

Multiculturalism and Identity Politics in Amir Muhammad's *The Big Durian*

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Abstract

The Big Durian is a political documentary directed by Amir Muhammad in 2003. It was the first Malaysian film to be screened at the Sundance Film Festival. The documentary film was never screened at the local cinema because it was not submitted for the Malaysian Film Censorship Board's approval. The film is described as groundbreaking as it questions the mainstream representation of Malaysian history. The success of *The Big Durian* has led to several studies on Malaysian independent cinema and politics. The documentary film presented history in a way it gave 'voice' to many different perspectives. *The Big Durian* offers an insight into Malaysian historical past and takes a look at how Malaysians are still struggling with their identity to the present day. This study aims to reveal how the film raises important questions about identity politics and multiculturalism in Malaysia based on the cultural memory framework. Qualitative analysis is appropriate to examine film in-depth and Visual Rhetoric (VR) inquiry is utilized in this study to unravel the connotative meanings of the documentary film.

Keywords: Identity politics, Multiculturalism, Cultural memory framework, Visual rhetoric

1. INTRODUCTION

The Big Durian (2003) is a semi-documentary film directed by Amir Muhammad, a Malaysian independent filmmaker. The documentary film reiterated the *amok* incident involving Private Adam, a soldier who left his army base in October 1987 and went berserk with his M-16 in the Chow Kit area. The incident spiked rumours of a racial riot similar to what had happened decades ago on 13th May 1969, between the Malays and Chinese as the result of the 1969 general election. The *amok* incident serves as a narrative drive in the documentary film and deliberately exposes the partisan loyalty and polarisation in Malaysia.

The documentary relies heavily on an investigative journalism approach with a twist, it incorporates staged interviews. The documentary form creates its image of the world, and do not attempt to show 'real images' of 'real-life' (Lindroos, 1999). The filmmaker interviewed academicians, writers, and fellow Malaysians who might have memories of the incident. The staged interviews were acted by Malaysian actors such as Jo Kukathas, Low Ngai Yuen, Rashid Salleh, Ghafir Akbar, Soon Boon Tat, and Nell Ng. The interviews serve as a collection of memories of the *amok* incident and what had been forgotten.

An important aspect of analysing *The Big Durian* lies in the ability to understand the pivotal incidents leading to some of the most controversial political upheaval in the country and the visual rhetoric of the film. Typically, rhetorical studies (of films, documents, speeches or any other symbolic activity) involve how works achieve their effects and how they relate to the shared interests (the margin of overlap) among people (Blakesley, 2004). Images that are routinely re-presented in television or print create a new visual experience that calls forth the reminder of the depicted event in the form of cultural remembrance (Edwards, 2004).

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The study utilizes cultural memory as a framework for the study of *The Big Durian*, intervening in growing debates on identity politics and multiculturalism. The discussion on memory is integral to this study as argued by Michel Foucault, “memory is a very important factor in the struggle. If one controls people's memory, one controls their dynamism. It is vital to have possession of this memory, to control it, administer it, tell it what it must contain” (Baker, 1985). The notion of memory is apparent in Amir Muhammad’s *The Big Durian* as the filmmaker mentioned “our past is disappearing right in front of our eyes, which is why every memory is important” (00:41:30).

In recent years, there are few exciting documentary films directed by Malaysian independent filmmakers who are determined to tell the other side of the Malaysian history such as Amir Muhammad, Fahmi Reza, Lau Kek Huat, and Tham Seen Hau. These documentary films were not screened in the cinema but have received much hype online and were screened at various film festivals locally and abroad. The preference to screen the documentary film online is due to Malaysia being one of the states with the strictest media censorship, having more than 100 movies banned over the past decade solely on the pretence of upholding morality for the sake of its community of viewers (Rao, 2013). As a consequence of media censorship, alternative narratives are silenced to safeguard the government’s ideology and protect the rights of the privileged few. Documentary filmmakers continue to reconcile with the nation's past through storytelling and narratives. The main objective of this study is to analyse how *The Big Durian* raises important questions about identity and multiculturalism in Malaysia based on the cultural memory framework.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Cultural memory is defined as a field of cultural negotiation through which different stories vie for a place in history (Grainge, 2003). *The Big Durian* illustrates the importance of memories and the need to understand past mistakes and what lies in the future. History is the reflection of the past and frequently enters into the process of determining the grounds and conditions of existence of the body politic (Baker, 1985). An important aspect of narration of history in political films is to highlight besides one view, there are the views of the marginal, forgotten, non-documented, or ignored aspect (Lindroos, 1999). The modes of remembering culture approach proceeds from the basic insights of the past that are not provided but must rather be re-constructed and re-presented continuously (Erll, Nunning, & Young, 2008).

