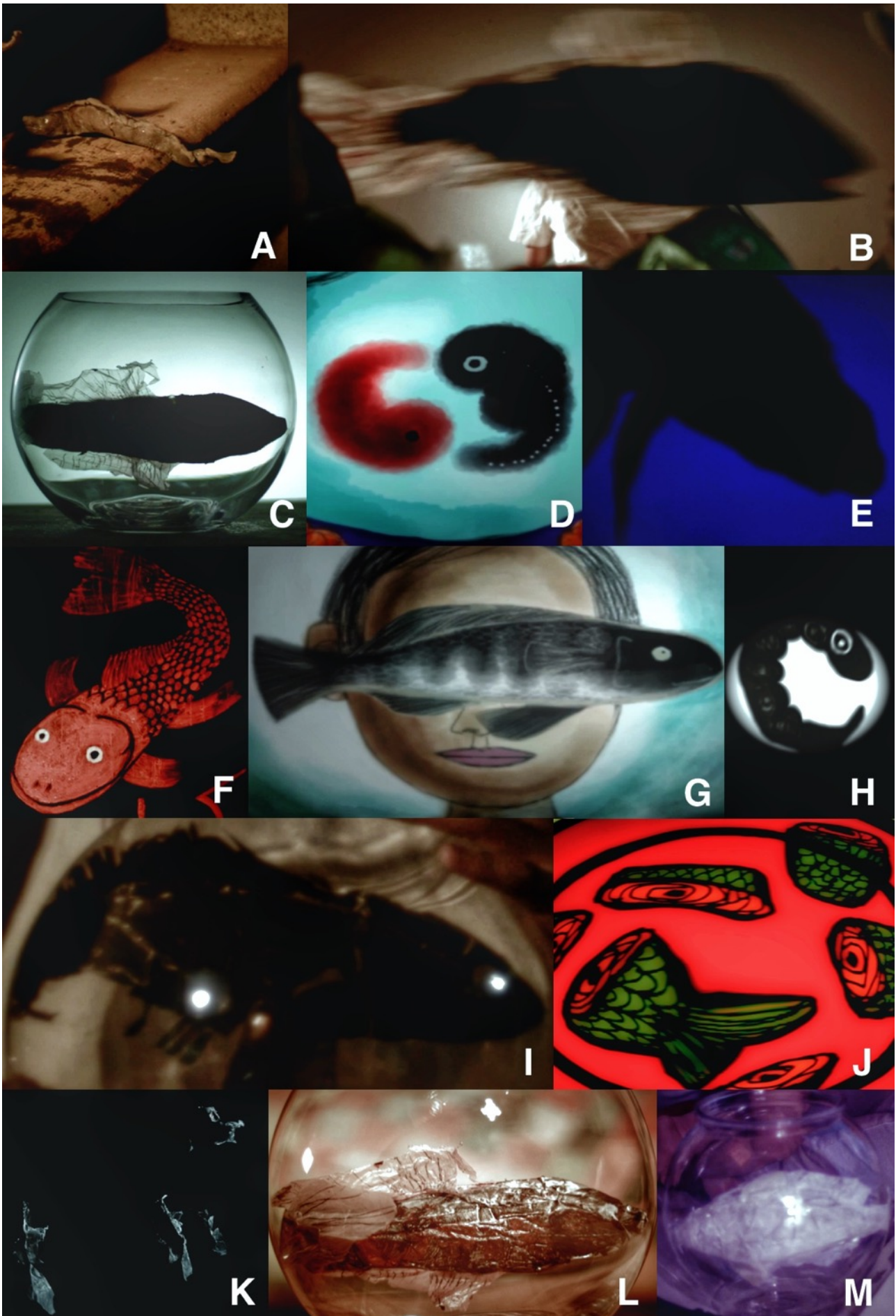


Figure 43A. The many simulacraic embodiments of *Haruan*.

Snakehead, the fish *Haruan* is represented by many different simulacra, made up of different materials and media, in various morphology. 13 of these simulacra are shown in Figure 43A. (see page 82), with the description for each simulacrum detailed above in Figure 43. (see page 81). I would like to revisit Deleuze's definition of a simulacrum, which I have previously reflected upon whilst looking for a fitting replacement for a real-life *Haruan* in the UK (see pages 55-56): A Deleuzian simulacrum would '*bear only an external and deceptive resemblance to a putative model. The process of its production, its inner dynamism, is entirely different from that of its supposed model; its resemblance to it is merely a surface effect, an illusion.*' (Deleuze, 1983).

All the simulacra of *Haruan* above would fit this definition; they are not the externally identical, hyperrealistic, post-modern clones of Baudrillard's simulacra (Baudrillard, 1994). These cinematic simulacra of *Haruan* are an earthier, more primitive group which only bear some of the physical attributes of the real *Haruan* (Figure 42.), yet perhaps ALL of the abstract associations of the creature. Each of these, individually and all of these, collectively are signifiers for the real *Haruan* and all of its properties. Therefore, these simulacra also adopt the signified concepts of the fish, depending on the psychological and ethnographical background of the audience. For instance, whilst not an exhaustive list, an audience member may perceive any of these simulacra as:

- a. A fish
- b. A fish in various stages of its life cycle
- c. A snakehead fish
- d. A hardy freshwater fish that can 'crawl' on land
- e. A fish that occasionally eats its young
- f. A magical, supernatural being (*Haruan* or Djahat)
- g. A human child (Ikan)
- h. A healer (Salomah)
- i. An incestuous rapist (Deris)
- j. A child murderer (Salomah, Salomah's mother or Deris)
- k. An illusion (? *Haruan*, Ikan or Djahat)
- l. Humankind
- m. Fake
- n. Real
- o. None of the above

In my opinion, there are also several important connections which a Malaysian audience will need to establish with regards to the film, right from its opening sequence:

i. The Indexical relationship between the word **Haruan** and the idiom:

Bagai Haruan Makan Anak

Like the Snakehead fish **eating its young**

ii. The Symbolic connection between the idiom and its meaning: **Incestuous Rape**.

iii. The Symbolic connection between the word **Haruan** and **Incestuous Rape**.

iv. The Symbolic connection between the word **Haruan** and the phrase 'eating its young'.

v. The Indexical/literal link between the phrase 'eating its young' and **Infanticide**.

vi. The Iconic relationship between the concept of the real **Haruan** fish with *all* of its **simulacra** in the film.

vii. The symbolic connection between the fish **simulacra** and the word **Haruan**. Loop back to i.

For a Malaysian audience who are not familiar with the idiom, or for a non-Malaysian audience, the connections with the imageries may begin at vi., then vii. The links i. to v. may be independently made with the unfolding of the narrative, but not, I suspect, from the beginning of the film as the idiom itself is not verbalised till later on, in a song, by Deris, Ikan and finally Salomah.

In Peirce's early works on Semiotics, he describes the concept of **Infinite Semiosis**, whereby 'since any sign must determine an interpretant in order to count as a sign, and interpretants are themselves signs, infinite chains of signs seem to become conceptually necessary' (Atkin, 2013). I would posit that this Infinite Semiosis is a crucial device for a film like *Haruan*, where it can potentially unify all the different layers of signifiers and their potential meanings to a receptive audience.

Whilst *Haruan* itself is a specific character in the film, its many signified characteristics may also be attributed to the other main characters, such as Ikan, Salomah, Salomah's mother, Deris and even Djahat. In conceptualising Deris's tormentor Djahat, the monster-fish morphology - with arms and hands like those of a shadow puppet (see Figure 44.,

Left) - was adopted to tie in with traditional imageries of the *Wayang Kulit*, and the dominant, piscine imageries of the fish *Haruan*. The look was also chosen to humanise Djahat (a talking creature with jointed upper limbs) as it exerts its influence on its *marionette* Deris (see Figure 44., Right). The moral ambiguity and interchangeability of the characters through idiomatic, linguistic and visual interpretations reflect upon the many



Figure 44. The *Haruan* / Djahat (Left) and the Deris / Haruan / Djahat (Right) Complexes.

facets of *Haruan* as a constant theme throughout the film. Ultimately, this ambivalence of an audience's interpretation of a character may reflect upon the fallibility of humankind itself, and the unpredictability of mankind's true nature. For instance, Djahat may be an 'evil' version of *Haruan*, but even the 'good' *Haruan*, which heals people and nurtures its young would kill and eat its own children if required; Salomah, who mothers Ikan and showers him with love, may be capable of taking another life herself, and Deris, who is full of hate and anger, may also have the capacity for repentance and self-sacrifice. It is interesting to note that throughout all the early viewings of the film, the multiplicity of the signifiers of the fish has not been identified as problematic by the viewers; the members of the test audience appear to have accepted the suggestion that there is only ONE *Haruan* in the story.

Brechtian aesthetics

Realistic means: discovering the causal complexes of society / unmasking the prevailing view of things as the view of those who are in power / writing from the standpoint of the class which offers the broadest solutions for the pressing difficulties in which human society is caught up / emphasising the element of development / making possible the concrete, and making possible abstraction from it.

Bertolt Brecht (1898-1956) in *Popularity and Realism* (1938) (Glahn, 2014)

The playwright and theatre practitioner Bertolt Brecht is perhaps most known for his Epic Theatre or Dialectical Theatre movement. Benjamin (1998: 1) describes Brecht's theatre movement as 'the filling-in of the orchestral pit', which demolishes the chasm between the stage and its audience, making theatre accessible as a public platform. Brecht believes that theatre is a powerful tool not only for entertainment, but also for social enlightenment (Brecht, 1948). One of the overarching ideas of Dialectical Theatre is its attempt to engage with an audience via constant introspection and awareness of itself and its processes, thereby challenging the viewers to reflect upon what they are watching onstage, thus possibly changing their social behaviour. However, Brecht *has* recognised the importance of theatre as entertainment, but encourages his audience to decide on 'which type of entertainment suits us best' (*ibid.*).

There has been some self-doubt and apprehension in my decision to adopt and experiment with some of Brecht's modernist and arguably socialistic European theatrical approaches to a Malaysian film, which tries to talk about some of the taboos within its society. I find it slightly surprising, and somewhat comforting to learn of Brecht's awareness of Chinese theatre techniques, namely of 'literalisation using verbal formulas, posters and captions' (Benjamin 1998: 7) which parallel some of his Dialectic Theatre methods of making what is seen on stage 'unsensational' (*ibid.*). Perhaps Brecht's system is geographically universal, and might traverse the transnational and transcultural divide to affect a Malaysian audience, with some possible adjustments, to appeal to its South East Asian sensibilities.

For the film *Haruan: The Snakehead*, I have experimented with several strategies, including Brechtian's self-awareness and alienation, which I feel may assist in delivering its difficult subject matters to a potentially unreceptive Malaysian audience. These are:

1. Referencing the familiar & the subliminal.

- The look and texture of a primitive and subliminal folklore.
- *Wayang Kulit*, mythological and cultural references.
- References to black-and-white classic cinema and usage of Malay songs of the same era.
- Theatrical/operatic/live performance-style acting.
- References to superstitions and the supernatural.

2. Referencing the old oral/visual form of storytelling.

- Voice-over of the narrative.
- Recital of Malay poetry and well-known idioms.
- Usage of familiar Folk songs (in Malay and Finnish).

3. Expressionistic visual & performance.

- Evoke the feel of a live cultural performance in Asian traditional art forms using shadows, body-painting, puppets and handcrafted props.
- Strong imageries with cranked-up, contrasting colours.

4. Substituting 'reality' with obvious simulacra.

- Usage of plastic 'reborn' dolls as the dead infants.
- Handcrafted fish in several versions, using different materials (plasticine, styrofoam, plastic, paper) which are all different in morphology and surface likeness to a 'real' *Haruan* fish.
- Digital drawings interspersed with live-action sequences to depict nightmarish events.

5. Brechtian 'self-awareness' and 'alienation' strategies.

- Breaking the 4th wall in actors' performances, including looking directly at the camera and throwing objects at the camera/audience.
- Editing techniques - deliberate uncomfortable length of difficult scenes.
- Usage of distracting diagonal/vertical text and static and dynamic title onscreen (including embossed sticky labels on Deris's hands) to correspond with an actor's actions.
- Usage of coloured subtitles (red or green instead of white), and occasionally literal and superfluous subtitling technique, such as translating 'La la la la la' in Deris's Toad song.
- Admixing of 2D drawings, claymation, string puppetry, crude digital animations and live-action sequences.
- Textual statements and questions posed to the audience throughout the film.
- A black-and-white flashback sequence which is completely different in its look, visual style and performance compared to the rest of the film.

- Usage of multiple languages (English, Finnish, Malay and Arabic) with Malay and English subtitling. These languages are occasionally spoken together in the same scene.
- Ambiguous timeframe and 'historical' setting with a non-chronological narrative flow.
- Chaptered, stand-alone segments and scenes.
- Usage of songs which are intermittently truncated to match a character's actions onscreen. Some songs appear mismatched in terms of mood and tempo to the actions onscreen, to create a disconcerting audio-visual discordance.



Figure 45. A proposed strategy for cinematically presenting taboos to a sensitive audience will need to negotiate an overlapping compromise between familiar and comfortable notions and difficult, alienating imageries. Familiarity alone may lull an audience into a comfortable, escapist state of mind, whilst a strongly alienating work may drive an audience away completely.

I would like to summarise these strategies of trying to deliver taboo subject matters through film as a hybrid aesthetics between naturalistic and non-naturalistic methods of cinematic storytelling, where there exists 'an ongoing dialogue between the alien and the familiar' (see Figure 45.). In my opinion, an audience needs to be able to identify with the imageries, and be in a position of relative comfort with what is presented to them *before* they are alienated and challenged with the uncomfortable realities which the film is hoping to address. I feel that it is important for this dialogue between the two elements to be subtle, balanced and continuous throughout the film, rather than segmental (for instance, the familiar first, then the alien) which may potentially come across as an exploitative ruse to ensnare an audience into watching the work against their collective will and want.

Titles, text and literalisation

The film *Haruan: The Snakehead* utilises labels, banners, on-screen titles and text for different purposes in its attempt to communicate with its audience. These labels stand out from the conventional subtitles due to their size, colour, orientation and behaviour on-screen, thus disrupting the flow of the narrative and attracting attention to themselves. Below are some examples of their usage in the film:

1. Externalising a character's thoughts or emotions

In one of Djahat's conversations with Deris, a shadowy outline of Djahat and Salomah's written name appear on the back wall as Deris prostrates himself in repentance. Djahat's



Figure 46. Above: Writing on the wall - Salomah's name appears with Djahat's whispers (Backdrop, Rear Projection). Below: Onscreen labels are not only used to translate the Malay letterings on Deris's knuckles, but also to 'literalise' his troubled and fractured psychological state.

non-diegetic whispers (or Deris's internal diegetic voices?) taunt Deris about Salomah (see Figure 46., Above) as the static text bearing her name remains on the wall throughout the rest of the conversation, dominating the screen. Text and simple graphics are also used in the foreground to externalise a character's state of mind. In a scene where Deris is torn between grief and hatred, the onscreen labels, along with the colours on his body act as literalisation devices to declare this split to the audience (see Figure 46., Below).

2. Labelling prop and foretelling actions

During the Production phase of the film, I have used physical, embossed DYMO® labels on a prop item and the knuckles of Deris's hands for different reasons. In a scene where Deris encounters an amphibian nemesis, the labelling of an everyday kitchen utensil clarifies the item's purpose (see Figure 47., Both panels). It also declares Deris's premeditation, thus foretelling the ensuing events within the scene. The red colouring of the label matches Deris's skin colour at the time, signifies danger and attracts a viewer's



Figure 47. Left & Right: The embossed, Red DYMO® label on a kitchen utensil. Right: Black, onscreen titles in English to literalise the prop *and* what Deris is about to do.

attention. The sudden appearance of black onscreen titles that correspond with the red physical label (see Figure 47., Right) followed by a brief pause, offers an English translation to the Malay physical label and further interrupts the flow of the film.

3. Deris's 'Talking knuckles'

Vaguely inspired by the 'LOVE' and 'HATE' knuckle tattoos, I initially wanted to physically draw black letterings onto Deris's red knuckles (see Figure 48.). The idea then developed into using embossed DYMO® labels instead, so that it would be easy for me to keep changing the letters during Production, thus allowing me to use Deris's knuckles as a form

of ‘dynamic message board’ as he kneads the dough for his *roti canai* (flat bread). This then developed further into a wordplay exercise, whereby I decided to use the Malay word

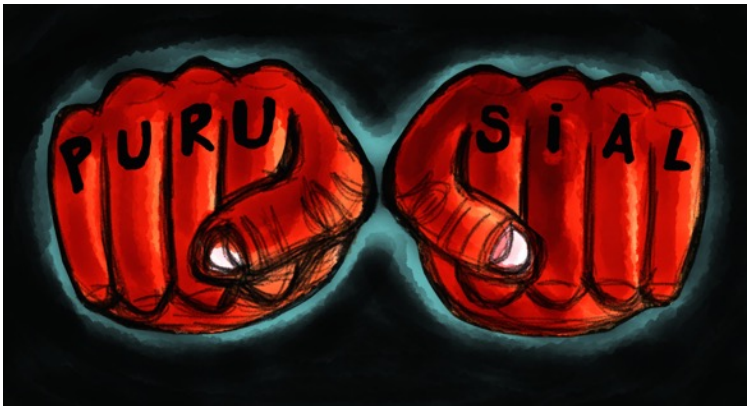


Figure 48. A PreProduction drawing of Deris's red hands showing the black letterings on his knuckles.

‘sial’ or ‘cursed’ as the constant base word spelt on the knuckles of Deris's Left hand. I then selected several single Malay words ending in ‘sial’, or two-word phrases with ‘sial’ as the second word, which would be visibly created by the combination of the Left hand ‘sial’ and the changing alphabets on Deris's Right hand. These

combined words or phrases are used in different ways in the film. For example, several of these combinations form short introductory sequences to individual scenes (see Figure

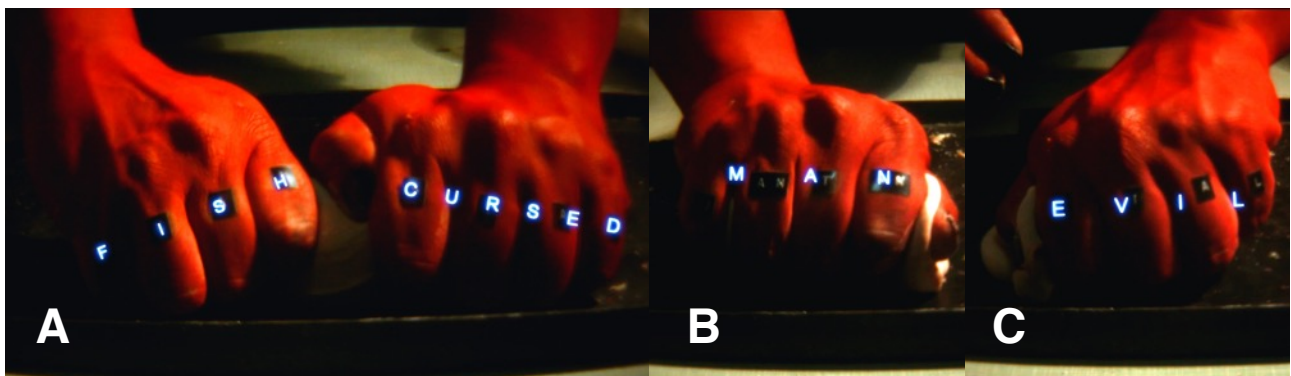


Figure 49. Deris's dough-kneading hands foretelling the events which are about to unfold - A: Of *Haruan*'s impending fate, and B & C: Of Deris's character and actions. Note the white corresponding text in English translating the Malay words on Deris's knuckles.

49.). Some are direct pleas to the (Malaysian) audience (see Figure 50., A), while others are perhaps the filmmaker's self-reflexive statements about the film itself (Figure 50.,B & C).

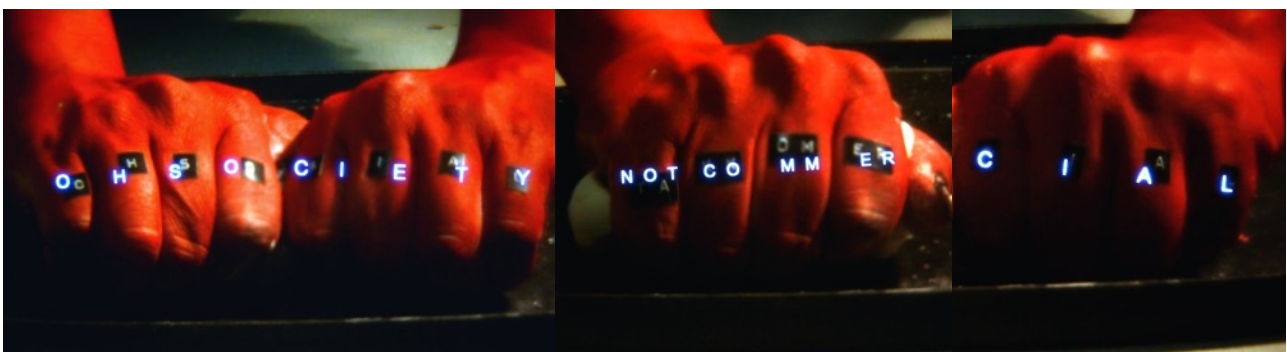


Figure 50. The film's self-reflexivity and self-awareness of its construct and its (target) audience.

