

WORK NEVER WORKS: ON MALAY COMEDY’S POLITICS OF LABOUR

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ABSTRACT

What accounts for Malay comedy’s longstanding preoccupation with work? This article argues that it marks a way of questioning capitalism’s universality wherein labour is not regarded as human nature but a specific demand emerging out of a recent and modern symbolic order. The radicality of this move will be demonstrated via Alenka Zupančič’s dialectical account of how comedy functions through revealing the contingency of meaning. Malay comedies operate to similar effects through a regular use simulation – such as mimicry, impersonation and disguises – where the notion of “work” is singled out to be scrutinised and estranged. But beyond this, bringing Malay comedy into conversation with Zupančič allows for a historical materialist extension of comedy’s dialectical operation in two regards. First, meaning is contingent not due to the “nature” of concepts but the extent to which concepts are affected by historical capitalism. Second, the simulations stress the corporeality of this process as the comic body is reducible neither as “just another object,” nor idealised as an emancipatory experience as how it has been rendered by notable theories of comedy. It is, rather, a site where historical understanding takes place.

Keywords: Malay comedy, Malaysian cinema, labour, combined and uneven development, psychoanalysis

INTRODUCTION

Many studies have explored the different ways Malay films enact political critique. But few if none have considered how comedies do the same despite making some of the most iconic moments in Malay cinematic history. This article responds to this lacuna to consider how Malay comedies historicise capital through their longstanding concern with labour. It does so in particular by insisting on the contingency of capitalism. Its most basic point, and one that continues to underscore even recent Malay comedy, is that one need not take work seriously. But the broader critique, read in light their incisive historical sensitivity, is that capitalism is not “natural”. Its cultural presence is merely superficial. Developmental discourse too therefore is not hegemonic. This allows for Malay comedies to be understood as staging impulses for a fairer world. This in turn allows insights into how comedy is a fundamentally a historical materialist operation. Humour is irreducible to neither morality nor catharsis. Rather it is attuned to the contradictions of modernisation as to more incisively uncover their most basic presuppositions for critique.

Alenka Zupančič’s Hegelian-inspired approach will be deployed to describe how Malay comedies conceptually dismantles the notion of labour to underscore its nonsense. By this, comedies are incisive in how they show that the integrity of concepts – in this case “work” – rests on a contradictory relationship with their opposite. For Zupančič, the meaning of anything is never wholly separate from what it negates. It is premised and dependent upon an opposition. It is through this ability to negate something else that it retains its salience. Laughter then is triggered when the opposition between two concepts is instead revealed to be a contradiction that cannot be concealed. Similarly, Malay comedy will show how the purported dignity of work could be mocked from the state of “non-work,” typically performed in various ways as unemployment or an earnest job search. But “non-work” is a compelling standpoint to begin with because the films are set amidst a modernising context where the necessity of wage labour – and their corresponding institutions such as capitalism and the nation – are only recent political imperatives. The comic renderings of work and non-work are not merely conceptual wordplay so much as a way of insisting on the impermanence of capitalism. Comedy too is thereby grounded as a way of critiquing capital.

This yields additional insights on the comic body. It is neither just a prop nor a site of accumulated drives but a way in which history is indexed. To laugh at bodies trying to adjust to work is to see bodies negotiating their temporal position in light of an emerging modernity. This will be shown through a close reading of selected comic scenes from Malaysian cinema history, rather than particular films.

In particular, the scenes attest to dominant trends in Malay comedies that resonate with Zupančič's key insights. From here it will be evident that Malay comedies historicise these insights to situate humour amidst a broader global-historical plain. But we shall begin, firstly, with an overview of Malay comedy and its treatment of work.

WORK AND NON-WORK IN MALAY CINEMA

Malay cinema has sustained a longstanding preoccupation with work. The examples are countless but three classic ones will suffice for context. *Ibu Mertuaku* (P. Ramlee 1962) is often recounted as a story of a failed relationship between husband-and-wife Kassim Selamat and Sabariah. But what is less discussed is how their failure pivoted on Kassim's inability to support Sabariah. This was prefigured when his mother-in-law Nyonya Mansur rejected their courtship, amounting to what is perhaps the most famous line in Malay cinematic history, on the grounds of his occupation as a musician. Mansur in fact stated her preferences in terms of more secure occupations, suggesting doctors, lawyers or magistrates as more reliable alternatives. Sabariah takes heed as she eventually chooses to spend the rest of her life with a rich doctor instead. In *Azura* (Deddy 1984), Zack comes of age through learning about the value of work after his father kicked him out of his house for being lazy. It was only upon proving that he is able to support himself independently, a realisation the film stresses through extended scenes of him toiling in the hot sun at a construction site, that his father eventually accepts him again. *Kami* (Zain 1982), is also about work, as two runaway boys from the village bond over discovering Kuala Lumpur through taking odd jobs as car washers and gardeners to survive the harshness of city life. Each of these films star legends in Malaysian film history, marking iconic roles for P. Ramlee, Jamal Abdillah and Sudirman, respectively, who we should also add are three of Malaysia's most celebrated singers.

