

## **Veni Vedi Vici : Vilified Visuality of Indonesian PATIs**

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### **Abstract**

Much of what we know about the world is informed visually through the prosthetic lens of the photographer. An important post-colonial and cultural studies scholarship today is about investigating visual culture, particularly on the relationship between photography and cultural identities of 'the Other'. By way of 'imperious' and 'colonial' guises, photography may be effectively by the ruling elite to inform the dominant polity or society about the cultural identity of its 'Other'. This study argues that certain photographic representations of Indonesian illegal migrants or PATIs (lit. *Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin*) by Malaysian print media during the period of their amnesty from the Malaysian government and their eventual deportation by December 2004, are inherently ideological and unnecessarily manipulative. However, it also argues that visual literacy can be employed to deconstruct and raise our awareness of such discursive production which operates against a benevolent construction of the Indonesian PATIs.

### **A Prologue of Prosthetics**

Much of what we know about the world is informed visually through the prosthetic lens of the photographer. In this respect, Helmet and Alison Gernsheim (1986:3) have rightfully declared that "no other medium can bring life and reality so close as does photography and it is in the fields of reportage and documentation that photography's most important contribution lies in modern times". Ever since the first camera was invented in the West in 1839, photography soon became an immensely popular and influential and popular pastime throughout the world. Western colonialism is partly responsible for extending the primary purpose of photography beyond the sphere of social snapshots. In the hands of western explorers, the camera evolved and achieved one of its most potent functions, that is, as a manipulative mechanism of control for the discerning eyes of the white elites in pursuit of power and glory.

Extending the point further, visual images of the coloured natives in their definitive and elementary environment served as 'postcards' from diverse colonial outposts in the non-western lands. Colonial eyes would gaze at anything that they fancied before it would be 'framed' and aggressively 'shot' with the camera. Photography



of this nature was popular, rampant and absolutely imperious. In his most important work, *Orientalism* (1978), Edward W. Said hinted that colonial visual culture was very influential in informing Europeans of their knowledge about 'the Other', that is, loosely speaking, the colonial knowledge about the identities of the lands, living things, cultures and societies outside Europe. It would be sufficient to suggest that photography already implicates cameras and photographs with various guises of colonial trappings for those who take them and the process for granted.

An important post-colonial and cultural studies scholarship today is about investigating visual culture, particularly on the relationship between photography and cultural identities. Indeed, the collapse of colonialism in the 20<sup>th</sup> century seems to have propelled some intellectuals to study visual representations of 'the Other'. To mention a few names, these scholar-enthusiasts range from Roland Barthes (1977) to Stuart Hall (1997) to Gillian Rose (2005) on ideological deconstruction of visual discourse; to Theo van Leeuwen (2005) and Gunther Kress (2001) on social semiotics and literacy of multimodal visual texts. In addition to these, a recently completed doctoral dissertation by a Malaysian postgraduate student at the Goldsmith College of London University entitled '*Colonial Images of Malaya 1919-1957*' indeed suggests the increasing awareness and scholarly interest on the colonial function of photography in furthering the cause of British imperialism.

In general, the aim of this prologue is to place this study within two conceptual perspectives implicated within visual culture, the death of photography by Nicholas Mierzoeff and Panopticism by Michel Foucault. Both perspectives are linked through the discriminating lens of the photographer, by deriving a series of visual images that have appeared in Malaysian mainstream dailies, and as will be shown, they apparently warrant for critical scrutiny. These images are representations of a certain social reality and although they may be too familiar for local readership, this study shall argue that even such an audience still need to be informed against certain misleading cultural assumptions. This study makes a case that the selected photographic representations of Indonesian illegal migrants or PATI<sup>1</sup> by Malaysian print media are inherently ideological and unnecessarily manipulative; all of which were photographed and published during the period of their amnesty from the Malaysian government and their eventual deportation by December 2004. It may be further argued that visual literacy can be employed to deconstruct and raise our awareness of such discursive production, which as this paper assumes, seems to operate against a benevolent construction of the Indonesian PATI.