Of sounds and songs

To hear and then see is thus a basic paradigm for the relationship between play and audience in Shakespeare's theatre, necessary if the spectator is to complete the theatre illusion and make of the stage a world.

John N. Wall (1979)

Attempting to create an aural world to match, complement and enhance the alternative verisimilitude of *Haruan: The Snakehead's* Malaysian visual universe is perhaps one of the most challenging aspects of the whole filmmaking process. Physical and physiological perception, and hence the recording of an aural stimulus are different from a visual one, inasmuch that visual imageries can 'stretch and compress time' (Monaco, 2009: 137-141) whilst sound has to exist in 'real time' (the analogy being that there are no 'still snapshots' for sound (*ibid.*)). However, I would argue that like its visual counterpart, the perception of aural stimuli has a psychological, and more importantly, an ethnographical component which is crucial for a film's cultural verisimilitude (Neale, 2000). With this in mind, my early PreProduction discussions with the Malaysian composer for the film had centred upon creating a traditional and visceral soundscape with nuances which are identifiable with the traditional and cultural sounds of Malaysia and its South East Asian neighbours. Two of the classical Malay songs which were used in two of *Haruan: The Snakehead's* major scenes - *Paduan Budi*⁴⁰ and *Bunga Telur Nasi Minyak*⁴¹ had been earmarked for the film during these early meetings. Both these songs were composed by the venerated Malay composer Zubir Said, the composer of Singapore's national anthem *Majulah Singapura* (Sim, 2014). *Paduan Budi* was one of the songs from the film *Dang Anom* (Hussein Haniff, 1962), in which the beautiful daughter (Dang Anom) of a nobleman falls foul of the Sultan when she refuses his advances in favour of her chosen lover - one of the Sultan's own warriors. In the film, *Paduan Budi* is a duet between Dang Anom and her lover as she greets his return from battle. The lyrics of the song describes their mutual love and deep longing for each other. When I first heard *Paduan Budi*, it somehow conjured imageries of Deris shaving and grooming in front of a mirror, prior to his nocturnal visit to Salomah's

bedroom. When the composer also shared similar imageries with me, we decided to use the song in the film, and create the Deris's 'shaving scene' to go with it (see Figure 51.). This sinister *migration of meaning* of the song's lyrics attaches a sense of foreboding to Deris's character and the scene itself. The visual imagery, together with the song's lyrics, identify *Deris* and his intentions with *Paduan Budi*, thus creating a



Figure 51. Deris shaving and singing along to *Paduan Budi*.

Deris-Evil-Incestuous Rape = Paduan Budi leitmotif (Etherington-Wright & Doughty, 2011: 69). *Leitmotif*, in this instance, describes a musical element which can be identified with a specific character, an emotion, an object or a location in a film (*ibid.*). The lyrics of the song are transcribed in Malay onscreen and subtitled in English to allow the audience to appreciate the contextual change, and to follow *Deris's* intermittent rendition of the song. Leitmotifs from *Paduan Budi* are also audible as Deris approaches a sleeping Salomah in her bedroom, and within the first 2 minutes of the film's opening sequence. An instrumental version of *Paduan Budi* is used during the end credits, to complement its usage throughout the film and establish the song's importance within the work. Original score and sound design for the film were composed to edited 'reels' of visual sequences in Malaysia.

Bunga Telur Nasi Minyak is another classical Malay duet, albeit an earlier (circa 1930s), more upbeat version. It is of the *Joget* dance genre - an ‘unofficial national social dance’ with Portuguese influence (Matusky & Chopyak, 2008), with the lyrics of the song describing the merriment of a traditional Malay wedding feast. The title itself is a combination of two items - a guest favour and a special rice dish, both associated with the festive occasion. In Post Production, I experimented with using this song against a



Figure 52. Two worlds. Left: The diegetic sounds of Salomah’s misery is heard as the camera watches her from the ‘outside world’. Right: The *non-diegetic* or *internal diegetic* *Bunga Telur Nasi Minyak* is heard as the camera observes Salomah from the ‘inside world’ of the toilet bowl.

harrowing scene of Salomah trying to dispose of a newborn infant in a toilet, as an alienation strategy. The cheerful song is non-diegetic, and is heard only during vicarious Point-of-View (POV) shots from the inside of the toilet bowl as ‘it’ observes Salomah and her actions, thus associating its ‘world’ with the song (See Figure 52.). The start-stop flow

Visual	Outside world	Inside world (POV)
	Naturalistic, internal view of a toilet.	Composed, reddish, mildly distorted ‘underwater’ look.
Aural	Diegetic. Direct recording of Salomah crying. Sadness.	Non-Diegetic or Internal Diegetic. Jarring Start/Stop play of ‘ <i>Bunga Telur Nasi Minyak</i> . Happiness.
Contextual (Semiotic)	Infanticide or abandonment of a baby produced out of wedlock or a product of incest or rape.	<i>Bunga Telur Nasi Minyak</i> ethnographically evokes a traditional Malay wedding scene or the concept of marriage.

Figure 52A. The visual/aural/contextual juxtapositions in Salomah’s ‘Toilet Scene’.

of the the song as the camera view flips between watching Salomah from outside the toilet door to looking at her from inside the toilet bowl further detaches the POV world as a separate psychological realm. In my opinion, the jarring visual, aural and contextual juxtapositions within this scene enhance its alienation effect and self-reflexivity.

1. Traditional sounds and tunes

Apart from evoking georegional imageries of South East Asia, traditional Malaysian songs can confer a sense of ethnographic familiarity to a film. For *Haruan: The Snakehead*, I have altered the lyrics to a few traditional Malay nursery rhymes, folk songs and songs from popular classical Malay films, so that the characters' dialogues can occasionally be delivered in these familiar musical tunes. The song '*Haruan Oh Haruan*' for instance is sung in the tune of '*Bangau Oh Bangau*', a nursery rhyme sung by animal characters about making excuses and not facing up to one's problems.

Conversely, *Haruan*'s speech and lullaby to Ikan are delivered in Finnish - a European language unfamiliar to many Malaysians (and perhaps non-Malaysians) - to *alienate* an audience and the *Haruan* character itself. The lullaby is chosen and performed for the film by one of my Finnish collaborators, who also happens to be the Art Director of the project. *Sydämeni laulu* is a sombre traditional Finnish funeral poem by Aleksis Kivi (1870)⁴², sung by mothers who have lost a child, during the funeral procession. Whilst this fact may not be known to a non-Finnish audience, the unfamiliar rhythm and texture of the Finnish language (compared to Malay), coupled with the imageries onscreen may be enough to evoke a sense of detachment and dreamlike transcendence within the lullaby scene.

2. Dance Duration

A scene where Deris first becomes 'possessed' by Djahat is depicted by Deris's trancelike dance in near darkness. The initial footage of Deris randomly dancing to silence is just over 20 minutes long. To help edit Deris's dance sequence, I have requested an original piece of traditional music to cut the scene to. This reverse process of cutting a dance footage to new music, whilst neither unique nor unusual, has become problematic for the process, in that it is difficult to gauge its 'acceptable duration'. Throughout an audience

feedback loop from early viewings of the film, I have trimmed the dance sequence from over 4 minutes long (the original duration of the composed song) to just over 2 minutes. Perhaps the 'difficulty' in editing and perceiving the scene stems from the amorphous, cyclical nature of the song and the imageries associated with it. In the end, after several feedback loops and edits, I have decided to consciously leave the duration of the sequence at a borderline 'uncomfortable' length, to maintain a distance between the audience and what is happening onscreen.

3. Dialogue and Diegesis

As with the visual imageries in the film *Haruan: The Snakehead*, I have tried to experiment with elements within its soundscape, in particular with how the voices of the narrative are delivered by the characters. Most of the recordings during the Production phase have been captured using both the on-board BlackMagic Cinema Camera microphone and a Zoom portable audio recorder, whilst Post Production recordings have relied solely on the portable audio recorders. Some of the dialogues were captured 'live' during Production, but the majority of the dialogues and voice-over narration were recorded in Post Production, both in the UK and Finland.

I have decided to mix voice over narration and onscreen dialogue for Ikan as the main storyteller of the film. From the moment Ikan greets the audience directly with his opening dialogue whilst looking at *Haruan* and the audience at the same time, the diegesis of Ikan's voice is not entirely clear, as his face is partly hidden behind *Haruan* and its glass bowl:

IKAN: Hello. My name is Ikan. I am 10 years old.

I love ALL fish, especially *Haruan*.

If one accepts diegetic sound as 'existing within the narrative world and can be heard by the characters within it', and non-diegetic sound is heard only by the audience 'outside of this world', then this opening dialogue is diegetic. The fact that Ikan is also addressing the audience directly, giving them access to the Diegesis, also places this opening dialogue - in my opinion - between diegetic and non-diegetic. We then hear the voice-over narration

of Ikan initially, then of Ikan (in English) and *Haruan* (in Finnish). Throughout these narrations, both Ikan and *Haruan* appear onscreen, but are not obviously *physically* talking to each other. Whilst voice over narration is often described as non-diegetic, in this instance one can argue that it is diegetic as well, as both Ikan and *Haruan* can hear their own ‘telepathic’ conversations. If ‘internal diegesis’ refers to the inner thoughts of a character, does it also apply to ‘inner conversations’ between characters?

Another example of diegetic ambiguity within the film is the character Djahat itself. In several of its visits to Deris, Djahat is only represented aurally, without any specific visual form onscreen which constantly relates to the entity. In many of the scenes where Djahat’s voice is heard, the character we see onscreen is Deris. This creates a possibility that the raspy whispers that the audience hear may not be the non-diegetic voice of Djahat, but rather the internal diegetic voice of the troubled Deris.

Winters (2010) argues that the problematic description of diegetic and non-diegetic sounds is compounded by the way it is applied to both film dialogue *and* music, as he eloquently surmised, ‘To assume that music functions primarily as a narrating voice in a narratological sense, rather than as an indicator and occupier of narrative space, is perhaps to misunderstand the broader nature of cinematic diegesis.’ Aslinger (2008) echoes this notion by suggesting that the term ‘aural appearances’ should be used instead of the ones based on diegesis when music helps to describe a character, a character’s actions or the plot within a film.

Whilst the debate on diegetic classification for sounds and music will undoubtedly continue, I would support Aslinger’s suggestion of a terminology change, for instance in describing scenes where a character *sings* the words of his actions or intentions. For example, revisiting Deris’s ‘shaving scene’ and *Paduan Budi* (see page 93), although the song appears to be heard by Deris coming from a radio within the diegesis, Deris then begins to sing along to the song, mouthing some of its lyrics, whilst suggestively acting out his evil intentions. This music-dialogue-psyche combination requires a more flexible description, and highlights the complexity of describing the usage of film sounds, dialogue and music.

Pseudo-Narrative Closure

In my opinion, *Haruan: The Snakehead* is a construct describing the different journeys of its characters, rather than a 'sequential plot progression'. Although the paths of its characters do cross one another, they do not necessarily have, or be shown to have a collective end point. Whilst I am keen to maintain the alienating, experimental nature of the work, I am also aware of the need to preserve some element of 'normality' for the film's target audience. *Haruan: The Snakehead*'s penultimate scene sees an older



Figure 53. Salomah's Asylum and sanctuary.

Salomah in an Asylum (see Figure 53.), surrounded by several replicas of the film's many simulacra. Unlike the controversial incorporation of a classical frame narrative within the final scene of the expressionistic and highly stylised *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* - which some argue negates its subversive voice and renders Dr Caligari's murderous crimes as another 'madman's fantasy' (Kracauer, 1966; Tortolani, 2013), Salomah's Asylum scene is not meant to dilute the film's experimental vision. It is more of a temporary sanctuary - both for Salomah and the audience. I would describe this scene as a pseudo-narrative

closure, as it suggests a somewhat positive conclusion to Salomah's tale, but through its telling by the resident psychiatrist of the Asylum. This third party information sharing is problematic when it is made clear that the Asylum's information on Salomah is based mainly on news reports, anecdotal evidence, hearsay and guesswork, as Salomah herself has stopped talking since she first arrived at the institution. This is self-reflexive on the way sensitive data on infanticide and incestuous rape is being collected by many organisations around the world, due to problems with access to the victims and parties involved. It is also self-reflexive on the film itself, or more accurately, on the nature of the stories that informed me during the ideation phase of the filmmaking process. I would argue that the Psychiatrist's narration is not an exposition of the film narrative *per se*; rather yet another ambiguous version of events in the lives of the film's characters.

6.3 Early test viewing feedback

The visit back to Malaysia in April 2014 had allowed me to test a few selected scenes from the edit on several unsuspecting family members and friends as chosen representatives of the film's primary Malaysian audience. Whilst they were aware that the edit they were watching was by no means the final version that would appear in the film, it is interesting to note that many of the more mature members of the Malaysian audience whom I showed



Figure 54. Mothers and Daughters. Above: A mother waking her stepdaughter up in the classical Malay film *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* (*Garlic and Shallot*) (S. Roomai Noor, 1959). Below: A flashback, black-and-white scene from *Haruan: The Snakehead* revisiting Salomah's revelation to her mother regarding a new addition to the family.

portions of the edit to gravitated towards a particular segment: a black and white scene which is used as a flashback ‘reveal’ within the film (see Figure 54.). Of all the scenes in *Haruan: The Snakehead*, this segment is the most ‘naturalistic’ in terms of its acting, dialogue delivery and visual style, with Salomah’s mother portrayed as an archetypal evil



Figure 55. An outdoor, flashback scene from *Haruan: The Snakehead*. Above: Low-angle view of Salomah’s mother as she wheels Salomah and her baby away from the maternal home. Below: A close up of Salomah, pondering her baby’s fate. Whilst still in black and white, these outdoor segments are aesthetically different compared with the indoor portion of the flashback scene.

matriarch character, and Salomah as the victimised ‘Cinderella’ figure. This dominant, angry and brash Mother or Stepmother figure can be seen in many ‘Bollywood-type’ melodramas of early Malaysian Cinema, such as *Pancha Delima* (P. Ramlee, 1956), *Ibu*

Mertuaku (My Mother-in-Law) (P. Ramlee, 1962) and *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah (Garlic and Shallot)* (S. Roomai Noor, 1959). Within its *mise-en-scène*, this black and white sequence has the verisimilitude of a classical Malay film - a mother and her daughter sitting on the floor, wearing a Malay 'kurung' blouse and a *batik sarung*, performing household chores. The indoor set has been designed to mimic that of a traditional Malay *kampung* house, with wooden floors and walls which are adorned with woven mats and motifs made of dried vegetation. I would posit that perhaps the Malaysian members of the audience who responded to this flashback scene identified with these verisimilitudinal features of classical Malay cinema. This would support my argument on the usage of cinematic imageries which are 'familiar' to an intended target audience (see Figure 54.), in this case the traditional nuances of rural Malaysian life. An audience of the completed version of the film, irrespective of their nationality may remember this scene for another reason, in that the black and white segment is immediately and abruptly different aesthetically compared with the rest of the film. Whilst the indoor imageries may be familiar to some, the outdoor portion of the flashback scene is increasingly alienating, with stylised low-angle views of Salomah's mother and Salomah's close-up shots dominating the frame (see Figure 55.). This change in aesthetics reflects the increasingly challenging actions onscreen, where it is suggested that a possible infanticide is in progress. I believe that this subtle, progressive dialogue between familiar and alien elements has facilitated the delivery of this difficult scene to its intended audience.

The feedback from test viewings in the UK thus far has been positive, in general. What I find immediately intriguing is the wide ethnographical variations in perception regarding what is deemed to be culturally significant or worrying within the film, and the transnational differences in responses between a Malaysian and a non-Malaysian member of the audience. For instance, my Finnish collaborators immediately relate the characters *Haruan*, Deris and Djahat to their Nordic mythological beings such as sea spirits, serpents and monsters. A Malaysian audience member, upon seeing the red painted Deris singing to his amphibian nemesis, wonders about Deris's potential motives in possibly wanting to use the animal as an ingredient for an animistic, black magic spell to charm Salomah. A diasporic Indian viewer instantly identifies the imageries of the painted Deris to those of the characters from the Hindu Epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* which, incidentally, are

also historically linked to the South East Asian's shadow puppetry which is heavily referenced in the film (see also the link of these Epics to *Wayang Kulit*, on page 76). An Egyptian Muslim viewer is deeply troubled by how Deris is inadequately covered and inappropriately attired (never mind being painted red, with black fingernails) as he prostrates himself in repentance before God, and promptly questions the filmmaker's knowledge about Islamic etiquette whilst performing prayers.

A non-Malaysian audience member of one of the test viewings has approached me recently to convey how relieved and happy she is that Salomah is finally 'safe' within the Asylum, away from her torments and tormentors. This feedback has convinced me that the employment of the pseudo-narrative closure in *Haruan: The Snakehead* is justified, and *can* work for some members of the audience who require the positive reassurance. In truth, however, as with many of these cases in real life, the fate of Salomah, and many women like her remains an unknown and an unpredictable variant.

Ultimately however, the feedback which can directly inform the research questions will need to come from public viewings of *Haruan: The Snakehead* in Malaysia, to an unprimed Malaysian audience. The feasibility of this exercise remains unclear at this point in time. However, I am determined to try to have the film screened in Malaysia at some capacity, in order to obtain the feedback which is invaluable to this research process.

7. CONCLUSION

No moral system can rest solely on authority.

A. J. Ayer (1910-1989) in *Humanist Outlook* introduction (1968)
(Augarde, 1991:16)

My preliminary findings from the contextual exploration of taboos within Malaysian cinema and Malaysian filmmakers suggest that there are no taboos unique to the Malaysian society, and that many of these 'taboos' are, in fact, religious prohibitions. I would also posit that many Malaysians do not fear these taboos themselves, but rather the stigma of being exposed as someone who breaks them, or being labelled as a non conformist. Three Malaysian films which have tried to deal with taboos are examined in order to interrogate the first research question as to how taboos have been represented in Malaysian cinema. The findings from these Malaysian films are then compared with the findings from my investigation into the unusual aesthetics of five challenging non-Malaysian films. The results from these two cohorts are analysed to formulate alternative cinematic techniques to depict taboos within Malaysian films. These techniques are then put into practice in the feature-length film *Haruan: The Snakehead*, which serves as an experimental tool to interrogate the main research question of the study: How can taboos be alternatively and effectively represented within Malaysian cinema, to a Malaysian audience?

This research project, and its practice component - the film *Haruan: The Snakehead* may not necessarily offer magical solutions to these complex, sociocultural problems. However, the work has generated new knowledge into the cinematic techniques which may offer answers to the research question as to how Malaysian taboos can be alternatively and effectively represented within its cinema and to its society. The first of these is the subtle yet powerful exploitation of semiotics, in the form of verbal and visual Malay language idioms which deal with specific taboos. The second technique is the application of hybrid aesthetics which marry theatrical and cinematic elements, evoking traditional forms of South East Asian performing arts and aural-oral-visual storytelling. The third is via the

introduction of alienating, non-naturalistic theatrical elements - such as those introduced by the playwright Bertolt Brecht, to instil self-awareness and reflexivity into the work, and its target audience. The fourth component of my findings is the use of multimedia simulacra to cinematically represent all the techniques previously mentioned, in the form of crafted set design elements, prop items or characters within a story. Perhaps the most important finding of this research is that in order to cinematically discuss taboos amongst a culturally sensitive society such as Malaysia's, a film needs to display a constant negotiation between familiar, traditional or regional elements and difficult, alienating concepts and imageries. *Haruan: The Snakehead* is a cinematic experimentation using all these techniques described, by way of the practical implementation of new knowledge, in attempting to represent taboos in ways which have not been previously adopted in Malaysian cinema.

A parallel experiment into a predominantly visual workflow within the entire process of filmmaking has also yielded new knowledge which is versatile, practical, effective and reproducible. This visual workflow exploits digital drawings produced using applications on an Apple iPad, which are constantly reworked and adapted throughout the entire filmmaking process according to their usage and implementation. These digital drawings act as conduits for the exchange of ideas and concepts between the cast, crew members and collaborators of the work. They are also used as the narrative base of *Haruan: The Snakehead*, its visual script (see Appendix C., pages 131-196), previsualisation drawings, projected 'optical' filters and even as stills and animated panels within the finished film itself. In my opinion, the visual workflow disambiguates the process of information sharing, thus promoting collaborative work (see Appendices D. & E., pages 197-200, 201-205). These digital drawings are also easily stored, shared and reproduced, features which are especially useful during the design phase of PreProduction.

The overwhelming yet subliminal control of the Malay *adat* - or sociocultural norms - in my mind, is still prevalent within modern Malaysian society, and may be one of the main reasons why the concepts of 'legitimacy' and 'family honour' are often upheld above an infant's right to live. It is imperative that Parliamentary dialogues on Government-led actions such as legislative considerations to deal with these complex issues, along with the ongoing, commendable work by numerous Non-Government Organisations (NGOs)

into the welfare of women, abandoned babies and their mothers continue to happen. Whilst the incidences of infanticide/baby abandonment and incestuous rape are readily reported by Malaysia's printed and broadcast media, I would argue that there remains a dearth in true sociocultural discourse at ground level, and a lack of sustained interest in these issues within the society itself.

The idea for the project stems from my urgent need to understand, and reconcile with the fact that too many newborn babies are abandoned and killed, for reasons unclear and unfathomable, in my beloved country of birth. I make no presumptions whatsoever as to whether the film will be accepted by the Malaysian public, nor do I wish to predict whether the film will affect change in the society's behaviour towards these taboos if they *do* decide to watch it. *Haruan: The Snakehead* is an honest invitation to face these taboos head-on, through alternative eyes, in a cinematic form which is not often employed in Malaysian cinema. It is my sincere hope that this film will engender a deeper awareness and understanding of the issues surrounding infanticide, baby abandonment and incestuous rape, and in some way promote a culture of openness and self-reflexivity within the Malaysian society in discussing matters deemed offensive and reprehensible, through cinematic discourse, and beyond.