In *The Big Durian*, these memories are conveyed by individual voices sharing their personal stories that evoke feelings and emotions. Emphasis on personalities and individual characters can elicit emotional responses and connect larger structural and institutional issues to the viewer’s everyday lives (Canella, 2017). The stories are conveyed by some of the Malaysians stereotypical characters such as a talkative Indian aunty, a middle-aged Chinese man who listened to gossips, a young Chinese woman who worked in a VCD shop and a naïve, young Sarawak man who used to work in the Malaysian tourism industry. All these characters shared their stories that were deemed to be trivial to the country's politics and yet rings true to our experience being Malaysians.

Malaysia prides itself on being a country that celebrates multiculturalism. These stories belong to Malaysians from various cultural and religious backgrounds. Despite relative peace and prosperity, the issue of ethnicity permeates every level of society and there are marked tensions and grievances among ethnic groups that threaten Malaysia's long-term stability and success (Ananthi Al Ramiah, Hewstone, & Wolfer, 2017; Beh, 2011). *The Big Durian* confronted these problems ranging from petty matters such as innocent kids fighting because they belong to different races to detrimental issues such as power abuse and violation of human rights. Using metaphors as symbolic meanings to decipher the problems faced by everyday Malaysians, *The Big Durian* dwelled into politics and offered a meaningful outlook into the Malaysian multicultural society.

The research applies the notion of the dilemma of multiculturalism proposed by Wu (2019) and argues that *The Big Durian* questions what it means to be Malaysian? Multiculturalism is grounded in multi-sited dialogue among different peoples that result in trivial and nontrivial debates within Malaysia (Changsong & Yiming, 2017). The multicultural debate is concerned with the question of how to deal with heterogeneity (Werbner as cited in Siapera, 2006). Charles Taylor’s essay on the politics of recognition explains that “Self-identity is constructed through reflection upon the identity of others, through mutual recognition. Misrecognition, or the failure to recognize certain identities, leads to injustice and does not allow the bearer(s) of such identities to participate fully in society as someone of equal worth” (as cited in Siapera, 2006). Nadir Dendotune’s statement is apt in portraying the sentiments that are felt by the non-Bumiputera group in Malaysia, “I was born here . . . How many generations does it take to stop mentioning my origin?” (as cited in Baber, 2012).

In Malaysia, the citizens are identified based on their ethnicity and religion, and the information is recorded by the National Registration Department and reflected in the Identity Card. National identity is often explicitly connected to race, ethnicity, or religion (Fukuyama, 2018). The notion of cultural memory has a close connection between a nation's pasts and national identity because according to John Locke, "There is no such thing as an essential identity, but that identities have to be constructed and reconstructed by acts of memory, by remembering who one was and by setting this past Self to the present Self" (as cited in Erll et al., 2008). The issues of ethnicity and identity are evident in *The Big Durian* as the conversations revealed the hypocrisy and the painful truth about Malaysian society and offered alternative viewpoints on how the subjects define their identities as Malaysians. The film analysis offers an insight into how such dilemmas are understood to represent the struggles faced by non-Bumiputera and how the political system and racial ideology continue to divide the country.

3. METHODOLOGY

The study applies a cultural memory framework and qualitative documentary analysis. Film interpretation usually uses some theory to pick relevant clues in the film, organize them into coherent patterns, and arrive at an interpretation (Bordwell, 1989). To enable a systematic analysis of televisual material, as well as for audio-visual 'texts' in general, while at the same time maintaining respect for the specificity of this kind of data, the researcher should link a semiological point of view with an empirical research method (Figueroa, 2008).