Given the centrality of work in Malay popular imagination, it is not that unusual that it also makes a constant feature of comedies. But rather than simply depicting or discussing work, Malay comedies do more by simulation. The simulations include a host of other acts such as copying, observing, masquerading, costumes, impersonation, pretending, disguising and so forth. They all, however, achieve the same effect, that is, to stress distance between the unemployed person and the job he or she is about to take before they are fused. The profundity of this very commonplace move is that it constantly differentiates subject and object: The worker (subject) is not immediately submerged into the work (object). They are, rather, positioned parallel to one another and thus seen as simultaneously same

and different. A.R. Badul, perhaps the most celebrated Malay comedian of the 1980s, built his trade through gags about pretending to have jobs. He overcomes his limitations as a poor worker through mimicking other more desirable professions at the time such as religious guru or a businessman. In *Hantu Siang* (Badul 1986), Badul disguises himself as archetypally successful Malay men (pilots, entrepreneurs) to cheapen their success by showing how easy they can be emulated. It goes without saying that exaggerated bodily displays are a key method of simulation. In *Balik Kampung* (Zainal 1986), three friends pretend to be blind and busk on the street after being frustrated by a difficult and non-rewarding job search. They perform via overstating blind-like gestures, wearing sunglasses and turning their heads upwards in swaying motion. The joke is that it is much easier to make money handicapped than as able-bodied proletarians.

This trend's prevalence is interesting enough but what is more noteworthy is its ongoing intensification. Simulation has been put front and centre at some of the most definitive venues of Malay comedy. One of Malaysia's highest rated television shows are *Muzikal Lawak Superstar* (2019), a comedy musical competition. Its first season features a segment that demands each of its participants to compose a skit about the workplace. Its live-stage semi-improvised format underscores the centrality of impersonations as each musical bit is set to show an occupational establishment in obvious ways. The costumes too were accordingly ostentatious: the industrial worker wears a hard hat; the nurse has a stethoscope around her neck; the religious guru with Islamic regalia. They all dance to exaggerate the features of the occupations they are in. It is important to note that *Muzikal Lawak Superstar* (2019) owes its popularity as an offshoot of the successful *Raja Lawak* (2007) franchise, another live-audience comedy competition that inspired various spinoffs over its 13-season span. Work is a common topic too, the full extent of which would be too vast to list here. But it would suffice to note that the programme has produced some of Malaysia's best contemporary comedians. One of its most popular sketches brought together a pioneer *Raja Lawak* champion (Johan) and a recent one (Jep Sepahtu) to do various skits about work. A well-known one sees Johan in a security guard uniform being chastised by his father for being a loser. His appearance was singled out as he was mocked for looking like a boy scout.

To understand the politics to this humour it is key for us to note that the simulation – the gap that always underscores work from worker – produces an effect that is best called “non-work”. In this case, non-work does not refer to unemployment (although unemployment usually sets up the storyline) but a gap that persists despite work already being instantiated. Consider, as an introductory example, a famous scene in the classic *Do, Re, Mi* (P. Ramlee 1966), Minami chances

upon a job opening (one of the job requirements reads “the ability to withstand castigations”). He knows nothing of job interviews for one, never mind what a curriculum vitae (CV) is but has a go anyway. The joke, however, is that he briefly gets the job by slowly observing and mimicking the interviewer so well to the point where the interviewer becomes momentarily convinced that Minami is actually the boss. The role reversal stops soon enough though. The interviewer suddenly snaps out of it and realises that he was being parodied. The boss chases Minami across the room but by then the scene has already established the symbolic salience of “non-work” through showing the tenuous position of “work”.

The running joke in “non-work” then is that one can never work right because there appears to be something about work that is inappropriate. One works less, one works more but work itself never seems or is never done “as it should”; One may be earnestly performing the task but not exactly looking the part. Work may “solve” unemployment but not without also producing the sense that something of work remains awkward. Consider another classic example: *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (P. Ramlee 1959) sees three friends travelling to a village to learn how to fight from a *silat* (a traditional Malay martial arts) *guru* (expert/master). A famous scene from the film has them introducing themselves to the *guru*. When asked about the work they used to do they each gave nonsensical answers: Ramlee’s previous job was counting sheep wool, Aziz’s was waiting for roosters to lay eggs and Sudin’s was tying different bear tails to one another. The *guru* listened earnestly as they recounted these far-fetched tasks. He empathises and remarks that they must have been difficult to do. The threesome say that it is just their luck. The joke of course is that the jobs are not examples of hard work so much as non-existent. Showing this, however, requires that the jobs are taken seriously as real jobs at the same time.