NOTES

1. Oxford Dictionaries. [Online] <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/taboo?q=taboo>, accessed 01/07/13
2. Oxford Dictionaries. [Online] <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/amoral?q=amorality#amoral>, accessed 01/07/2013
3. Oxford Dictionaries. [Online] <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/idiom?q=idiom>, accessed 01/07/2013
4. See the Malaysian Population Statistics Official Site. [Online] http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Population/files/population_projections/Population_Projection_2010-2040.pdf, accessed 01/07/2013
5. See the Statistics section of the FINAS Official Website [Online] <http://www.finans.gov.my/index.php?mod=industry&sub=filemmalaysia>, accessed 03/08/2013
6. See the Malaysian Department of Statistics Official website. [Online] <http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?lang=en>, accessed 12/08/2013
7. Taken from the Press Statement of the Malaysian Department of Statistics regarding the Population and Housing Census of 2000. Official website. [Online] <http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/index.php?lang=en>, accessed 12/08/2013
8. The term *Bumiputra* is derived from a combination of two Sanskrit/Malay words – *Bumi* (earth/soil) and *putra* (prince/son). It refers to the concept of ‘the indigenous population’ or the ‘sons of the soil’ (Siddique & Suryadinata 1981: 662-663). In Peninsular Malaysia this refers mainly to the Malay population, whilst in Sabah and Sarawak it refers to the various indigenous ethnic communities (*ibid.*).
9. Oxford Dictionaries. [Online] <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/verisimilitude?q=verisimilitude>, accessed 01/07/2013
10. Oxford Dictionaries. [Online] <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/simulacrum?q=simulacrum>, accessed 01/07/2013
11. Oxford Dictionaries. [Online] <http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/language>, accessed 04/09/2014
12. Oxford Dictionaries. [Online] <http://oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/diaspora?q=diaspora>, accessed 01/07/2013
13. See data from the National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Centre, University of California at Berkeley. (December 2005) *Fact Sheet on Boarder Babies, Abandoned Infants and Discarded Infants*. [Online] http://aia.berkeley.edu/media/pdf/abandoned_infant_fact_sheet_2005.pdf, accessed 16/09/2013

14. See '517 baby dumping cases since 2005.' (09 February 2011) *The Malaysian Insider* [Online] <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/malaysia/article/517-baby-dumping-cases-since-2005>, accessed 12/08/2013
15. See data from the Population Profile of the United States (1997) *U.S. Bureau of the Census, Current Population Reports*, Series P23-194, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 1998.[Online] <http://www.census.gov/prod/3/98pubs/p23-194.pdf>, accessed 16/09/2013. Note that in 1997, Population of the U.S was 266.4 million, whilst the Malaysian population was 21.6 million (from Index Mundi at <http://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/population.html>), accessed 16/09/2013.
16. See the news article 'Brothers held for incest.' (21 July 2012) *The Star Online* [Online] <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Nation/2012/07/21/Brothers-held-for-incest.aspx>, accessed 15/09/2013
17. See the news article 'No incest with stepdaughter, says cop.' (13 April 2013) *The Star Online* [Online] <http://www.thestar.com.my/News/Community/2013/04/13/No-incest-with-stepdaughter-says-cop.aspx>, accessed 15/09/2013
18. See the news article 'Ex-fisherman to spend twilight years in prison for incest.' (08 April 2013) *New Straits Times* [Online] <http://www.nst.com.my/latest/ex-fisherman-to-spend-twilight-years-in-prison-for-incest-1.250931>, accessed 15/09/2013
19. Perhaps the only overt censorship imposed onto ...*Dalam Botol* was to its original title, which was *Anu Dalam Botol*. 'Anu' is a Malay word which is often used as a versatile substitutory noun with a spectrum of meanings, innocent or otherwise. *Anu* in this context was dropped from the title as it refers to the main character's penis which is kept preserved in a bottle after his male-to-female gender reassignment surgery.
20. Not unlike Raja Azmi's ...*Dalam Botol*, the original Malay title of U-Wei's film *Perempuan, Isteri dan Jalang* (*Woman, Wife and Whore*) was bowdlerised upon its official release in Malaysia. The word *Jalang* (*Whore*) was replaced by an ellipsis, prompting Raja Azmi to jokingly suggest that perhaps Malaysian filmmakers should strive towards having a dot-dot-dot somewhere within the title of their films as a measure of credibility.
21. See the explanation on how *nasi kangkang* or 'straddled rice' is made. [Online] <http://themalaysianlife.blogspot.com.es/2010/01/menstrual-blood-vegetable-nasi-kang.html>, accessed 03/06/2012
22. See the information regarding *Silat* on the official *Pencak Silat* Federation United Kingdom website. [Online] <http://www.pencaksilat.co.uk/>, accessed 03/06/2012
23. See Evernote website. [Online] <http://evernote.com/penultimate/>, accessed 17/09/2013
24. See Sketchbook Pro website. [Online] <http://www.autodesk.com/products/sketchbook-pro/overview>, accessed 17/09/2013
25. See Paper by 53 website. [Online] <http://www.fiftythree.com/paper>, accessed 17/09/2013

26. Resembling the works of M. C. Escher (1898-1972) Dutch artist. His body of work is characterised by explorations of infinity, architecture, and tessellation. See the M. C. Escher Foundation Official website. [Online] <http://www.mcescher.com>, accessed 25/01/2015
27. See MORIA Science Fiction, Horror and Fantasy Film Review. [Online] <http://moria.co.nz/horror/cabinet-of-dr-caligari-1919-das-kabinett-des-dr-caligari.htm>, accessed 15/09/2013
28. *Verfremdungseffekt* or 'making strange what is familiar' is a dramatic technique developed by the playwright Bertolt Brecht. It is designed to distance an audience from a theatrical performance in order for them to objectively reflect on what they see on stage. See University of Southern Queensland. 'Artsworx.' [Online] <http://www.usq.edu.au/artsworx/schoolresources/mother-courage/Brechtian%20Techniques>, accessed 17/09/2013
29. Susan Sontag (1933-2004) American writer, filmmaker, human rights activist and literary icon. See her brief biography on the Susan Sontag Foundation website. [Online] <http://www.susansontag.com/SusanSontag/index.shtml>, accessed 18/09/2013
30. Mariano et al. (2002) Significant elements occupy widely separated planes in the image; all elements are given equal importance and are in focus.
31. (*ibid.*) Significant elements within a frame are placed both near to and distant from the camera. These elements do not have to be in focus (unlike deep focus).
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Forbidden Views: Malaysian Taboos (2012) Directed by Razli Dalan, Sambalmee Productions Ltd., UK, Malaysia. 15 mins.

Haruan: The Snakehead (2014) Directed by Razli Dalan, Sambalmee Productions Ltd., UK, Malaysia. 72 mins.

APPENDIX A.

A FILMMAKER'S JOURNEY

A reflection on the making of *Haruan: The Snakehead*

Diaspora and the reality of distance

April - September 2013

To begin with, *Haruan: The Snakehead* was initially meant to be shot in Malaysia, as a live-action, social realism film. I strongly felt at the beginning of the study that as the film was meant primarily for the Malaysian audience, the film would have needed to be made in Malaysia, and in Malay language, as to achieve verisimilitudinal authenticity of the local imageries captured and honesty of the work to its subject matter. After several failed attempts at producing the film in Malaysia within the monetary budget I have without compromising its conceptual and contextual premise, I have had to revise my whole approach towards the project.

The challenges I encountered whilst trying to shoot the project in Malaysia include:

- 1) As I am not based in Malaysia, I found it problematic to try to convince and obtain commitment from potential collaborators to a project which is being shot in the future. As the work is a low-budget independent production, there is no recourse to achieve contractual obligation via forward payment. Perhaps this is not unique to the Malaysian film/media industry, but the combination of not living or being physically present in the country and a relatively small production budget made it very difficult for the project to be taken seriously.
- 2) The experimental element, the difficult subject matter and the 'non-commercial' nature of the work, whilst interesting and refreshing to some, were off-putting to many future collaborators and potential sponsors. For instance, after viewing and discussing the story panels which form the narrative of the work, a representative of the National Film Development Corporation Malaysia [FINAS] labelled the project as 'a personal film',

which would require at least 4 million Malaysian Ringgit (about 800 thousand British Pound Sterling) to execute as a 'proper cinematic release'. He was slightly dismayed that my planned, available budget for the work is about 100 thousand Malaysian Ringgit - about one-fortieth of his estimated budget for the project. The gentleman also proceeded to explain that the National Film Board does not have the funding to support films 'of this nature'.

- 3) Whilst I accept that this observation is purely anecdotal and subjective, throughout my meetings with potential Malaysian collaborators and financial backers, I did perceive a constant sense of suspicion and wariness towards me and the project - of a Malaysian living abroad for a long period of time, of the motivation behind the film, of the subject matter and the experimental nature of the work or perhaps the combination of all these elements together. This general reaction was seemingly consistent from many of the Malaysians I spoke with, irrespective of their age, gender, educational background, previous exposure to life outside Malaysia or filmmaking experience. This reaction is not an unexpected one; to a certain extent, it hints upon this subliminal fear of self-reflection within the Malaysian society. What I do find a little surprising is how universal this sentiment is amongst Malaysians. Or do these observations stem merely from my own sense of paranoia?
- 4) This feeling of rejection, albeit self-perceived, amplifies the sense of diasporic distance I referred to within the definitions section of the write up (See page 12.). The geographical distance became a significant obstacle, which was severely compounded by this sense of diasporic alienation. It became clear to me after my last trip home in April 2013 that I would not be able to produce the film *Haruan: The Snakehead* in Malaysia. There were dark moments between April and June 2013 when I felt that the whole research was in jeopardy, and that the film was in danger of not being produced at all.
- 5) After much soul-searching, self-reflection and long discussions with my supervisors Erik Knudsen and Andrew Willis, I begin to seriously reevaluate the self-imposed rules and the rigid expectations I had for the project, that it:

a)Has to be a live-action film.

b)Has to be shot on location in Malaysia.

- c)Has to use Malaysian actors.
- d)Has to be performed in Malay language.
- e)Has to use a live *Haruan* fish.
- f) Has to be acceptable to the Malaysian Censorship Board and its intended Malaysian audience.

One by one, these rules are challenged, and alternative solutions to the problems are considered. To me, the biggest hurdle at this point of the process is changing my whole thinking and attitude towards the project, in that it needs to be much less idealised and much more practical without compromising its experimental concept. The next significant obstacle is to psychologically accept that shooting the film outside Malaysia is a viable and perhaps a much better option. Whilst it is perhaps the most difficult, this decision is also the most liberating.

In choosing to produce the film in the United Kingdom, a few options become immediately impossible, for obvious reasons. It is not possible to shoot a live action film on location with real Malaysian or Malaysian-like sceneries in the UK. It is also no longer possible to use a live *Haruan* during the shoot, as the fish falls under the 'restricted species' category, which is prohibited in the UK, North America and Australia⁴³ due to its potential threat to local ecosystems. Some fundamental changes are needed; the film *Haruan: The Snakehead* which will be shot in the UK towards the end of 2013 will be a very different film conceptually compared to its Malaysian prototype.

Producing a visually authentic Malaysian film outside Malaysia brings forth vexing issues of verisimilitude and realism, but is also creatively stimulating. Having to design a 'Malaysian universe' outside Malaysia purely from memory, experience and borrowed imageries enhances the constructedness of the project; the subjective depiction of Malaysiana by a Malaysian living abroad may also act as a direct response towards and a reference to the diasporic distance and separation I mentioned earlier. Perhaps it is relatively easier to approach unpopular issues pertaining to one's own society from a point of geographical, psychological and emotional detachment. To this end, the film *Haruan: The Snakehead* will develop its own cinematic and theatrical realism which will adapt to the practical demands of producing the project in the UK.

Changing the rules

Be ready and willing to fail. Failure is good. It means that you are seeking new ideas.

Robert Rodriguez (1968 -) at the University of Texas at Austin's
126th Spring Commencement (Meckel, 2009)

I revisit my initial set of rules and expectations from the beginning of the study, and reflect upon how these have gradually evolved thus far or, on occasions, have had to be drastically changed to accommodate a shoot in the UK. The film *Haruan: The Snakehead*:

a)Has to be a live-action film.

Haruan: The Snakehead will primarily be a live action film with the aesthetics of a theatre performance, interspersed with a mixture of simple animated sequences, still drawn imageries, multimedia installations and traditional Malay musical renditions. It will have its own 'imagined realism', with dream and mythological elements woven into the narrative.

b)Has to be shot on location in Malaysia.

Haruan: The Snakehead will be shot almost entirely in a studio in the UK. A small portion of the film may still be produced in Malaysia after the UK shoot.

c)Has to use Malaysian actors.

Haruan: The Snakehead will maintain its use of Malaysian actors. The two main actors will be flown to the UK for the shoot, whilst the rest of the cast will be sourced from the Malaysian community living in the UK. This decision is made as a way to preserve some 'Malaysian-ness' and to add verisimilitude to the film through its cast. This is crucial, especially now that the rest of the film's universe would be artificially constructed.

d)Has to be performed in Malay language.

Most of the spoken dialogue in the film will be in Malay, although one of the main characters will alternate between Malay and English, to reflect

the bilinguality or polylinguality of many Malaysians. All the dialogue will be subtitled in Malay and English as appropriate. Another character within the film may even speak an entirely different language which has no obvious connection to any of the South East Asian languages, as to emphasise its mythological status and highlight its temporal and spiritual detachment from the other characters.

e) Has to use a live *Haruan* fish.

As previously mentioned, many *Channa* species are prohibited in the UK, Australia and North America due to their ecologically aggressive nature. The fish in the film would now be a crafted simulacrum of the real one, which befits the evolving 'imagined realism' of the work.

f) Has to be acceptable to the Malaysian Censorship Board and its intended Malaysian audience.

How this film is received and treated by the Malaysian Censorship Board and Malaysians in general would directly inform and affect the conclusion of the study. However, the film has to be true to itself first, and I would try very hard to not allow how the film might be perceived in Malaysia to colour its direction, context, content and integrity.

The road to here (Or a few final words on long-distance Casting and Producing pain)

**PreProduction
September 2012 - October 2013**

I am now approaching the final weeks of PreProduction for *Haruan*, with 2 weeks of Principal Photography scheduled from the end of October 2013. Whilst I have come to terms with and am looking forward to shooting a Malaysian film in the UK, the pain of Casting and Producing a film from a distance can sometimes be excruciating.

Whilst I have now finally secured 2 Malaysia-based actors to play the main roles of the elder sister and the stepfather of 10-year old *Ikan*, the casting process alone has taken me almost two months. The reality of diasporic distance rears its ugly head again; it has been very difficult to convince serious film and theatre actors to act in the film without a face-to-face meeting about the project. There is also the issue regarding the cost of flying actors and collaborators to the UK for the shoot, and looking after them whilst they are here, plus aligning schedules, logistics, and the planets. What I find the hardest so far is not having a Producer to share the mammoth task of producing and coordinating a two-country project with.

I came across the two Malaysia-based actors separately, and in a different manner. I first saw the actress for the elder sister character in a music video⁴⁴ that was shown to me, by dint of the video potentially having the same look and feel as the film *Haruan: The Snakehead*. The father-daughter characters in the music video had excellent screen chemistry; unfortunately, despite being interested in the work, the actor who played the father character could not commit to the film due to another project he had agreed to prior to being approached for *Haruan: The Snakehead*. The actress was immediately interested, but needed much convincing and reassuring due to the subject matter, the experimental nature of the work and the fact that she has never travelled far outside Malaysia before. I then approached a friend who is a rather popular TV and Film actor in Malaysia, asking him whether he could recommend an actor for the film. I was in two minds when he offered himself, as I felt at the time that he did not look like the stepfather character I had in mind. I was also unsure of using a big-named actor for my first feature work, for both monetary and personal reasons. The awkwardness of the situation resolved itself, as he has had to pull out of the project due to his difficulty in working *Haruan: The Snakehead* into his hectic schedule. It was also suggested to me that I approach UK-based Malaysians who would be interested to act in the film regardless of past acting experience. I am open to working with non-actors, and have done so before in my short films. However, I did not pursue the matter further as I do feel that *Haruan: The Snakehead* is a heavy, experimental, performance-driven piece which may even be daunting for seasoned actors. Finally, I emailed a theatre and film actor/director whom I met in Malaysia in April 2013, whilst I was looking for collaborators for the work during those even darker days when I was trying to

shoot the film in Malaysia. When he offered himself, I gladly accepted, as I am aware of his body of work, and am impressed by his attitude and commitment towards the project. The best thing that I have done for the project in the past month (and something I probably should have done earlier) is to convince and appoint one of my sisters in Malaysia to act as an Associate Producer for the work, a task she has tackled with gusto. It may sound rather obvious that I should have organised to have a producer or a liaison person in Malaysia in the first place, and I *did* have a person that fitted that description, albeit as an informal appointment. The process thus far has taught me the need to be more business-like in my communications with collaborators, cast and crew, and to formalise all interactions as intellectual properties and money are involved. Again, these are obvious points, but in the thick of the creative process these important, practical considerations could easily be overlooked. But sometimes, as I have found out like my own private recurring nightmare over the past few months, in independent filmmaking things can just happen, or not happen, for no justifiable reason.

Despite all my protestations, I am still enjoying the process of making an independent film. I am also relieved, slightly terrified and cautiously excited that the research component and the practice element of the study are finally coming together in the making of my first feature-length work. I have embarked upon this process with no delusional ideas that it is going to be painless. However, I am still a little surprised at how painful it can be at times. Never mind. *Haruan*'s UK-based crew and Malaysia-based cast (and one crew) are now very nearly ready to begin this conveyor belt ride into the unknown. I will write again, if only to report about *Haruan*'s Production fortnight, and its aftermath.

Haruan: The Snakehead

Production & Post Production notes October 2013 - September 2014

Production

Securing a suitable and affordable studio for a two-week shoot has been a lot more challenging than I anticipated. I have been fortunate enough thus far to have collaborators and friends who believe enough in the project to help tackle the problems encountered as

they come. Principal Photography of the film *Haruan* commenced on location at Chappertown Studios, Manchester on the 30th of October 2013 and lasted for two weeks. Unsurprisingly, the production phase of the work mimicked the vicissitudinal nature of the whole study, and was peppered with joyously triumphant and extremely trying moments in almost equal measures.

One of my biggest worries prior to shooting *Haruan* was the choice of camera I wanted to capture the film with. I initially wanted to use the hugely popular, tried and tested digital SLR Canon 5D Mark II or its more recent model 5D Mark III. However, a fortnight before Production began, I was informed of the existence of a quirky digital camera which has been praised for its dynamic range, low-light performance and an affordability factor which belies its near 'industrial cinema camera' capabilities. After some research and a heavy reliance on 'gut feeling', I purchased the body of a BlackMagic Cinema Camera (BMCC) with an EF Canon mount, with the intention of using borrowed and hired Canon-mount lenses. At the time of Production, the BMCC was a relatively new addition to the market. The cost of buying the BMCC body outright (circa £1300 in October 2013) was justified by the fact that hiring it would have cost me at least £100 per day. What I did not completely appreciate at the time was the cost to get this unconventional camera Production-ready; the costly capture media (solid state hard drive (SSD) at around £150 per 250 gigabyte, we needed three of these SSDs for the film), connector cables, viewing monitor, extra batteries, camera mount and a professional video tripod all added up to the escalating equipment cost. Despite these fiscal woes, the surprisingly rich texture, the dynamic range and the overall quality of the raw unedited footage from the first few days of Production were enough to convince me that the BMCC was the perfect choice to capture a low-action, low-light film like *Haruan: The Snakehead*. I am happy to report that I remain convinced and am delighted with the final edited product, in terms of the look of the captured images and the way the media handled in Post Production.

Post Production

Post Production work began in December 2013. I initially sought the help of a friend to aid me with editing the film, and to allow some distance and objectivity between me and the work. The initial help with organising and compartmentalising the raw media within the

editing software chosen for the film (Final Cut Pro X on MacBook Pro) was invaluable and eased the editing process immensely. However, due to the highly personal and region-specific nature of the film, the multiple diegetic and non-diegetic languages used (mainly English and Malay, with some Finnish and Arabic) and the ongoing need of additional multimedia elements throughout the post production process - be it my digital drawings, simple animations, still photographs or integrated text, both my initial Co-Editor and I came to the realisation that perhaps the process would be less complex if I edit the film on my own.

Editing a personal project that I had lived with for the past 3 years (and dreamt about for much longer) alone was a lonely and claustrophobic experience. There was a dark period of nearly 3 months from mid December 2013 where I could not proceed at all with the editing, for I could not see how my digital drawings would work with all the live action footage obtained during Principal Photography. Perhaps it was cold feet; I was having second thoughts about converting the film to a 'safe', fully live action project as opposed to the mixed bag of live action footage, digital drawings, simple animations, still photographs and multilingual text that I originally intended. Perhaps I was fooled by the relative 'prettiness' of the live action shots that I somehow felt that my drawn and crafted elements would not be able to compete with them side-by-side. It took me a while to realise that I had, at that moment in time, missed the whole point of the experiment completely and had strayed far from what I had initially planned during PreProduction: The jarring, uncomfortable mix of self-aware imageries IS one of the strategies I planned for the film, in keeping with Brecht's technique of *Verfremdungseffekt* mentioned earlier (see page 42). I will elaborate further as to the Brechtian self-aware elements within the film when I discuss *Haruan: The Snakehead* in detail (see pages 86-88). Once I had reconciled with this idea of the film as a multimedia hodgepodge and a 'deliberate strangeness', editing work resumed in earnest at the end of March 2014.