The analysis of *The Big Durian* is conducted using the Visual Rhetoric (VR) approach to unravel the connotative meanings of visual images such as metaphor and allusion (Danesi, 2017). The focus of VR is the visual processing of forms and their meanings, and how to read (interpret) visual texts such as ads and films (Danesi, 2017). The research utilizes thematic coding to analyse the themes in the film which contain implicit meaning that can also be identified as "problems," "issues," or "questions" (Bordwell, 1989). The interpretation of the identified themes was further explored using film language analysis because it is often suggested that much meaning is conveyed by visual images (Rose, 1994). However, the limitation in this study is the media text contains a diverse cultural context, and to enable an in-depth study of the film, the study identified and selected a few crucial themes to be discussed in this article.

The Big Durian was divided into segments and four researchers were involved in the coding exercises. Each researcher watched the films more than two times and highlighted important themes related to each segment of the film using the film script. The coding exercise includes the analysis of film language that is crucial to the discussion of the selected themes. The study of audio-visual data as an object of analysis concerns itself with aspects such as language, images, and music through which we get to know (to see, to hear) a part of social reality/ies (Figueroa, 2008).

The analysis is done using Microsoft Excel and Quirkos, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) software. The use of software allows coding to be done systematically and the data sources can easily be accessed and cross-referenced. The final phase of the analysis involves further interpretation of the themes to unravel the connotative meaning of the film and it was conducted through discussions between the researchers.

4. ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

For the coding exercise, every researcher coded the themes in the documentary film using the film script, and later, the coding was analyzed using Quirkos by the main researcher. The researchers are identified as I1, I2, I3, and I4. In total, there are 604 codes altogether and in the process of grouping the codes, few codes were merged, and the number of codes was reduced to 589.

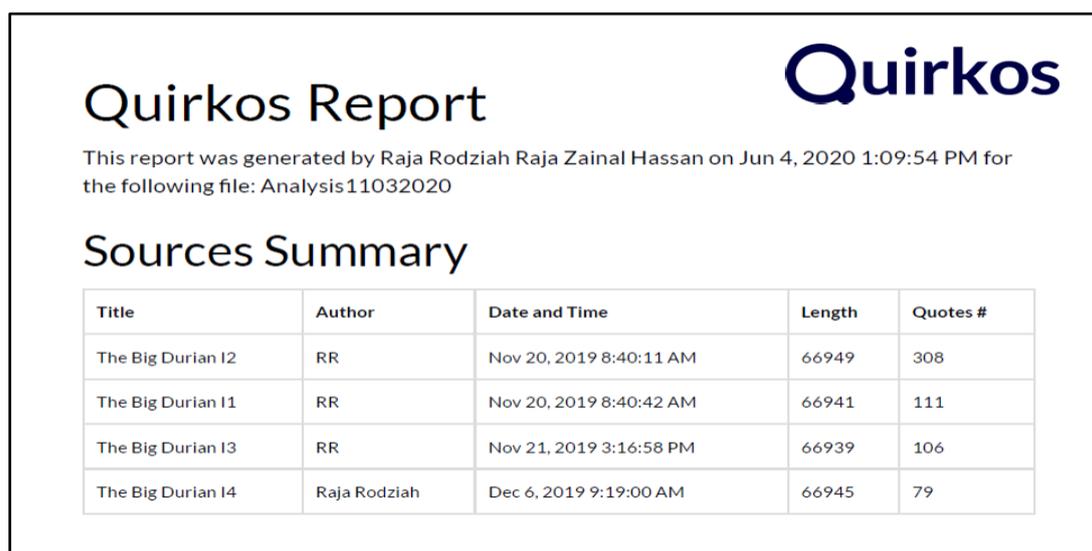


Fig. 1. Quirkos Report

The researchers analyze the generated codes and through several discussions, the codes were group into a few main themes as follow:

Table 1. Main Themes

Themes	Description	Codes Count
Political Criticism	Criticism against the ruling government abuse of power, interfering with the judicial system and mistreatment of the opposition.	120
Social Criticism	Analysis of the social structure and criticism on injustices and power relations in general	102
Maintaining Political Power	The ruling government maintain power and Malay dominance by instilling fear, arresting opposition politicians, media control	75
Racial Conflicts	The conflict between two or more ethnic groups over political, social, economic, or religious issues	57
Public Panic	Public panic is triggered because of speculation of riot and trauma of 13th May incident	51
Identity	Identity refers to the sense of belonging one feels towards the country	35
Alternative Narrative	The alternative narrative represents the public's story and widely believed speculation which differs from the official narrative	34
Racial-based Political System	The racial-based political system was inherited from the imperialist policy and continue to be practised in the country	30
Notion of Freedom	The notion of freedom refers to individual rights and equality, and resistance against injustice in society	24
Metaphor	The use of metaphor to illustrate implicit meanings in the film	23
Racial-based Education System	Based on constitutional rights, vernacular schools are allowed to be operated to protect the rights of every citizen to preserve their language, religion, and cultural background.	10
Official Narrative	The official narrative is disseminated to the public by the ruling government through mainstream media	9

