Visual Revival: The Art of Animation Adaptation in Retelling Malay Classic Film

Wan Muhammad, Siti Zanariah, Isyaku Hassan
Department Modern Languages dan Communication

Abstract

Malay classic films are rich repositories of cultural values, traditional narratives, and artistic heritage. Malay classic cinema, rich in cultural values, traditional narratives, and artistic heritage, faces the challenge of staying relevant in an age dominated by digital media and animated content. As media consumption shifts towards digital formats and animated content gains popularity, 2D animation emerges as a compelling medium to preserve, reinterpret, and reintroduce these classics to new generations. This article explores the role of 2D animation in retelling Malay classic film narratives, focusing on how visual storytelling, cultural translation, and technological adaptation can breathe new life into cinematic heritage. It also highlights the challenges and creative opportunities involved in adapting live-action classics into animated form while retaining their original soul.

Keywords: 2D Animation, Animated Adaptation, Culture Symbol, Cultural Inheritance, Malay Cinema, Attractions

Introduction

The golden age of Malay cinema (1950s–1970s) produced iconic films that shaped the region's cultural identity. Works by legendary figures like P. Ramlee, under studios such as Shaw Brothers and Cathay-Keris, blended drama, music, satire, and folklore. Malay classic films reflect not only entertainment but also moral values, societal norms, and local folklore (Amalia et al., 2024). Films like *Tiga Abdul* (1964), *Ali Baba Bujang Lapok* (1961), and *Pendekar Bujang Lapok* (1959) weave humor, fantasy, and music in a way that remains unique to the Malay world. According to Muhammad and Mastura (2021) despite the cultural value of classic Malay films, many remain disconnected from today's audiences(). As the modern audience leans toward stylized and digital media, animation presents a viable platform for visual revival, offering new possibilities for creative reinterpretation without erasing the authenticity of the original works.

Animation presents a viable platform for visual revival, particularly in the context of preserving and reinterpreting cultural heritage. Unlike other visual media, animation allows for a stylized, interpretive approach that can breathe new life into classic narratives while maintaining their symbolic essence (Pierre et al., 2013). Through expressive character design,

culturally inspired background art, and visual metaphors, animation offers a medium that is both accessible and emotionally resonant (Wells, 2013). This makes it especially effective for reviving traditional or archival content—such as Malay classic films—that may no longer hold the same visual appeal for contemporary audiences. The medium's flexibility enables animators to reframe familiar stories in a format that appeals to younger, digitally native viewers, without compromising the authenticity of the original message. As such, animation is not merely a tool for entertainment, but Cook et al. (2023) argue animation a powerful vehicle for cultural continuity, allowing past narratives to be re-experienced in fresh and meaningful ways.

Visual Revival is more than just an artistic endeavour but it is a cultural project that bridges the past and present. By reinterpreting classic Malay films through animation, it ensures that these narratives continue to resonate with audiences, fostering a deeper connection to Malaysia's rich cinematic heritage. This paper is evaluating the used of animation mediums in maintaining and altering visual, humour, and symbolism and Malay cultural.

Literature Review

A review of the thematic, stylistic, and cultural characteristics of classic films from the 1950s–1970s. Malay Classic Cinema, spanning the late 1940s through the early 1970s, represents a crucial phase in the evolution of Southeast Asian cinema, specifically in Malaysia and Singapore. According to Rosini Jonit (2007) the emergence of this era is deeply intertwined with the cultural and political landscape of post-colonial Southeast Asia. Drawing from a rich mixture of local traditions, colonial influences, and global cinematic trends, Malay Classic Cinema reflects the region's complexities, from identity formation to social structures (Subet et al., 2023). Malay Classic Cinema was characterized by a blend of various genres, including romance, comedy, drama, and historical epics. The romantic genre, particularly in films like Bujang Lapok (1957) and Tiga Abdul (1964), played a significant role in attracting mass audiences while also addressing themes of social class, familial relationships, and the evolving role of women in society. The cultural impact of Malay Classic Cinema also remains profound with the films providing an accessible space for the Malay community to explore questions of identity, social norms, and historical memory.

