Contemporary Malaysian Horror: Relational Politics of Animism and James Lee's *Histeria*

Bogna M. Konior

According to Malaysia's former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir bin Mohamad, local horror cinema is counterproductive to building a progressive society. While the genre is now at the peak of its popularity, it was banned throughout the 1990s and accused of tainting modernity with 'backwards' ways of thinking. Modernity's progress through erasure has already been conceptualized as a repression of various cultural contexts, religious practices, and pre-colonial epistemologies, yet its ontological implications are rarely investigated. Nonmodern ontologies, such as animism, are aesthetically, narratively, and theoretically embedded in a number of contemporary horrors, especially those created by independent or art-house directors, who see in the genre the possibility of discussing the ontological taboos of modernity, such as the personhood of the nonhuman. In contrast to an ethnographic approach to animism, I here read it as a method of disruption: a negation of the idea that cinema is the quintessential modern medium. Animism, as a practice of relational personhood (Bird-David, 1999) renegotiates ontological boundaries modernity claimed to have set in stone: between self and other, nature and culture, humans and nonhumans, belief and practice, religion and play. By taking animism as a theoretical framework rather than a cultural trace, I highlight various points of intersection between James Lee's gory slasher horror *Histeria* (2008) and this nonmodern ontology, positing it as a template for animistic slasher horror, where humans and nonhumans connect and disconnect on the axis of personhood, and the transition from relationality to individuality is depicted as a threat.

Keywords: slasher film, animism, contemporary Malaysian cinema, ontology, horror

> *A ghost is haunting modernity—the ghost of animism. It awaits us everywhere when we step outside modern reason's cone of light, outside its firmly mapped order, when approaching its frontier zones and "outside." We find it in the imagined darkness of modernity's outside, where everything changes shape and the world is reassembled from the fragments that reason expels from its chains of coherences.*
>
> Anselm Franke (2012)

In 2008, James Lee, one of Malaysia's most celebrated independent directors and a pioneer of DIY filmmaking, unveiled the country's most gory horror film to date, *Histeria* (Pillai & Lee, 2008). Blood, guts, and chopped off bodily parts sprouted on screen, marking a turn to the slasher[1], rather than the safe and probed confines of the popular ghost movie. Yet, *Histeria*'s rebellious, gory challenge to the dominance of ghost films does not remove animism

from the equation. On the contrary, animism is at the core of *Histeria*'s contribution to the slasher genre, rendering visible the seemingly unlikely convergence of non-modern ontologies and the cinema, the quintessence of modernism (Pomerance, 2006). While in classical anthropology and ethnography, animism is most readily linked to its religious extension in shamanic practices, its recent incarnation as a critical concept in contemporary philosophical and anthropological thought provokes further insight into the nature of horror. That the cinema's very ontology is rooted in inherently non-modern fluidity of boundaries has already been noted by scholars, from Epstein's (2012/1926; 2012/1947; 2012/1955) animistic theory of cinema, to Ruiz's "For a Shamanic Cinema" (1995), to *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (2000), where Moore argued that a number of early cinema theorists, such as Siegfried Kraucauer, Sergiei Eisenstein, and Béla Balázs define it as a transformative space, where humans can access the realm of nonhuman perception inconceivable without the cinema's ontological promiscuity. In *Religion and Film: Cinema and the Re-Creation of the World* (2008), Plate (2008) argued that the cinema creates a possibility of constructing alternative worldviews and ontologies, thus charging it with the production of new concepts proper to philosophy (Deleuze & Guattari, 1991/1994) as well as with the "decolonization of imagination" that de Castro (2014) defined as the new task of anthropology. In this way, echoing Latour's (1991/1993) famous argument that "we have never been modern" (p. 12), cinema can remain a space where modernity has never arrived.

This paper proposes a double disconnection from the dominant trends in studying Southeast Asian horror: first of all, it moves from the religious and ethnographic connotations of animism to a theoretical experimentation based on the coupling of the cinema and "new animism," and secondly, it claims that approaching a genre, "world" film as a cultural signifier does not exhaust its contribution to film theory or to the reflection on what cinema can achieve. It challenges both the assumption that Malaysian cinema can only be investigated as a cultural representation as well as the position of genre (horror) films as merely peripheral to film-philosophy. Consequently, I read James Lee's *Histeria* through the ontological angle of animism not as ethnography, but as an idiosyncratic, film-philosophical tool rooted in contemporary anthropological insight, interrogating the relational nature of horror, where human and nonhuman *actants* connect and disconnect on the axis of personhood.

From the digital to the horrific: James Lee

Although an exhaustive history of Malaysian horror cinema is yet to be written, it is enough to hover over its turning points to reveal its complexity

and the many struggles it underwent as a genre that necessarily deals with the forbidden and the taboo. While the first screenings in Kuala Lumpur date back to 1898 and by the 1910s major Malaysian cities had their own theatres (White, 1997), the earliest surviving mention of a horror film, *Pontianak* (Loke & Rao, 1957), takes us back to as recently as the 1950s, two decades after the first official Malaysian film, *Laila Majnun* (1933) by Indian director B.S. Rajhan was screened for the first time. From the infamous Shaw Brothers to Japanese influences during the occupation between 1942 and 1945, Malaysian cinema has been from its very inception a kaleidoscope of styles, genres, and cultures, making for an idiosyncratic presence of myths and folklore which was the main source of inspiration for horror directors between 1950s and 1960s.

From the mid-1970s up until the early 2000s, it was difficult for local filmmakers to produce or direct horror films, even though foreign horrors were still being screened. With Mahathir bin Mohamad sworn in as the Prime Minister in 1981, the increasing drive to both modernize the country and turn official policies towards Islam further put horror films in a tight spot. Mohamad proclaimed the "superstitious nature" of horror counterproductive to building a progressive society as well as at odds with the country's official religion. Thus, horrors were brought to a halt. At the beginning of the millennium, though, Malaysia, like other Southeast Asian countries, underwent a digital revolution (Baumgärtel, 2011). In the early 2000s, the equipment became lighter and more portable, while a new generation of filmmakers, often having previously worked in advertising or design, brought in broader skill sets. The digital revolution eventually coincided with the higher degree of creative freedom which led to the emergence of a "new wave" in the country, first nicknamed "The Little Cinema of Malaysia," now referred to frequently as "The Malaysian New Wave," where horror became one of Malaysia's dominant genres.[2] From Muhammad's *Susuk* (2008) to Woo's *Seru* (2011), some of the most insightful *and* successful contemporary Malaysian horrors were made by those filmmakers who either pioneered the new wave, DV, shoe-string filmmaking or were the offsprings of that wave.