Positive Portrayal of Malaysia	The Government's effort in projecting a good image of Malaysia to the world.	8
Socio-economic Criticism	Criticism on the economic system that gives privilege to the Bumiputra and political affiliation	6
Memories	Memories refer to what the public remembers about the amok incident and what had been forgotten	5

Based on the main themes, the researchers were able to contextualize the issue of identity politics and multiculturalism in Malaysia and relate it to the discussion of alternative representation, undesired memory, and the notion of freedom. The following discussion allows the study to further illustrate examples from the film and explain how Malaysians reflect on the political history which has impacted their sense of belonging.

5. DISCUSSION

5.1 Alternative Representation

The opening of *The Big Durian* began with a monologue. A Sabahan actress, Erna Mahyuni plays the character of Diana Muluk, a waitress reminiscing the days when she first came to Kuala Lumpur (KL) in search of freedom. A monologue is remarkable because it shows the dynamics of remembering and forgetting from an actor's perspective (Assmann, 2011). She was clad in a t-shirt and *batik sarong*, sitting on the stage sideways while hugging her knees to her chest and a spotlight aimed at her face. The medium shot of the character is slightly jittery giving the effect of raw, first-hand recorded material that told the story of a timid girl from the village who wished to be free but was disappointed by the reality. When Muluk first arrived in Kuala Lumpur in 1987 (The same year of the *amok* incident occurred), she witnessed a bribe-taking place between her uncle and a police officer. The scene is crucial to the discussion of freedom and in the interviews that follow, the film illustrates the lack of freedom and oppressive behaviour that has been normalized by society.

People don't report bribery or any forms of oppressive practice by the authority against them because they feel threatened by the system. *The Big Durian* showcases comments and interviews from various perspectives, from different ages, races, genders, social statuses, and minorities. These interviews include hearsays gossips, alternative versions of the event, as well as fear of voicing out. The interviews were carefully edited and juxtaposed with the factual reporting of the real event as narrated by Amir Muhammad. This approach serves to preserve the unofficial narratives and memories that otherwise would be lost, as stated at 00:41:30 that "every memory is important," challenges the credibility of the official account and destabilizes the mainstream narrative. The style of Amir Muhammad does not function solely within a narrative context. Nichols (1978) emphasizes this kind of cinema vérité does not organize a narrative as a whole but more poetically as a mosaic; only the parts have a diegetic unity.

The documentary then shifted its focus from Private Adam incident to the racial riot of 13th May 1969 and brought up the uncanny similarity of how sensitivity came into play for political gain in the told historical events. Seemingly unrelated events told in parallel renders the facts or truths unimportant but how the handling and manipulation of the official narrative come under the spotlight. The intention of the filmmaker has deliberately spelt out at 00:19:38 that "anything happens, and you speculate because the truth never comes out." These stories provide insight into the *amok* incident and how the incident has spiralled into a political turmoil that affected the subjects' lives. The multi-stranded organization is a documentary response to the reality that social phenomena have several triggers and can be seen as patterns of overlapping factors (Barbash & Taylor, 1997).

Roughly 00:04:34 minute into the film after the opening credit, Amir Muhammad interrupted the sequence of the film by rising to climax, he posed a question "Why were Malaysians so jittery at that time?" The question was asked briefly after the essential information on the *amok* incident was presented to the audience. Implicitly, the question suggested that there is a bigger issue than the *amok* incident itself which needs to be addressed urgently. The scene is followed by two images; the KLCC twin tower (tower 1 & 2) and Masjid Jamek which resides in the middle of two rivers, *Sungai Gombak* and *Sungai Klang*. Symbolically, the images convey the meaning that there are always two sides to the story, the dominant narrative, and the alternative narrative. The rivers were also the location where dead bodies were dumped during the 13th May incident (00:23:12). The film is suggesting that nothing is what it seems and the content forcefully exposes the audience to the alternative truth. This sets the tone of the film as Amir Muhammad probes further into the question of freedom and identity.