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<sup>1</sup> PATI is an acronym for *Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin* which loosely refers to illegal immigrants or aliens in Malaysia. It is however officially referred to in English as Undocumented Foreign Migrant.



## PATI: Origin and Issue

It is essential in this study to make an attempt, albeit very thinly, to establish the fact that today's discourse of (Indonesian) PATI (or Undocumented Foreign Migrant) is actually resulted from the permutation in our historical knowledge about 'human mobility' and its circumstances in the Malay Archipelago. Human migration – its other popular disguise - has been a perennial phenomenon among the peoples in the Southeast Asian region since time immemorial. The Malay poet laureate Muhammad Haji Salleh depicts the diasporic mobility of peoples in the poem '*Blood*'<sup>2</sup>. But for Muhammad, the Malay Archipelago is the great embodiment of the essential Malay being - whose very veins and arteries are personified by the 'tributaries' that were carved out of islands and peninsulas. The peoples of Celebes, Sumatra and Java for example, had started the incessant rhythm of migration to various points of embarkation in the Malay Peninsular to pre-empt the pre-eminence of Malacca as the cosmopolitan kingdom in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. The 'free-flowing' movement along such legendary 'tributaries' (read 'migratory routes') in the region, however, was ruptured following the end of European colonialism and the formation of modern nation-states like Malaysia, Indonesia and the Philippines. Regional movement or migration was then redefined vis-à-vis the enforced immigration laws of each independent nation.

Records from the International Office of Migration 1998 have suggested that there are currently 1.8 million foreign workers in Malaysia today, with the majority arriving from Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines respectively. Only about 500,000 may boast the fact that they have legitimate travel and employment documentations. *Tenaganita*, an active Malaysian non-governmental organization (NGO) dealing specifically with issues affecting foreign workers has claimed that there are nearly RM3 million foreigners who may or may not be legally employed in this country. Echoing similar concern, in a working paper titled '*Economic liberalization and labour in Malaysia: Efficiency and equity considerations in public policy reform*', K. S. Jomo and V. Kanapathy (1996)<sup>3</sup> have concluded that this grossly large entity is equivalent to almost 10 percent of the country's total population, a signal that the time has come to press the 'panic button', as it were.

Migration is necessary, at least for the cause of human civilization but more significantly for the cause of economic prosperity. Malaysia, for instance, then under the Mahathir administration, began to launch the important integrated

<sup>2</sup> In Thumboo, E. (ed.) 1976. *The second tongue. An anthology of poetry*. Singapore: Heinemann

<sup>3</sup> Cited in Mus Chairil Samani and Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan. *Antara PATI dan TKI: Analisis visual Utusan Malaysia dan Berita Harian*. Unpublished working paper presented at the Seminar Bersama Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia dengan Universitas Indonesia: Cabaran Semasa Isu Rentas Sempadan Malaysia-Indonesia 15-16 Disember 2005 (SEBUMI 05).



economic development and nation-building policies under the most ambitious blueprint called 'Vision 2020'. Indonesian PATIs, by and large, have been absolutely central in the day-to-day progress of Malaysia's grand narrative, primarily in their capacity as the highly skilled workforce in the construction sector. According to UNESCO's observation, PATIs have been infiltrating into Malaysia since the 1970s when there was a huge labour shortage though no action was taken then until the number of illegal aliens became noticeable in the 1990s<sup>4</sup>. It has been recognized that the first major wave of migration (legal or otherwise) among Indonesian PATIs into Malaysia occurred between 1997 and 1998 due to the East Asian economic crises that effectively cause the collapse of Southeast Asian currencies especially the Indonesian *rupiah*. The Indonesian government was forced to accept a long-term financial support from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to stabilize its ailing economy at the expense of its political sovereignty. Four years later, the second wave of migration (legal or otherwise) of Indonesian PATI was set off by a global economic reaction to the post-September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on major American cities.