James Lee is one of those directors who surfed the new wave of digital filmmaking all the way to the center of the local film scene. Along with Yasmin Ahmad and Bernard Chauly, and now perhaps also Woo Ming-jin, Lee could be labeled as a middle cinema artist. Renowned for independent art-house films, such as *The Beautiful Washing Machine* (2004), which won the Best Film Award and the FIPRESCI Prize at the 2005 Bangkok International Film Festival, *Snipers* (2001), *Ah Beng Returns* (2001), and *Room to Let* (2002)**,** with *Histeria* (2008) he crossed over to the mainstream,

where he continues to experiment today. Lee's independent works have been celebrated for its openly socio-political involvement with Malaysia's complex ethnic relationships. With Mahathir bin Mohammad serving as the Prime Minister, horror was not the only cultural element subjected to scrutiny. In 1981 it was declared that for a film to be classified as Malaysian, it had to be shot in *Behasa Melayu*, the country's official language, thus excluding Mandarin, Tamil, Cantonese, Telugu, Punjabi and the other 130-plus languages spoken in Malaysia. In the early 2000s, Lee's multi-cultural and multi-ethnic films actively opposed this policy by featuring diverse actors, characters, and narratives. Although his current genre films look to engage a broader audience, he remains involved in crafting artistic responses to official policies. In 2009, for instance, he participated in *15Malaysia*, a collective short film project meant as a multivocal response to 1Malaysia, a program introduced by Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak, which prioritized homogenous, national unity.

While bleak endings became the staple of Lee's art-house films such as in *Waiting for Love* (2007), horror forms the foundation of his mainstream endeavors, from his segment in *Visits: Hungry Ghost Anthology* (2004), to the YouTube horror series *3 Doors of Horror* (2013) produced by his independent film company Doghouse 73 and featuring horror shorts by up-and-coming filmmakers such as Edmund Yeo (*Floating Sun*), Leroy Low (*I miss You Two*) and Ng Ken Kin (*Horror Mission*), to the *Twilight*-inspired teenage romance with vampiric undertones *Tolong! Awek Aku Pontianak* (*Help! My Girlfriend is a Pontianak*, 2011). His next project, the big-budget sci-fi film *Atlantis Conspiracy*, which has a perfectly-executed short already available online from Doghouse 73 Pictures, is also situated firmly within the genre. And next to Lee's still unreleased (outside of a DVD release in Australia) cannibal horror *Claypot Curry Killers*, *Histeria* is Malaysia's most graphic film to date, even if the insertions of gore, guts, and blood which make for a visually explicit variation on a fairly generic narrative line are rather brief.

Animism beyond ethnography

As a genre *and* "world" film, *Histeria* (Pillai & Lee, 2008) is an uncommon case study for an ontological reflection on animistic horror as it most readily invites a contextual analysis, touching on, through its very title, the phenomenon of hysteria (or, as doctors label it, a somato form disorder) among teenagers in Malaysia, quite a frequent occurrence that even prompted the creation of the Anti-Histeria Kit at the University of Malaysia Pahang.[3] Throughout the last decade, Southeast Asian cinema and moving image have been gaining increased exposure, mainly due to exhibitions and

international film festivals, yet little scholarly attention has been devoted to theorizing them beyond the socio-historical or national context. Southeast Asian cinema studies are most often positioned as a subset of area studies (Harrison, 2006, p. 133-134; Lim & Yamamoto, 2011), where the cinema is charged with sociological and cultural work. Both of the two existing book-length academic studies devoted to Malaysian cinema in English follow a similar approach (van der Heide, 2002; Khoo, 2006). Combining textual and cultural analysis to reflect on the cinema's "contradictory and plural" identities, van der Heide (2002, p.2) criticized an essentialist reading of films aimed at revealing their cultural specificity and uniqueness (cf. Hanan, 2001). Tilman Baumgärtel (2011) took this argument further, arguing that Southeast Asian independent filmmakers distribute their art-house films at international film festivals where they find their primary audience. While Baumgärtel posited that the affinity between these independent films and their international audiences is a prime example of Anderson's (1991) "imagined communities," he also added that private, independent, conceptual Southeast Asian films are *still* often perceived by international scholars as "the very gist of specific culture of the very country [even though] both the audience and the government institutions that support films show little or no interest in them" (Baumgärtel, 2011, p. 12), rather treating them like a cultural curiosity than a national treasure (Kong, 2009). As Iranian film scholar and critic Houshang Golmakani (1993) pointed out, the so-called "Third World" films are often reduced to the function of cultural signifiers, celebrated for their fetishized "otherness," picked apart by critics in search of distinguishing features that signalize their locality. To the Western critic and intellectual, Third World films are only interesting if they are perceived to be rooted in a "local" culture, situated in an explicitly portrayed social or political background that facilitates the function of learning about something "different." In this way, the fate of Malaysian cinema maps onto that of horror studies, which often has to be argued from a contextual standpoint to be worth the analysis at all, especially in the case of horror, which raises uncomfortable ethical questions and revels in sexual and physical violence, thus prompting some film scholars and critics to denounce it on moral grounds (Hutchings, 1993). Given Malaysian horror's frequent engagement with shamanism, it could also be easily swept under the category of comparative religion studies through cinema, where "imagining the Other," be it God or ghost, plays a crucial part (Kempna 2010, p. 243). As Wright (2007) noted, cinematic horror often provokes a combination of two methodologies that also currently dominate the studies of Malaysian cinema, where close reading of singular films followed by an

analysis of production, distribution, and reception contexts is meant to reveal deeper cultural truths (p. 25-26).

Yet, from the point of view of an animistic philosophy of cinematic horror, it is not the cinema's relation to a "reality behind it" that is interesting. No doubt, ethnographic and cultural analyses following the paradigm of reading cinema as a representation of a broader socio-cultural reality continue to contribute to the study of Malaysian cinema. Other fields, however, such as film-philosophy, have devoted little inquiry to the so-called "world cinemas," implicitly assuming that those films could only be of interest to scholars with an ethnographic interest in a given area. I present a slightly different approach, situated at the intersection of film studies and the ontological turn in anthropology, which concerns itself with philosophical problems of ontology more than it does the ethnographic problems of cultural representation. I aim to investigate some of the ways in which *Histeria* portrays and produces relational, animistic personhood. In doing so, I follow the ontological assumptions of "new animism," a critical framework that departs from animism's colonial roots in the anthropology of religion and instead emerges at the intersection of anthropology, philosophy, and the theory of cinema as a critical tool. The older usage of the term dates back to the work of Sir Edward Tylor (1832-1917), who introduced it to the Western intellectual milieu through his influential book *Primitive Culture* (1871/1958). In labeling animism as "a belief that inside ordinary visible, tangible bodies there is a normally invisible being: the soul" (Harris, 1983, p.186), many cultural anthropology textbooks follow the Tylorian definition, thus placing animism in the realm of belief, particularly in ghosts and spirits, reflecting on the Western constructs of *anima* and vitalism rather than those of the indigenous peoples that anthropologists encountered. The misinterpretation of animism as a religion (Frazer, 1860/1983), an anthropomorphic projection (Hume, 1757/1957), a stage in the development of the rational self (Freud, 1911/1991; Piaget, 1932), the opposite of science (Huxley, 1881), or a vitalistic life force (Stahl, 1708) has been criticized by contemporary anthropologists as an attribution of modern dualities to a non-modern ontology (Harvey, 2005; Bird-David, 1999). In contemporary anthropology, a number of scholars, including Bird-David, de Castro (1998), Ingold (2000), and Vilaça (2005) have attempted to reclaim animism from these prejudices. Descola's (2005/2013) classification of ontologies into totemism, analogism, naturalism, and animism most clearly explains the properties of animism as an ontology. In Descola's categorization, animism functions as an ontology in which humans and nonhumans share the same interiority (personhood), while they differ in physicality (for example, different bodies). Naturalism, allocated to post-Enlightenment,