NON-WORK AS DE-IDEALISATION

Non-work then shows how work is exemplified but always imperfectly. This imperfection in turn takes us to the distinct way with which Malay comedies treat labour: They discuss work only to eventually render it meaningless. It is important to note then that Malay comedy rarely ever shows work resisted, refused or even reformed. The common move instead is to de-idealise work. Work is always positioned as a universal demand that must be obeyed. But the humour quickly undoes this demand by showing how it cannot be met even after trying to. By this, the opposite of work, and what makes it funny, is neither leisure nor freedom but nonsense.

This link between de-idealisation and nonsense also happen to resonate with Alenka Zupančič's (2008) account of how comedy is fundamentally materialist. We miss comedy's subversive potential if we regard it as a simple concrete inversion of an ideal, where the body has supposedly overcome the mind, or hubris is met with reminders of human authenticity or frailty. The problem with this approach is that it just ends up replacing one ideal with another. The infeasibility of religion is replaced by a similarly unfeasible attitude of irreverence, or a high regard for the sacred is merely replaced by elevating the abject, for example. Instead, Zupančič's (2008) approach shows how an ideal is truly subverted only through the inconsistencies inherent to its own logic: comedy emerges where concepts are regarded so earnestly that one is brought to its opposite, eventually heightening the unsustainable antagonisms intrinsic to its definition, to the point where it no longer makes sense. The ideal is untenable due to its very own terms.

To describe this, she uses the "archetypal example" of a "toffee-nosed baron" who trips and slips upon one accident after another (falling into a puddle, slipping on a banana peel etc.) without ever losing her arrogance (Zupančič 2008: 29):

What we are dealing with here is in no way an abstract-universal idea (belief in the elevated nature of his own aristocratic personality) undermined, for our amusement, by intrusions of material reality... On the contrary, is it not only too obvious that the capital human weakness here—what is most human, concrete, and realistic—is precisely the baron's unshakeable belief in himself and his own importance: that is to say, his presumptuousness?

We miss the point when we regard the accidents as the joke's concrete element. Rather she points out that what is actually concrete is the Baron's steadfast assumption of his high status. The joke would not be funny—in fact it would not even count as a joke—if the baron was immediately humbled by his misfortune. If anything, the baron's body and physical props (banana peel, puddle etc.) are the joke's far more idealistic elements. Having a moral of the story ("everyone should be humble") ends up simply idealising humility.

Rather, it is in the accidents' inability to stop the baron that the meaning of aristocracy is elucidated. The comedy, in other words, is in how it shows how the notion of baron-ness cannot sustain in and of itself. Just as the baron could easily pick himself up upon after every mishap, so too does baron-ness as concept continue to bounce off every attempt to dismantle it. The joke then is not about the baron's human fallibility, as flawed and subject to the mercies of chance, but rather the nonsense in the notion of baron-ness that can only be seen through the certain earnestness with which the baron continues to carry himself. It is in this way that

comedy stresses what Zupančič calls the “humanity of the concept itself,” the flaw at the heart of an ideal’s conceptual integrity. It is the flaw that calls for the need for conceptual integrity in the first place (Zupančič 2008, 29).

In this regard, comedy brings out a universal truth to concepts and identities as they ultimately stand upon a term, namely how they are each constituted by profound antagonisms that cannot be overcome despite their deepest convictions. Similarly Malay comedies also show non-work is a conceptual move, insofar as work is taken on only for its nonsense to be shown. The universality of wage labour is clearly recognised in how it is regarded as a non-negotiable. The men accept it as something they must do. But more than that the comedies also aim for its conceptual integrity, that is to say, the fact that work is an established norm: the scenarios are so often set where work is institutionalised such as offices and job interviews. The men are also often commanded to get a job by culturally esteemed figures be it the wealthy, their spouses or parents. The simulations are therefore taking on the meaning of work directly by showing, as Zupančič (2008) says, a contradiction immanent to the notion of work itself. The examples listed above are noteworthy in how work is mocked not through shirking, striking or refusal but through firstly accepting work as a universal expectation.

