

## Enhancing Employability via 'Thirdspace' Pedagogy and Ethics

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### ABSTRACT

Although the diversity of Malaysian pluralistic sociocultural society may present itself as a challenge in the maintenance of ethnic relations, it can perhaps be transformed, nevertheless, into a critical resource for graduate employability. Formal qualifications aside, Malaysian local graduates should be asking themselves whether they have the civic capacity and universal prerequisites as 'glocalised' employees of the future. In this paper, we will attempt to situate the discourse of employability within an ethical-pedagogical dimension of globalisation through social semiotics. It is suggested that insight into the ways of the globalised world may be provided through a pedagogic dimension known as 'the Thirdspace' (Bhabha, 1994), comprising a hybridized and cutting-edge space of 'in-betweenness' where diverse cultures meet and engage each other. This study takes off from a research on the perceived cultural and language competencies of undergraduates undertaken by a Malaysian university. Based on the findings of this research on the benchmarks for graduate competencies for future employability painted, a profile that went beyond the communicative and linguistic capabilities into elements such as attitudes, mindset and cultural awareness. With this in mind, this paper proposed that university curriculum utilises a Thirdspace pedagogy to expose and enhance cross-cultural literacies of Malaysian university undergraduates through socioculturally resonant Malaysian cinema.

**Keywords:** *Malaysian cinema, new employability, pedagogical innovation, sociocultural competence, university curriculum.*

### INTRODUCTION

In today's epoch of cultural globalization and economic migration, the wisdom of great philosophers like Einstein and Lao Tzu has become more important than ever. The sign of one's 'intelligence', as Einstein puts it, 'is not knowledge but imagination' (Viereck, 1929), whereas for Lao Tzu, 'knowing others is intelligence but knowing oneself is true wisdom' (<http://www.libertariantaoist.com/?p=1712>). Imagining and knowing oneself and others are key ingredients towards attaining social and cultural capital. These are central to determining the success of any national transformation programmes in the *longue duree*. In this regard, the higher education institutions assume the important 'nationalistic' function of inspiring and mobilising multiethnic, socioculturally diverse young Malaysian towards becoming the guardian of a civic nation. There is perhaps no other mechanism more important to measure and ratify human intelligence than a university education. In this regard, higher education institutions would assume the important 'nationalistic' function of inspiring and mobilising multiethnic, socioculturally diverse young Malaysian towards becoming the guardians of a civic nation. One feature of education is enquiry. The fact is that 'intellectual differentiation', will only make up half of the real success story of human capital. The other half of the story rests with employability. In actual fact, one of the challenges to formal education systems anywhere in the world today, is to demonstrate to the stakeholders their capability to deliver university graduates with stable and better

opportunities for employability when they enter the free-market economies of the world.

Recent statistics have shown that the employability figures for local Malaysian university graduates in 2016 is 77.3% compared to 76.3% and 75.1% in 2015 and 2014 respectively (<http://www.utusan.com.my/berita/parlimen/kebolehpasaran-graduan-tempatan-semakin-meningkat-1.549802>). This is an important indication that the tertiary education system is responding to the human capital market demands for knowledgeable (K-workers) and skilled recruits to help the social and economic transformation programmes of the nation. There is clearly an over-emphasis on statistics as the systemic, top-down policy and practice at large. The policy on 'human capital' reckons that the "[d]evelopment of human capital is the determination for increasing the competitiveness and the productivity of the country" (in *Pelan Induk Pembangunan Pendidikan (PIPP) 2006-2010: 'Merintis Pembaharuan – Satu Misi Nasional'*). The blueprint, launched by the then Prime Minister Dato Seri Abdullah Haji Ahmad Badawi on 16th January 2007 also includes the mission to produce future workforce that can be on par globally, one that is liberal and yet glocalised in mentality. This resulted in the reorientation of many university courses to the 'business and industrial' modus operandi known as 'benchmarking'. The main purpose of benchmarking is to produce high-quality and reliable undergraduates in meeting specific standards of quality such as technical knowledge and the skill sets determined by prospective employers (Bensimon, 1995). The compelling philosophy underpinning such practice is 'meritocracy', in other words, ideological practices that typically discriminates and privileges one over the other on the basis of one's academic achievement. This apparently has become the ethos and habitus of the present Malaysian education system particularly within the cohort of 'Research Universities', Malaysian academics are expected to assume and incorporate the dominant hegemonic nexus of local-global knowledge economies, businesses and industries into their curriculum and research designs and practices. But what then is 'human achievement'?