The Indonesian government's stance on the issue of illegal immigration of its people especially to Malaysia is one of ambivalence. This is not surprising at all. The Indonesian government, on the one hand, relies much on neighbouring countries like Malaysia and Singapore to provide employment opportunities for its multifarious peoples. The Indonesian government, on the other hand, receives strong criticism from its neighbours for 'condoning' illegal immigration from various parts of its country. In fact, the Indonesian government has never been more supportive in their quests for greater economic sustenance on foreign shores. Illegal Indonesian migrant workers are somewhat esteemed by their national government, who has always maintained to the host nations that their 'alien' emissaries should be referred to as '*Tenaga Kerja Indonesia*' (TKI) – literally, Indonesian Migrant Workers<sup>5</sup> - as opposed to a term like PATI.

It is precisely such pro-TKI attitude that has caused much unease among host nations. There is more than just stormy weather and high seas to represent the security implications for them when crossing international waters in fragile dinghies and tug-boats in their darkest hour. In recent times, they have been implicated with the rise of social and criminal problems in their host countries, hence, suggesting that Indonesians are characteristically problematic, ungrateful and mob-like. In Malaysia, despite the general perception that Indonesian PATIs are abundant, efficient, skillful and cost-effective, they have been portrayed as equally notorious for lawbreaking, disrupting public law and order, causing harassment and threatening harmony through deviant and subversive clandestine

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.unesco.org/most/apmrnwp9.htm> 20/7/2006

<sup>5</sup> [http://menkokesra.go.id/pdf/deputi3/human\\_trafficking\\_eng.pdf](http://menkokesra.go.id/pdf/deputi3/human_trafficking_eng.pdf) 20/7/2006



activities. When the Malaysian government eventually became alarmed with the discovery that 80% out of 1.2 million PATIs staying in the country were from Indonesia, it pressed the 'panic button' and immediately begun a repatriation program. The Coordinating Ministry for People's Welfare of Indonesia reports the following:

The return of PATI's from Malaysia in 2004 was carried out by the Malaysian Government through *Nyah* (Deportation) Operation scheduled for September 1, 2004, but later rescheduled to after *Idul Fitri* (the feast that celebrates the end of fasting period) – November 16, 2004 – but it was once again postponed to January 2005. However, nearing the 1425H *Idul Fitri*, the Malaysian Government issued amnesty policy for PATIs who will return voluntarily to their country between October 29 to November 14, 2004. The amnesty program was extended twice, first after November 14, 2004 until December 31, 2004, and then following the national disaster of the earthquake and tsunami in Aceh, the Malaysian Government again extended the amnesty program until January 31, 2005.<sup>6</sup>

### The Reality of Photography

In many ways, the apparent digitalizations of electronic devices have confirmed the status of digital camera as one of those indispensable household invention today and it marks photography as the ubiquitous visual culture of modernity. Since its introduction more than 150 years ago, photography has been a unique tool developed by mankind to do two things, firstly, to 'stop' or capture time or moments in human experience and secondly, to enable him or her to witness - in their own space and time - what they cannot see.

In his book *Photojournalism. An Introduction*, Fred S. Parrish (2002:2) claims that "photography enlivens the past by jogging our memories of personal [*and communal* – my emphasis] experiences' and it has such an integral role in helping 'people to better understand each other and themselves". This is certainly relevant in many ways because the pure visibility of a certain photographic image, whether in the past, present or even in its futuristic form (thus reducing its realistic value), will inevitably engage us in making sense of what *was* before naturally invisible to our visual sense. When a still image is shot through the camera lens, a particular moment in a sequence of time becomes isolated and then crystallized as 'reality'. A group of paparazzi, for instance, who is determined to seek the truth about a particular rumour surrounding a particular subject, may be able to consider the veracity of the 'story' they are

<sup>6</sup> [http://menkokesra.go.id/pdf/deputi3/human\\_trafficking\\_eng.pdf](http://menkokesra.go.id/pdf/deputi3/human_trafficking_eng.pdf) 20/7/2006



looking for by re-examining what has been a memorable and lasting, as Parrish has phrased it, “representation of reality” (ibid.).