THE NON-SYNCHRONICITY OF THE CONCEPT

But while non-work shows the immanent point of nonsense in the universality of work, Malay comedies is situating the universality amidst a certain contextual awareness. The fact that work is firstly to be sought after means that it is positioned as something distant. More importantly, Malay films often dramatise this distance by staging the search for work as a journey across a rural-urban difference. The protagonists are almost in every instance men from the village who head to the city in search of jobs and greener pastures. The contrasting landscape then marks an attempt to make sense of history: The rural connotes the past and this could mean something negative (lack of progress or laziness) or positive (pristine tradition). The city too similarly could be coded in ambivalent ways. At times it is regarded as where progress and wealth are happening but it is also seen as a place of moral corruption. They are not necessarily positioned as opposite worlds, however. In fact, much of urban space is shown intertwined with clear aspects of rurality. But the differing landscapes enable the comedies to visualise historical thinking as the city is indicated to be where capitalism is happening. By this, finding work in the city is not simply about getting a job. It is also in effect an adjustment to a new historical situation. The search for work then is more than just a matter of livelihood. It recognises the force of a new spatio-temporal demand.

This brings us to another crucial feature of Malay comedies about work. What is as constant as the search for work is work's temporariness. For the inability of holding on to a job is as much a common filmic trope. Key is how this has the crucial effect of reminding the audience of the divergent temporalities taking place, which would not be so obvious if the men had found work as soon as they arrived. The state of always losing work, in other words, puts the protagonists in a perpetual state of reset. They still embody the "past" temporality despite physically being at the heart of capitalism. The ebb and flow that runs through the job-search, the job-acquisition and the job-loss constituted the *Bujang Lapok* tetralogy's 30-year span. The basic storyline is that the three characters remain bachelors because they were unable to hold on to any job for long despite having sojourned across the country in search of employment. This plot has become canonical storyline template of sorts especially in the 1980s when the rural-urban divide intensified as the government pursued far reaching infrastructural measures to engineer a strictly Malay capitalist class. *Sikit Punya Gila* (Raja Ismail 1982), *Balik Kampung* (Zainal 1986), *Jejaka Perasan* (A. R. Badul 1987), *Marah Marah Sayang* (Johari 1987), are 80s comedy classics that replicate the *Bujang Lapok* model. More recent examples include *Man Sewel Datang KL* (Rahman 2012) and *Sepah: The Movie* (Rosli 2012). All are buddy movies seeing jobless bachelors navigating modernity through the cycle of work discovery and job loss. Their togetherness highlights how the constant cycle of job search and loss is a collective experience of a given era more than a personal moral failing.

Malay comedy shows the concrete universality of work as a historical demand that is continuously constructed and reconstructed. Non-work "makes sense" as a joke because work is embodied amidst a temporal contradiction between a universalising capitalism and the locality. In other words, what makes non-work funny is that it highlights the contingency, the antagonism indicating a fundamental instability, in work's universality. Conceptually speaking, the contradictions of work could be pointed out and mocked because the concept has not been closed off. "Not closed off" in this case refers particularly to the recognition of an unstable symbolic order. In Lacanian terms one can say that work has not been fully quilted to the modernising Malay symbolic order because that symbolic order is being cut across different times. In a more specific sense, it refers to what shall be called the non-synchronicity of the concept, that is to say, the concept as its significance moves across divergent temporalities and their symbolic demands. But more than that, this movement happens because there is a tension between the different demands that cannot be resolved. Therefore, non-work is not simply about showing how the concept is belied by a failure to conceal its contradictions. It also indicates that the contradictions were never fully concealed in the first place, owing to the pull of

divergent temporalities that continuously unsettles any restriction of meaning to any one experience of time.

We can note the more specific theoretical implication of non-synchronicity by how it actually produces a crucial Hegelian insight: For Hegel, the concrete does not simply refer to a thing's unique characteristics. Rather concreteness is about the entity as a whole. The particularity, its embeddedness in history, determines its objectivity, that is to say, its totality as a concept. Malay comedy similarly acknowledges, defines and crystallises "work" into a notion. But it also shows that the concept is embedded in history via the post-colonial movement of global capital. This leads us to a well-known Marxian corrective of Hegel, namely how abstraction is an operation that is always anchored in its situation. But Malay comedy does not merely state this as a matter of fact. It deploys non-work to demonstrate how work is conceptualised through the contradictory convergence of times forced by capitalism. It visualises how capital moves the inherent tension between the particular and the universal. It does not simply show that capitalism and conceptualisation are fundamentally connected. Rather, the concrete universal is produced out of non-synchronicity. If concreteness is about history, and if history is contradictory and not a matter of a sweep into unilateral linear time, then definitions emerge in the need to make sense of different temporal demands. Recognising the non-synchronicity of the concept is to recognise that conceptualisation is fundamentally tenuous.