modern ontologies is the opposite: humans and nonhumans differ in interiority (only humans possess personhood), while they share the same physicality (material forms). Descola rejected the naturalistic assumption that there exists one unified reality (the *res extensa*) with multiple social or cultural interpretations of it. Instead, he argues for multiple ontologies (cf. Vankatesen, 2010).

While the scope of this short paper does not allow for an overview of animism's transition from "a derogatory term to a critical concept" (Harvey, 2005, p. vii), I will briefly introduce a few incarnations of animism that inform my analysis of *Histeria*. The first is Harvey's definition of animism, which presupposes that "animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons, only some of whom are human, and that life is always lived in relationship with others" (p. xi), and that animism is an everyday *practice* instead of an elaborate system of beliefs (p. 48-49). This definition of animism will help me steer the analysis of *Histeria* in the direction of everyday, non-modern relational practices expressed through the film's content and form. Specifically, I will refer to Willerslev's (2012) consideration of animism and cynicism, Fausto's (2004) conceptualization of predatory animism, and de de Castro's (2004) insights on the relation between body and perspective in animism. While these discussions of animism could be argued as tied to the geographical location of the respective studies, I also propose that any film is able to engage multiple animisms (and that maybe in fact we are all animists when we watch a film). I will also refer to Latour's (2013) concept of "the beings of fiction" in order to present how *Histeria* engages with the concept of nonhuman personhood. Finally, although a proper exploration of this entanglement of cinema and animism requires yet another paper, I am also indebted to Felix Guattari's experimentation with animism that Melitopoulos & Lazzarato (2010; 2012) labeled a "machinic animism," an animistic "conception of subjectivity [achieved] through neurotic phenomena, religious rituals, or aesthetic phenomena" that privileges aggregate personhood over individuality (2010, p. 97). Commenting on Guattari's "machinic animism," Jean Claude Polack explained that an animistic sensibility is a connective practice "of the self or perhaps with non-living beings, or bodies outside the self" (in Melitopoulos & Lazzarato, 2012, para. 2). The fact that for Guattari "aspects of polysemic, trans-individual, and animist subjectivity also characterize the world of childhood, psychosis, of amorous and political passion, and of artistic creation" (Melitopoulos & Lazzarato, 2010, p.98) allows me both to highlight the aggregate selfhood of *Histeria*'s characters. While Guattari's work remains rather in the background than at the forefront of this paper, I think it valuable to bring him into this discussion and ask my readers to keep his engagement with

animism at the back of their heads: not only does he prove that continental philosophy has been engaging with animism as a relational, counter-individualistic formation of subjectivity but also underlines that "animist subjectivity should not be understood as historically or anthropologically specific" (Hetrick, 2014, p. 60), which in turn allows me to bring multiple conceptualizations of this ontology into my analysis.

Horrorizing animism: *Histeria*

Following Descola's (2013) assumption that animism is an ontology where humans and nonhumans share the trait of personhood while differing in exterior qualities, Lee's (Tee & Lee, 2004) *My Beautiful Washing Machine*, despite its gloomy, capitalist, urban setting can be read as a prime example of animistic cinema, where a washing machine is relationally endowed with personality and agency, and becomes one of the film's major characters, steering action and form by its presence. Thus, Lee's critique of second-hand ownership within capitalism is relevant for both humans and objects. In *Histeria*, however, animism emerges with greater subtlety. It appears not so much in the agency of objects but rather in the basic unit of animistic ontology itself—the practices of relational personhood. I propose that *Histeria* can provide insight that extends to the majority of slashers that concern the following scenario: a group of humans negotiate their relations with a threatening nonhuman (demon, monster, ghost, possessed object) but in the end one or more of them, previously unsuspected, and at the expense of others, manage to harbor a positive relation with the nonhuman on the basis of predation on the other humans. Through engaging animistic practices of relationality, these horrors highlight the cinema's convergence of modern and nonmodern ontologies.

Histeria's narrative, as told by Murni, the sole survivor of a massacre, unveils in flashbacks. The story begins when six teenage girls playfully deceive their teachers with a fake hysteria attack, only revealing the joke when the school has already called in a *bomoh* [healer]. As punishment for their misbehavior, they are ordered to spend the weekend at an old school dorm. At the dorm, the girls are supervised by their teacher Mr. Helmi, and by a student supervisor, Zeta. We later learn that Mr. Helmi maintains a sexual relationship with one of the girls, Ju. As for Zeta, she later becomes part of the group and shares its tragic fate. One night, Ju follows the school's mysterious gardener and digs out an object he buried in the ground. She then gives it to Murni. On her way to Mr. Helmi's room, Ju is possessed by the jinn and eventually murders Mr. Helmi. Meanwhile, we also learn that the gardener was once the jinn's master yet is now unable to save the girls because the jinn, as he explains, "has a new master now." As the story

unveils, we also learn of complex relations—loving, vicious and at times homoerotic—among the girls. When the girls realize that their life is in danger, some of them call their boyfriends, who arrive at the dorm and are also killed by the jinn. Eventually, when all but two girls remain alive, Murni's best friend Alissa is also killed, while Murni sheds tears watching her slaughter. *Histeria* then returns to the hospital, where Murni finishes narrating her story to the policemen and the doctor. "An anthill spirit killed all of my friends," she whispers, while everyone around her smirks cynically, inquiring why the spirit would let her live. Immediately, *Histeria* presents an alternative version of events, ending with Murni grinning as the demon slaughters Alissa, implying that Murni was complicit in the murders. While the doctor decides that Murni should be moved to a mental hospital, we later watch her uttering the dark spell, summoning the jinn, thus suggesting that Murni indeed is the "new master" that the gardener has mentioned before.