One, however, should exercise a precaution against the comfort of such a phrase since it is made up of two critical oxymoronic properties – representation and reality. As critical opposites, they should be treated separately as it is a common, innocent ‘mistake’ to presume still photographic images as ‘pure’ and ‘factual’ representations of reality. Tony Schirato and Susan Yell (2000:181) look at the ways that visual genres of newspaper photograph “function as adjuncts [in] testifying to the reality and humanity of the articles they accompany”. They believe that written pieces need “a ‘little piece of the real’ - a photograph – to provide them with credibility”. What Schirato and Yell have suggested is the idea that visual images including still photographs can be ‘arranged’ as narratives in which ‘the realist’ element like raising the national flag on Mount Everest, rubbing nose with a Maori or tending to a injured Iraqi child crying in pain, may be chosen to ‘mirror’ the narrative of the article. A ‘mirrored’ photograph usually serves to illustrate the “truthfulness of the photographic narrative” as well as the “truthfulness of the written article” (ibid.).

### Framing Indonesian PATIs

Two main conceptual assumptions have informed the analyses and interpretations of Indonesian PATIs photographs as visual discourse. The first takes off from Nicholas Mirzoeff’s conceptualization of the demise of photography that results in the rupture in the representation of reality. As Mirzoeff (1999:65) explains:

With the rise of computer imaging and the creation of digital means to manipulate the photograph, we can in turn say that photography is dead. Of course photography will continue to be used every day in vast quantities but its claim to mirror reality can no longer be held. The claim of photography to represent the real has gone.

It is true to a certain extent that the current euphoria of digital photography that is currently overtaking the position of the most popular means of representing reality, we may be least concerned with the question of the authenticity of our subjects. Although it may sound strange, the death of photography, as Mirzoeff has explained, implicates its photographic subject as having an ‘illegitimate’ identity. This is certainly the case with the images of Indonesian PATIs although technically speaking, there is no clear evidence that their images have been tampered digitally (though no one will ever know the truth). Underlying the demise of photography, in contradistinction to the rise of photographic pessimism is the assumption that representations of photographic images are not necessarily natural but instead are laden and laced



with ideological assumption or content that can influence the opinionated photographer. It follows that there is a qualitative conception of Indonesian PATIs as 'the Other' – migrant, illegitimate or scourge – which arguably predetermine their visual images and narratives for the mainstream readers of the Malaysian dailies.

It is noted that Mirzoeff's idea is distinctively poststructuralist as it seeks to question the hegemonic practice of still photography and validity of a visual image as given, taken-for-granted representation of reality. What has become more important now is that it has informed us to enforce resistance, to some degree, against visual hegemony especially in the media. Hence, as far as photojournalism is concerned, the visualization of images of the Indonesian PATIs, may have been 'selectively reproduced' and bear the hallmarks of the photojournalist's establishment, its idiosyncrasies and perhaps his or her own cultural baggage, experiences and biases that readily colour his perception on the subject of his or her assignment. Critical reading, if not resistant, of photojournalism as the 'end' of photography means that it is now quite "possible to create photographs of scenes that never existed without the fakery of being directly observable" (ibid. 88). In addition to this, Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996:45) too, both highly influential social semiotics theorists, have persistently argued in their works that 'pictorial structures do not simply reproduce the structures of 'reality' as they write:

On the contrary, they *produce* images of reality which are bound up with the interests of the social institutions within which the pictures are produced, circulated and read. They are ideological. Pictorial structures are never merely formal; they have a deeply important semantic dimension. (ibid.)

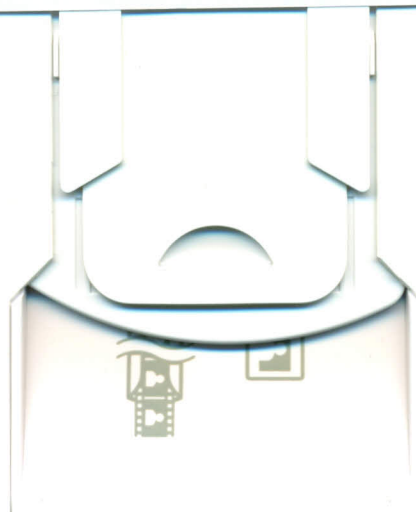
The second assumption is informed by Michel Foucault's concept of the Panopticon, which originated in Jeremy Bentham's 18<sup>th</sup> century concept of (en)closed surveillance in British prisons. The Panopticon was structurally designed for almost a singular purpose, that is, to give prison watchers the most economical and yet most effective way of knowing and monitoring prisoners from a certain safe distance. Ironically, the Panopticon was considered an "inhuman" technology "not in the sense that it is brutal or unfeeling, but in the sense that the 'human' capacities of the supervisor are almost irrelevant to its operation" (Barry, A. cited in Jenks 1995:43). Foucault however, pursued this logic of this technology further in his important work, *Discipline and Punishment*, in which he argued that Panopticon's major effect "was to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power" (ibid.). Panopticism then, is the ideology that implicates surveillance with the exercise of power and authority.