It will help to consider an example of how non-synchronicity of capitalism sustains the openness of a concept. *Setinggalan* (Aziz 1981) opens with Sudin's father-in-law, wife and five children eagerly reading the letter he had written from Kuala Lumpur. The wife reads it aloud as the father, who is most likely illiterate, listens on (illiterate men are common in Malay films). She says that Sudin had moved to *setinggalan* (illegal urban "slum") housing. The father asks what that is and the wife guesses that it is a bungalow house. She then said that Sudin invited the family to move to the city given that he had found a job. The father asks her what the job is and she says *sekuriti* (as in security guard) unsure of how to pronounce the word. The father then asks what that is and she says, also uncertainly, that it is something like clerical work (this is actually very funny when you hear it in Malay). Sudin's father-in-law then turns to the camera to lament why youths are so eager to move to the city when villages are cleaner, greener and far more spacious. The film goes on to reveal the opposite. The city turns out to be harsh and unpromising. The father's monologue cuts to Sudin walking out of his slum house to see the neighbourhood landlord and plead for a reprieve as he is a Ringgit short of his MYR80 monthly rent. All this to say meaning (even wrong ones) is produced out of a stream of different times, revealing the contradiction in the universality of wage labour's contention with the locality of the Malay rural-urban divide.

Setinggalan, as a unique spatial experience, is also an interesting setting for this sliding of signifiers. While *setinggalan* is often referred to in the news as slum villages, it is actually the unique blend of village infrastructure and urban lifestyle that emerged as a result of mass rural Malay migration to cities in the 1970s and 1980s. The largely wooden and zing design of *setinggalan* houses shows the economic poverty of their populations. But it is also an extension of their past village environment. What makes *setinggalan* unique is how they manifested as village communities, despite being located at the heart of Malaysia's major cities. Residents named their neighbourhoods after villages in addition to having a village social structure where various aspects of rural communal living are practiced. Their proliferation amidst the cities led to massive anti-*setinggalan* drive by the state especially as it took a neo-liberal approach to urban development in the late 1980s and 1990s and favoured land privatisation to attract developers. The policy now was to evict *setinggalan* communities and move them to proper public housing on the pretext that they were squatting on land that do not belong to them. The *setinggalan* community's defence is that they are not squatters but settlers who played a crucial role in developing Malaysia's urban identity. But their village-communal makeup could not fit the state's official developmental urbanism.

The opening scene in the film is instructive for how concepts retain their openness amidst capitalism and the spatial-historical, antagonisms it causes. Wage labour is recognised but not without at the same time historicising it as a product of modernisation, profilmically shown as an incompatibility of divergent times and the incompatibility of historical spaces. The example of *Setinggalan* (Aziz 1981) is also instructive for how it shows that the sliding of signifiers is not deterministically on capital's side. Malay comic word-plays heighten non-synchronicity through showing the fundamental uncertainty underlying the social order. The dynamic between the universal and the particular at work here is again key to note. Capitalism is taken for granted as a palpable force but not without also showing the persistence of a contrary historical logic.

This is more evident in encounters with more overt symbols of global capitalism. In *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (P. Ramlee 1961), another classic, the three friends arrive to the city in search of work at the Hong Kong-based multinational Shaw Brothers studio. They register their encounter with the newness of the film industry and studio facility through an argument about proper pronunciations. Sudin first referred to it as a *filem stadio* before Ramlee corrected him and said it the "proper" English-sounding way, to which Sudin remarked that sounds more or less like what he just said. While marvelling at the size of the infrastructure Sudin then pointed out where the *sunting* happens to which Ramlee then corrected him again and said "shooting". Sudin is actually not that wrong because *sunting*

in bahasa Malaysia translates literally to “cut”. In fact, in local film parlance it actually means “edit”. Ramlee then is correcting Sudin on the basis of the signifier’s appearance, as in the acoustic image the sign evokes, more than what is “actually” signified. But he is correct only according to the symbolic conventions of an international capitalist industry.

The crucial insight in this scene is that the local “strikes back”, insisting on its own realm of meaning against that of an expanding capitalism. But key is how we can only see this because the scene features both words to leave them as they are. It is through sustaining each word’s salience that the film can demonstrate the non-synchronicity taking place: Sudin is actually correct in substance (films do require *sunting* because they have to be edited) but this can only make sense in Malay. Ramlee is also correct because *sunting* does not mean anything in the international Western filmic lexicon. This shows two different but incompatible ways of relating to the same object. But more than that the sameness stands out only because a difference was registered. Sustaining Ramlee’s (in)correct wording (Sudin does not bother to disagree with him) has the effect of making the presence of the local symbolic order even more obvious. Their contradictory relationship underscores the respective meanings and incongruence caused by capitalism. The local stands out alongside the global as equals; the particular fuses with the universal; an instantaneous comparison happens and the joke can now “work”.