My most recent trip back to Malaysia in April 2014 provided me with the opportunity to meet with the Malaysia-based composer and sound designer for the film to discuss the original score, audio mixing and matters pertaining to licensing rights for the songs that have already been used during the shoot. As we would be working in different continents throughout the edit, the composer suggested that I divide my edit into 'reels' of 15-20 minutes, which would allow him to work independently on a segment of the film as I

continue with editing a different segment. I divided the raw footage chronologically into 5 reels prior to my journey back to the UK.

As we approach the end of August / early September 2014, the Post Production phase of the film is nearing its completion. I have started to show several 'beta' versions of the full edit to small, multinational test audiences at home and at the university in the UK, to generally positive, somewhat encouraging and sometimes surprising reviews. Several heated debates and discussions were had afterwards; I have taken the comments and input from these test viewings onboard and have used them as feedback loops to scrutinise and hopefully improve the final edit of the film.

The journey of the work as a whole, its processes, and the film *Haruan: The Snakehead* as its end product have taught me many new things about myself, my family, my fellow collaborators, the people around me and the Malaysian society to a certain extent. I would like to think that I am wiser from it, though not necessarily less troubled by the issues I am trying to highlight.

APPENDIX B.



A SYNOPSIS

Haruan

The Snakehead

Be careful what you eat



his tale revolves around the life of a 10 year old boy named Ikan, who lives with his sister Salomah and their stepfather Deris. Their mother has long since passed on; Salomah, who is 13 years older than her brother, is like a mother to him. Salomah is not just Ikan's sister, she is his carer, teacher, friend and a shoulder to cry on. Ikan loves his sister

Salomah dearly. Ikan also adores all kinds of fish, especially *haruans* or snakeheads. Salomah likes to tell all sorts of stories about fish to Ikan. On Ikan's eighth birthday, Salomah surprised Ikan with a baby snakehead as a present. The pet *Haruan* lives in a glass bowl, which Ikan takes along with him wherever he goes. The fish becomes the boys daily companion, the one he talks to. *Haruan* is also a magical fish; it is said that it can cure illnesses and heal wounds, breathe on land and even speak and recite poetry.

Even though Ikan has been brought up by his sister, he has not once seen or heard Salomah speak. According to tales told by the village folks, Salomah was once a cheerful and bubbly little girl. However, Salomah withdrew into herself after the unexpected death of her mother. Another version of events suggested that Salomah began to change as soon as Deris entered her mother's life. At the time, Salomah was 13 years old. Apparently, Salomah stopped speaking completely on the very day her mother died.

Deris is another person of not many words. He is also not an easy man to read. Deris is blind in one eye, which appears milky white and opaque. According to unverifiable sources, when Deris was a small child, his right eye was urinated on by a toad. The source of this tale of the micturating amphibian remains a mystery until today. Might this unfortunate incident be the root of Deris's constant insecurity about his appearance and intense anger with the world?

Deris is a quiet man. Deris is also a vengeful man. Deris fell in love with Salomah's mother ever since he cast his one good eye on her whilst she was working as a waitress at Kak Puteh's food stall. At the time, Deris was also working at the stall as a *roti canai* (flatbread) maker. Deris and Salomah's mother were married not long after that; in fact, exactly two months from when they first met. 'Kamis's widow is so lucky,' said the villagers. 'At least Little Salomah will be taken care of.' But, who knows how Salomah really feels about anything, as Salomah has never told anyone. When Salomah's mother became pregnant soon after her marriage to Deris, Salomah was only thirteen years old. When Salomah's mother collapsed whilst hanging her washings out to dry, Salomah was still thirteen years old. When Midwife Zaharah screamed to declare that they have lost Salomah's mother and her baby due to a massive bleed from the womb, Salomah remained thirteen years of age. Maybe Deris blames Salomah for somehow causing her mother's untimely demise. Maybe Deris keeps seeing the semblance of his deceased wife in his stepdaughter's face. Maybe Deris is desperate for his own biological child. Or, maybe Deris has finally succumbed to Sang Djahat's evil coercions. Is it really plausible that Ikan's beloved *Haruan* would one day devour its young?

Ikan knows what has to be done. Ikan and *Haruan* need to save their dearest sister, Salomah. *Haruan* really wants to try to heal Salomah's wounds and woes. The young *haruans* have to be protected. Deris must be stopped...

APPENDIX C.

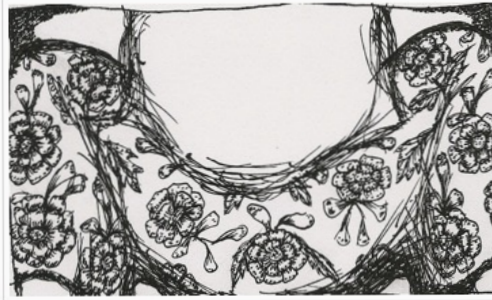
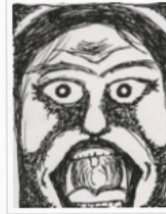


HARUAN: A GRAPHIC NOVELETTE

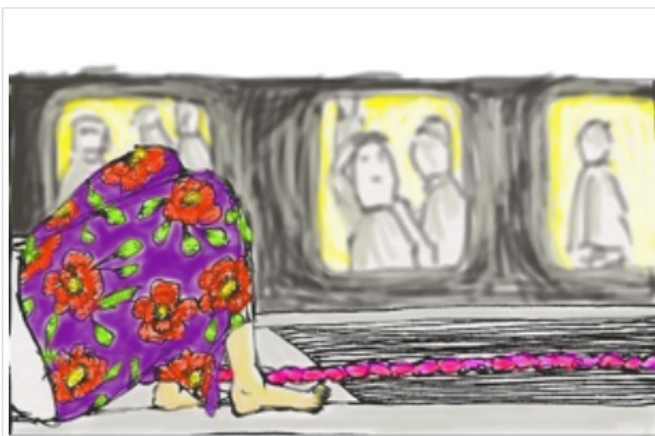
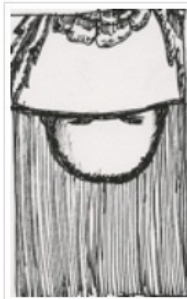
129 Panels (Edited 2014)

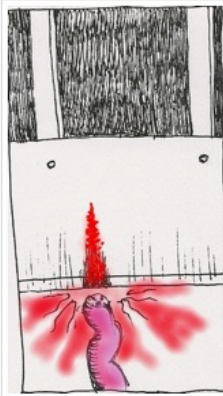
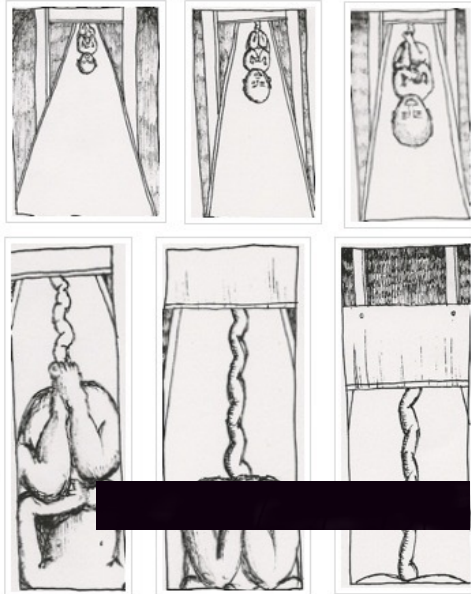
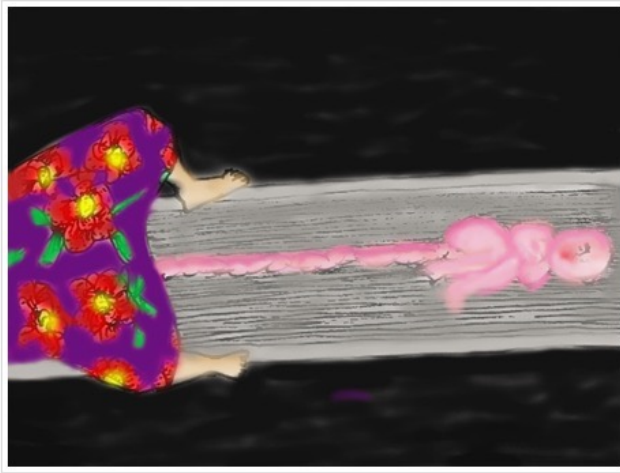
Penultimate© App for iPad
(September 2011- December 2013)

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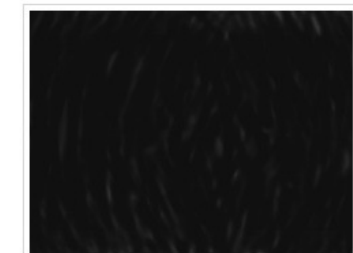
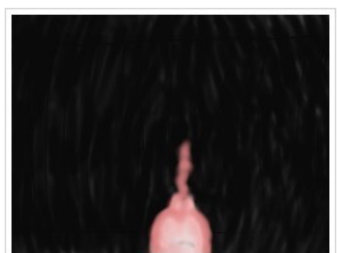
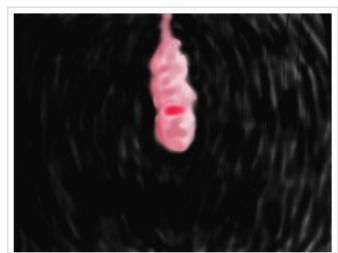
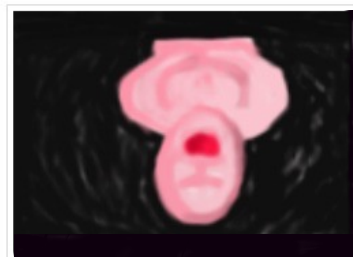
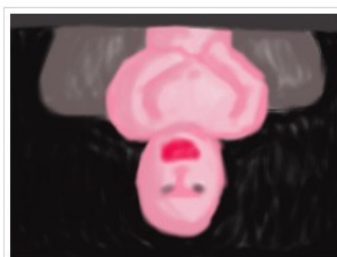
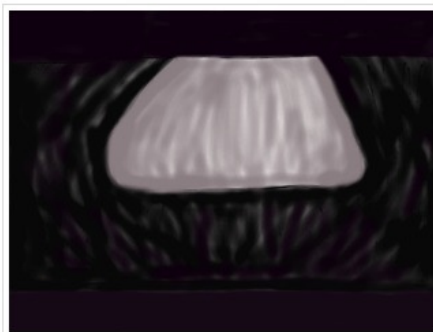
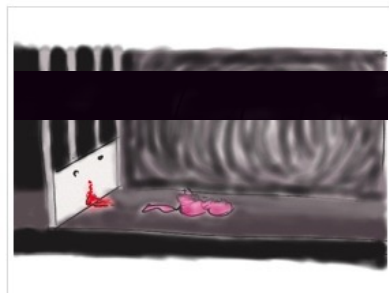


SALOMAH'S NIGHTMARE



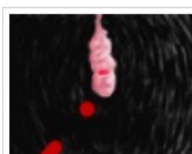


TWOK!





SPLASH!





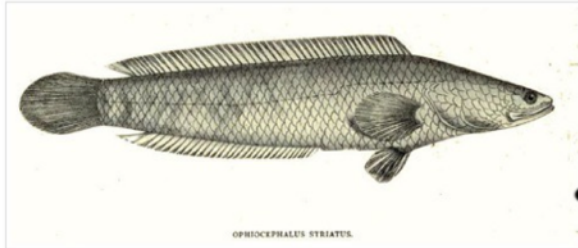


THEY CALL ME IKAN.
I AM 10 YEARS OLD.



CHANNA STRIATUS

ASIAN
AFRICAN SPECIES A.K.A.



SNAKEHEAD
HARIAN



ABLE TO 'BURROW' IN MUD
AND TRAVEL BETWEEN BODIES
OF WATER



Rich in...

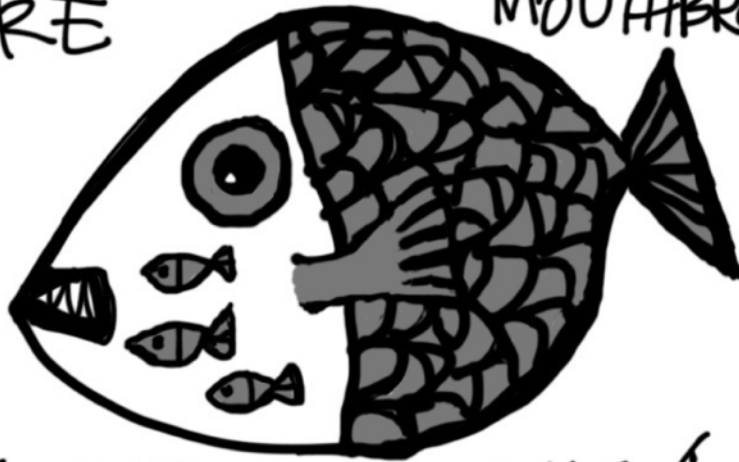
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ACID

GLYCINE

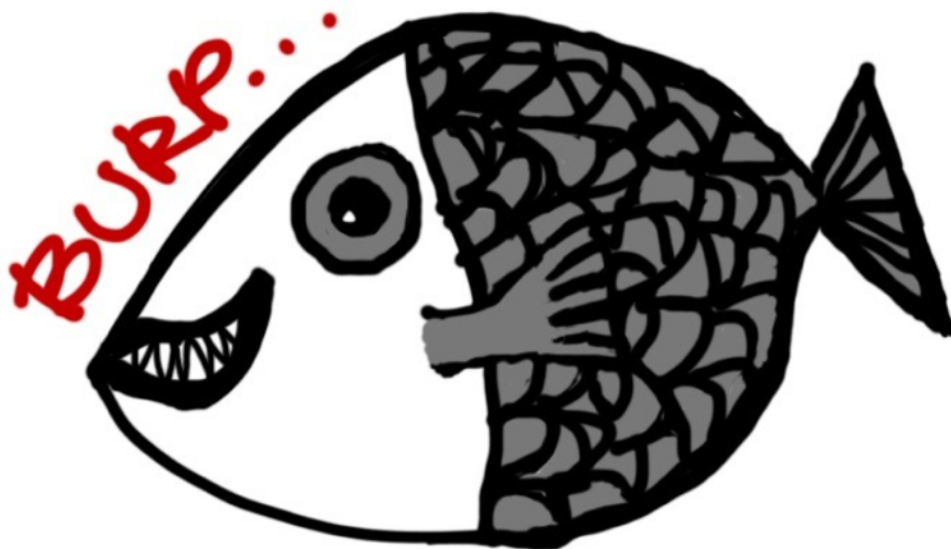
AMINO
ACID

BUILDING BLOCKS
FOR CELL GROWTH
AND WOUND HEALING

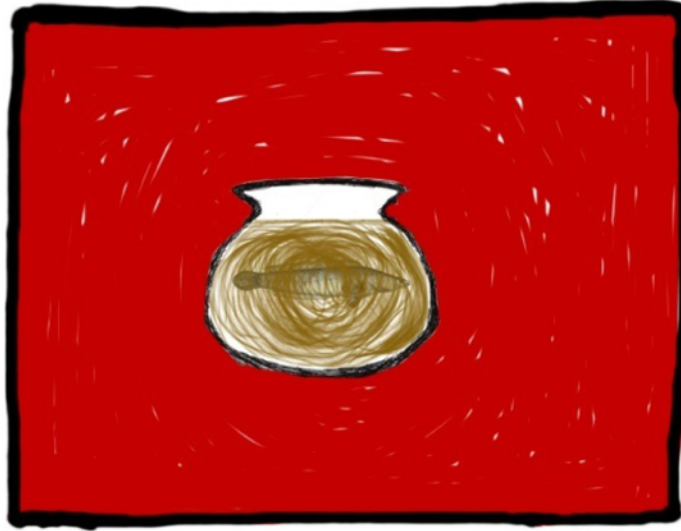
SOME **CHANNA** SPECIES
ARE MOUTHBROODERS.



PERHAPS HUMANS ARE JUMPING
TO CONCLUSIONS ABOUT HARUANS
EATING THEIR YOUNG?



OR NOT...



THIS IS HARVAN.
MY HARVAN. HE IS
ONE YEAR OLD.

HE IS BEAUTIFUL.
EATS.
ANYTHING



STRIPY
BODY

SHARP
TEETH

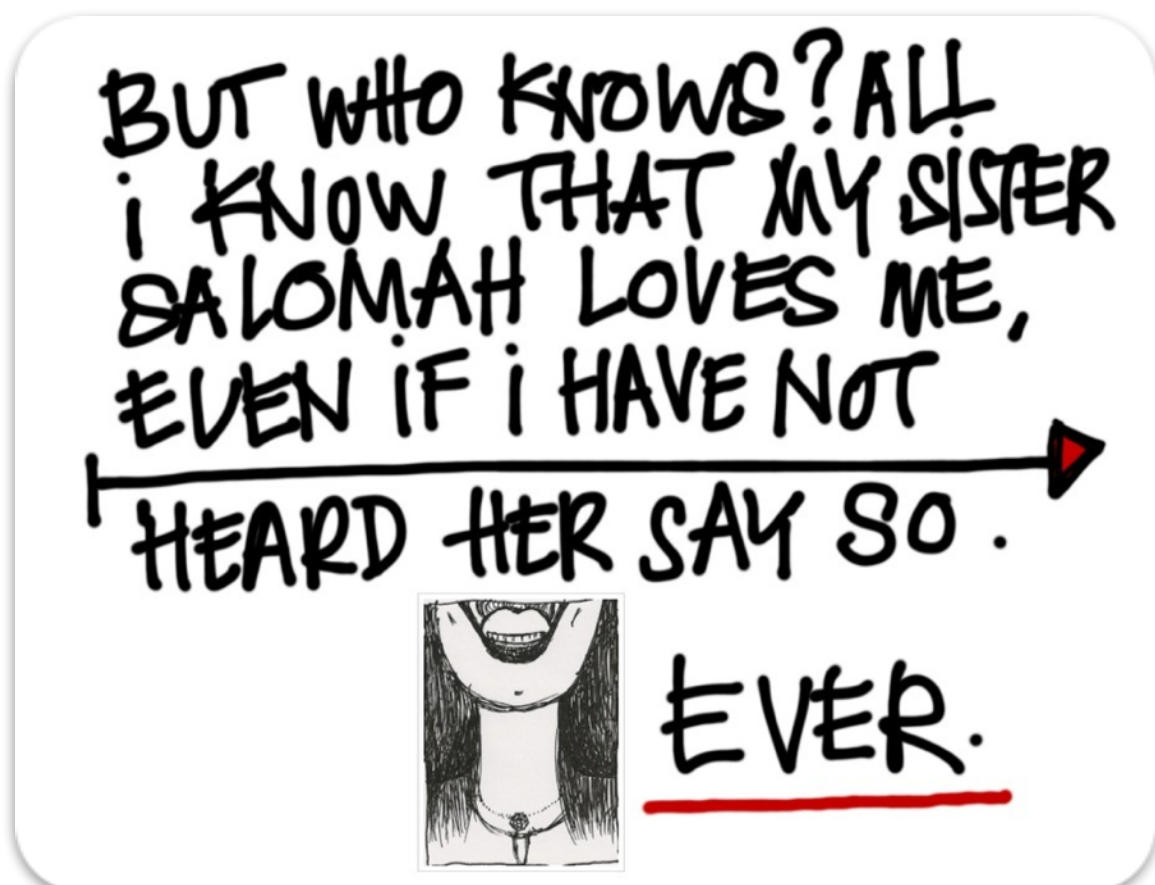
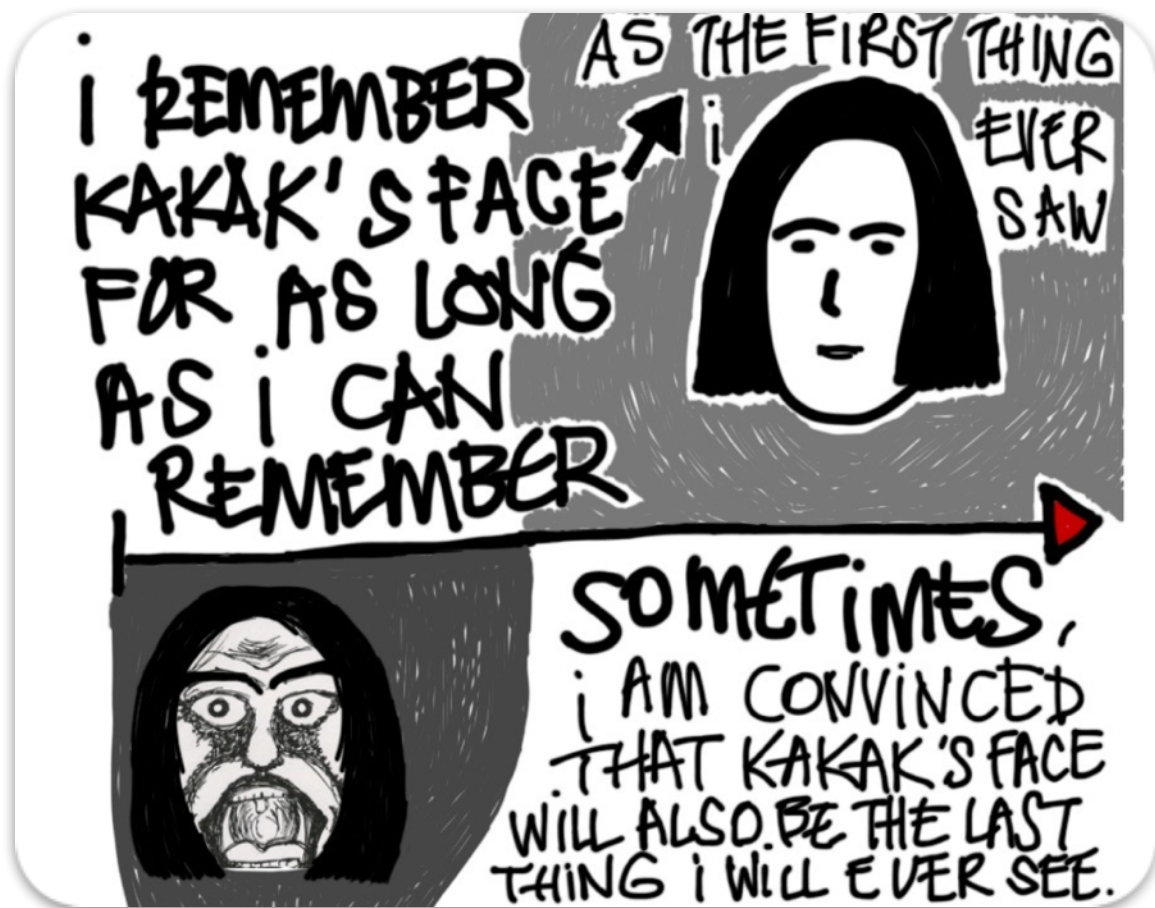
I CAN LOOK AT
HIM ALL DAY.