The framework of Panopticism, as discussed by Foucault, can be appropriated to visual discourse via photography precisely because it involves the process of 'visualising' from a distance. Photography is a popular form of surveillance, which in Foucaultian sense, is a powerful way of knowing, controlling and disciplining the subject. The fact that all visual images of Indonesian PATIs were published by print media corporations that are friendly and closely connected to the ruling Malaysian government enables Foucault's Panopticism to be used to inform how photographic surveillance at a distance is used for the process of subjectification, stereotyping and control. Once the Indonesian PATIs become visualized through photographic still images, they become 'enclosed' and 'trapped' inside an ideological Panopticon that is socially controlled and mediated by the Malaysian media. John Tagg (ibid. 44) has pointed to the long history of photography in Western society in "effecting spatial extension of surveillance" although at the same time, cautioned on the exaggeration of the role of photography for social control. The discourse of photographic surveillance is further extended by David Lyon, who suggests that it "has become a pervasive feature of modern societies, [that] we live [...] in a 'surveillance society'" (ibid. 45). Lyon's work appears to confirm that panoptic societies in various settings and forms have somewhat become a standard feature of a globalised world, bringing together the opposite elements of surveillance and intrusion into humanity.

### Methodological Consideration

A total of 5 visual images pertaining to Indonesian PATIs have been culled from two Malaysian newspapers, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Berita Harian* which were in local circulation between November and Desember 2004 - the period of nationwide PATI amnesty and repatriation. The essential questions pertaining to these images are: 'What messages do they communicate to the reader?' and effectively, following Stuart Hall (1997:41), "How visual representations convey meaning?". The semiotic approach of Ferdinand de Saussure's linguistic model of sign, signifier and signified can be applied to a popular cultural practice like photography, whereby photographic representation can be mapped or deconstructed to reveal or implicate it with the theoretical assumptions previously proposed. Not only Saussure's semiology generally provides the platform and tool for the investigation of visual discourse surrounding Indonesian PATI, but it also informs the photographic grammar or literacy that occurs during image construction through the photojournalist's panoptic lens. In the structuralist sense, the visual grammar for a still photography usually consist technical signifiers which are typified as camera shot and camera angle, and their respective signifieds can be summarized as follows:





Technical Signifier (Camera Shot / Angle)	Signified Meaning
Close-up shot - face only	A sense of intimacy
Medium shot - most of body	A sense of personal relationship
Long shot - establish setting and characters	A sense of context, scope; public distance
Full shot - full body of person	A sense of social relationship
Pan down - high to low angle	A sense of power and authority
Pan up - low to high angle	A sense of smallness / insecurity, domination

Figure 1. Brief typology of technical signifiers and their signifieds in filmic and photographic discourse.

In a sense, it is fair to suggest, following Kress and van Leeuwen<sup>7</sup> that visual images have to be treated more seriously because there is an “overwhelming evidence of the importance of visual communication, and the staggering inability on all our parts to talk and think in any way seriously about what is actually communicated by means of images and visual design”. Indeed, visual narrative suffers from intellectual invisibility in many societies. But what may happen if the selected visuals of Indonesian PATIs that have indeed been encoded with technical signifiers by the photojournalist were not ‘anchored’ to a ‘verbal’ text at all? If Kress and van Leeuwen were right, readers would not make much sense of the photographs although they would try to establish varieties of coherent ‘relationships’ not so much between the semiotic codes, but rather between images and the correlating texts (if any) precisely in order to make sense. The assumption that visual images are dependent on written statements or otherwise they become too polysemic or too subjective, has been suggested by Roland Barthes (1977), an influential cultural semiotician, in explaining the complementary relationship between image and text (or caption-photograph) artifacts in his essay *The Rhetoric of the Image*.