DIFFERENCE IN HISTORY

We are now more able to contrast the non-synchronicity of the concept, which sustains a persistent openness in concrete universality, with what Zupančič calls the “humanity of the concept” (wherein the universalisation of the particular is a matter of conceptual closure) (Zupančič 2008, 30). Todd McGowan’s summary of her position explains this succinctly: “As we see the universal concretising itself, we experience the comic: we laugh at the distance that we imagine between the universal and the concrete disappearing” (McGowan 2017, 61). But the non-synchronicity of the concept shows the opposite: the universal and the concrete come together to produce antagonisms. Malay comedy then retains the general Hegelian formula while pushing the movement further. The distance between the universal and the concrete is diminished before it is then quickly accentuated again, thereby making the contradiction inherent to concrete universality even more apparent. Universalisation, in other words, ultimately produces more difference rather than more understanding. The non-synchronic inverts the formula above: we laugh at the distance that we imagine between the universal and the concrete expanding. This, to be sure, is not a matter of privileging non-identity against

identity. Rather Malay comedy highlights difference to extend the grasp of already existing contradictions as an open process. Universalisation is a way of extending difference rather than the other way around.

That capitalism universalises as much as it differentiates speaks to its fundamentally uneven nature. Capitalism does not globalise to homogenise everything in the image of the West. Rather it amounts to “developmental variations both between and within societies, along with the attendant spatial differences between them” (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015, 44). Capitalism does not universalise without encountering, and consequently without also being impacted by, local circumstances that are always already interacting with other elements. Thus, modernisation entails “the inorganic melding of native and foreign agencies, institutions, practices, ideologies and socio-economic systems, resulting in time-compressed, accelerated developmental transformations (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015, 50). This allows for “sociologically differentiated forms of agency” (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015, 51). Productive forces, because they are shaped amidst such varied fusions of contexts and times are “determining but not deterministic” (Anievas and Nisancioglu 2015, 52). Just as modernisation emerges out of new combinations of social configurations at a global scale, so too do potential for unconsidered notions of agency and responses to capitalist alienation.

This allows us to approach the insight behind Malay comedy’s evocations of the rural-urban divide. It is an obvious treatment of the divergent temporalities that are taking place but more than that it is also a fidelity to the fundamentally uneven nature of Malay capitalism. For one, the contrast of divergent temporalities has the visual effect of showing Malays in a state of “neither here nor there”. This in turn is telling of their broader political predicament. On one hand Malays can claim clear national political dominance. They constitute the official language, majority ethnicity and religion in a multicultural, multi-religious and multi-linguistic polity. Their cultural privileges are constitutionally ensured and backed by a monarchy and an expanding Islamic bureaucracy. They also make up the majority leadership and labour for the police and military. But their command of the state has not translated to economic dominance. Despite decades of far-reaching governmental measures to modernise Malays and adapt them to global capitalism, the Malaysian economy remains dominated by a more historically established urban-based Chinese commercial class. The fact remains that where the few Malay capitalists have been successful, it is because of active government support. Otherwise, Malay economic power would be represented indirectly through their majority leadership in government-linked companies, which manage the national petroleum and palm oil industries. Note then the distinct Malay nationalist conundrum. The elite’s dependence on state help means that they cannot claim to be an independent

capitalist class. But even if they are “independent”, they cannot claim to be a Malaysian capitalist class given that their Chinese compatriots remain more historically advantaged in this regard.

Just as the nation can never be fully Malay, their capitalism too remains only partially in their image, never commanding the entire national landscape. It is crucial to note how this impasse has long colonial roots. Malays were by and large removed from the British colonial industries, which preferred migrant Chinese labour for tin mining (owing to the earlier arrival of Chinese capitalists to Malaya) and migrant Tamil labour for rubber plantations (owing to Britain’s hold over the Indian subcontinent). The British, for a host of political reasons, ensured that Malays remained within a peasant economy as fishermen and paddy planters. While this shielded Malays from the drudgery of industrial work it also dislodged them from the development of a capitalist social structure. The most significant gulf is the omission of Malays from urban development. Kuala Lumpur, Pulau Pinang and Ipoh, to take just three examples, have their origins in the Chinese domination of the tin industry. It was not until the New Economic Policy in 1979, which was designed in response to the Malay-Chinese riots of May 13th ten years earlier, that the Malay-nationalist dominated state decided to engineer a Malay commercial elite and wrest the economy from the Chinese. This required the construction of an entirely new infrastructure to accommodate this transition. New Malay-majority cities and their malls, universities and factories, were built to realise the Malay nationalist dream of a full-fledged Malay capitalist world. An entire generation of Malays from the village provided the labour for this new infrastructure.