#### EMPLOYABILITY AND THE IMPLICATIONS

A study of perceived competencies among final year undergraduates was compared with employers' perceptions. A questionnaire was designed for both final year undergraduates and 76 employers to find out their perceptions on the literacies needed for finding jobs and on their perceptions as to whether the universities provided the necessary training for graduate employability. Constructed on a conceptual framework of pluriliteracy (Koo, 2006, 2007a, 2007b) eight literacies which are identified according to changes in workplace and communication contexts: linguistic proficiency, communicative literacy, culture awareness, content literacy, sustainable citizenship, attitudes and mind-set, vocational literacy and critical literacy. Based on the findings of this study students ranked the following literacies, viz – communicative literacy, linguistic proficiency, content literacy, general knowledge, positive attitudes and mindset, critical literacy, cultural awareness, vocational literacy and sustainable citizenship. Employers on the other hand, ranked the literacies differently: positive attitudes and mindset, content literacy, communicative literacy, vocational literacy, linguistic proficiency, critical literacy, general knowledge, cultural awareness, sustainable citizenship (Koo et al., 2006; Koo et al., 2008). Although the rankings differ, the findings points to the fact that the world has shrunken due to interconnectedness, coalescing into a sense of greater togetherness, of immediacy and reciprocity in relationships, and of cultural diversity – a global village (Crystal, 2001, p.6).

One of the concerns in the pedagogy of the future is the inculcation of values and attitudes that matched this global-glocal dichotomy that informs the environment of the 21st century. Taking this stance, there appears to be a need for a pedagogy that differs from the conventional teaching that is being conducted in the schools – that students of the future need to be taught values and attitudes that can match the millennium. This paper focuses on the pedagogic implication in terms of use of teaching methods and materials. In other words, proposing a pedagogy that fosters positive attitudes and mindsets that can match the cultural diversity towards forming part of the sustainable citizenship.

#### THE FOCUS

It is now apparent that problem-based learning of some kind has become increasingly integral to delivering the university curricular and extra-curricular learning outcomes. The university programme can be fully expected (by the stakeholders) to cater to every student's need to attain knowledge, practice and necessary skill sets (Hadley, 2017). Malaysian students also need to demonstrate that they have sociocultural competence as the pre-requisite millennial literacies. The global awareness for such competence is evident in one of the New South Wales Board of Studies' educational objectives which is to promote "intellectual, social and moral development of students, in particular, developing their knowledge and understanding about societies and cultures" that may result in the promotion of "positive values and attitudes" as the desired outcome of students engagement (<https://www.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/...hsc/.../society-culture-st6-syl-from2015.pdf>).

In the Indian continent, a study of Arts and Science final year college students in Namakkal district, Tamil Nadu, Periyar University listed 14 factors that can enhance employability, viz. communication, listening, learning, basic literacy and numerical skills, time management, creativity, computer skills, organisation and thinking skills, team work skills, problem solving skill, work ethics, leadership skill, management skill and self-management skills. Their recommendation was based on the fact that although the students did well academically, they were not able to sustain in their job "because of less skill and tolerance" (Gowsalya & Kumar, 2017, p.16). This ties in with recent increasing focus in Australia and New Zealand towards student study direction with related career direction within the same field of study has drawn much criticism because of the concentration on relating student study direction with career direction within the same field of study. In view of the changing nature of future employment one of the suggested solutions is to focus on "transferability of skills across contexts and disciplines, and proactive, entrepreneurial, innovative individuals who are capable of managing their own careers through creating, constructing, designing, and identifying employment opportunities, rather than training for a particular profession" (Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017, p.95). Clarke (2018), proposed a model which encapsulates a more integrated approach on graduate employability from six dimensions – human capital, social capital, individual attributes, individual behaviours, perceived employability, and labour market factors. Another option in pedagogy for employability was suggested through 'Literature in the Foreign Language Class' (*Litinclass*) (Almeida & Puig, 2017). This study suggested that learning Literature can have an important role in generating specific employability skills as discussions in literatures relate "not only to purely linguistic abilities, but also helps foster other soft skills such as intercultural awareness, problem-solving abilities and critical thinking" (Almeida & Puig, 2017, p.105). This implies that soft-skills or

people skills are the key to future employability – the personal attributes needed to succeed in the workplace; how to work with others (Doyle, 2019).

Following these arguments, it indeed appears that graduate employability should be endorsed on the basis of the students' social integrity and cultural competency. In fact, it is also important for a globalizing economy like Malaysia to foresee the state of its human capital in the face of pragmatic, ethnic and ethical challenges of the workplace in the local and global contexts. We do feel that this scenario has not been seriously considered or factored in. Recent media reports have exposed the fact that our nation's youth, including those in tertiary education, are increasingly involved in a demoralizing crisis of integrity and depreciating sense of social differentiation. We believe that the present education system should strive to instill the essence of cosmopolitan ethics, cross- and inter-culturality as well as social differentiation into its human capital output policy and program. By inter-culturality it also implies both cultural understanding and language ability (Syarizan Dalib et al., 2017).