Trajectories of personhood

Histeria opens[4] with several medium tracking shots of Murni, clad in a bloodied white gown, the redness of the blood against her white robe the ultimate symbol of violated innocence (cf. Bettelheim, 1977[5]). Moving to a long establishing shot, the camera looms behind Murni to reveal her teacher pulling by the dorm's entrance. Murni walks towards her, dizzy and traumatized. An over-the-shoulder shot reveals her blood-smeared face and frantic eyes, before she shrieks in anguish in response to the teacher's question: "Where are the others?" The first words spoken in the film already draw a thematic arc: the enactment of Murni's relationship to her others, both human and nonhuman. While this is hardly unique to Malaysian horror, it is rather specific to it that the horrific element would be summoned up in order to foreground relations between the characters. In Malaysian contemporary horror, this foregrounding often translates to demons/ghosts/jinn*s* with little backstory, functioning solely as a point onto which relationships can be anchored. In the subsequent scenes, Murni is held at a hospital, while a group of policemen and a doctor question her about last night's events. She explains that a murderous jinn has killed all of her friends, and she is the sole survivor. The men then express their disbelief, asking why the jinn would spare her. Confronted with the policeman's suspicions, Murni weeps, caressing a photo of her dead friends, before she starts narrating a story that starts on a hot, humid night in a jungle by her school. There in the jungle, six girls stand by a gigantic anthill. Right before they approach it, their movements through the wet, muddy, overwhelmingly nonhuman space dictate the rhythm of these scenes: though uncertain, they

move as a group, as one, bound to each other in their actions. When they function as one, Lee often frames them together, structuring the mise-en-scène in a geometrical manner to express their unity and symmetry, as if they were one character. The girls address the anthill through the jinn that it harbors within and open a dialogue, suspending naturalist practices in favor of animism. Through the practice of this dialogue, they recognize both the anthill and the jinn as persons endowed with agencies, not mere mute objects[6]: "Persons are those with whom other persons might interact with varying degrees of reciprocity. Persons may be spoken *with*. Objects… are usually spoken *about*" (Harvey, 2005, p. xvii).

Surely, horror is one of the most fitting genres for exploring animistic ontologies. Save for realist horror (Freeland, 1995), it most often involves a relation to the nonhuman, often a nonhuman inside another nonhuman: a hunted object, house, or landscape. From here on, the characters move on three axes of animistic (relational) personhood: the anthill/jinn and the girls; the anthill/jinn and Murni; and the girls and the girls *as mediated* through the jinn. Throughout the film, the viewer is invited to participate in these negotiations of personhood, pondering the relations between the girls and the jinn, especially Murni and the jinn, and Murni's relation to her friends, which turn out to be more layered than we might have previously assumed. Until the very end, the relationship between the girls and the nonhuman jinn is ambiguous and open-ended, and we struggle to figure out who is on whose side. This ambiguity is also reflected in the girls addressing the jinn as "Oh, the evil one… the spirit of many faces, come be me," highlighting that composite agency residing in the jinn as much as it does in their small group of six. The relationships through which personhood unveils itself are constantly in flux, expressed both through style and narrative. While at first we are introduced to a tight group of friends, once the girls reach the place of their detention, another character joins them. As Mr. Helmi acquaints Zeta with the group, the mise-en-scène structures the hierarchy among the girls into geometrical forms, with Zeta standing on the top of the stairs, while the girls part into two semi-circles around her, looking her down suspiciously. This structuring will be repeated in the film a few more times, each time corresponding to the changing dynamics within the group. While Zeta's mission is to make sure they perform the assigned tasks, the girls also seize the power to include or exclude her from the group. This reinforces the theme of *Histeria*, which is not only human/nonhuman relations but also composite relational personhood of the girls.

Although the detention at the dorm was meant as a punishment, the girls are excited to move in; Murni in particular exclaimed how "she's heard all kinds of stories about this place." What she referred to are urban ghost

stories, present in Malaysia and anywhere in the world, where there exists at least one abandoned school building (McHugh, 1959). The girls conspire against Zeta and plan to both punish and reward her. First, they probe Zeta with a few scary stories, which they take great pleasure in telling, highlighting how the whole group bonds over their embracing of the nonhuman, even though they are fully aware that they are making these ghost stories up as they go. Here they initiate their bond through an engagement with a "being of fiction," which anthropologist Bruno Latour (2013) defined as *actants* dependent on others practicing their existence, "not because they are false, unreliable, or imaginary; [but] because they ask so very much from us and from those to whom we have the obligation to pass them along" (p. 249). Latour's definition applies to all kinds of nonhuman persons but most readily to myths, narratives, and stories, especially those that travel through word of mouth, demanding to be performed again and again by other persons. Among animists, stories too could be treated like ancestors, from whom others learn and who endow others with their wisdom (Harvey, 2005, p. 18-19). These stories require renewed engagement in order to live on. When Alisa tells Zeta that their gardener is in possession of a haunted object (a story that the film later confirms to be at least partially true), she says: "That [haunted] thing has to be passed on to someone else before the owner dies," thus acknowledging a certain similarity between passing on stories and passing on haunted objects. For the girls in *Histeria*, the ghost stories perform yet another function: they mediate the process of including a new person into the assemblage personhood. Only when Zeta plays along and agrees to participate does she become part of the group.

While both the framing and the narrative illustrate the composite yet always fluid trajectories of personhood among the group, their relation to the jinn introduces both the aesthetics and thematics of disjunction, disseverment, and dismemberment. Right after the girls alter the frontiers of their group by including Zeta, another person craves to be invited, too. As the girls are sleeping, we witness a rapidly edited sequence set to a shredded, high-pitch sound—a nightmarish insert that shows one of the girls, covered in dirt and leaves, crawling out of the demonic anthill. This first moment of horror in *Histeria* signals that yet another agency enters the equation and that its nature is that of disjunction. That this sequence of disseverment marks the upcoming disintegration of the girls' composite personhood is evident in the next scenes. Ju follows the mysterious gardener into the woods, watching him as he buries something in the ground. Digging with her fingers, she pulls up a little package wrapped in yellow paper, tied with a red ribbon. Soon after, she entrusts the object to Murni, who questions Ju on the nature of her nightly escapades. As we learn, Ju and her teacher Mr.