But this did not help catching up with the Chinese. In fact, what began as an inter-racial rift between Malays and Chinese gradually produced an intra-racial rift between city and village Malays, especially as the rural-urban divide became more apparent the more their ethnic capitalism deepened its hold. The New Economic Policy was rife with corruption and mismanagement as an obvious crony class gained favours and multi-million-dollar contracts. In the early 1990s an entire economy around information technology, aimed with the express purpose of positioning Malays as a globally competitive people, was launched to disappointing results as the Asian economic crisis in 1997 plunged the country into losses from which it could not recover. Today, there is a clear sense that the Malay nationalist urban-capitalist ideal has waned. In 2019, the Rural and Regional Development Ministry reported a surge of Malays returning to the village for family, career and environmental reasons. Indeed, the current rate of urban to rural migration greatly outweighs the rate of rural to urban migration (Mahavera 2019). The government, recognising the growing appeal of rural life is channelling resources now to

improve rural infrastructure, a marked shift from its drive to construct cities just three decades earlier.

As films, the comedies clearly speak to an awareness of how capitalism is not a straightforward mutation into a Western model of development but rather a strained fusion of differing social times. The search for work—performed via migrations to cities that are experienced as new and alien spaces—also becomes a critical inquiry into capitalism as a new value form that is emerging amidst the experience of an uneven terrain. However, as comedies, they think through the contingencies that are produced out of the combined and uneven experience of development. Just as capitalism unsettles Malay modernity’s general realm of meaning making so too can work be questioned. Situated in this context we can understand comedies of non-work as a demonstration of combination as it takes place. The play and slide of signifiers evoked around the notion of work shows the coming together of the different forces that shapes the totality of history. The previous section described how the non-synchronicity of the concept reflects how a capitalist symbolic order is an antagonistic cycle of definition and redefinition. Now we can turn to the political implications of this process: Malay comedy’s humorous play of signs indicates how the symbolic non-synchronicity capitalism produces is bringing work’s contingency to the fore. But understanding this as concretely universal—the historicity of the concept—requires that we consider how this questioning takes place. This brings us to how non-work often evokes the body in history.

CORPOREAL COMEDIES

Just as non-synchronicity exposes the antagonisms underlying the concept, so too are bodies of non-work revealed as a site of contradictory demands. The immediate insight this produces here is that “the body” too is similarly an idea. But that this idea is not timeless but is rather contingent as it is situated amidst an awareness of history’s contradictions. This, to be sure, is not simply a matter of saying that the body is socially constructed. The body is “constructed”, insofar as it is shaped by and grounded upon the emergence of capitalism. But it is also combined and uneven, fragmented by the contradictory convergence of different times capitalism produces. It is in revealing this fragmentation that the universality and contingency of work, that is to say its uncertain symbolic position, can be shown. Just as Malay comedies display signifiers of different times sliding into one another so too does non-work situate bodies at the crossroads of different historical possibilities. This is the insight into how non-work is performed as simulations that stress the contradictory nature between work as idealised and work as embodied.

This contingency can be seen particularly when the demand for work leaves the body constantly adjusting in relation to historical change. In a celebrated scene in *Seniman Bujang Lapok* (P. Ramlee 1961) the three friends enter the studio manager's office for a job interview. The studio manager tells them to sit down. The three friends look around but find no chairs. They then manoeuvre into a seating posture where they are sat but at the same time not. They extend the absurdity of the situation by then taking out "invisible" cigarettes and coffee cups and pretend to smoke and drink. The manager then realises there are actually no chairs and then asks them what they are sitting on. The threesome responds by saying that they are actually sitting on real chairs and only those with a short lifespan, as in those who will die soon, cannot recognise it. The studio manager quickly, and rather nervously, assents to the threesome's account of "reality" and agreed that there are chairs there. He then asks them where they got the chairs to which they reply that it is odd that he should ask since they are his after all. He then says he remembers buying them the day before. The studio manager walks up to the three friends and told them to not sit on the chairs anymore as they are already old and they might fall over.