Scholarly perspectives on animation as a medium for cultural translation, preservation, and creative adaptation. Animation a powerful medium for storytelling that traverses cultural, historical, and ideological boundaries (). At its core, animation serves not only as a mirror to culture but also as a tool for its reinterpretation. Through visual metaphor, allegory, and artistic innovation, animated works reinterpret myths, histories, and social norms, allowing both creators and audiences to question, revise, or celebrate cultural identities (Hushain et al., 2023). Karmakar (2021) said, animation inherently lends itself to abstraction and symbolic storytelling, making it uniquely suited to reinterpret complex cultural narratives. Therefore, cultures can communicate their values, fears, and aspirations in a visually expressive and often fantastical manner. According to Azhar & Abdullah (2020) Animation as cultural reinterpretation is a testament to the medium's versatility and narrative depth. Whether used to preserve folklore, challenge dominant histories, or imagine new futures, animation plays a vital role in shaping and reshaping cultural consciousness. Reinterpretation through animation is a creative process that reshapes how we engage with

culture, history, and identity. Whether by reimagining myth, revisiting history, challenging norms, or embracing hybridity, animation invites us to see familiar stories through new lenses.

Animated adaptations reflect distinct cultural aesthetics, narrative priorities, and historical contexts, while also speaking to global audiences (Sijia, 2022). Studio Ghibli's The Tale of the Princess Kaguya, directed by Isao Takahata, adapts one of Japan's oldest folktales, The Tale of the Bamboo Cutter. This film uses an expressive, hand-drawn watercolor style that evokes classical Japanese brush painting. It's how animation can enrich and reinterpret ancient stories with both reverence and new insight. Meanwhile Iranian animation directed by Marjane Satrapi and Vincent Paronnaud, Persepolis is based on Satrapi's autobiographical graphic novel. The film adapts her coming-of-age story during the Iranian Revolution using black-and-white animation that reflects both the starkness of the events and the intimacy of personal memory. This film reimagines the Spider-Man franchise through an animated, multiverse lens that honors the comic book origins. Spider-Verse blends graffiti art, comic panels, and kinetic animation to create a fresh, visually groundbreaking adaptation. According to Karmakar (2021) The power of animated adaptations lies in their ability to transform stories across time, space, and cultural boundaries. It's a creative process of reinterpretation—one that breathes new life into traditional narratives while often reflecting contemporary values, politics, or identities.

Methodology

Three classic films with elements of comedy, drama, and legendary tales were selected: *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*, *Isi Neraka*, and *Nujum Pak Belalang*. Scenes from these films have the potential to be adapted into animation. The focus group method was used, conducting group interviews to discuss the visuals, humor concepts, and symbolism identified in the films. These films were then presented in focus group sessions to discuss the participants' favourite scenes. The selected scenes were those that stood out as preferred highlight. The focus group was divided into three groups, each consisting of six members. This number allowed for easier interaction among participants during the discussion sessions.

Table 1
Film Malay Classic

No.	Film	Genre
1.	Pendekar bujang lapok	Komedi
2.	Isi Neraka	Drama
3.	Nujum Pak belalang	Cerita lagenda

Visual analysis is conducted to examine the overall visual aspects of the selected film based on findings from focus groups. The purpose of this visual analysis is to study the elements of background and character design, particularly the physical characteristics of the characters. The visual elements examined include costumes, the physical appearance of characters, as well as facial expressions and poses. Meanwhile, the background analysis focuses on depicting the atmosphere of the 1950s–1970s era and also props. The data obtained from this analysis is applied to the character design process. Humour analysis is carried out to study the use of humour in the selected film through dialogue and character speech, such as the use of local accents and dialects. The analysis will cover the types of humour, their functions, and the effects on the scenes themselves. Additionally, it looks at

how meaningful messages are conveyed without offending any party. Symbolism and cultural analysis are conducted to examine the use of symbols and cultural representations in the film by exploring how these elements contribute to the narrative and the audience's understanding of the depicted culture. The analysis refers to objects, colours, characters, or situations that carry deeper meanings beyond what is seen on the surface.

Next, the data obtained from these findings assist in the development of the character design process, such as creating sketches of physical appearance, costumes, and facial expressions of the characters. It also contributes to the creation of settings and props, as well as the use of symbols and cultural elements in each design. After going through the pre-production process, these designs will then undergo the 3D modelling process using Blender software.