Helmi maintain a sexual relationship. On her way to his room, Ju is attacked by the now-freed jinn. Possessed, she mutilates and kills Mr. Helmi, feasting on his neck and face. This first act of association between one of the girls and the jinn is already ambiguous: while we know that the relationship between Ju and Mr. Helmi is voluntary, in this scene he is portrayed as a sexual predator. "What's wrong?" he asks while Ju hangs her head down, unresponsive. Smirking and touching Ju while she remains passive, he insists, "Don't be shy, darling" in a scene that suggests that he does not mind her lack of consent and that this particular dynamic might be indicative of their relationship. Crucially, the transformation of Ju's *body*, and specifically her face, which now looks as if someone tore off the outer layer of skin, is the prerequisite for the murder of Mr. Helmi. While studying animism in the Amazon, de Castro (2004) notices that the body is "an assemblage of affects or ways of being that constitutes a habitus . . . and the body is the origin of perspectives" (p. 475). A change in bodies equals a shift in perspective— while for the human Ju Mr. Helmi is a teacher and a sexual partner, for the nonhuman Ju he is only prey. Animism's disengagement with the naturalist notion of the split between mind and body could be one way of accounting for how horror visualizes bodily metamorphoses. Harvey (2005) pointed out that (old) animism, as a rhetoric of life, and specifically of who does and does not possess it, was intimately entangled with the pressing issues of modernity: "the relationship of mind and matter, consciousness and materiality, humanity and others, and the West and the rest" (p. 205). While new animism acknowledges that the centrality of "spirit" (as opposed to the body) was rather a projection of modernist dualisms onto the everyday relational practices of animists, *Histeria* could be seen as embodying the very negation of this mind/body split. In showing that a bodily transformation equals a transformation of the self, *Histeria* suggests that an alteration of the body equals an alteration of perspective. In Ju's case, this proves particularly true, because later on we will learn that the jinn has its own physical body and (with the exception of Ju) does *not* possess any of the girls, instead choosing to feast on them as Ju now does on Mr. Helmi. The alteration of Ju's face expresses her own shift in perspective, although created through her relation to the jinn, whence she changes her body in order to reverse the predatory relation with Mr. Helmi, quite literally turning him into prey instead. Thus, one of the ways in which *Histeria* adheres to the ontology of animism is that it portrays the relation between mind and body without the dualism proper to modernity or naturalism.

Another way in which *Histeria* complicates the idea of "anima" (the soul) as an idealistic concept rooted in the mind/body split is the visual presentation of the monstrous presence itself. Both the anthill and the jinn

are muddy, messy, dirty. Further into the film, when the gardener faces the jinn outside the dorm, we catch a glimpse of the creature. Unlike in most Malaysian horror films, this is not a *pontianak* (female vampire) or an *orang minyak* (the Oily Man). Its muddy, earthy, wet body represents the very anthill it comes from rather than the smokeless, scorching fire the Qur'an depicts (15:27, Al-Qur'an: A contemporary translation). It visually recalls the *badi*, which Skeat (1900/1984) describes so in his classic anthropological study *Malay Magic*:

> The evil principle which, according to the view of Malay medicine-men attends everything that has life...Von de Wall describes it as the enchanting or destroying influence which issues from anything, *e.g.* From a tiger which one sees, from a poison-tree which one passes under, from the saliva of a mad dog, from an action which one has performed; the contagious principle of morbid matter. (p. 427)

Although Skeat's study is by now nothing but archaic, the description he provides already reveals that for practicing animists, the supposedly idealistic *anima* is in fact material.[7] "Morbid matter" if engaged can spread like an infection or a disease. If we define the anthill-jinn as full of *badi*, it becomes clear why *Histeria* is focused on exhibiting in graphic detail the torn, rotten, meaty, bloody corpses of the murdered humans: it is the morbid matter spreading over to those who summoned it. The way the jinn is portrayed collapses spectral and material into an empirical unit of personhood, perceivable in the form of the morbid anthill or the jinn itself.

In the second half of the film, when the narrative turns to the slasher trope of illustrating gory murders, disjunction marks both the dynamics within the group, as well as the film's stylistic elements, especially the montage. Well-lit beforehand, the vast space of the old dorm is now drenched in darkness. Marina's gruesome death in the bathroom sparks panic, and soon the rest of the girls uncover other mutilated bodies. Suspicion hangs heavily in the air as the girls argue about who is to blame for the unfortunate events. Throughout this dispute, the girls are framed on their own, often through closeups of their faces. By framing the girls separately, as well as including prolonged sequences of shaky, disjointed montage, *Histeria* communicates the disintegration of their composite personhood through both visual style and dialogue. Discarding its previously elegant flow, the montage becomes rapid, claustrophobic, introducing disunion and rhythmic separation into character development. What seems to be conveyed is that the jinn disappears and reappears, entering each girl's psyche separately, tearing

them away from each other, and attacking them individually. That slasher films always build on this very dynamic is evident when we examine their most definitive theme: although it is in the characters' best interest to stick together, they decide to separate. In *Histeria,* the disastrous transition from a collective self to individuality can be linked to how the ethics of aggregate personhood functions in animism: Relationality is safer than individuality. As Harvey (2005) observed, "animists are people who recognize that the world is full of persons and life is always lived in a relationship with others" (p.xi), that is, individuality is always communal, "both intensely private, personal and unique and also immediately shared and relational" (p. 44). The quest for individuality could equal striving for a disconnected self, reasonable, self-standing, in contrast to a more animistic, contextual, embodied self. In *Histeria*, the trail of horror develops from the safe position of aggregate selfhood and moves into dangerous spaces of either breaking the group into individuals, or having a relation with the monstrous nonhuman.

While for most of the girls the rapid, shredded editing symbolizes their separation from the group, for Murni the kaleidoscopic montage seems to signal her getting closer to the nonhuman—a collage of the self that is inclusive of the monster. According to Guattari, "[for animists] the daily commerce with particles of self or perhaps with corpses, outside of the self, does not pose a problem" (as cited in Melitopoulos & Lazzarato, 2010, p. 98). Commenting on the affinity, if not exchangeability, between Amazonian shamans and the bodies of jaguars that they inhabit for the purpose of hunting, anthropologist Carlos Fausto (2004) coined the term "predatory animism." While predatory animism is irrevocably tied to the specificities of Amazonian shamanism, the term itself proves useful for theorizing the kind of animism present in slasher horror films, where it can describe the relation between the humans who decide to disconnect themselves from their human companions and bond with the nonhuman for the purpose of predation. In *Histeria*, the relation between Murni and the jinn could be described as a predatory animism, through which "subjectivity is attributed to human and nonhuman entities, with whom some people are capable of... establishing relationships of adoption and alliance, which permit them to... kill" (p. 171).