5.2 Notion of Freedom

To engage the public in the discussion of cultural politics is not always straightforward. Soon (2011) reported that in the studies of post-2008 Malaysian political structures, the cultural politics articulated by artists, filmmakers, cartoonists, musicians, committed social actors and academicians are often overlooked. Filmmakers utilize organizational strategies to construct a certain kind of relationship between the film text and the real world (Oberacker, 2009). Their political languages do not manifest themselves in political party agendas or policies, but the creation of ideas, non-official histories, life stories and alternative citizenry to restore the moral politics that the ruling party has failed to provide (Soon Chuan Yean, 2011). In the analysis of *The Big Durian*, a total of 120 codes are related to political criticism which includes the discussion on the abuse of power, racial ideology, and social inequality.

Documentaries marshal evidence but then use it to construct their perspective or argument about the world, their own poetic or rhetorical answer to the world (Nichols, 2017). Amir Muhammad probes further on why Malaysians refuse to discuss sensitive issues. This was illustrated in the interview scene of a random woman in a parking lot that was purposely set up to portray that the interview was done spontaneously to enhance the film's credibility (00:08:24). Amir Muhammad approached the woman and asked a question on the *amok* incident, but the woman tried to avoid the film crew and she questioned them "special branch is it?" The scene highlighted the restrictions on political speech and the problems that prevent political speech from being practised effectively especially when it is involving sensitive issues such as ethnic rivalry and religion which are considered taboo (Azizuddin Mohd Sani, 2008). The sentiment was echoed by Renuka Thiagarajah, a homemaker acted by Jo Kukathas in the film (00:23:48), she said "...what for to get involved? This is a problem between the Malay fellas and the Chinese fellas, you let those fellas sort it out. Every few years they need to take out their *parang* and kill each other for a few days then they carry on. Nation-building, building-building this going out with the big *parang* all is just one big show."

In Article 10 (1) of the Malaysian Constitution, Malaysian citizens are guaranteed the right to freedom of speech however this freedom comes with a list of restrictions especially when dealing with sensitive issues. Farish A. Noor, a renowned political scientist, and historian shared his view about Private Adam's *amok* incident and how this could be linked to the political crisis in Malaysia, "If we looked at our politic culture, it is uncivilized" (00:25:24), "The abuse of power among the Malaysian politicians has not changed much since feudal time, the king's henchmen would intimidate the public and they were thugs. It is not just UMNO youth. The youth wings of all our parties behave like thugs" (00:35:59) and "Both the government and the opposition have not made meaningful changes. They use thuggish tactics and thorny issues like race and religion" (01:10:33).

The Big Durian continued to address the issue of racial ideology that is deeply rooted in the Malaysian political system. The film highlighted how the system has failed the Malaysian people for 56 years. In most multicultural societies, the argument of ethnocultural attachment has become an important precursor to debates over the management of diversity (Mydin, 2014). According to a study conducted by Ramiah, Hewstone, and Wolfer (2017), diversity and integration have far-reaching effects in Malaysia, and over the years, there has been an indication that ethnic and religious identities have been entrenched and sharpened resulting in outbreaks of misunderstandings and violence. The "struggle over-representation" occurs when each member of the nation begins articulating his identity as "possibilities for self-direction" and it is in this power struggle that politics of recognition takes place (Mydin, 2014).

5.3 Undesired Memories

In a multicultural society, the dynamic between its members is highly dependent on a constructed interaction that for the most part aims at maintaining a harmonious society. This construction of the "world model for reality" is a well-formed compromise deeply rooted across members of society i.e. religion, ethnicity, status, and age; an outcome of the participation and interactions agreed upon by members of the society (Schmidt, 2008). The film represented members of society from a multitude of walks of life including different ages. Though the historical event depicted in the film took place some 15 years before (of the film production), youths' memories or the lack thereof were also portrayed in the narrative.