Visual Design

The visual analysis aims to identify the visual elements in the film *Pendekar Bujang Lapok*, focusing on the characters. This visual analysis will examine aspects of the characters such as costumes, physical appearance, facial expressions, and poses to identify the elements in character design.

Figure 1: Pendekar Bujang Lapok

The background design in animation is carefully planned to accurately depict the atmosphere of the 1950s–1970s. Elements such as village houses, old towns, Malay palaces, or rural surroundings become key components that represent the time and place in the narrative. Wooden houses on stilts with nipa palm roofs, intricate carvings on the floors and walls, as well as classic items like old radios and rattan chairs, evoke a strong sense of nostalgia for the viewers. Colours like brown, pale yellow, faded green, and brick red are used to represent the rural or traditional home atmosphere. The backdrop of small towns or old cities is also important in classic films. Rows of wooden shops, signs in Jawi and Roman scripts, as well as old vehicles like rickshaws and classic taxis, create a unique retro ambiance. This design not only adds authenticity but also reflects the local cultural identity of the time. Such background details should be given attention so that the audience can experience the visual acknowledgment of the classic era.

Cinematography techniques in animation also contribute to the aesthetic elements. Techniques such as close-ups, panning shots, or static camera angles can mimic old films, thereby preserving the mood of the classic film. Aesthetics in the adaptation of classic Malay films in animation is not merely about visual beauty but encompasses efforts to preserve the spirit, values, and artistic style that once defined the golden era of Malay cinema. Through careful and sensitive adaptations, these works not only allow a new generation to enjoy them again but also continue to live on as a cultural heritage.

Humour Concept

Humour in classic films is not merely for entertainment, but also serves as a subtle channel for delivering social criticism, satirizing societal norms, and creating a closer connection between characters and the audience. In its adaptation into animation, the element of humour is preserved and further enhanced through visual creativity and broader animation techniques.

Figure 2: Nujum Pak Belalang

Humour in classic Malay films is typically rooted in folk comedy – easy to understand, spontaneous, and closely related to everyday life. Characters like Sudin, Ajis, and P. Ramlee are known for their casual style, humorous local dialects, and natural, unforced daily situations. In animated form, this atmosphere is brought to life more vividly through exaggerated facial expressions, hyperactive body movements, and added visual elements such as humorous symbols and dramatic motions. This makes the animation not only faithful to the original humour but also more engaging for the younger generation.

Animation provides the space to expand the form of humour, by developing it into funnier situations through the principle of exaggeration—such as overly exaggerated character movements, endless running, or facial reactions enhanced with comical sound effects. This technique is harder to achieve in live-action films but works effectively in animation. Humour in animation can also be creatively linked to social criticism. In classic films, many jokes touch on issues like poverty, bureaucracy, or social inequality, but are delivered in a light-hearted manner. In animation, these messages are preserved while being adapted to current issues, making the work relevant without losing its classic identity.

Symbolism and Culture

In the animated adaptation, the Keris is depicted more dramatically—glimmering or glowing—to reinforce its symbolic value. Similarly, the village house represents familial closeness and traditional roots, while the rice fields symbolize a simple yet dignified way of life. These elements are carefully re-visualized in the animation to ensure the original message is preserved.

Figure 3: Isi Neraka

Clothing such as baju Kurung, kebaya, Tanjak, and Kain Pelikat can be designed with intricate batik or Songket patterns, reflecting the beauty of Malay textile art. Customs such as junjung Duli (royal homage), Merisik (marriage inquiry), Berpantun (exchanging rhymed verses), and Makan Bersila (eating while seated on the floor) can also be visually presented to educate younger audiences about the social norms of the past. Symbols and culture in classic films are also used to subtly convey moral values. These conflicts can be illustrated visually through colour, lighting, or shifts in atmosphere, making them easier to understand without diminishing the authenticity of the message.