For the purpose of this study, Barthesian image-text relations remain relevant - especially since the generally ‘taken-for-granted’ interest about visual literacy has been anything but academic - when the dependence on written narrative become paramount in accessing the affairs of Indonesian PATIs during the period of amnesty. This study does not attempt to demonstrate any wish to totally embrace the Kress and van Leeuwen’s critique of Barthesian image-text ‘anchorage’ because it never set out to do so in the first place. Rather, it seeks to derive from and negotiate a balanced method of analysis situated within the Barthes and Kress - van Leeuwen matrix. Therefore, this study will not discount the accompanying

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.utexas.edu/coc/journalism/SOURCE/J395smF0/read/kresstx1.htm> 20/7/2006



'verbal' text because it can sometimes help to contextualize the image while at the same time fully acknowledge that pure visual representation can become untenable in informing the discourse of Indonesian PATIs; how it "governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about"; how "ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others" (Foucault 1997: 44). Why, it is only for one thing that Sherlock Holmes would chide Dr. Watson, that is, for his failure to recognize the clues: "You fail ... to reason from what you *see* [my emphasis]. You are too timid in drawing your inferences"<sup>8</sup>.

### Analyses and Interpretation

To start with, the medium-shot image in Figure 2 is taken from an opposite angle, which in fact is quite parallel to one's eye level. By constructing such eye-level shot, this frame effectively establishes a social relationship between the reader, now as observer, and the scene that s/he is 'watching'. The advantage of a parallel shot as evident in this image is that it is able to significantly inform the reader-observer/participant about the representation of social reality of a rock concert held in an industrial area in the suburb of Kuala Lumpur. One may deduce from this visual framing that the reader-observer is looking at particularly two social actors who have 'risen' above the rest of the mass gathering of about 500 Indonesian migrant workers. Indeed, for some reason, the 'verbal' text does not refer the crowd in the image as Indonesian PATIs but interestingly anchors all of them unanimously as Indonesian factory workers who seem to be enjoying a rock concert by 17 Indonesian musical bands during the third anniversary of '*Perayaan Halal Bihalal Bocah Dewe*'<sup>9</sup>. Semantically, not only is such unanimous assumption highly questionable but it is also quite impossible for the reader-observer to identify from the image in Figure 2 that they are *all* Indonesian. In fact, there is not a single convincing signifier in this image that gives away their Indonesian-ness to the reader. Rampant misrepresentation of cultural identities can indeed be easily purported in a text-image, in which the verbal text may exploit, manipulate and control the message within the image. Thus the reader-observer will need to investigate the visual text in order to negotiate and challenge the dominant narration of the verbal text.

<sup>8</sup> [http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/5171\\_Berger\\_Final\\_Pages\\_Chapter\\_1.pdf](http://www.sagepub.com/upm-data/5171_Berger_Final_Pages_Chapter_1.pdf) 20/7/2006

<sup>9</sup> Loosely speaking, in Indonesian language, '*Perayaan Halal Bihalal Bocah Dewe*' means 'celebrating the gathering of our children'. Visually, this 'celebrated' shot is meant to construct the social disarray and disruptive tendency as and when Indonesians make *en masse* appearance in public sphere. If the translation had been made accessible to non-Javanese / Indonesian speakers, then these 'children' would have been subjected to severe discipline and punishment for misbehaving by Malaysian public and authority. But, in earnest, the 'damage' to the representation of Indonesian PATIs has been effectively arranged through such ideological framing.