Amir Muhammad presented the youth's "world model for reality" with a story by Zedeck Siew recollection of 1987 when he was a wee baby. Zedeck shared that upon asking his parents about the incident, they responded that "they don't remember anything about Private Adam" (00.07:29). The high angle chocker shot of Zedeck froze as Amir Muhammad offers his view that it was unlikely that Zedeck's parents did not have a memory of the incident but chose to conceal the truth to relieve Zedeck of off unnecessary worries. The "world model for reality"

constructed by Zedeck's parents is not a singular example. It is common in Malaysia that memories of political and social turmoil on the assumption that they will disrupt harmony, are excluded in the dominant narrative. As members of the society, older members such as Zedeck's parents participated and interacted in line with the constructed compromises of excluding the undesired memory. Of which then, the youth's identity is very much a reflection of what the parents conditioned him to.

The scholarly field provides countless definitions of culture and the social dynamic of which the cultural practices are agreed upon. One such definition was offered by Michel Foucault whereby he refers to culture as "a hierarchical organization of values, accessible to everybody, but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion" (Taylor, 2014). This is illustrated in the Nigel Rajaretnam's scene (00:29:55), a student who recalled his childhood experience being turned down by the other kids when he wanted to join them in a "catch" play because he was regarded as the *Other*. The kids told Rajaretnam, "Infidels can't play with us" to which Rajaretnam responded, "Before that, I was just black."

Similar to Foucault's analysis approach on the "negative structure" of society, Rajaretnam's experience with his presumably Malay counterparts forces the audience to face the unsettling forms of participation and interaction among members of the multicultural society. Presenting alternative participation and interaction in his film, against the flawlessly constructed multicultural Malaysia presented in most mainstream films, Amir Muhammad took on the filmmaker's responsibility to "change our perceptions of things and direct our attention toward newness that affects us" (Tascón, 2015). Through this example of the "negative structure" of society, the filmmaker also encourages attention, interest, and learning of positive societal dynamics. As suggested by LaMarre and Landreville (2009), studies from emotion psychology and political science showed that bad experience, of oneself or others, substantially offers a more robust positive change in behaviour and action.

6. CONCLUSION

It is speculated that the reason Private Adam ran *amok* in Chow Kit is that his brother was killed by a *Sultan* and the crime was left unpunished (00:19:55). Feeling lost, he took matters into his own hands to restore justice. Towards the end of the film, Amir Muhammad posed a question to Farish A. Noor, "Do you see any hope for our future?" (01:10:05). The question was accompanied by the non-diegetic insert of children's images. In the final act, Muluk returned to the screen and the camera offered a close-up shot of her face. She quietly shared with the audience her encounter with Private Adam and she muttered, "He didn't look like a man in a cage. He looked like he had just been set free. I envied him. I wanted to be like him" (01:11:59). Private Adam ran *amok* represents the struggle of every Malaysian in an unjust society. The central concern of multiculturalism is the emphasis on quality of opportunity regardless of ethnicity (Mydin, 2014) and the debate remains painful as it strikes at the very heart of who people think they are (Chin, 1992).

The Big Durian highlights that for generations, Malaysians face a difficult task to achieve unity due to the political systems that are based on racial ideology. Malaysia efforts towards a national identity are marred by chauvinistic sentiments (Nasuruddin, 2019). The racial ideology that is heavily embedded into the layers of Malaysian society has created an agitated society that refuses to speak out and a younger generation that is oblivious of its past. As the past is disappearing, the documentary film intended to document a piece of history as a manifestation of hope for Malaysians. Memory depends less on a deliberate decision to record than an inability to forget, the negotiation of memory depicts the resonance and tension of the past as it is configured in present-based struggles over the meaning of lived experience (Carter and Hirschkop as cited in Grainge, 2018).

Producing a documentary film and stirring a painful discussion, Amir Muhammad brilliantly offers an alternative presentation of Malaysian history. By giving voice to a view of the world, the voice of an orator, or documentarian, enlists and exposes desires, longing, makes possible the requisite conditions of visibility to see things anew, to see, as if for the first time, what had, until now is elusive (Nichols, 2008). Rhetorical analysis of the film highlights the importance of visual imagery in construction of meaning. Images can simulate visual reality and evoke attitudes and emotions associated with real people, objects, places, and situations (Larsen, 2015). *The Big Durian*'s success is achieved through carefully edited film and the extensive use of symbolic images and film techniques. Its biggest achievement is to make people start thinking what being Malaysians mean to them.

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