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to explore and make a case for pedagogical innovation arising from a new emphasis in employability from the perspective of graduate sociocultural competence. We argue that our pluralistic historicity and diversity as members of a globalizing Malaysian society should be harnessed as much as possible by the community of university academics as part of their curricular duties. Whilst the innovation required may not be suitable nor appropriate for every university course, the concept of Thirdspace may have pedagogic advantage in the Social Sciences and Humanities where the relative notion of 'thirdness' can perhaps be aptly deployed or regulated in philosophical, educational, cultural, political, historical, linguistic and semiotic discourses. To make our case, we decidedly turn to film as the most discursive, sophisticated and resourceful popular culture in approaching thematic topics pertaining to sociocultural competence.

#### SOCIOCULTURAL COMPETENCE AS 'NEW' EMPLOYABILITY

Social differentiation and ethnic identity politics have played their roles in conditioning Malaysian from almost all walks of life. Hence, despite the assurance by eminent social scientists of an inherent social resilience in our multiethnic make-up to offset dynamics and differences or negotiate conflicts and controversies, the apparent elements of respect, tolerance and common sense or rather the lack of these, are found at times in a state of flux, if not wanting. Localized sociocultural sentiments or ideological structures are often deployed in our society as a defensive mechanism against competitors. This professional mindset can only be nurtured if it is embedded as a curricular innovation in private and public universities through a shift in the pedagogy. Besides communicative and leadership skills, perhaps one of the critical benchmarking at the globalised workplace is concerned with sociocultural competence in the context of cross or intercultural communication. The challenge to produce socioculturally-literate human capital in local undergraduates and graduates may not at all seem easy because, as Koo Yew Lie (2004a, p.8) has claimed that "diversity however, has to be strategically negotiated, represented and contested in various spaces" because for her, "active possibility for diversity through dynamic engagement with difference, through negotiation, production and representation, has yet to become a systemic feature of Malaysian education". In this paper, we argue that sociocultural competence stands on equal footing with curriculum competence in enhancing graduate employability.

Arguably, in the age of migrant economies and global citizenry without nationality, employers may now begin to look beyond paper qualifications for added-value extra-curricular insights about their candidates' employability. In a world where the cultural milieu is increasingly concerned about the virtue of humanity such as the individual rights and access to democracy and intellectual freedom of speech and ideologies, employability has never been critically addressed than ever before. As far as perception is concerned, graduates from Social Sciences, Humanities and Liberal Arts faculties may already be feeling discriminated against their non-Arts rivals from job opportunities to the remuneration package. There is not much that can be done about it to tip the other end of the perception scale. However, despite the fluctuating period of the global economy, global employment opportunities have caused 'brain drains' and created 'economic migrants'. Job advertisements are now placing emphasis on linguistics in the case of increasing prominence of Mandarin and China's expanding control on global and regional economies. The relation between human capital, the Thirdspace and globalization can be gleaned from Koo's insightful commentary on 'glocalising' workplace culture that Malaysian undergraduates should bear in mind about:

Multicultural adult learners need to become aware of the reasons, processes and effects of traversing and hybridizing lifeworlds. This may help them engage strategically in contemporary *local-global spaces, a requirement of new learning and work where plurality is significant* [my emphasis]. For example, multiple interaction patterns, communication styles, ways of speaking and self-presentation are now required for teamwork involving culturally diverse members of different lifeworlds and disciplines brought together by possibilities of globalization and communication. The creation of new knowledges is a requirement at post-Fordist work sites where 'new' involves new ways of looking at a problem, and the need to accommodate new sociality, new commodities and new ideas (2004b, p.81).

As prospective globalised economies open their windows of equality of opportunities to future graduates, their employability could eventually be decided not on their scrolls but rather their sociocultural literacies (and political correctness). Therefore, it is not impossible to imagine why some of our graduates in the competitive job market are socio-culturally challenged. Employability or for that matter, 'un-employability' as discourse cannot underestimate the importance of 'cross- or inter-culturalities', an alternative term to 'sociocultural literacies' in the ever glocalizing, smart technology-driven workplace. Briefly, 'cross- or inter-culturalities' in the context of this paper, alludes to the capacity and ability to communicate not only across linguistic and cultural differences but also beyond these essential intercultural competences. Intercultural communication scholars (Deardorff, 2006; Liu 2012; Lustig & Koester, 2012; Syarizan et al., 2017) have concurred that intercultural competence requisites are bound to the foundational notions of 'respect' (valuing other cultures, cultural diversity); 'openness' (to intercultural learning and to people from other cultures, withholding judgment); and 'curiosity' and discovery (tolerating ambiguity and uncertainty).