The conversation continues but not without leaving the tables (or chairs) turned: the manager now assumes the sitting position while now looking up to the three men for the rest of their conversation. This makes it evident that the three have commanded the manager's office space from their performance. The manager is impressed by their sudden moment of improvisation and grants the three a screen test. In effect the time of the multinational studio's manager, which set the terms of the encounter, is then steered by the time of the three local bachelor's living in poverty. This scene establishes the dynamic that will underline the entire film as it narrates a nascent local film industry being constituted by a regional film powerhouse, marking the expansion of global capitalism into hitherto unexplored territory on one hand, and local sensibilities which have only had recent and minimal exposure to film culture, on the other. The example mentioned earlier of the three friend's interruption of a shoot is one outcome of this coming together, as is many other instances in which their definition of what is enjoyable in film will clash with the studio's. Either way the identity and survival of the film industry itself is thrown into question as a result (the three men continue to live in poverty despite being full time actors).

But key is how the comedy of it all, the establishment of the contradiction that will run throughout the film, began with this posturing scene. Their out of joint sitting position is where the laughter is triggered. Bodily humour is recognition of a symbolic adjustment. But the effect is showing how the body is non-synchronic, never fully on time, that is to say subject to more than one temporality between the

global studio in the city and rural poverty. Work too is similarly sustained between the universal and the concrete.

To laugh at non-work—where bodies are moved in awkward ways in the job search or the activity of working—is to laugh at the body’s failed attempt to settle into the smooth flow of capitalist time. Because the comedies are premised upon prolonged and short-lived job searches—the employment they find is often only temporary or tenuous—the failure to cohere into “proper” bodily form is similarly due to work’s unstable symbolic position in history. There is a key conceptual move this makes. The films isolate the concept of work by placing it front and centre in the comic narratives. This in effect abstracts work as it is now thought of as a separate entity from its object and the means of production. But the fact that this occurs amidst a temporal divergence indicates a limit to the abstraction for it indicates that work cannot but be embodied in history.

Zupančič, to be sure, also conceives of comedy as a fundamental operation of revelation. This in fact informs her notion of comedy as a short circuit wherein the concrete universal antagonisms in the concept are revealed. But this remains largely a momentary revelation, a quick opening that shows the underlying contradictions in the order of things where they are by and large eluded in everyday life. Choosing the imagery of a short circuit is telling in this regard for it refers to the excess energy in a *closed* circuit that cannot be externalised. This outlook of enclosure is more central to Zupančič’s theory than it might initially seem. Recall how her commitment to the universality of good comedy leads her to insist that comedy is fundamentally about crystallising the concept at hand, that its contradictions always reach an end point in understanding. The sense of closure is also apparent in how she believes understanding attests to “the indestructibility of the concept” (“The comic universe is, as a rule, the universe of the indestructible”) (Zupančič 2008, 29). But more than that this indestructibility is inferred from the indestructibility of the body: “The concrete body of the baron, which repeatedly falls into the puddle of human weaknesses, is not simply the empirical body that lies flat in the mud, but much more the belief in his baronage, his ‘baroness’” (Zupančič 2008, 32).

She may understand the body “as the indispensable grounding of the universal” (Zupančič 2008, 30) But it is also clear that this grounding is merely a means to an end— “one of the props” —against which the concept bounces back to a point of elucidation (Zupančič 2008, 29). The body too then is submerged in the concept, sealed off as much the concept ostensibly is, and so a matter of faith. Comedy is a return to sameness and this explains the politics. It is ultimately about keeping

everything as is, “a persistence of something that keeps returning to its place no matter what” (Zupančič 2008, 218). In any case enclosure, be it conceptual or corporeal, is a definitive outlook of the capitalist era. Similarly, the notion that bodies are bounded and hermetically sealed is a recent product of capitalism wherein the idea of enclosure similarly informs conceptions of self and other. This emerged when the outlook of territorial sovereignty became hegemonic at a key point in the internationalisation of capitalism where the linearisation of time and space was necessary to ensure the continuation of the capitalist value form across different spaces. The problem was not so much difference that was experienced but how the ideal of sovereignty was conceived in response to the fundamentally chance encounter with them, that is to say, differing spatio-temporal orders. Chance of course is a matter of unexpected time. An anti-capitalist approach to comedy similarly requires an understanding of how this chance encounter is laughable. Malay comedy is but one instance of this possibility. Meanwhile non-work does leave us with this thought: the concept is breakable and what better way to show this than through the breakability of work.

CONCLUSION

This article has turned to Malay comedies’ treatment of labour via Alenka Zupančič’s psychoanalytic theory of comedy to propose a new way of questioning the universality of capitalism. It has shown that in Malay comedies, simulations, mimesis and disguises are deployed to scrutinize and estrange the concept of “work,” and consequently the developmental ideals and aspirational values “work” is supposed to represent. Key is how the comic body becomes a site of historical thinking and temporal processing.

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