Figure 2. A gathering of about 500 Indonesian workers in a rock concert in Balakong, Selangor

The reader-observer, who is never insulated at all from textual and photographic manipulation, is essentially compelled to focus on three key signifiers foregrounded in the centre of the frame, that is, (from left to right) a half-bodied actor in dark/black top, a dark/black t-shirt with a white image sticker and almost a full-bodied girl wearing jeans and white top. It is apparent from their position that they may also become the central attention to the crowd in the background as well as to the multitudes of reader-observer – structurally speaking; there would be no better ‘natural’ panoptical setting than this one. Thus, it not surprising that this signifying trinity, as it were, lends itself as a site of discursive practices of their Indonesian-ness or PATI-ness, hence culminating in an image of a certain nationalized but foreboding identity. How can this be a tenable interpretation?

This image brings to light the bold but boorish behaviour of about 500 Indonesian migrant workers on foreign soil. Beyond such ‘scary’ numerical monstrosity, they are wickedly linked to the symbolic, ritualistic and even ‘satanic’ disposition of the signifying trinity. The girl assumes an intoxicated gesture while hoisting into the air, with the help of another ‘faceless’ partner, a dark/black t-shirt carrying a motif commonly but notoriously associated with ‘black’ (read ‘satanic’) heavy metal music. This visuality significantly relegates the Indonesian migrant labourers to the underworld, wild and dangerous; and that their concert is ceremonially satanic. The reader-observer may or may not concur with this (over)interpretation but as far as the powerful intrusive, panoptic lens is concerned, this image is a powerful

reminder to the reader-observer that a multitude of Indonesian migrant workers (PATI or non-PATI) around him or her are quite capable through their hideous reunion of wrecking havoc in public places and other unspeakable culpabilities.

In Figure 3, a medium close-up image has been taken to show a group of so-called Indonesian PATIs awaiting for their imminent departure at a jetty in Stulang Laut, Johor Bharu. In this range of shot, the reader-observer is privileged with a discerning view of the facial expressions and gestures of most of them in the foreground. This shot utilizes a right-to-left panning from a low angle to capture, making it a good example of a panoptic surveillance at work using a still photography. Since it is among the very few visual images published in *Utusan Malaysia* during the repatriation program, they can be considered somewhat 'precious' or 'special', as it were, for the close scrutiny of its readership.



Figure 3. A group of Indonesian PATIs waiting for their turn to board the ferry at the jetty in Stulang Laut, Johor Bahru.

Contrary to the sense of ecstasy in Figure 2, there is no sense of euphoria in their facial expressions as they seemingly cast their glances away from the camera perspective. Semiotically, this image seals the fate of Indonesian PATIs beyond any doubt that they are heading home for good by virtue of certain signifiers embedded in it. There is a sense of languor and idleness in their body language (while some try to avoid the prying lens) as they rest their bodies on their belongings which almost have a distinctive pattern, ultimately suggesting a similarity in outlook and purpose in a foreign land.

There is a great subtlety in trying to map a particular signifier in this image though. However, if one is aware from the beginning that the position of visual 'articulation' is from right to left, there is every chance to spot at the top left corner, the uniquely bilingual discursive articulation of power: "KELUAR . EXIT". Although it is just a signpost, nevertheless, it is a potent sign, if not pompous, in the exercise of power, law and order. But it can only succumb to such an imperious discourse and position, almost overarching the signifying figures of departing Indonesian PATIs virtually by the semiotic brilliance of the photographer. Indeed, one may readily accept the fact that this visuality is self-explanatory; and that the image-text will relay the complementary information to the reader without the sophistry of semiotic explication. Actually, this image is an evidence of how the press work in tandem with the authority to inform the public on the reality of repatriation as an on-going process while simultaneously regulates social order through such patronizing use of the signifying practice to eject Indonesian PATIs at the command of a single interpellation: "KELUAR . EXIT".