### THIRDSPACE LITERACIES

According to James Gee (2008), literacies are always situated within specific social practices and discourses, and individuals and social groups are constantly redefining them. Education is a socioculturally defined practice and within a complex socially differentiated society like Malaysia, the classroom should always assume the identity of the Thirdspace, where learning “deeply social, something that occurs through interactions with [O]thers” (Gee, 2005, p.2). As others have conceptualized it, the main ideological framework of the Thirdspace pedagogy is ‘dialogical’ which makes it not merely a space of encounter, but also of reflection and production. Maniotes (2005) considers the Thirdspace as providing the critical juncture where students' cultural capital merges with the content of the curriculum during classroom discussions. Using a literature reading classes as a point of departure, she uses the Thirdspace to merge both the official curriculum and the personal experiences of the students outside the classroom whereby mainstream and non-mainstream values, attitudes and behaviour are negotiated, and discussed. Thus, conceptually, the pedagogic Thirdspace is about promoting sociocultural literacies wherein differentiation “is recognised, valued, and used as a resource for the productive learning and the active participation of all students in classroom activities” (Gore, 2001, in Kostogriz 2002, p.8). According to Kramsch (2009, p.238) the “resonant pedagogy [of the Thirdspace] encourages making connections to dominant attitudes and worldviews as expressed through the textbook, the grammar exercises, the readings [and global visual culture] yet pushes for an elucidation that goes against the grain, questioning the social labelling of known acceptable practices”.

### THE MULTIMODAL THIRDSPACE

As a form of social practice, Scribner and Cole (1982, p.236) cited in Lankshear and Knobel (2006) claim that filmmaking is a “socially organized practices [that] make use of the symbol system and a technology for producing and disseminating it”. Both Kress and van Leeuwen (2006, p.77) have suggested that “any text whose meanings are realized through more than one semiotic code is multimodal” which in turn underlines that the various modes of meaning-making “should be looked upon as interacting and affecting one another”. It is through such ‘multimodality’ that our sociality and identity are negotiated, communicated and regulated in films that we may actively watch. In similar veins, Lankshear and Knobel (2006, p.4) too have claimed that “the generation, communication and negotiating meaningful content through the medium of encoded texts” are part of important everyday literacy practices which they argue, “shape and are shaped by particular social, cultural, historical and material contexts”. Indeed, a film encoded in multimodal texts may be manipulated for a variety of sociocultural and political reasons using its visual and auditory semiotic resources as well as other forms of narrative intervention.

In a fascinating study by Markus Rheindorf (2004, p.137) on “multimodal signification in *Dirty Dancing* (1987)”, dancing styles is seen as a means of intervention as well as semiotic mode around which “all conflicts over boundaries of class” are choreographed in the film, as it were. Rheindorf argues that because film “tends to reduce almost any sort of social conflict – and in particular conflicts of class, race and gender - due to the “hegemonic discourse of ‘Hollywood’ or ‘mainstream cinema’” (Ibid, p.139). Other alternative modality such as ‘dance’ is used to disrupt the hegemony, to “allow for an apparent dissolution of boundaries on the dance-floor, a space that (like the sports ground) is often conceived of in popular imagination as transgressing all class of boundaries. Contrary to this, however, Emma Dexter and Kate Bush (in Bate, 1994, p.3) argue that the

primary function of *mise-en-scene* is “the staging of a scene for the camera”, whereby, ‘through film and photography, each stages intricate fictions, diverse selves, images of fantasy and desire’. The notion of ‘staging’ then becomes critical and it begs the critical inquiry, following Bate, “What has been staged here?” (5). Bate argues that *mise-en-scene* is not just “‘mere technique’ or a question of ‘good [artistic] composition’”, rather as he points out, it is “the basis of what *constitutes* the actual place and space of the image, of what it *signifies*. In this sense, *mise-en-scene* offers a concept which recognises the image as a place of *work*, a site of meaning and production, of precisely *staging*.” [all emphases in original]. The main concern with *mise-en-scene* in Bate’s argument is not about the ‘sight’ of the representation of images or objects inside a frame of shot, but about how these objects or images act as the ‘site’ whereby identities are situated and negotiated.