WATCHING HIM
SWIM MAKES ME
HAPPY.

HARVAN IS MY BEST **FRIEND.**
I THINK HARVAN IS MY
ONLY FRIEND. APART FROM
SISTER SALOMAH. BUT SHE
IS NOT A **FISH.**





SHE TAUGHT ME ALL
I KNOW. ABOUT LIFE.
ABOUT PEOPLE. ABOUT
FISH.



SISTER SALOMAH SAID
MOTHER DIED WHEN I
WAS A BABY. I DON'T
REMEMBER HER AT ALL.

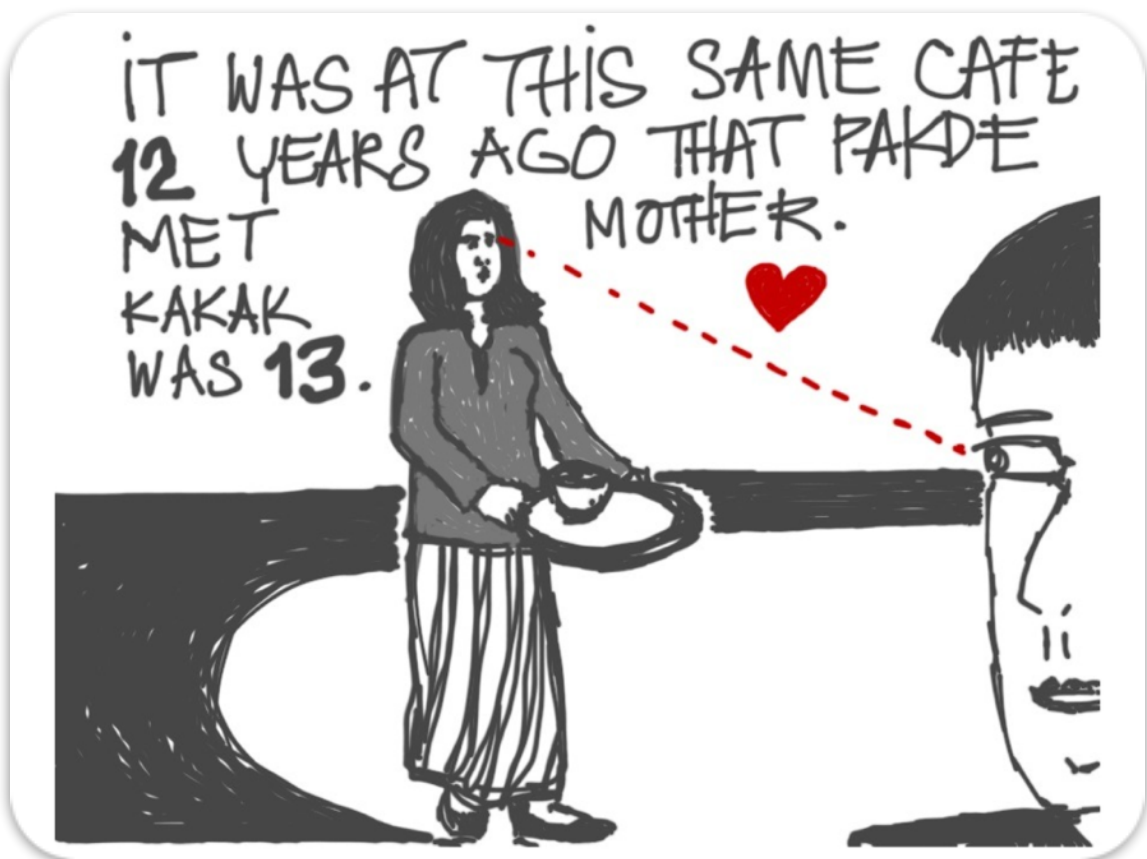
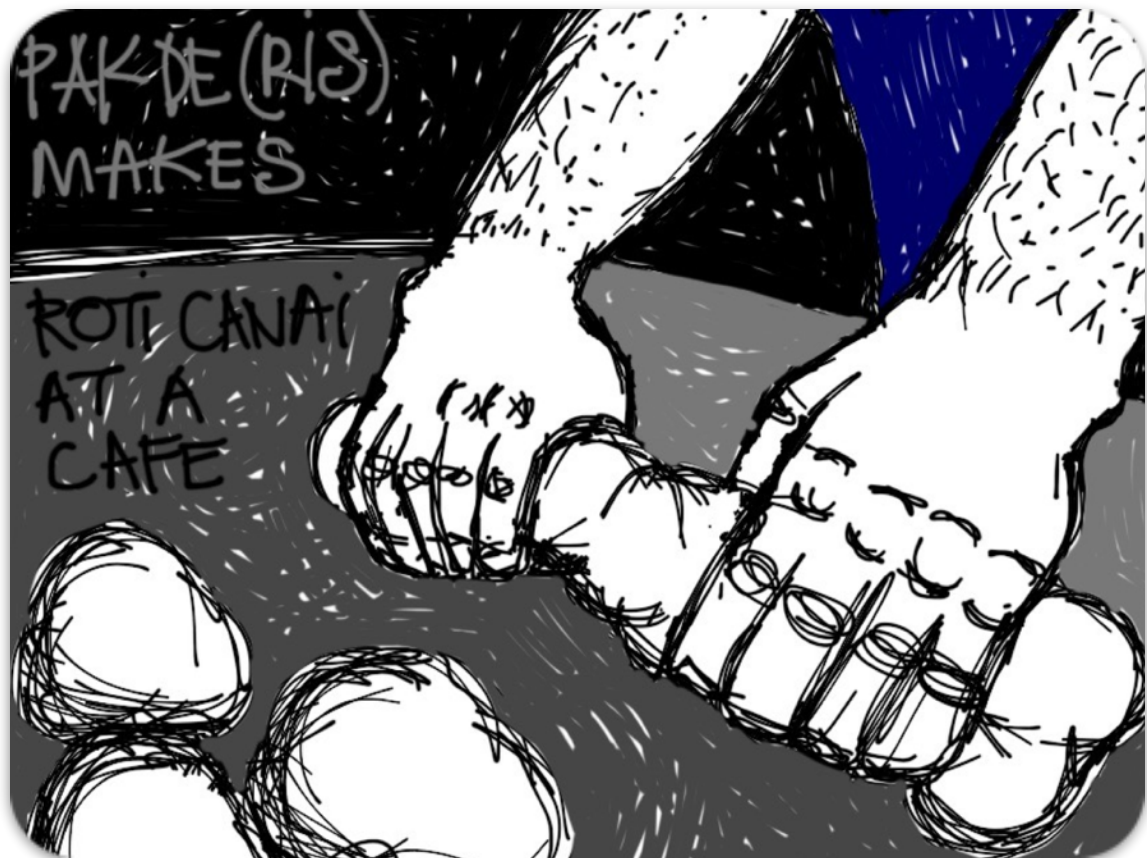


i ONLY REMEMBER MY
SISTER SALOMAH. i
ONLY KNOW HER.



i THINK i KNOW HER.





13-YEAR OLD
SALOMAH
WAS A HAPPY
GIRL.



SHE
ALSO TALKED.

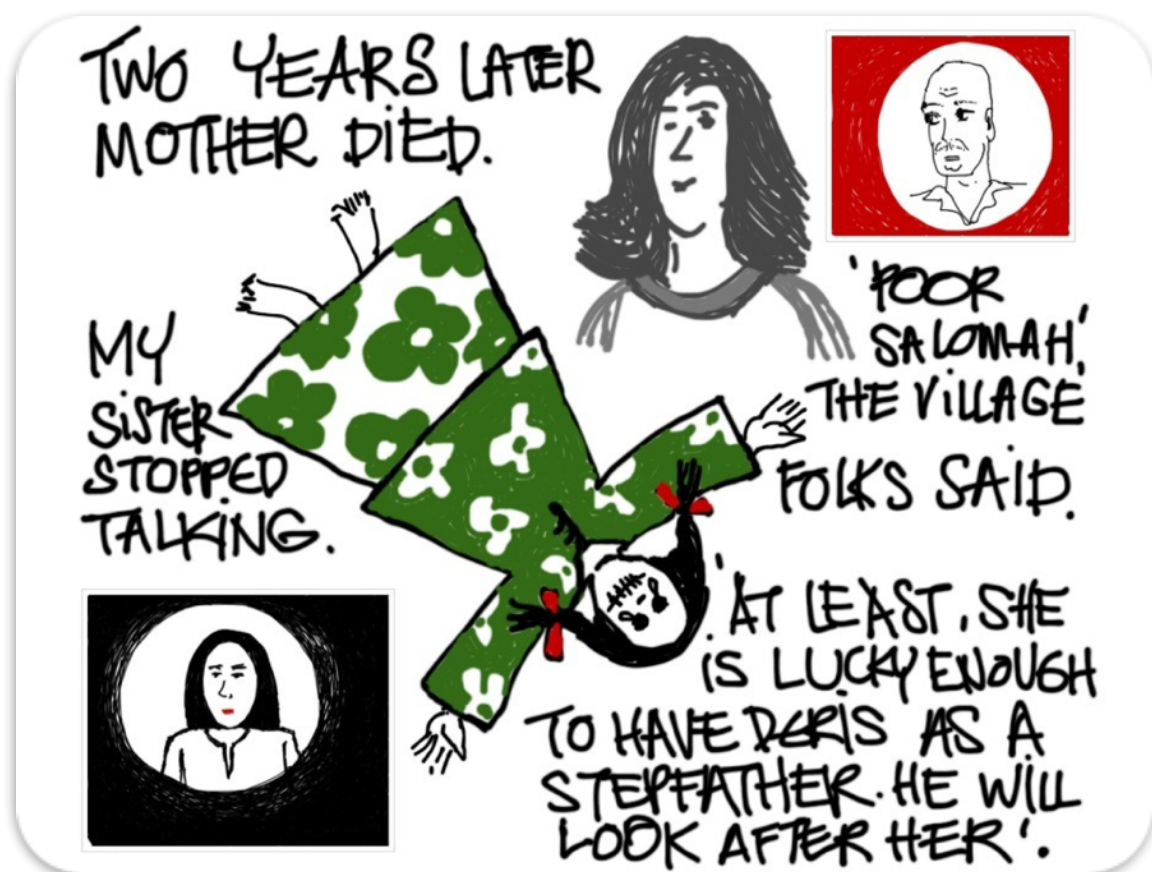
WHEN PAKDE MARRIED MOTHER
NOT LONG
THEY MET
FIRST

EVERYONE
RELIEVED
THE PRETTY
WAS NO
AVAILABLE.



AFTER
FOR THE
TIME,
WAS
THAT
WIDOW
LONGER
THE

VILLAGE WIVES WERE ECSTATIC.



DEATH

PEOPLE.

BECAME

ANGRY -

FOR NOT

HIM KNOW

PREGNANCY

HER. AT

FOR REMINDING

MOTHER.



CHANGES

PAK DERIS

BITTER AND

AT MOTHER

LETTING

THAT ANOTHER

WOULD KILL

SALOMAH,

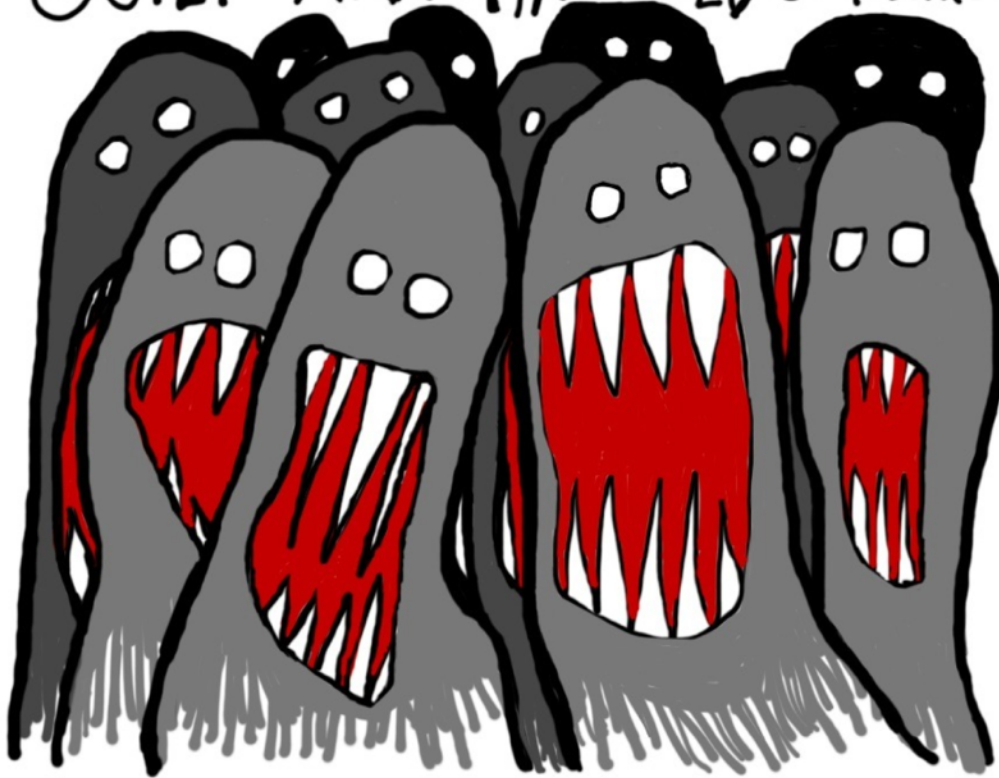
HIM OF

AT HIMSELF, FOR INSISTING THAT
MOTHER BEAR
AS A TROPHY
MASCULINITY.



FOR EXISTING. ANGRY FOR BEING.
JUST PLAIN BLOODY ANGRY.

GUILT AND HATRED CONSUME



IN THE
NOTHING
LEFT
A HUSK
WITHOUT
SOUL.

END,
IS
BUT
A



LIKE AN
ABANDONED
CALLING
FOR A
SQUATTER.



EMPTY
HOUSE
OUT



IT WOULD NOT
BE LONG
BEFORE



ONE
ARRIVES...



DJAHAT



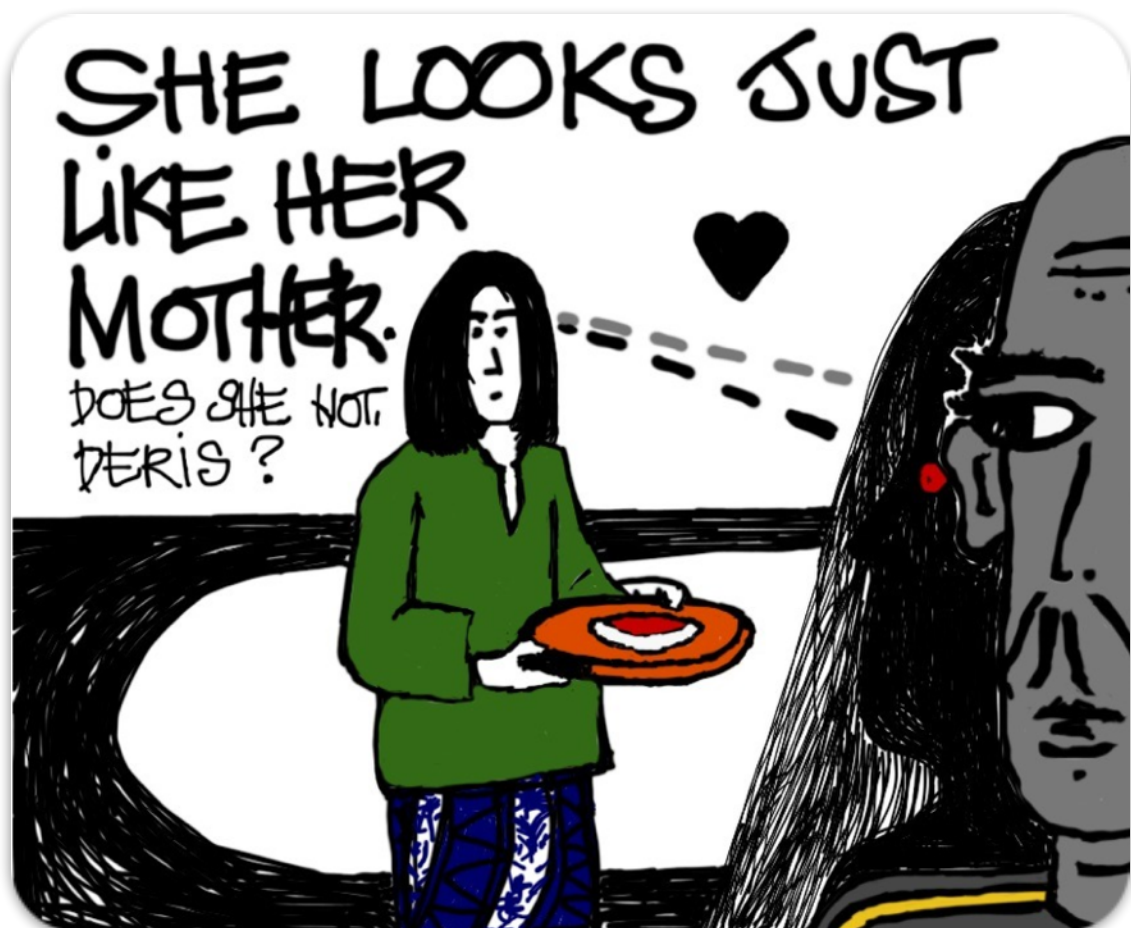
LOVES

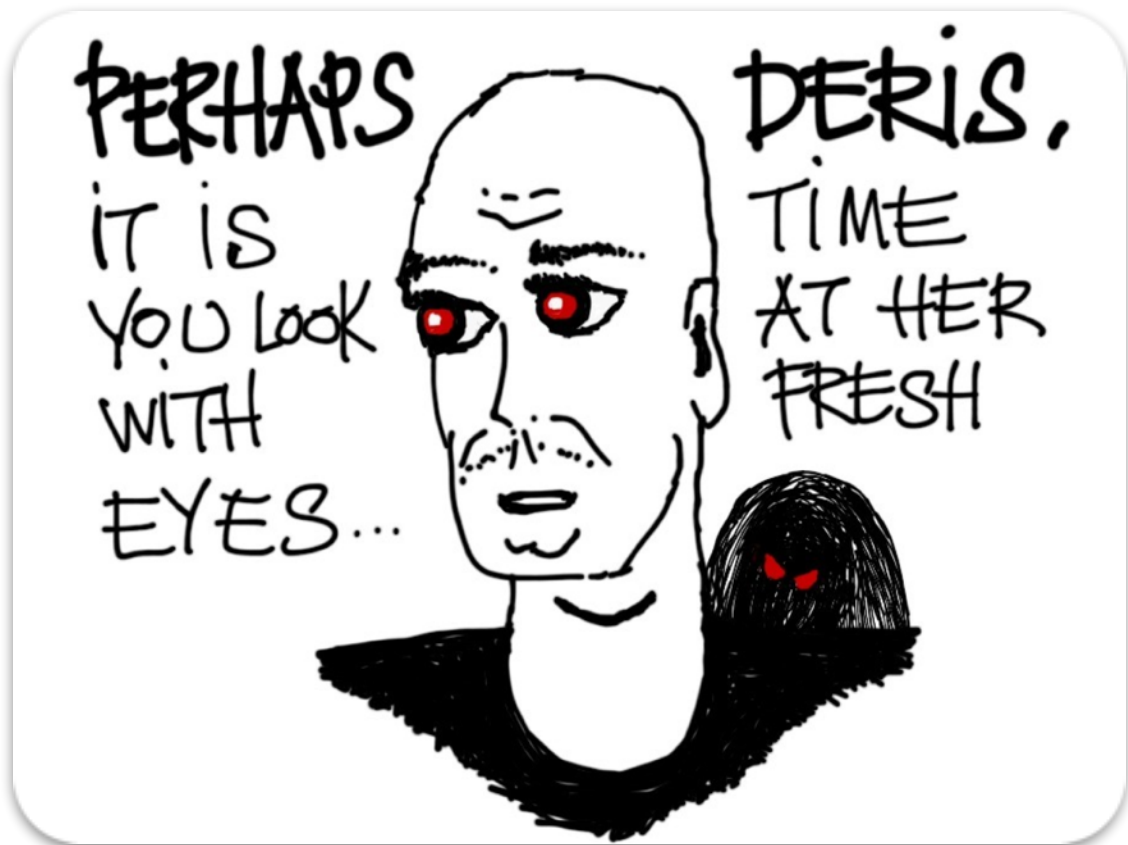
DERIS.