Discussion

The adaptation of animation to classic Malay films introduces an exciting form of visual renewal by creating a balance between cultural preservation and modern storytelling that suits the new generation. Animated media is a form of creative entertainment that effectively captures attention and influences children's thinking, and although universal in nature, it is often closely associated with this group (Ariff & Mahbob, 2020). This renewal reflects creativity in breathing new life into classic films through enhanced visuals and special effects without altering the original plot, preserving traditional elements in a fresher format. By blending tradition with modern design, animated works can preserve cultural elements while appealing to contemporary tastes, thereby increasing their artistic value and market appeal (Chen, 2025). The visual recreation through animation represents an innovative and strategic approach to reviving this heritage by introducing these cultural treasures to society in a fresh and relevant form.

The researcher applies elements found in classic Malay films to the creation of animation. In the visual analysis process, the research identifies visual aspects by focusing on characters, backgrounds, and cinematography techniques to determine the design features present in the film. Chen (2025) highlights that character design, particularly minimalist styles, plays the most significant role in shaping animation visual styles, followed by colour application, dynamic expression, composition, and material expression. In the humour concept analysis, the research identifies the types of humour used in the storytelling and how they are translated into animation. Storytelling is the most crucial element that animators and directors must fully understand in order to create a compelling and impactful animation (Ghazali & Ghani, 2019). Meanwhile, in the symbolism and cultural analysis, the research examines how symbolic and cultural elements are used to convey representational and moral values, educating viewers about the social norms of the past. According Li (2018) human thought, language, and communication are inextricably linked to symbols, making them crucial for understanding society and culture.

This adaptation has the potential to attract younger audiences by preserving the elements found in classic Malay films. Animation is a highly engaging and innovative medium that effectively connects with audiences across different age groups (Praveen & Srinivasan, 2022). However, animated adaptations involve high production costs and the need for skilled labour. In addition, sensitivity toward cultural heritage must be maintained to avoid changes that may distort the original values of the film.

In the process of creating animation, there are various important components that must be given attention, particularly in terms of technical, artistic, and cultural aspects. These three elements complement each other to ensure that the animation produced is not only visually appealing but also holds aesthetic value and deep meaning. Based on this research, the animation production process is greatly supported by findings from studies, especially in visual analysis, the concept of humour, as well as symbols and cultural elements. Each character is designed with a deep understanding of the target audience's cultural values and psychology, while the setting is carefully planned to align with the theme and storyline. Therefore, the results of these analyses not only enrich the visual content but also contribute significantly to the effectiveness and impact of the animation on the audience.

In addition, some participants were less fond of other classic Malay films because they lacked comedic elements and were not suitable for all segments of society. This indicates that animation is more suitable for classic Malay films with a comedic genre, while still preserving cultural politeness and propriety.

Conclusion

This adaptation is a creative approach that does not alter the original work, but instead brings old or classic stories into a more modern and relevant context in line with current developments. An analysis was conducted on classic Malay films to identify key elements that would assist participants in producing animation. However, adaptation theory must also be applied to help understand how a work is transformed from one medium to another—not merely in terms of technical changes, but also in terms of the cultural, social, and creative values behind the adaptation process. The three elements of analysis presented in this research help identify aspects of visuals, humour, and symbolism and culture. Therefore,

based on the research and literature review conducted, it is evident that animation adaptation cannot be produced without analysing the elements found in classic Malay films. Adapting a film into animation is not sufficient by relying on visuals alone. It must be combined with aspects of humour and symbolism and culture to fully support the animation production process. The use of background music and speech style also contributes to the aesthetics of the adaptation. Original songs from classic films or rearranged music in the styles of *keroncong*, *zapin*, and *ghazal* are used to preserve the classic aura. The dialogue is maintained in formal Malay, rich with proverbs and *pantun* (rhymed verses), so that younger generations can appreciate the beauty of the Malay language as it was used in the past. The approach of adapting classic Malay films into animation is a smart and strategic effort to breathe new life into old works. This is evident through the combination of traditional values and modern technology via animation, making the experience more immersive and exciting. Typically, the animation production process begins with designing characters and backgrounds to provide animators with a clear understanding, thus facilitating the animation development process. There are three phases in animation production: pre-production, production, and post-production. By analysing these three elements, the early stage of scene design is made easier by identifying the characteristics found in visuals, humour, and symbolism and culture.

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