The ‘everydayness’ of cinema as a popular culture for the masses implies that cinematic texts have sociocultural communicative function, especially in ‘staging’ of social *mise-en-scene* of the everyday sociocultural “codes” such as languages, practices, rituals and dominant discourses (Peirce, 1898/1955 in Kramsch, 2009). The critical function of film, for Turner (1999) and other sociologists, is to explore the ‘staging’ and articulation of dominant sociocultural and politico-historical discourses that govern and inform our practices in ‘glocalizing’ multiethnic society like Malaysia. Dominant discourses of a multicultural Malaysia are arguably embedded in the *mise-en-scenes*. Filmmakers and mythmakers alike tend to deploy social, cultural and political signifiers to corroborate our socioculturality, as much they enable ‘us’ – not only university educators but also multinational corporate entities – to access the narrative of the ‘image-nation’ through an imaginary set of social meanings. As Turner (1999, p.69) has forcefully argued in *Film as Social Practice*, a reflection of our social construction of the world “is authenticated through the details of the *mise-en-scene*” and we can “learn much, unconsciously, from the *mise-en-scene*”.

Marie Falkesgaard Slot points out that “a text is a result of a social action and is always in a context, somebody does something in social, economic and cultural ways with texts. A textual analysis involves “the process of interpreting and analysing any media text, typically focusing on its form and content, style and structure” (cited in O’Shaughnessy and Stadler, 2005, p.91). The discourses under which texts are constructed must therefore be analysed to see how a current text occurs. In their study of African tourist brochures, Fursich and Robin (2004, p.141) have described textual analysis as “a qualitative reading of text that concentrates on the cultural and ideological assumptions of media contents. This method involves the analyses of multiple levels of signs, symbols and other signifiers evoked in the text. It permits the intentional selection of sites under scrutiny”. In this paper, the interrogation of cinematic corpus is always socio-culturally and politically situated because films are read as social practice and potentially bears socially-meaningful interpretation and discourses.

#### POPULAR CULTURE AS THIRDSPEACE

Film, a highly significant popular culture in the lives of most varsity students, is a fairly critical and dependable aggregator of modernity simply because it cannot be produce inside a sociocultural vacuum. Film carries with it the sociocultural, historical including political reflections on quotidian issues. Naturally, following this assumption, university courses located inside the social sciences, humanities and business curricula are not only eligible and perhaps better disposed than pure sciences and technical schools in adapting to new

'glocalising' pedagogic resource such as film. Incorporating 'liberal doses' of filmic discourses into liberal arts curricula, may enable its subconscious and conscious signifying practices to, in Metzian terms, "parallel perceptual situation common to everyday experience and the cinematic experience" (Stam et al., 1992, p.35). This in fact, is quite a straightforward argument that basically justifies the deployment of cinematic aestheticism as a space in which Malaysian human capital can be informed about the 'literacies' of employability – in other words, filming the curriculum.

The core issue in such discourse centres upon the question of humanity and humanism which Malaysian audience are not too keen to share before the arrival of these stimulating 'art house' films. Given Malaysia's particular socio-political context, Malaysian independent films are strongly rooted in the everyday politics of cosmopolitan Malaysia. They reflect the sociocultural condition shaped by economic globalization as well as geopoliticking that inform ordinary Malaysian about their identities. The dialogues that they enter with each other as fellow bona-fide citizens are crucial for nation-building as well as building positive universal values simply because in the current globalising mode, Malaysians and every other person in the world for that matter, inhabit multiple spaces and norms almost at the same time. Some of these films possess strong universalism in their themes which reflect that the new emergent filmmakers are more intellectual, critical, creative and a believer in universal humanity. This 'fluid' motion is educational, awareness-raising, oppositionistic, provocative, counter-hegemonic, resistant in nature and content; and yet, it does not seem to be antithetical to the global or the local.

#### THIRDSPACING MALAYSIAN FILMS

With the apparent emergence of a promising Malaysian-centric cinematic practice, the nation begins to engage itself with a new dynamics of the Malaysian imaginary. Moored between its official projection of a multicultural, unified nation and the everyday consciousness of its diverse citizens who inhabit multiple spaces and norms, Malaysians have been invoked to engage in identity politics never before seen. The Malaysian cinematic texts begin churning out multiple genres that articulate and celebrate a new preoccupation with reworking the spaces, junctions and what being Malaysian means in the light of globalisation and the mobilities of people, ideas, objects and images. Such a demonstration of cosmopolitanism in a national film industry that is growing in diversity of genre and meaning certainly implicate it with the notion of impending de-nationalisation of the cinematic space. It is plausibly through the lens of globalisation and cosmopolitanism – the former describes the socio-political dimension and function, whereas the latter explains the cultural diversity and ethos of contemporary cinemas – that Malaysian film should be articulated today despite coming from a fledgling postcolonial 'third world' cinema industry in Asia. It is also only appropriate that such discourse and knowledge be subjected and critiqued from outside or risking it to suffer from mundane, parochialism of self-content, as the means to critically inform and reflect its own discourse.