Naturalistic (dis)belief, cynical practice

The challenge that *Histeria* poses to the solidified divisions of naturalism is not a return to some form a of "traditional" practice; on the contrary, the film's engagement with animism is multilayered and expunges the definition of animism as an ancestral religion. The separation between belief and practice in classical anthropology has been criticized as a

projection of modern dualisms onto the practices of non-modern peoples: while anthropologists believed animism to be a belief, for the animists, the separation of belief from practice never existed (Harvey, 2005; Bird-David, 1999). While classical anthropologists see in animism a highly abstracted system of beliefs, for the animists, relations with the environment, animals, objects, and other nonhumans are at the core of everyday practice. This is especially relevant to *Histeria*'s cynical animism, practiced against the foil of self-referentiality of the horror genre. The girls practice animism but never *believe* in animism. When they summon the jinn, the atmosphere among the girls is that of cynicism and ridicule as they struggle to remain serious while reading out occult formulas from a piece of paper. While they obviously do not believe, they *act* as if they believe by attempting to communicate with the jinn. For the jinn, it is not relevant whether the girls believe or not—it appears simply because it has been invited to do so. Thus, *Histeria* reverses the clichéd horror narrative, where by the end of the movie it would be revealed that the monstrous presence was merely a symptom of mental illness (Derry, 2009). Instead, *Histeria* starts with the faulty assumption of a dissociative disorder in order to then counter it by saying that it was a case of demonic possession all along. As such, it also reverses the modern logic according to which every superstition can be untangled through rational inquiry.

This coupling of animism and cynicism is most apparent in the exorcism scene. Early on in the film, Tini pretends to be possessed, prompting the school to contact a *bomoh*.[8] "Where did they find the mantra?" the *bomoh* inquires. "The Internet," is the answer, affirming the entanglement of technological and natural agencies in contemporary Southeast Asian horror.[9] As Ancuta (2009) noted, this fusion of technology and spectrality is increasingly visible in Southeast Asian horror films, strengthening the notion that they in fact operate on the same plane. Here again the cinema confirms that it had never obeyed the division between technology and what modernity has labeled "the supernatural," such division in effect separating the supposed "natural" and "supernatural" worlds. On the contrary, from the inception of cinema, which coincided with an unparalleled interest in spiritualist séances, technology and black magic went hand in hand (Natale, 2012). In *Is Spiritualism a Fraud?* (Paul & Martin, 1906), where the cinema is used to stage a nonhuman encounter but at the same time to strip it of its magic, technology has been both demonized and celebrated as a weapon against the "supernatural" or the nonhuman. And assigning personhood to technology, whether inside or outside the cinema, is another way in which animism has always been present in our thinking about films, even if we fail to recognize these operations as animistic. As Ingold (2006) notes: "[An

imputation of life to inert objects] is more typical in western societies who dream of finding life on other planets than of indigenous peoples to whom the label of animism has classically been applied" (p.9). Similarly, animism can be characteristic of teenagers building highly relational narratives with technology, personal devices, or the Internet. That the girls look up spells on the Internet helps "update" animism to a current state of the world—beyond the nature/culture or technology/magic dualism that is rather proper to post-Enlightenment naturalism (Descola, 2005/2013).

While the connection between animism and shamanism is often foregrounded within the anthropology of religion in Southeast Asia (Aragon, 2000; Fjelstad & Nguyen, 2011; Braünlain, 2013), for the girls in *Histeria* the shaman represents a repression of their desire to relate to the nonhuman monster. The *bomoh* in the film does not concern himself with the ethics and practices of relating to the nonhuman world but functions as a mechanism of disconnection (exorcism) from that very world. In this way, the film highlights the ambiguity of modernity as a movement of progress through erasure, instead proposing a non-linear, cyclical development of animism. As the shaman forces medicine into Tini's mouth, she yells, "No, it's bitter!" to which all the other girls respond with laughter, revealing the joke. The girls' levelheaded cynicism does not disconnect them from animism—on the contrary, in "Laughing at the Spirits in Northern Syberia: Is Animism Being Taken Too Seriously?", anthropologist Rane Willerslev (2012) noticed that while an animist is aware of her traditions, she might perform them cynically, ironically, and with a solid dose of laughter. In line with the findings of new animism, Willerslev wrote that animism "is largely pragmatic and down-to-earth, restricted to particular contexts of relational activity" (para. 2). However, he effectively questioned the assumption that animists practice animism completely seriously. Through his ethnographic research he found that "underlying animistic cosmologies is a force of laughter, an ironic distance, a making fun of the spirits" (para. 4). Thus, while the offended *bomoh* warns the girls: "This is no joking matter. You will live to regret this," he also criticizes their rebellious questioning of the narrative of progress and regression by embedding animism with irony and cynicism.[10] The animism here is far from the pure one that classical anthropologists so fetishized; it is instead messy, polluted, ambiguous, which in its own self-mockery still extends willingly into the direction of the nonhuman while retaining its playfulness. Here, a genre film like *Histeria* reveals its strength: not only does it challenge the assumption that mainstream genre films cannot philosophize, but also, through its performativity, challenges the clear-cut, sanctified boundaries of classical anthropology—between naturalism and animism, modernity and shamanism, belief and practice,

serious religion and playing around with tradition. *Histeria* subtly asks questions of belief *and* practice, shifting epistemological registers. Who believes in what? Who is modern and who is regressive? While we could assume that this postmodern reworking of animism means that even the animists themselves do not "believe" in what they practice, Willerslev concluded that "I do not mean that [laughing] questions the reality of the existence of spirits. Rather, joking reveals that [animists] do not take the authority of the spirits as seriously…as their mythology tells them to" (para.12). This complex interplay between jokingly practicing and cynically believing is at the heart of *Histeria*: while the girls mock the rhetoric of their ancestral traditions, their practice towards nonhuman entities renders them animists nonetheless. While previously framed as vulnerable, silently waiting around the bed, the girls begin to dominate the frame with their assertive body language and laughter after playing a trick on the shaman, even complimenting Tini on her "performance." For Harvey (2005), performance is a key term in animistic ontologies, highlighting the active, material practice of animism, instead of it being merely a belief or an anthropomorphic projection (p. 37). "Animism," he wrote, "is revealed not only, or even primarily in stories and ceremonies, but in everyday ordinary acts" (p. 43). *Histeria*, as a film, performs animism, whereupon performance does not mean a fraud, but a stylized practice. Here is also where *Histeria* aligns itself with the horror genre at large, which since the 1980s has been increasingly self-referential (Jackson, 2013, p. 11-13), playfully inviting the audiences to momentarily practice the assumption of various nonhuman entities, even if outside of the cinema this practice might be suspended.