ALMOST
AS MUCH
AS IT LOVES
ITSELF.

DERIS IS
THE PERFECT
HOST: COLD,
ACCOMMODATING,
FULL OF
HATE.
PERFECT.









TO BE
FREE,
TO BE ABLE
TO EAT
ANYTHING,
TO BE
ABLE
TO HEAL
THE
WORLD.



TO BE
ABLE TO
HEAL
MY
SISTER
SALOMAH.



HARUAN. WE MUST HELP
SISTER SALOMAH.
WE ARE ALL SHE
HAS. WELL, YOU KNOW
HOW YOU CAN EAT
ALMOST ANYTHING?
PERHAPS YOU CAN DEVOUR
HER PAIN AND DRINK UP
ALL HER TEARS...



BUT YOU ARE A
FRESHWATER
FISH.

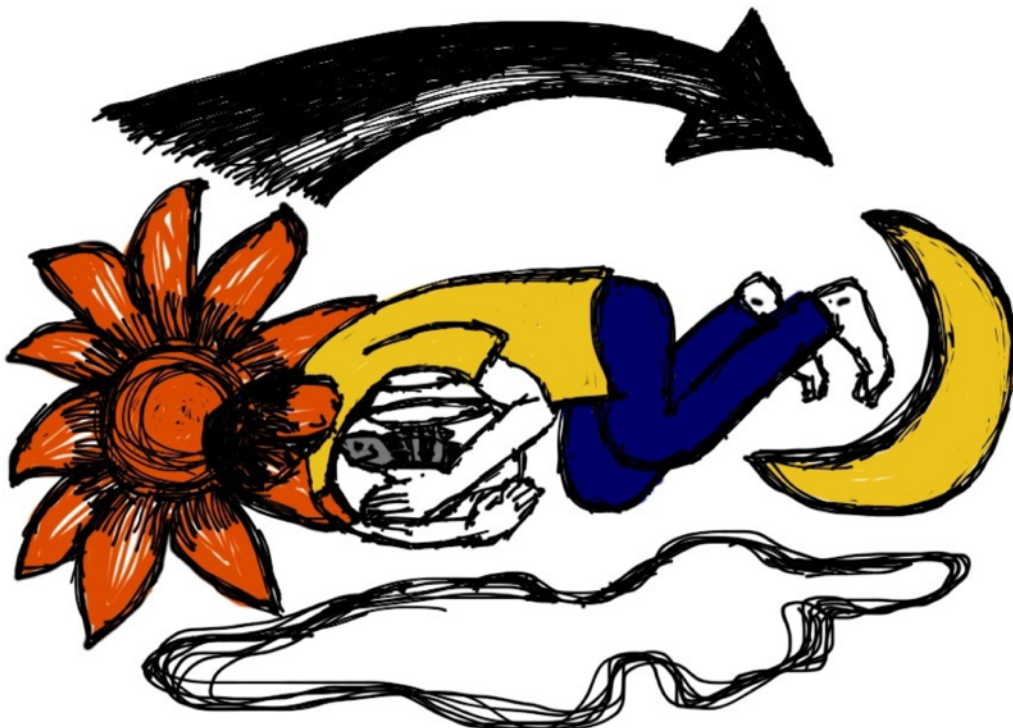


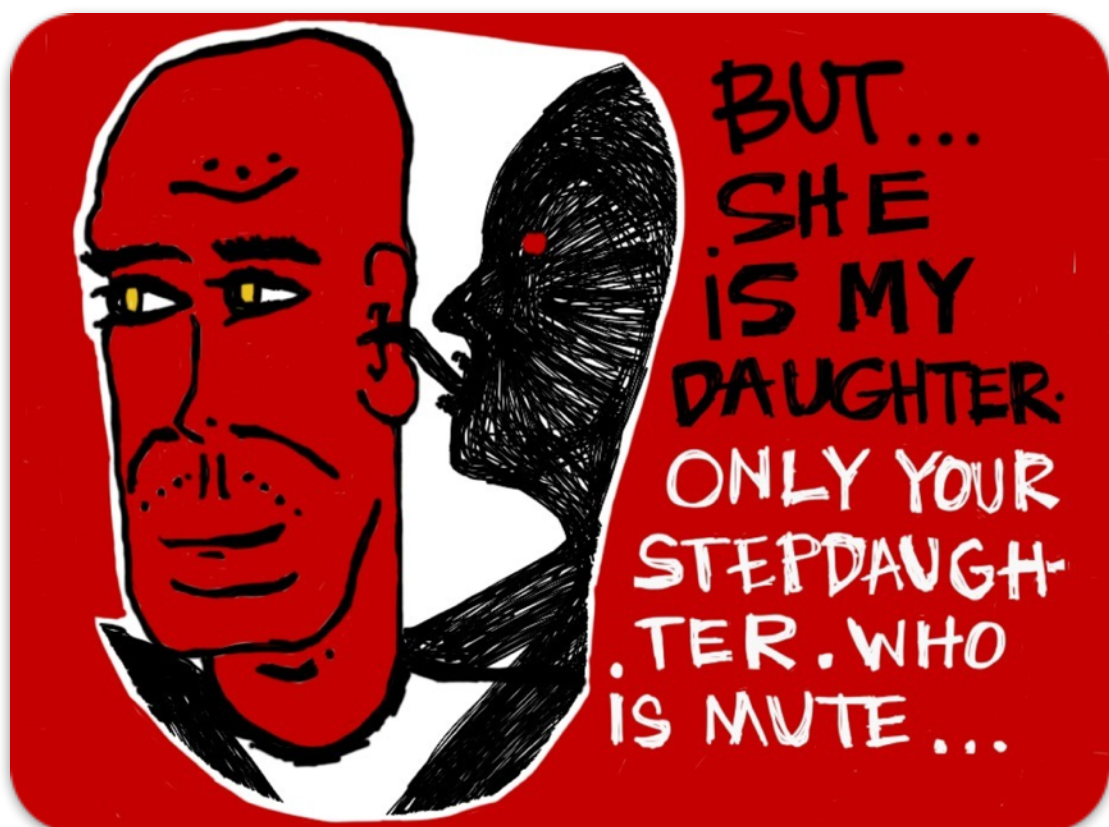
ALL THAT SALT IN HER
TEARS WILL KILL YOU.

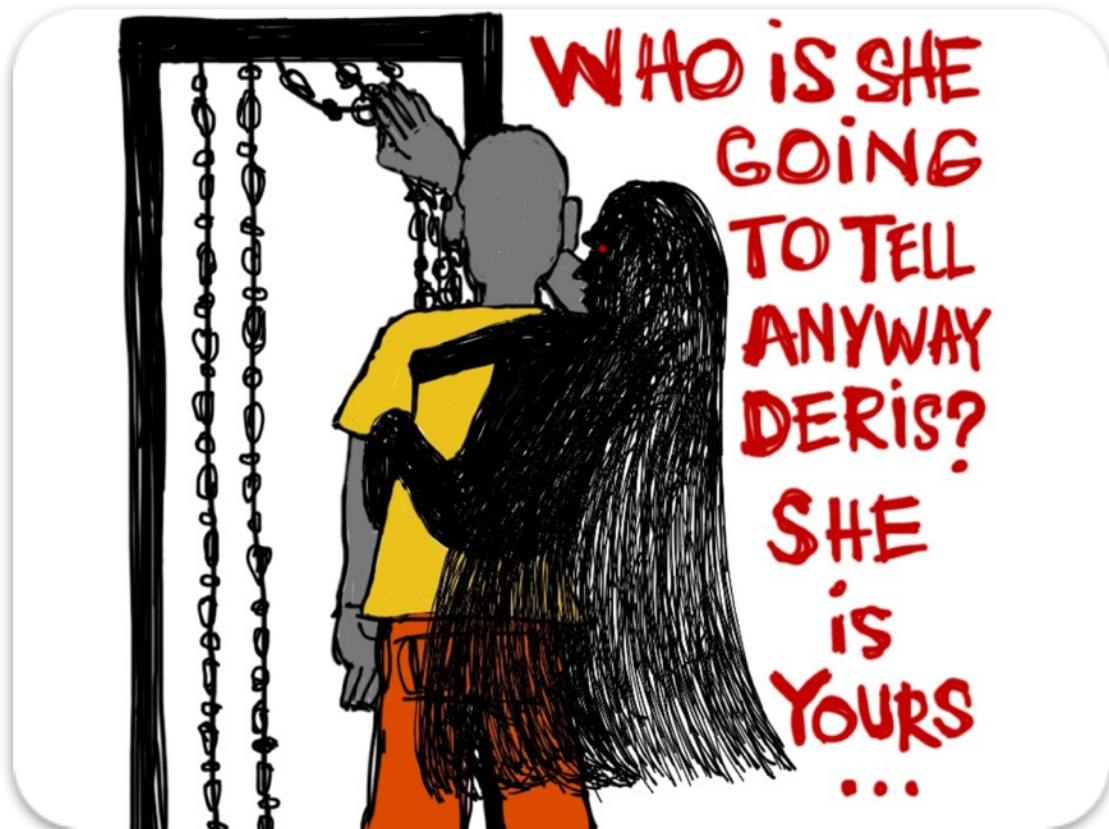
i HAVE TO BE SELFISH.
IT'S A NOBLE CAUSE,
BUT i COULDN'T POSSIBLY
LOSE YOU TOO ...



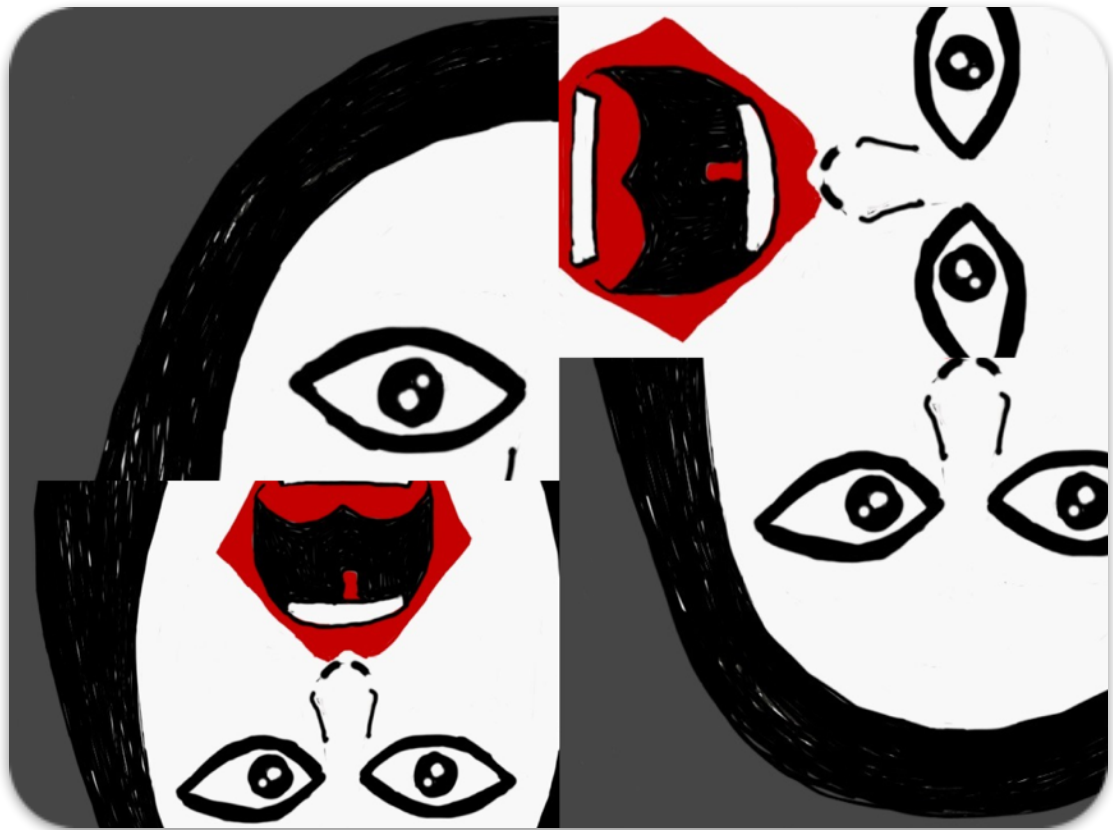
NOT EVER.

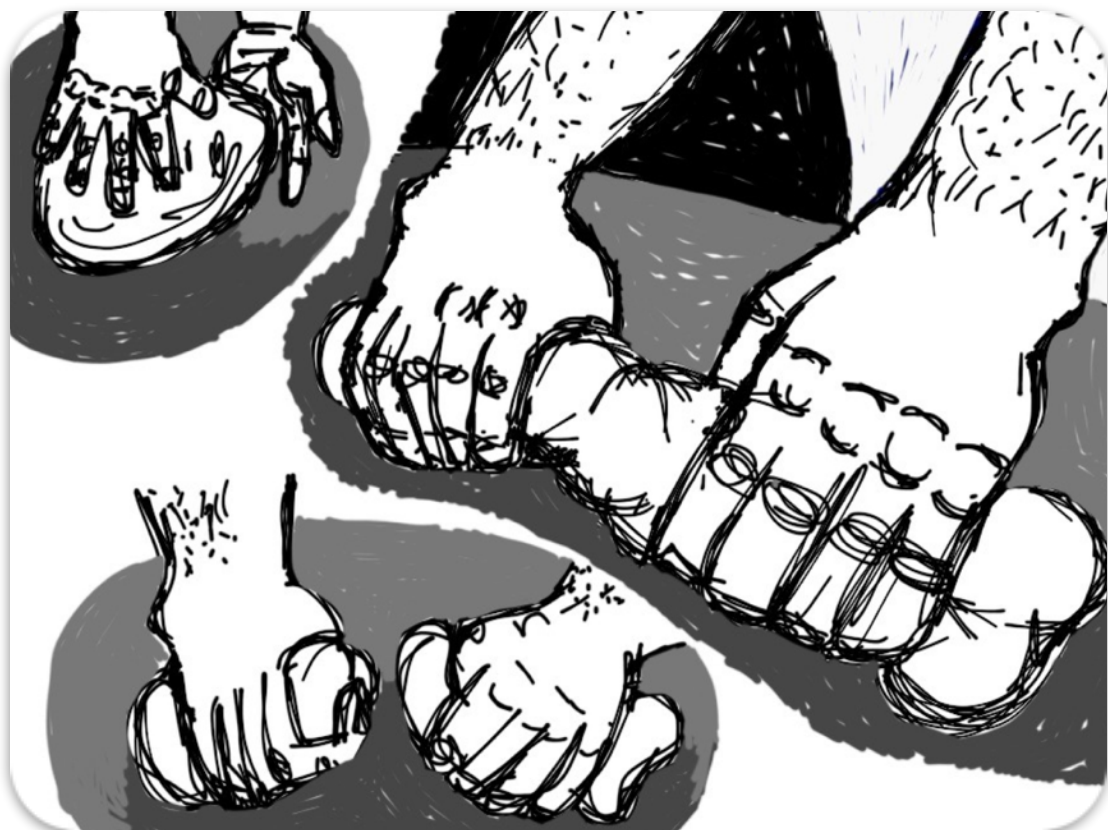










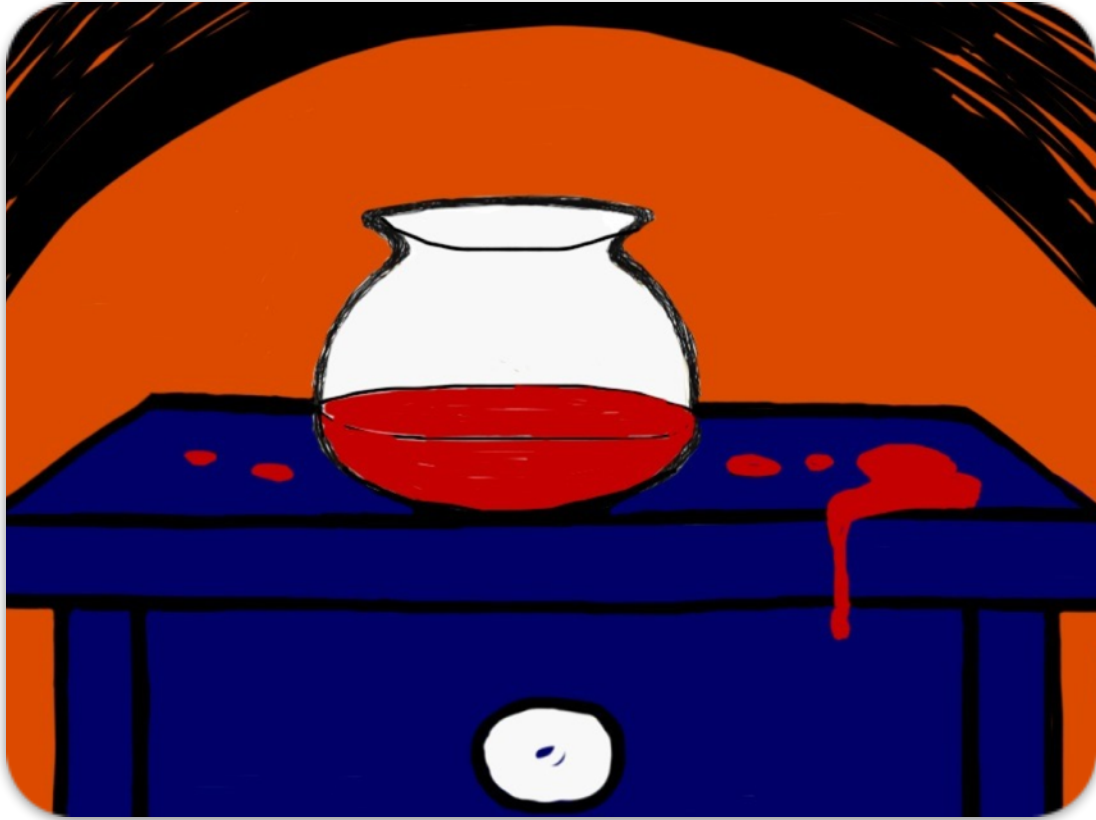


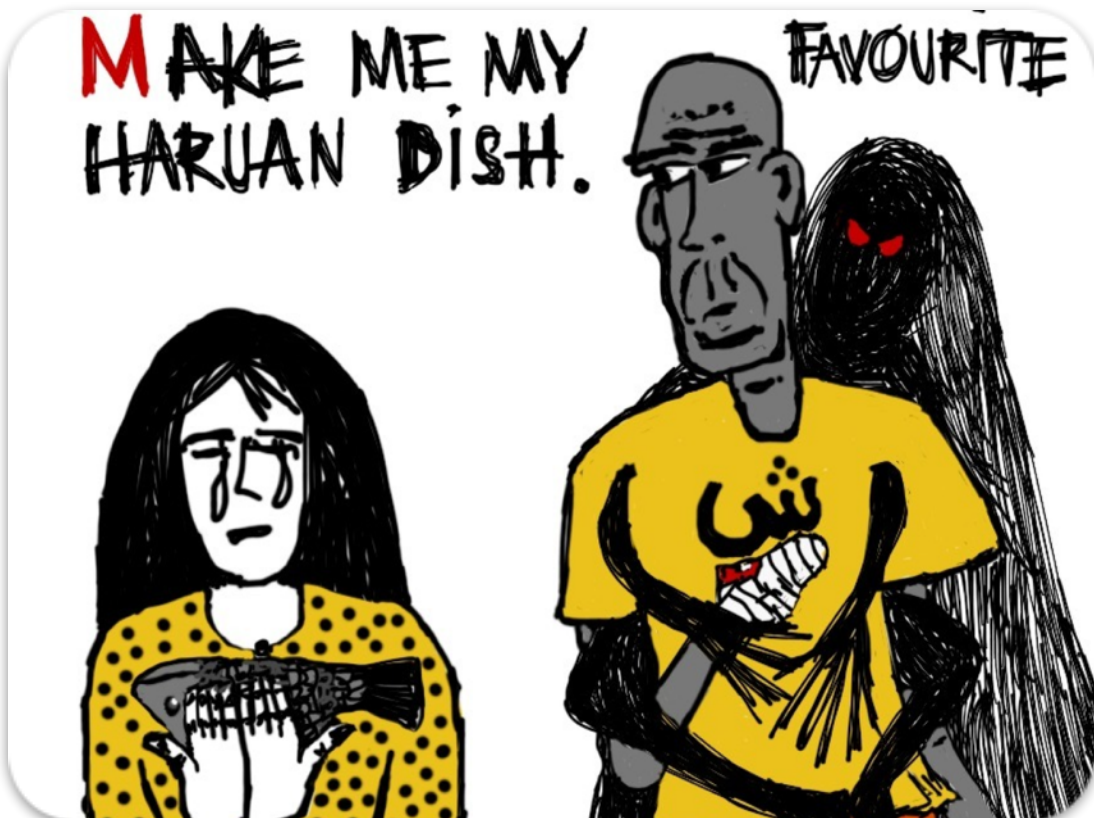
















HARUAN!
SIS SALOMAH!
WHERE
ARE
YOU
GUYS?