Malaysian cinema is steadily transforming itself into a 'Thirdspace' that embodies perhaps the 'intention' by filmmakers and mythmakers to construct and promote a 'civic cinema' for a civic nation. The agenda of 'civic cinema' movement is, according to Khoo Gaik Cheng (2007, p.230), to "to represent a multiethnic Malaysia and touch on 'sensitive' issues that form the crux of Malaysian society, ultimately the desire to see a Malaysian film, defined as a film that represents the Malaysian multiethnic condition". This is an important



signifying multimodal Thirdspace imaginary for Malaysian undergraduates to take stock of in order to enhance their sociocultural literacies.


#### EMBEDDED THIRDSPEACE ETHICS

The films of Yasmin Ahmad are arguably among a handful of creative cinematic attempts to critically embed diverse socioculturalities of the Malaysian society. Yasmin's filmography is particularly suited to stimulate critical insights and colourful discussions among undergraduates if it is embraced into university curriculum. Yasmin passionately and consistently shared her vision of a civic nation through the civic cinema, a sociocultural-functional representations of the next generation of differentiated and pluralistic Malaysians on the edge of the Thirdspace: the multiple intersections of glocalised space of hybrid, ambiguous cultures and lifeworlds. The following is an illustration of the utilization of appropriate *mise-en-scenes* for classroom activity to underscore how the embedded ethic of Thirdspace socioculturality can be elicited in the classroom in order to enhance students' sociocultural competence and networking behaviours (Batistic & Tymon, 2017) Thus, from a social capital perspective, such attitudes will in turn indirectly value-add to their prospects in terms of employability.

Both Frames 1(a) and 1(b) from Yasmin Ahmad's film *Sepet* (2004) indicate the use of medium close-up shot for the purpose of providing the details of actions or gestures. In Frame 1(a), a Chinese restaurant cook is seen using a knife presumably to prepare a dish of roast pork, called 'char siew' in Chinese. He does not realise that a young woman in Malay traditional dress is about to enter his restaurant. Frame 1(b) shows Orked's gesture of surprise, if not shock as she looks at the roast pork being chopped. The cook however, is unmoved by Orked's theatrical antics. Orked mutters something in Chinese but the cook just keeps his head down. The medium close-up shot from inside the restaurant offers a 'light' contrast of spatiality, as it were, between the restaurants daylight 'exterior' and a shady 'interior'. Furthermore, the semiotic interplay of 'light' and 'dark' shades almost divides the frame to a proportionately balanced silhouette-effect, and it is poetic to say the least that the dominant hues in both frames are black and white, which traditionally implicate binomial opposites of positive-negative, good-evil, pure-polluted, to name but a few, with the visual discourse of the *mise-en-scene*.

## DECONSTRUCTING THE SEMIOTIC THIRDSPACE

Table 1: Mise-En-Scene Analysis Template

MISE-EN-SCENE ANALYSIS TEMPLATE		
Film: <i>Sepet</i> (2004)	Director: Yasmin Ahmad	Duration: 100 mins.
Thirdspace Premise: Crossing the Threshold	Intercultural/Sociocultural Negotiating Social Taboo	Competency:
		
Frame 1(a): Outside the Thirdspace	Frame 1(b): Inside the Thirdspace	

### SOCIAL SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS

- A classic social, cultural and political encounters set in Malaysia's majority-minority matrix (or paradox).
- Interestingly, in this visual discourse, Orked signifies an osmotic motion into the Jason's ethnic, cultural domain, rendering her as an alien 'minority'.
- This is enhanced not only by the fact that while Ipoh is predominantly 'Chinese-centric', but also by the cultural perception against things associated with 'Chinese' commonly held by Malays.
- As such, a meeting in a *kopitiam* (cafe) between a Malay girl and a non-Malay of opposite sex is easily tantamount to spatial transgression with social and cultural implications.
- In her traditional dress - the *baju kurung*, itself a signifier of Malayness and accords her with social and religious superiority – Orked sportingly 'mocks' her own 'given' social privileges through a politically, socially sanctioned mode of expressing disgust against any 'abominable' gastronomic (like a Char Siew) choice of the Other (read non-Moslem/Malay).
- A Char Siew is a brilliant polyseme for 'Chineseness' and an artefact of central importance to Islamic knowledge and practice in multicultural Malaysia.

### CRITICAL LITERACIES

- Negotiating social taboo [see below for detailed discussion]

### RECOMMENDED ACTIVITIES

- Sharing understanding and experiences dialogically on taboo
- Discussing why and how social taboo is part of socioculturally-situated literacies
- Eliciting anticipated pattern of social behaviour and attitudes in taboo circumstances
- a healthy dialogic discussion whereby sensitivities of differing parties are heeded
- an engaging forum whereby conventional views are open to challenges and contestations.