Animistic horror as an ontological threshold

The intersection of animism and cinema evident in the horror genre could provide insight into the experience of horror spectatorship itself. In the beginning of the film, when Murni tries to convince the policemen that it was the jinn who killed her friends, the doctor dismisses her explanation by suggesting that "our brain tricks us to protect us" and "the memory of the [traumatic] event is deeply suppressed… the brain has created another reality." First, the language of reason mirrors the discourse produced by classical anthropology on animism, charging it with a childish incompatibility of seeing the dualisms of the world: "primitive thought has not yet evolved those distinctions of substance and attribute, quality and relation, cause and effect, identity and difference, which are the common property of civilized thought" (Gilmore, 1919, p.4). The fact that *Histeria* positions this kind of language as pejorative, relating it to the character of the unpleasant doctor, signals its readiness to discuss broader issues of reason and belief,

as well as its suspiciousness of the post-Enlightenment rationalist discourse. Secondly, the suggestion that "the brain creates its own reality" ties in with film-philosophy as well as with the challenge that animism poses to the supposed dualism of belief and reality. Although film-philosophy has already considered the position that cinema is not "an illusion of reality [but] a reality of illusions," (Pisters, 2012, p.6) Descola, in an interview regarding animism with Kohn (2009), broadened this statement by commenting on how the arts can move freely between the ontologies that they create:

> Descola: ...art, or certain kinds of reflexive thought, or philosophy, enjoy a certain degree of freedom, which affords the possibility of stepping into different ontologies, divorced from the once in which you were born.

> Kohn: Right, these ontological modes are not just contextually bounded. They can travel. It's sort of shamanistic. (p. 143)

Kohn's (2009) statement draws out the possibility that the cinema itself is a shamanic art as it mediates between various ontologies. In this way, the idea that in horror, both the characters on screen and the audiences participate in a "suspension of disbelief" (Carroll, 1990; Ferri, 2007), or that watching horror is like a controlled nightmare could also reflect how the cinema affords its viewers an opportunity to move between various ontologies, along with the on-screen characters. While Descola's four ontologies could be the basic variety of the ontological fold against which the cinema forms itself as an art (Kohn, 2009), it can also idiosyncratically move along varied ontological patterns. For example, it can engage in multiple animisms, or slide in and out of animism, naturalism, totemism, and analogism within the limits of one film. In other words, while ontologically diverse practices are irrevocably tied to their geolocation, the cinema allows us to step into multiple ontologies. As I suggest in this paper, *Histeria*, as other horrors, moves between *various* animisms in order to challenge the prevailing ontology of modernity that is naturalism. Thus, *reclaiming* animism through practice (also through the practice of film-watching) does not have to mean a return to pre-monotheistic forms of religion; instead, as philosopher Isabel Stengers (as cited in Hetrick, 2014), suggests, "reclaiming animism therefore means not *returning* to a more authentic or 'true' state of being before the advent of modern technology, but rather *reactivating,* in a pragmatic manner the potentiality of a 'more than human world' (p. 61).

Conclusion

My attempt to place James Lee's *Histeria* in an idiosyncratic dialogue with various strands of contemporary philosophical and anthropological thought is the focal point of this paper. Rather than deciphering a larger socio-cultural reality behind *Histeria*, I tried to think of the union of film-philosophy and new animism *through* the film, using it as a reflective surface upon which the ontological assumptions of such a coupling can be cast. What does it mean to say that a film engages in (new) animism? The ongoing expansion of animism beyond the anthropology of religion and into the terrain of ontological inquiry has allowed me to read *Histeria* along multiple animisms—a practice that I hope would show that animism is no one thing. From relational enactment of human and nonhuman collective personhood, to cynical animistic practice and predatory animism, or even to inviting the viewer to practice animism if only for the duration of the film, *Histeria* serves as an intriguing canvas onto which a theoretical experimentation with animism can be projected. While the aim of this particular paper is to diffractively read a mainstream genre film through a set of ontological assumptions, there are many more points of intersection that deserve examination: how does animism realize itself in connection with spectatorship and affect? What can it offer to post-humanist or non-humanist philosophy of the arts? How can animism help detach the ontology of cinema from the paradigm of representation? Can there be a theory of animistic aesthetics? How can the 'ontological turn' influence the way we *do* ethnography of the cinema, or through the cinema? I myself have by no means exhausted the animistic reading of *Histeria*.

As a result of my research into the conceptual revival of animism, I have been able to trace how *Histeria* produces relational personhood within a group of friends as mediated by the nonhuman element and how the film enforces relational ethics of animism through suggesting that striving for individualism can be fatal. At the same time, *Histeria*, as a popular horror film, remains an ambiguous site of contestation, where concise ethical judgments are hard to form: while animism empowers some of the characters and helps them create their aggregate identity, for some it creates the basis of predation. Nevertheless, through animism, common horror tropes such as the characters splitting instead of sticking together can be read anew. As a genre that always posits a challenge to ethics, the horror film can defy the stereotypical assumption that animism is a "spiritual" practice that is always ethical or good, and it can flesh out the complexity and even moral ambiguity of animism as an ontology.

In many respects, contemporary Malaysian horror cinema remains heavily understudied, even though some fascinating horrors have emerged

in the last fifteen years. A great deal of insightful work is being produced in ethnographic and cultural studies of Malaysian (or, at large, Southeast Asian) cinema. However, in my own field, which I can broadly label as film theory or philosophy of the arts, the so-called "world cinema" is often overlooked. While this paper is too short to provide a fully-formed methodological proposition, I have tried to explore it from a different angle, and with that, I hope that contemporary Malaysian horror can attract varied and idiosyncratic methodologies.

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Endnotes

[1] While horror scholars stand divided on the issue of identifying the generic elements that constitute the slasher, I would (ambiguously) place Lee's horror an as example of the genre. At the center of this debate is the "supernatural"—while classic American slashers such as *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (Henkel & Hooper, 1974) solidified certain genre elements, such as the presence of teenage protagonists and graphic murder scenes, horror scholar Peter Hutchings argues that with the *Nightmare on Elm Street* series commencing in 1984, the slasher broadened its scope to include the "otherworldly," while maintaining its emphasis on other classic slasher elements (2008, p. 294). While this essay does not discuss how exactly *Histeria* fits the slasher genre, it is worth pointing out that it retains certain formulaic slasher elements (teenage protagonists and sexual awakening, point-of-view of the killer, gore, narrative punctuated by the death of each girl, female victims, serialized murders) but also infuses it with some elements of the 1980s slasher that explicitly reject realist narratives, as well as the post-1990s self-referential slasher (film-within-film, female killer, plot twist at the end). That said, whether the animistic philosophy of horror even *should* distinguish between the "supernatural" and the "natural" is another question.

[2] As Muthalib (n. d.) informs, it was largely the petitions of director Shuhaimi Baba that made the Censorship Board reconsider its stance on horror. Baba argued that horror as a popular genre could help financially revive the local film industry and even compete with foreign films at the box office (para.1).

Her *Pontianak Harum Sundal Malam* (Fragrant Night Vampire or Pontianak: Scent of the Tuber Rose, 2004) was a huge box office hit.