HARUAN OH HARUAN
 WHY OH WHY DO I EAT THEE?
 HOW DO I NOT EAT HARUAN
 IT IS BUT FOOD TO ME
 IT IS BUT FOOD TO ME



PAKDE OH PAKDE

I KNOW WHY YOU EAT HARUAN
HOW COULD YOU NOT EAT HARUAN
YOU ARE BUT A HARUAN
HARUAN EATS ITS YOUNG
HARUAN EATS ITS YOUNG

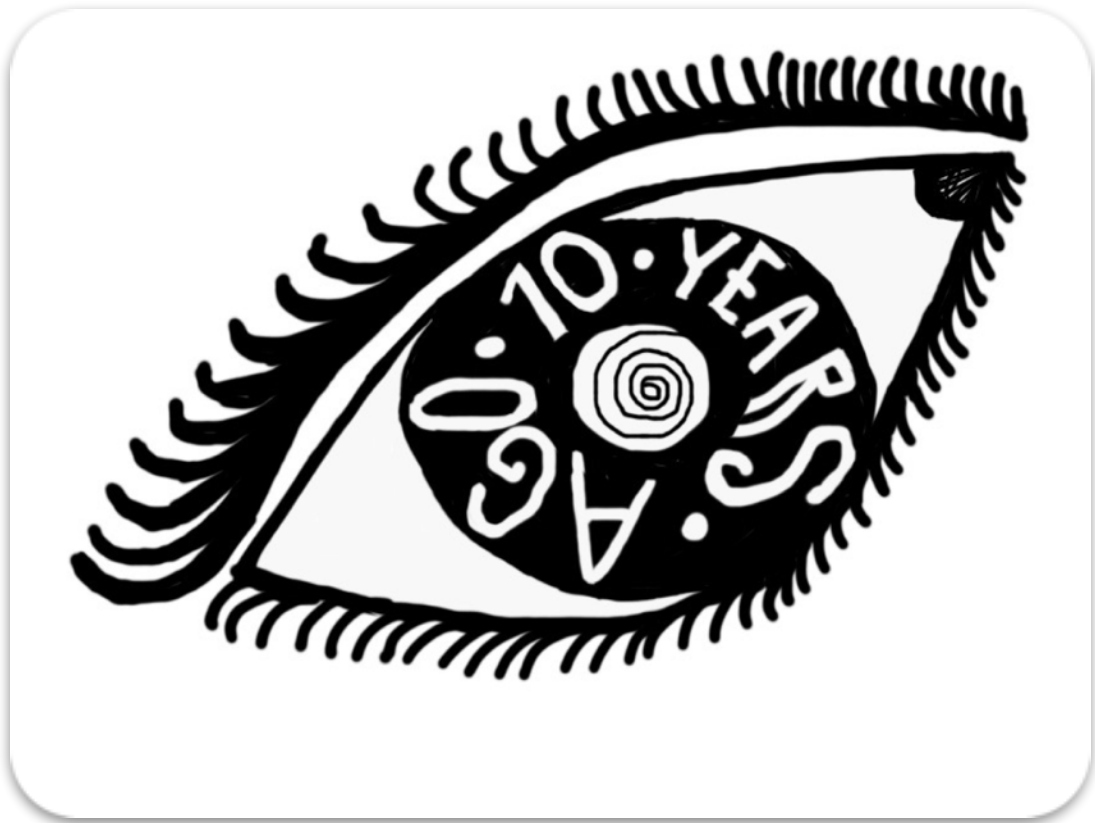


YOU EAT MY HARUAN

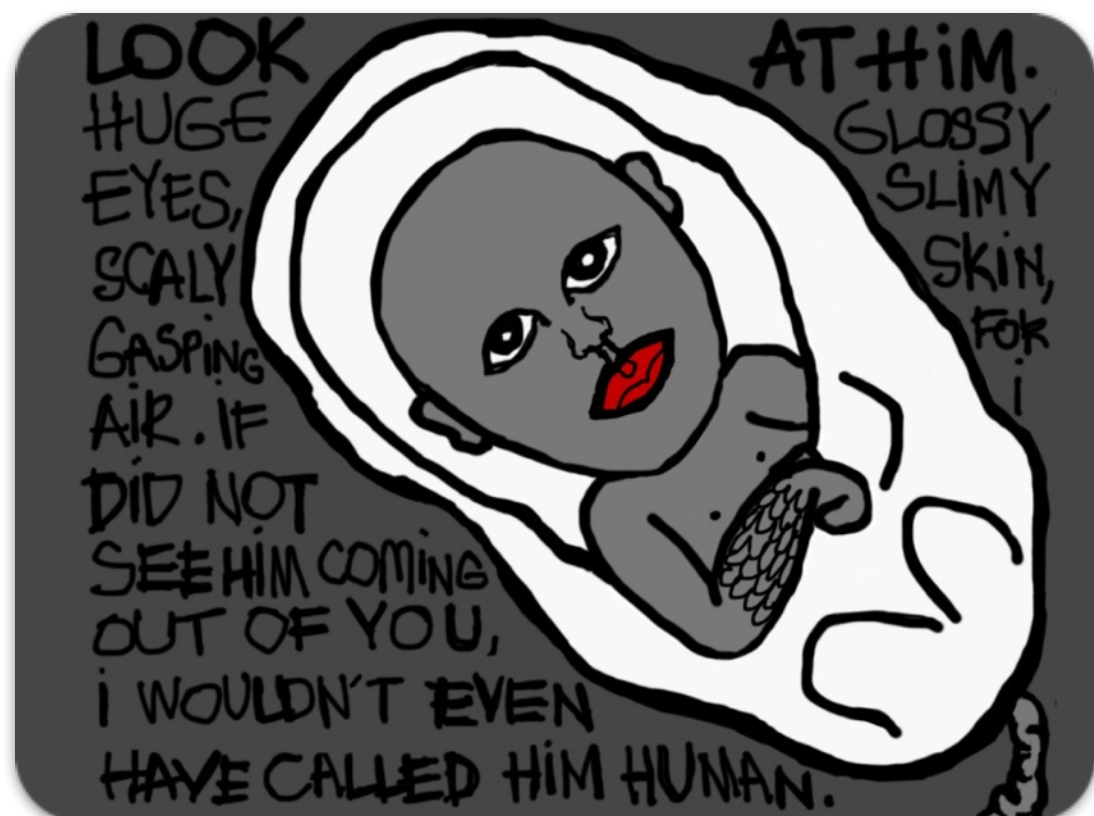
JUST LIKE YOU DEVOUR
YOUR DAUGHTER SALOMAH
YOUR DAUGHTER SALOMAH
SHE IS NOT FOOD FOR YOU!
SHE IS NOT FOOD FOR YOU!











A FISH. A
IKAN. A
HARUAN.
MY
SIN.

KILLED
CANNOT



LITTLE
BABY
HE IS
HUSBAND'S
ALL THAT
HARUANS WE
AND ATE. WE
KEEP HIM.

TIME
TO BURY
THE
PAST.



TIME
TO LET THE
HARUANGO.







OBSERVATORY 7



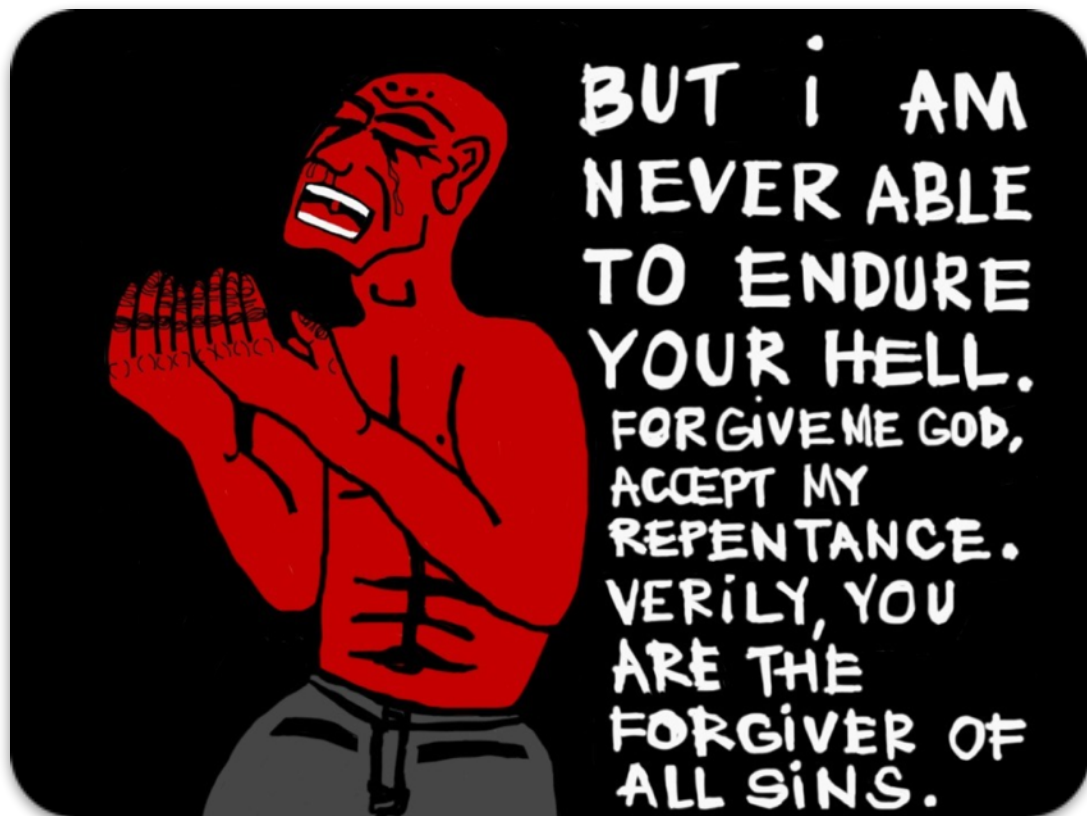
WE CALL
HER CIK
IKAN (MISS
FISH) FOR
HER LOVE
OF THE
CREATURE.
SHE DOES
NOT SPEAK. SHE
HAS BEEN WITH
US FOR 15 YEARS.

ACCORDING TO
HER RECORDS
SHE WAS FOUND
BY THE ROADSIDE
BARELY ALIVE,
HAVING BLED
MOST OF HER
BLOOD VOLUME
THROUGH
CHILDBIRTH.
THERE IS NO
MENTION AS TO
WHAT HAPPENED
TO THE BABY.









SALOMAH

REMEMBER HER
DERIS? WHO
MAKES HER FEEL
BETTER?
WILL SHE EVER
FORGIVE YOU?



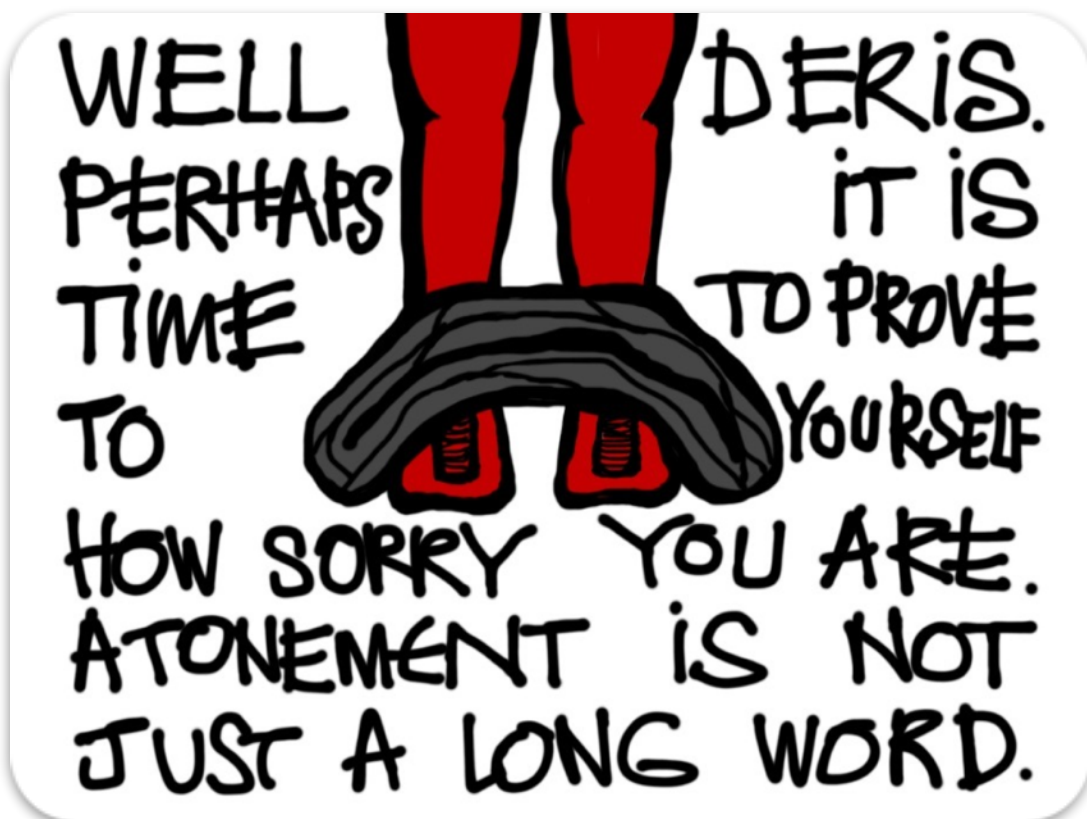
YOU TRICKED ME INTO DOING
IT. YOU DID NOT NEED
MUCH
HELP.



i HATE YOU.
i HATE YOU
MORE.







GO ON...THIS
CHANCE TO
RIGHT THING
YOU ARE
OFF WITHOUT
CAN NO
CONTROL.
FOR HER.
SALOMAH.
OWE HER



IS YOUR
DO THE
DERIS.
BETTER
WHAT YOU
LONGER
DO THIS
FOR
YOU
THIS.

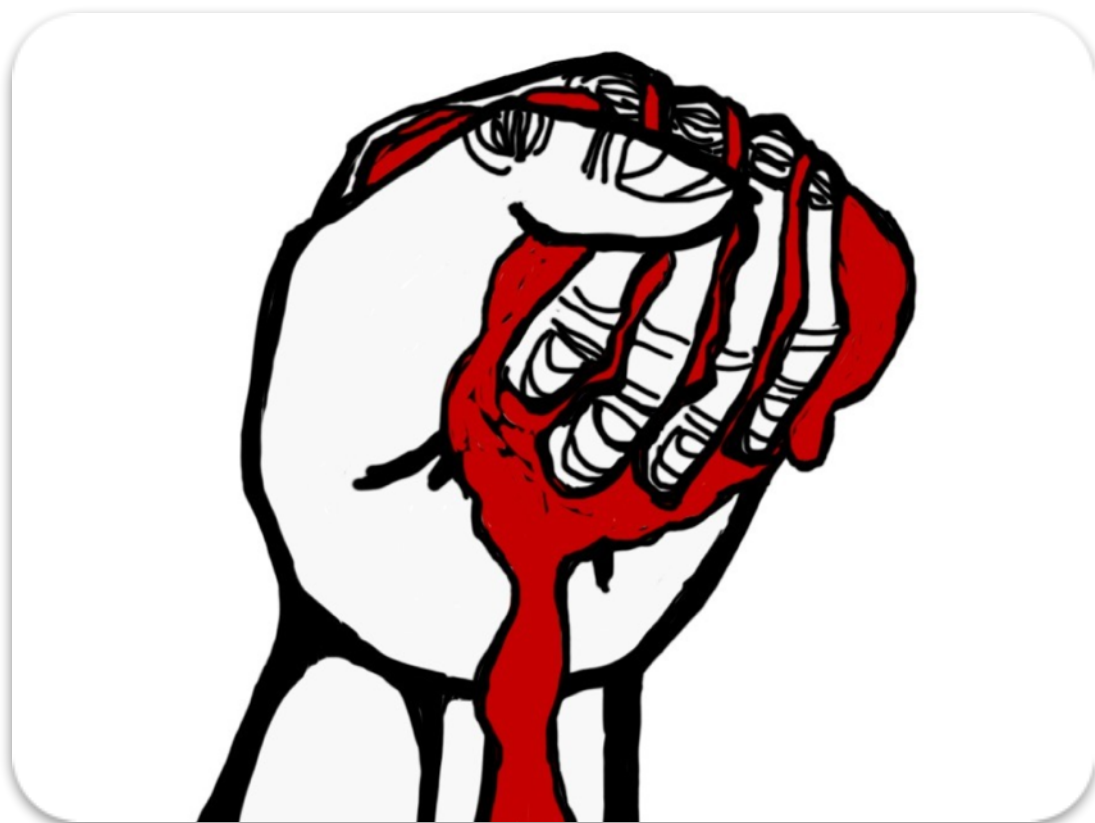
I AM PROUD OF
DERIS. SO VERY

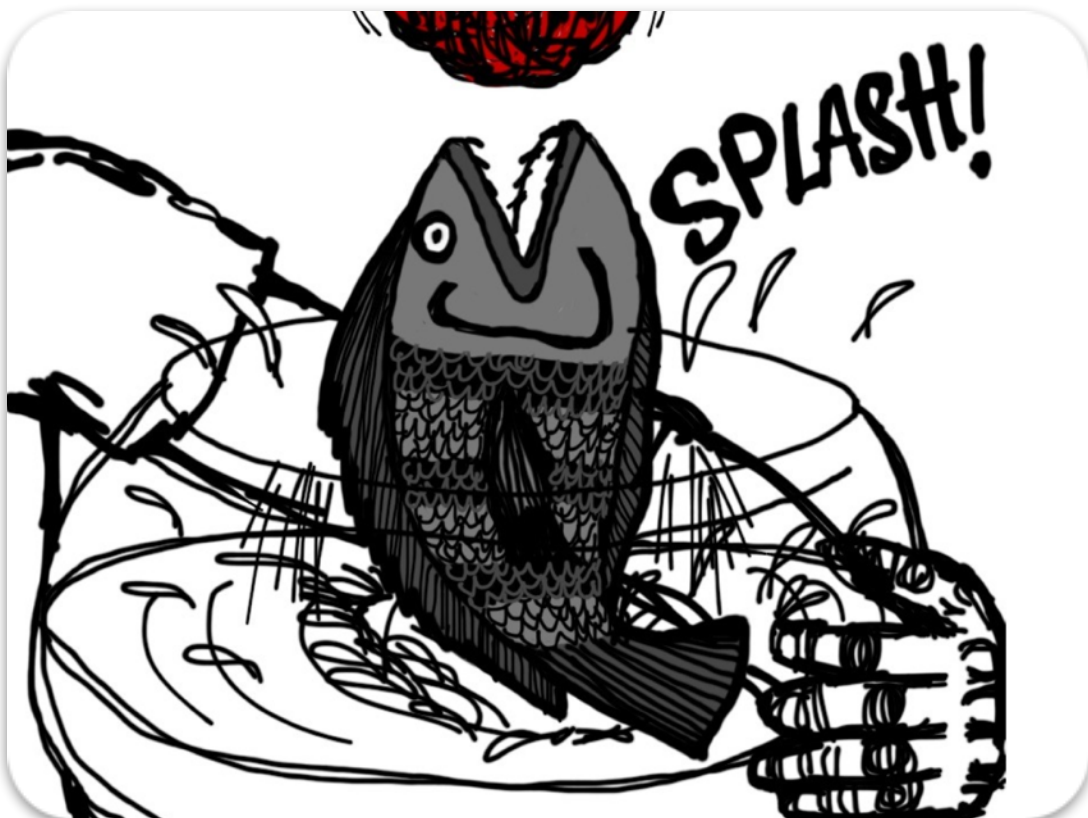
YOU
PROUD.



FORGIVE ME
SALOMAH...