The social *mise-en-scene* analysis of both frames place into perspective a socially constructed, working-class cultural encounter literally at the threshold of the restaurant that demarcates the inner sphere of restaurant from the public corridor. This inter-ethnic vignette 'stages' the classic everyday-defined reality of social, cultural and political encounters set in Malaysia's majority-minority matrix (or paradox). With specific reference to Malay-Chinese (in favour of the term 'Sino-Malay') ethnic matrix, the visual discourse attempts to frame the overlapping, multiple lifeworld spaces that predominantly characterise Malaysian multicultural and cosmopolitan sociality. Here, a Malay-Chinese spatial literacy becomes necessary because visually, such cosmopolitan 'staging' may easily become a convoluted and questionable social agenda, for example, to certain viewers from the Malay-Moslem ethno-religious group. A scene such as Orked's critical 'crossing' into the cultural boundary of the Malay-Moslem cultural Other (read Chinese) is arguably outside of the socio-visual vernacular in Malaysia cinema. Chinese *kopitiams* or coffee-shop restaurants used to be a hugely popular multicultural icon before pro-Islamization program was launched in 1980s.

The alienation of multicultural 'icon' including historically and socially constructed practices becomes apparent in the film through a series semiotic 'defamiliarisation' mainly seen through Orked's osmotic crossing as she passes through the threshold of a Chinese restaurant, the challenging proximity with the 'char siew', in her journey into the inner sanctum of 'Chinese-ness', in 'a far country', as it were. The restaurant assumes the surrogate-country or node or even a nation-state as putative locale of cosmopolitanism, where the majority-minority matrix is inverted temporarily, allowing the disconcerting but critical sense of 'defamiliarisation' to emanate to the audience. And what can be more intriguing for the audience to witness the perpetual presence of Malay-Moslem nationalist motif in the form of Orked's modest *baju kurung* suddenly floating (or disappearing?) into an awkwardly familiar cultural landscape - a sight/site that not too many may approve most probably due to a kind of gastronomic repulsion, yet it is potentially the all-embracing 'Thirdspace' for the nation to interact with its ethnic members – than to be defensive as to outrageously interpret it as suggesting a form of cultural transgression or abomination by the filmmaker?

Though it may seem rather scandalous, but cosmopolitanism's counter-narrative may sometimes be dispensed in a brilliant theatrical mockery and sarcasm as a critique against an inherent ideological practice of a certain ethnic during a particular encounter and this can be seen in Orked's 'reading' of cultural taboo: that from her 'knee-jerk' shock reaction towards the *char siew*, an excellent signifier of 'Chinese' sociality, the central importance of Islamic knowledge and practice in Malaysia's multicultural society appears to be established except that Orked too may have been 'feigning' her unfashionable, unintelligible, overkill 'knee-jerk' response as a counter-narrative semiotic against the essentialist Malay-Moslem ethno-religious conditioned narrative.

#### THIRDSPEACE PEDAGOGY FOR EMPLOYABILITY

The Thirdspace is a pedagogy which allows for a merging of the formal curriculum-defined knowledges with the ethos of everyday-defined selves and socialculturality (Maniotes, 2005). Feminist scholars Fee and Russell (2007, p.187) constructed the Thirdspace as an "interruptive, interrogative, and enunciative space where new ways of being and innovative kinds of cultural meaning can be brought into existence. It is a productive space also, where

there is of necessity a blurring of existing boundaries and binaristic identities". In many ways, the conditions and expectations of tertiary education in a glocalizing society like Malaysia is still steeped in structuralistic perspectives. It is important to recognise that there is a need to provide Malaysian university students with Thirdspace sociocultural literacies and life-long pedagogy. This is perhaps due to the stereotypical and ethno-nationalistic politics of identity which an aspiring civic nation like Malaysia should not be promoting but apparently is seen rather susceptible to. It does seem appropriate to be thinking about Thirdspace pedagogy as a framework in which "the politics of seeing the Other and the 'us-them' binarism is rethought productively to take into account the students' everyday lifeworlds which is individually differentiated" (Kostogriz, 2002, p.9) across the sociocultural spectrum.

The work of the Australian education theorist, Alex Kostogriz is particularly instructive in the context of providing university students going into the job market with sociocultural competence market through a robust yet effective pedagogic framework. For Kostogriz (2002, p.11), the Thirdspace offers educators "a mode of articulation of new identities and meanings, blurring the limitations of existing boundaries and calling into question established categorisations of culture, identity and cultural literacy". Indeed, one should speak candidly about how important it is to transform the ingrained attitude among Malaysian students who tend to 'appreciate' sociocultural differentiation only within the essentialized binarism that transcends their structured everyday-defined politics and practices of representation. This is why the Thirdspace pedagogy is potentially constructive and transformative because it is not about resolving incongruities but is itself, following Kostogriz's argument, "a way of living and learning with difference(s) and ambivalence in systems of cultural representations and practices of representing".