[3]The kit is available for around RM9,000 and includes items like chopsticks, salt, vinegar, pepper spray, formic acid, and other small items that should ward off malicious ghosts. *Histeria*'s portrayal of shamans as a sham ties in with the recent discourse ignited when international media reported on shamanic rituals performed by Ibrahim Mat Zin, whose repertoire draws on both Islamic and animistic symbolism, to aid in the search of the Malaysian Flight MH370 that mysteriously disappeared. Covered by the BBC, his performance was a trending hashtag on Twitter and triggered a mix of outrage and shame, with multiple newspapers as well as anonymous commentators expressing the belief that *bomoh*s (healers) are "stupid, shameful, ignorant," while the prime minister of Malaysia, Najib Razak, had been labelled "brainless" for allowing the ritual to happen (Payne, 2012).

Furthermore, the wealth of religious contexts, from possessed objects to jinns, invites a comparative analysis that would reveal the varied mythologies of horror, which, as an international trade point, Malaysia aggregated throughout its history, harboring sailors from Indonesia, Thailand, China, Borneo, as well as England, Portugal, and the Netherlands.

[4]To be specific, *Histeria* opens with a quote from Surat Al-Jinn of the Qu'ran, an anecdote of how a few men sought refuge with a jinn, only to have misfortune befall them. While jinns figure both in contemporary and pre-Islamic Arabic ontologies as one among three sapient beings created by Allah (humans and angels being the other two), the film does not explore these religious implications but rather positions the jinn as an example of a monstrous, dread-inducing nonhuman presence on screen. Like many contemporary Malaysian horrors, *Histeria* is supposed to provide a moralistic reflection on the forbidden black arts. In this way, censorship affected Malaysian film industry in a similar manner that the Hays Code affected Hollywood in the 1930s. The Hays code regulated on-screen morality. While it was clear that the audience loved early gangster films and identified with the fallen heroes, classic gangster films usually featured an opening statement that established that the film was a warning or a morality tale. Accordingly, the gangster usually paid for his sins, often through death (Munby, 1999). Yet *Histeria* ends on a rather ambiguous note, not exactly punishing those who contacted the jinn. On the contrary, throughout its running time, *Histeria* orchestrates ambiguous human/nonhuman assemblages and lets the audience experience the opacity of these relations.

[5]Bettelheim's (1977) influential reading of fairytales as fables of sexual initiation takes its fullest form in his analysis of The Little Red Riding Hood. In *Histeria*, the motif of a young girl transitioning from innocence to sexuality is repeated several times through the color red, theorized by Battleheim to symbolize menstruation and hence the onset of sexuality. The girls are often wearing a mix of white and red that signifies the horror of sexuality through a "reddening" of innocence with blood. While in this paper I explore a different angle, *Histeria* could provoke interesting insights from the perspective of gender studies as it touches on themes of lesbian love and sexual awakening. It is worth pointing out that the boyfriends in *Histeria* are far from white knights. They are instead legitimately hilarious, driving around the city and discussing how much of a "player" they can be in their sexual conquests. Although all of the victims in the film are female, it is worth noting that *Histeria* also reveals its killer as female by the end of the film, and in general, it hardly can be read as a simple projection of generic sexism. Ju's promiscuity and the girls rejection of their hijab-wearing teacher could open up debates on the role that school environments in Malaysia play in the development of teenage sexuality, especially given the fact

that girls are often the primary audience for school-set horror (Renner, 2012).

[6]While I am here following Harvey (2005) in establishing a distinction between persons and objects, this is largely a matter of terminology. In object-oriented ontologies, such as that of Bryant (2011) or Harman (2011), or in Latour's (2005, 2013) or Bennett's (2010) work, objects also possess agency. In animism, however, the slipping in and out of personhood through relational practice is a key distinction (Harvey, 2005, p. 36-37).

[7]Like any anthropological study dating back over a hundred years, Skeat's (1984) *Malay Magic* deserves scrutiny. However, to the extent that the surrounding discursive climate allows him to, he sometimes manages to approximate how animism collapses belief and fact. He says, for example, "…a belief which is actually held, even a mere fancy that is entertained in the mind, has a real existence, and is a fact just as much as any other" (p. viii). Quite a Latourian statement! Sadly, he spoils the joy very quickly, stating a few sentences down: "there can be no doubt that an understanding of the ideas and modes of thought of an alien people in a relatively low stage of civilization facilitates very considerably the task of governing them" (p. ix).

[8]While this paper does not deal with comparative religion studies and thus excludes shamanism in its scope, it should be noted that contemporary Malaysian shamanism has largely been incorporated into Islam.

[9]In the contemporary Malaysian horror *In the Dark* (Wee & Yeo, 2013), the following conversation takes place between a shaman and a woman: "Have you ever seen a ghost before?" "Yes, I did. I saw them at the movies." The film-within-a-film quality is, however, most notably present in *Seru* (Asraff, Pillai & Woo, 2011), which could in its entirety be read as a pastiche of the contemporary Malaysian horror scene. In *Histeria,* when the girls try to scare Zeta with urban ghost stories, she comments that she is not frightened at all, because "it sounds exactly like something from a movie." While these sarcastic remarks are part of the genre's self-referentiality (Hills, 2005) and another confirmation of the entanglement of technology and ghosts in contemporary Southeast Asian horror, they also explicate that cinema is a place where various ontological conditions can be approached as equally *real*. Horror has been specifically theorized as such a vehicle (Lyden, 2003).

[10]When after the faux exorcism Tini comments that "it is so obvious this medicine man is a fraud," she could also have meant that this *man* is a fraud, thus placing *Histeria* in a larger framework of feminist philosophy that centers on relationality. The inherent relationality of animism ties in with feminist philosophy, which is sometimes at large described as ontologically relational, versus "masculine" thought, which strives for autonomy and individuality (Friedman, 2000). According to psychoanalyst Nancy Chodorow (1978), the relational theory of the self rejects the idea of hyper-individualism in favour of fundamental external relatedness. Particularly the work of Marilyn Strathern, and her elaboration on the concept of persons as dividuals instead of individuals fits in with this line of argumentation (see, for example, work on "porous" or "buffered" selves; Smith, 2012). Strathern informs that in Melanesian animist ontologies, a person is never reduced to an individual; instead, she is "a composite of relationships, a microcosm homologous to society at large" (1988, p. 13, 131).

BOGNA M.KONIOR holds a RMa in Media Studies from the University of Amsterdam and is currently a PhD student at Hong Kong Baptist University where she is researching on the conceptual revival of animism across different platforms in contemporary thought as well as its relation to post-millennial Southeast Asian cinema and moving image (corresponding author: bognakonior@gmail.com).