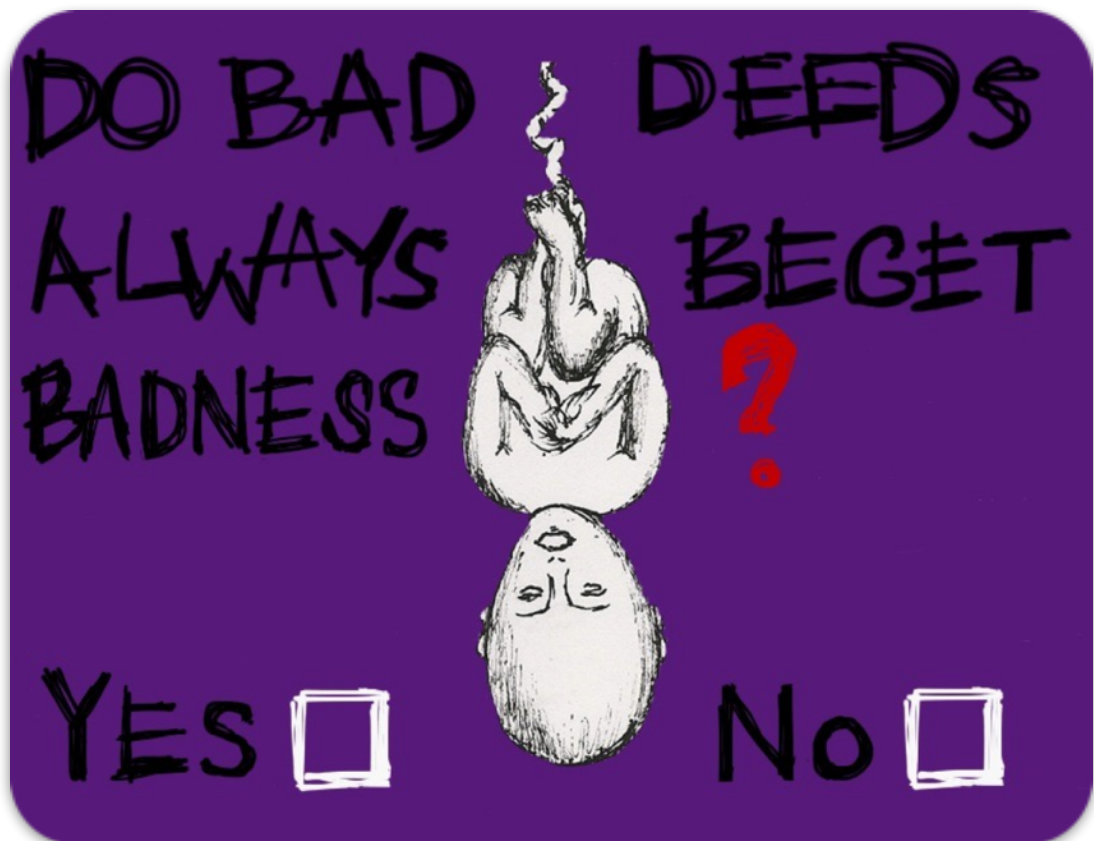




HARUAN OH HARUAN
KENAPA KAU MAKAN ANAK?
MACAM MANA ENKAU TAK
MAKAN

HARUAN OH HARUAN
WHY OH WHY DO YOU EAT YOUR YOUNG?
HOW DO YOU NOT DEVOUR YOUR
YOUNG...





APPENDIX D.

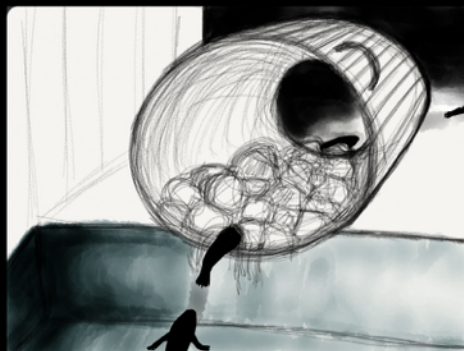


SCENE DRAWINGS OPENING SEQUENCE

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H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
7



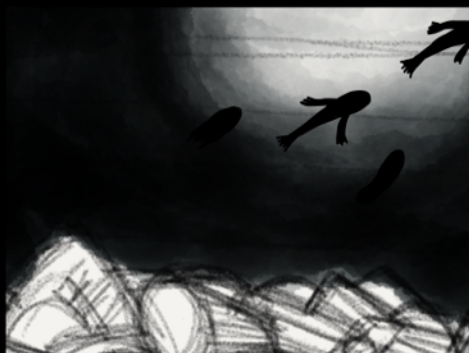
H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
8



H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
9



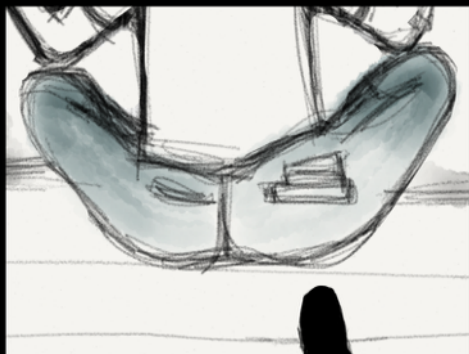
H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
10



H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
11



H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
12



H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
13



H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
14



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue

Opening sequence

The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare

15



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue

Opening sequence

The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare

16



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue

Opening sequence

The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare

17



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue

Opening sequence

The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare

18



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue

Opening sequence

The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare

19



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue

Opening sequence

The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare

20



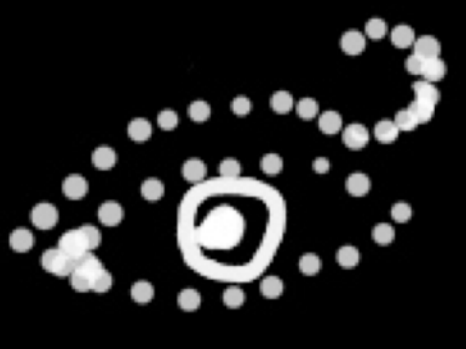
2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue

Opening sequence

The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare

21



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue

Opening sequence

The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare

22



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
23



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
24



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
25



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
26



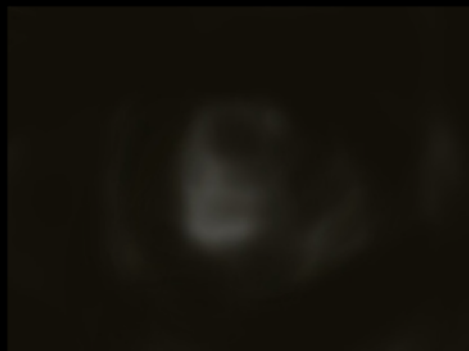
2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
27



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
28



2013

H•A•R•U•A•N Prologue
Opening sequence
The Exodus of the Newborn and Salomah's Nightmare
29

APPENDIX D.

Detailed scene drawings for the opening sequence of *Haruan: The Snakehead* (2014). Some of the panels are used as rear-projected images, whilst others are incorporated into the film during Post Production, as simple animation segments interspersed with live-action sequences.

APPENDIX E.

VISUALISING TABOOS:

The use of digital drawings throughout the entire filmmaking process of *Haruan: The Snakehead*

PreProduction



Ikan introduces Salomah in *Haruan: The Snakehead* : Despite being given artistic autonomy, note how the details within the frame's *mise-en-scène* (prop items, characters, scene layout) are closely relayed to and replicated by the Production team (Art Director & Production Designer) in the film (see panel Below), based upon the detailed PreProduction digital drawings for the scene (see panel Above).

PreProduction



View across the waste bin: An example of PreProduction digital drawings from the opening sequence of the film (see panel Above). This particular set of drawings has helped not only the Production team to reproduce the set, but also the Cinematographer to recreate the vignettied framing of Ikan in the background. The sequential digital drawings have also aided camera movement through the 'waste bin', whilst focusing on its content in the foreground (see panel Below).

Production



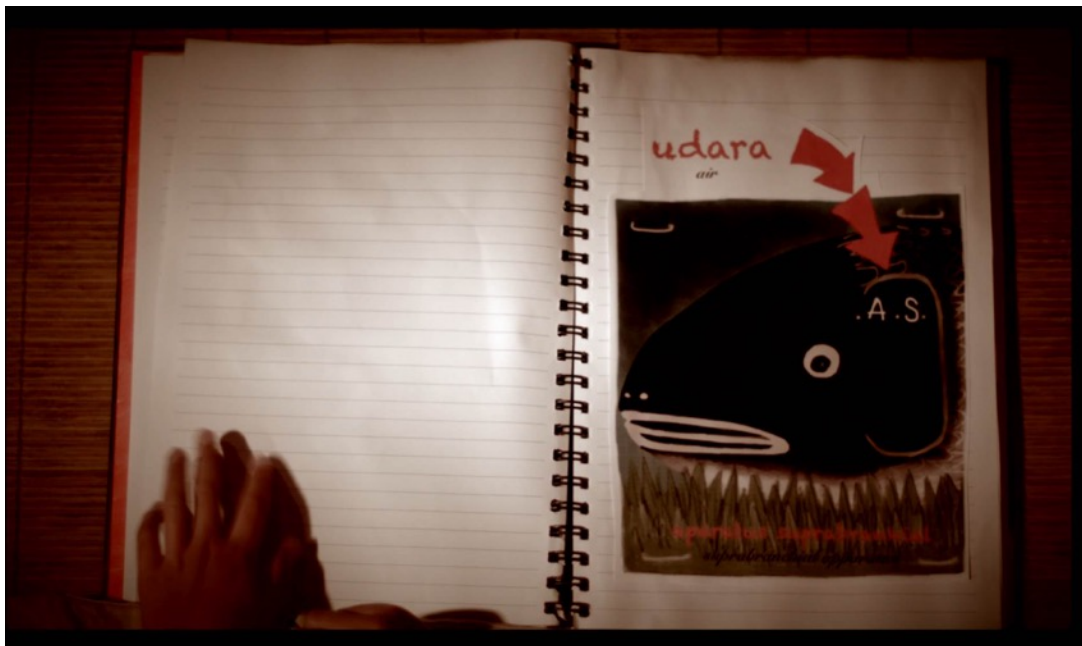
Digital drawings as 'motif GOBO': Inset: A sample from a digital drawing panel, depicting the motif on the wall of a padded cell. This digital drawing is used as a 'Goes-Before-Optics' device through its projection via an Apple iPad. The projected motif adorns Salomah's asylum screen walls, and provides the main light source for the scene.

Production

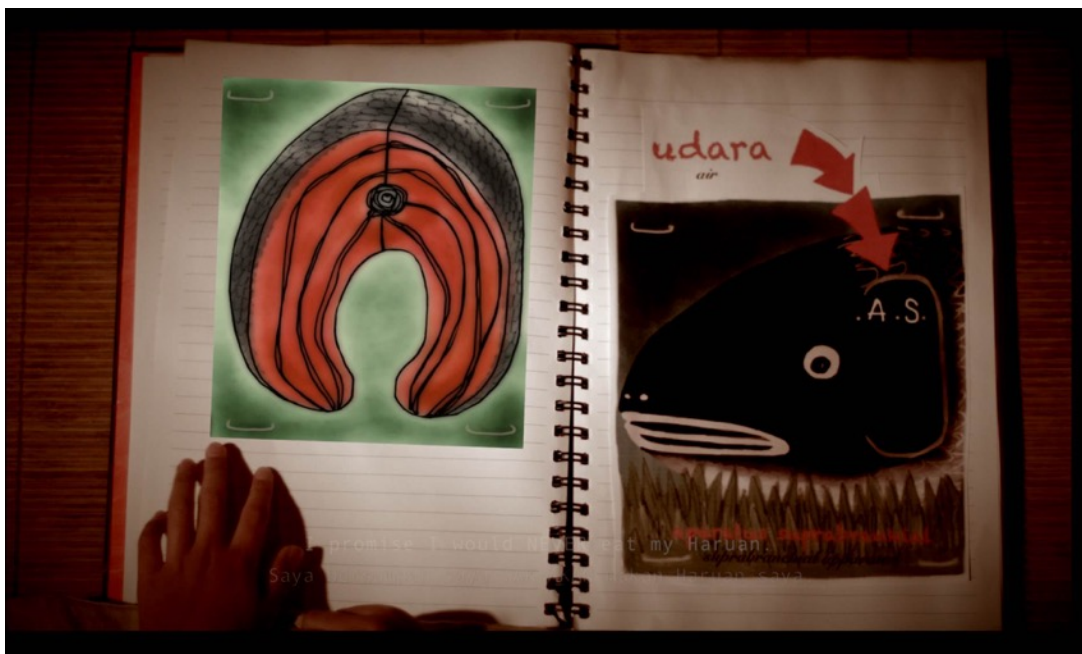


Digital drawings as 'lighting GOBO': Inset: A digital drawing panel with a 'louvred-window' motif. This 'Goes-Before-Optics' device provides not only a suggestion of a louvred window nearby, but also a linear light/dark lighting patterns across the room.

Post Production



Digital drawings as composite layers: Digital drawings are inserted into the film during Post Production, either as still images or simple animations - with or without chroma compositing.



In this example, as Ikan narrates the tale of the snakehead fish from his 'Tome of Haruan', digital panels appear on the blank pages of the book alongside its printed illustrations, to aid his storytelling.

Post Production



Digital drawings are also used as 'full-frame' inserts during Post Production, either as simple animations (for instance, the animated sequence of Salomah's nightmare at the beginning of the film), title pages for 'chapters' within the film or as stand-alone panels which depict an imagery from a character's thoughts or memories. The digital graphic novelette panel from the psychiatrist's retelling of Salomah's presumed life story in Salomah's Asylum scene (see panel Above) is converted into a

APPENDIX F.

THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN *HARUAN*'S GRAPHIC NOVELETTE AND THE FILM: Early ideas vs Production choices

CHARACTERS:

DERIS

- A. DERIS'S BLINDNESS IN HIS LEFT EYE, ALLEGEDLY FROM BEING URINATED BY A TOAD, CREATES AN ONGOING SOURCE OF ANGER AND HATRED WITHIN HIM. THIS MYTHOLOGY OF FROG/TOAD URINE CAUSING BLINDNESS IN HUMANS AND ANIMALS IS NOT UNCOMMON IN MALAYSIA AND OTHER COUNTRIES IN SOUTH EAST ASIA. THIS 'AMPHIBIAN ANGST' ALLOWS THE DEVELOPMENT OF TWO SCENES INVOLVING THE TOAD.



- B. DERIS BURNING HIS LEFT PALM ON THE HOTPLATE FOR COOKING *ROTI CANAI* OR FLATBREAD. INITIALLY IT IS TO BE USED AS THE TRIGGER FOR DERIS'S DEMANDING TO BE HEALED BY *HARUAN*. THIS ACUTE INJURY SCENE IS OMITTED, IN FAVOUR OF A



A MORE SUBTLE, WORK-RELATED CHRONIC ACHES AND PAINS IN HIS HANDS, DUE TO HIS TWO QUITE DIFFERENT MANUAL JOBS. THIS ALLOWS ME TO DEVELOP A SINGING SCENE WHERE THE LYRICS TO A CLASSICAL SONG IS CHANGED, TO HIGHLIGHT THE MANY DUALITIES IN DERIS'S CHARACTER. THE SCENE

ESTABLISHES THAT DERIS NEEDS HEALING; IT ALSO PUTS HIM AWKWARDLY IN BETWEEN A MOTHER (HIS WIFE) AND HER DAUGHTER (SALOMAH).

C. THE COLOUR GREEN IS NOT USED AS ONE OF DERIS'S BODY COLOURS. ONE OF THE REASONS FOR THIS IS THAT THE GREEN BODY PAINT DOES NOT WORK AS WELL AS THE RED ONE IN LOW LIGHT. GREEN BODY COLOURING IS ALSO REMINISCENT OF A POPULAR SUPERHERO CHARACTER, AN IMAGERY WHICH IS PROBABLY NOT SUITABLE FOR THIS FILM.



D. DERIS IS BALD IN ALL THE EARLY DRAWINGS OF THE CHARACTER. WHILST THIS WAS INITIALLY A FACTOR IN MY CASTING OF THE DERIS CHARACTER, I HAVE AGREED TO WORK AROUND THE CHOSEN ACTOR'S CHOICE OF HAVING QUITE LONG HAIR, AS THIS LOOK WORKS FOR HIS DEPICTION OF AN 'OLDER' DERIS.



SALOMAH

E. IN THE GRAPHIC NOVELETTE, SALOMAH IS COMPLETELY MUTE SINCE THE AGE OF 13, AND USES SIGN LANGUAGE TO COMMUNICATE. AS I DID NOT FEEL THAT THERE WAS ENOUGH TIME FOR THE ACTRESS WHO PLAYED SALOMAH TO RESEARCH INTO AND CONVINCINGLY PORTRAY A SIGNING, MUTE CHARACTER WITHOUT APPEARING CONTRIVED, I HAVE DECIDED TO NOT GO AHEAD WITH THIS ASPECT OF SALOMAH'S CHARACTER.

F. SALOMAH'S 'TOILET SCENE' WAS ADDED DURING THE FINAL STAGES OF PREPRODUCTION, TO PORTRAY A YOUNG MOTHER'S INVOLVEMENT, ALBEIT UNWILLINGLY, AS A PARTICIPANT, RATHER THAN JUST A PASSIVE VICTIM, IN THE ACT OF INFANTICIDE/BABY ABANDONMENT. TO ME, THIS IS ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT AND CHALLENGING SCENES IN THE FILM, PERHAPS BOTH FOR THE FILMMAKERS AND THE AUDIENCE ALIKE.

DJAHAT

G. IN THE EARLY PHASE OF PREPRODUCTION, DJAHAT IS CONCEPTUALISED AS A SMALL, HAIRY, DEMONIC, HUMANOID CREATURE WHICH 'PIGGYBACKS' ITS HOST, IN THIS CASE THE DERIS CHARACTER. DUE TO THE LOGISTICAL DIFFICULTY IN GETTING EITHER



First drawing of Djahat, circa September 2011

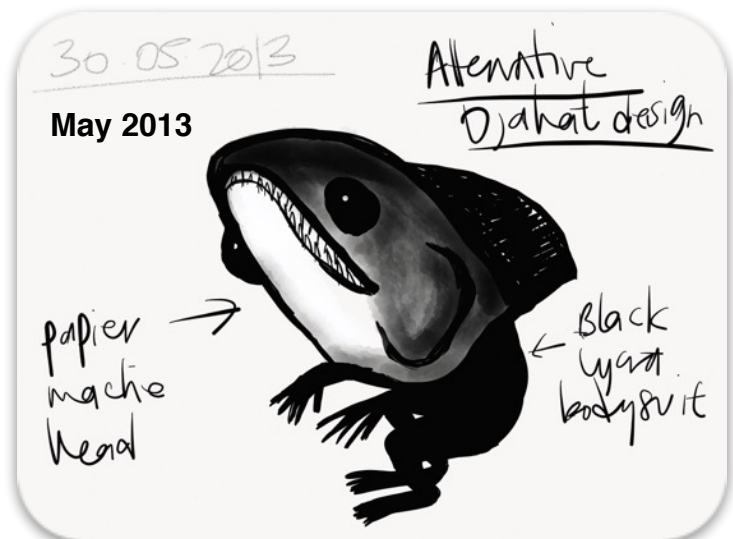
October 2011



A SMALL PERSON OR A CHILD TO PLAY DJAHAT IN A COSTUME WHILST RIDING ON DERIS'S BACK, THE DESIGN AND IDEA OF DJAHAT AS A CHARACTER HAVE EVOLVED SEVERAL TIMES THROUGHOUT THE FILMMAKING PROCESS; FROM ACTORS IN FULL COSTUMES, TO FISH-HEAD HEADGEARS AND FINALLY TO SHADOW PUPPET-LIKE SIMULACRA.



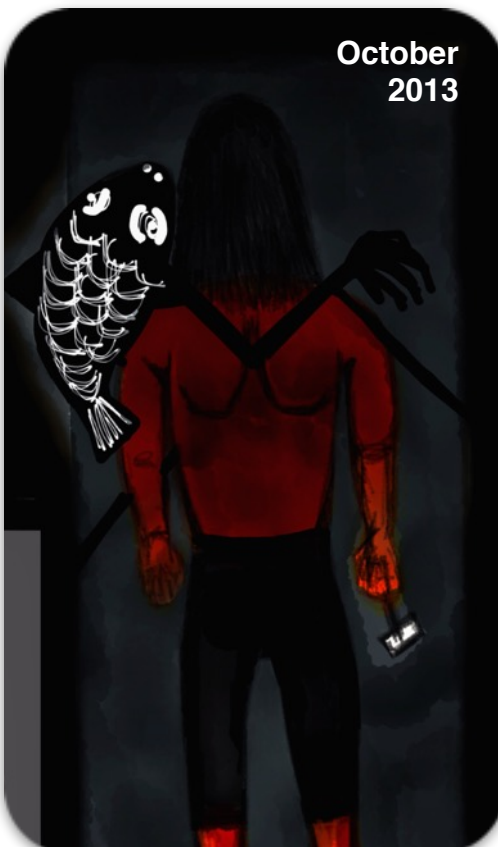
October
2013



May 2013

Djahat headgear
Lateral view

September
2013



October
2013



November
2013

ONE OF THE EARLY IDEAS TO PORTRAY THE DERIS/DJAHAT COMBINATION WAS TO HAVE MULTIPLE DJAHATS OF DIFFERENT COLOURS, ATTACHED TO NOT JUST DERIS, BUT TO DIFFERENT HUMAN 'HOSTS' WITHIN A SCENE. WHIST VISUALLY INTERESTING, IT WOULD BE A MAJOR LOGISTICAL FEAT TO ACHIEVE THIS WITH A SMALL CAST AND CREW (FOR INSTANCE, IT TOOK 2 PEOPLE 2.5 HOURS TO PAINT DERIS RED PRIOR TO A SCENE).



IKAN

- H. I INITIALLY WANTED TO FURTHER UNIFY IKAN AND HARUAN BY USING COSTUMES AND HEADGEARS WORN BY THE BOY, TO SIGNIFY THE CLOSENESS BETWEEN BOY AND FISH. IKAN'S NAME ITSELF IS A WORD PLAY WHICH MEANS 'FISH' IN MALAY. TO ENHANCE THE CINEMATIC VISUAL IMAGERY, I ALSO WANTED IKAN TO MIMIC SOME OF THE BEHAVIOURS OF HARUAN, FOR INSTANCE BURROWING AND 'CRAWLING' IN MUD. HOWEVER, I ABANDONED THIS CONCEPT FOR A SIMPLER, MORE SUBTLE YET POSSIBLY MORE AMBIGUOUS NOTION OF A BOY NARRATOR IN A WHITE T-SHIRT AND A PAIR OF SHORTS, CARRYING HARUAN IN A BOWL WHEREVER HE GOES.