The historicity and diversity of Malaysian pluralistic socioculturality can be translated into and leveraged upon by curriculum designers in local universities to prepare and enhance graduate employability. The ways of being in today's world must be exposed to their imagination in such a way so that universities will be truly regarded as promoting a skill set imbued with universal socioculturality. The human capital agenda will stand to benefit from such curriculum reform precisely because it does not have any exclusive racial nor ethnic purchase to it. For this agenda to be meaningful, enriching and not dogmatic, Malaysian tertiary students must be enrolled into situated 'Thirdspaces' that can provide them with greater access to voice, creativity and representation. The 'new' employability of Malaysian graduates, in other words, is no longer about competitive domestic challenge because the stakes have taken a globalized dimension, whereby human capital is increasingly expected to be cosmopolitan with sound normative humanistic ethics. Pedagogically, ethical and humanistic narratives should be embedded into the curricula so that a global social semiotics framework capable of promoting horizontal camaraderie and opening a 'Thirdspace' attitude amongst Malaysian graduates can be developed.

Though it may seem remotely impossible for technocrats and cultural critics, we have tried to demonstrate how films can serve and consolidate the nation's human capitalism agenda by mobilising the Thirdspace pedagogy. Indeed, almost any university curriculum should give itself the opportunity to tap into the critical resources of popular culture like the Malaysian cinema. This is one of the ways for where final-year Malaysian students may begin the important process of unlearning their ethnocentric baggage and prejudices. Film has always served humanity in helping societies understand, engage and cope with varying cross- and inter-culturalities that has become part of the phenomena in

the globalized workplace: racism, ethnocentrism, gendered and marginalised identities including disability and queer sub-groups. Such diversity in the multilingual and multicultural job market and its dynamic complexities should be addressed by the Malaysian education and human resource policy makers.

Therefore, university courses and programmes should be made aware of the shifting or blurring of institutionalized structures such as ethnicity or nationality in the face of global migration and the digitalization of hyper-realities most succinctly demonstrated by the emergent 'Google Republic' – where everyone becomes a global citizen through sheer mediatization. Although Malaysian cinema has not dared to assume philosophical storytelling, the prospective 'new' employability discourse can already be anticipated if academics begin to harness popular visual culture such as film and 'blend' its multilayered significations into their syllabi and courses. The times are indeed changing and the Thirdspace is potentially the innovation that can help transcend these questions: Can our graduates survive in such a challenging space, when they are forced out of their own communal comfort zones? And how do they negotiate the increasing plurality of their lifeworlds and organizations and the institutionalized discrimination against diversity, if they were not exposed to them through interactive and attractive methodologies during their university education?

#### CONCLUSION

This paper is a reflection towards employability and the quality of Malaysian graduates that can be tapped by curriculum designers and academics. We would like to conclude by quoting Abdul Wahed Jalal. In his article "Rethinking our education" in a Malaysian newspaper, *The New Straits Times* (2017), he made the following observation:

What and how we teach our children today will determine the attitude, values, social awareness as well as skills of tomorrow's citizens. Perhaps, it is the right time to rethink the goal of education.

Is it to socialise young people so they can fit into the fabric of society? Is it to train a workforce for business and industries? Is it to introduce young people to greater possibilities that life has to offer?

These are all reasonable goals, but they do not really address the deepest purpose that education has — helping young people to be creative, bringing new ideas and creating their own future.

Imagination and creativity are both necessary for university students to make their way around and into complex, multi-faceted discourse as employability. For this purpose, film aestheticism may offer itself as a resourceful pedagogical site to engage them in thematic discourses on racism, ethnocentrism, gendered and marginalised identities including the disabled and the queers, which are fairly represented if contested in most developed societies today. There should be an alternative discourse which explores the pedagogic challenge involved in preparing university graduates not only to become a rounded intellectual asset but also one who is socially competent human capital. It is imperative for the Malaysian educators in general to recognize and understand new critical criteria that may enhance graduate employability in an epoch where rights to citizenship and freedom of expression have routinely been part of the cultural globalization package.

Therefore, it is vital for university curriculum to not only place a premium on academic excellence but on the creative and critical process in re-orienting the aims and standard of excellence in delivering tertiary education that cater to the market forces. Having said that, however, there is arguably a mitigating thought and even somewhat a redeeming insight if one concedes to the fact that the discourse of employability should have long acknowledge the embeddedness of socioculturality as the core humanistic value which must be pursued philosophically and pedagogically in the universities.

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