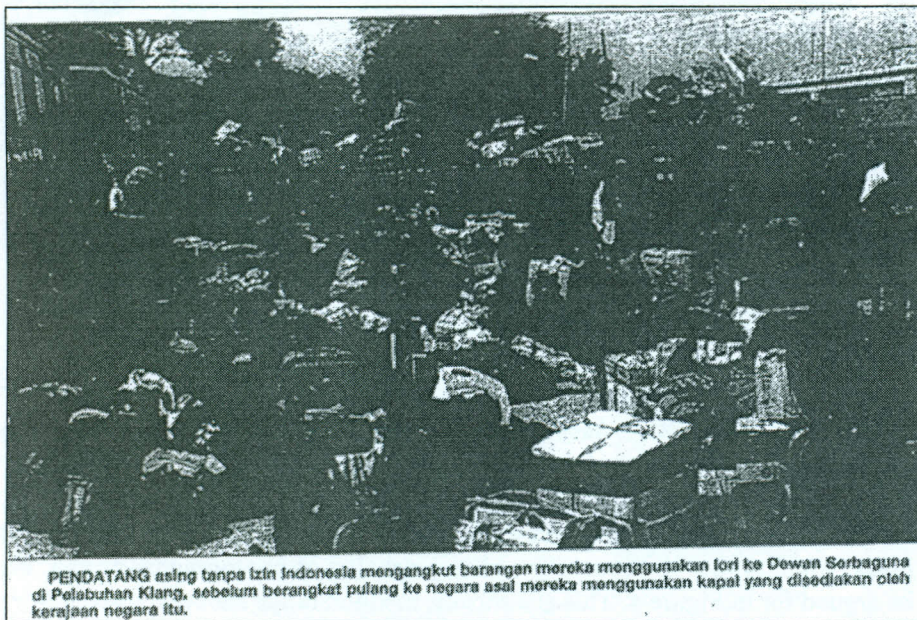


Figure 3. Indonesian PATIs uploading their possessions unto removers to be taken to a warehouse in Port Klang, Selangor.

In Figure 3 the use of a long shot unfortunately shows white and dark patches of a very poorly scanned image of Indonesian PATIs uploading their personal belongings into several lorries to be removed to a warehouse in Port Klang, Selangor. It may be acceptable if the reader reaches the conclusion that there

are more belongings than human beings. It is also too easy to presume that the belongings signify the amount of chattels that have been 'amassed' during their illegal stay in Malaysia. Such prejudice is perhaps common and humane given the fact that the growth of migrant workers is almost exclusively economically-driven. But this image also implicates its murkiness with a sense of chaos and disorder, does it not? Although these are to be expected in such circumstance, mayhem and mess are attributes that apparently preferred by the local press in visual representations of Indonesian PATIs as can be seen in Figure 4 below.



Figure 4. Indonesian PATIs having their slumber while others wait to board the ferry at the jetty in Stulang Laut, Johor Bahru.

The evidence of the intrusive and panoptic surveillance performed by Malaysian press, whether they are journalist, photojournalist or photographer proper, can be argued for in Figure 4. This is a sneaky, medium range shot that also employs a high angle position of articulation, looking down at the 'mayhem' that is happening at the ferry checkpoint at Stulang Laut, Johor Bahru. In the foreground, the reader can see quite clearly that some Indonesian PATIs are soundly asleep on top of their own belongings. Not only will this image retain in one's social memory how Malaysia is that 'land of milk and honey' where riches can be made if one is willing to work hard (and get some rest anywhere one wants), it can also perhaps 'misinform' the reader the survival instinct inherent in migrants workers.

In this case, this visual is capable of establishing or reinforcing a certain national stereotype by connecting all the main signifiers. The sleeping persons in this image, men and women, are constructed as sleeping on their wealth while some are hugging their possession. Oblivious to their surrounding, they ironically embody Shakespeare's *Macbeth* 'come what come may'<sup>10</sup> attitude; that their trusted survival instincts are always ready for any occasion, including their need to nap. It draws the attention of the reader perhaps to begin comparing his or herself with the personas in the image. For instance, the idea of being photographed without one's permission especially that which is potentially offensive and consequently defamatory (including while slumbering) may trigger cultural, psychological and political alarms for the uninitiated. But this image apparently suggests that it does not 'hurt' the Indonesian PATIs at all. Now, this can evolve into a visual vice that the visuality of illegal migrants is supposed to be quite 'crude' and 'different' than us. When this happens, photographing Indonesian PATIs gradually concretizes itself into surveillance of 'the Other', its alienation and maintenance of 'difference'.

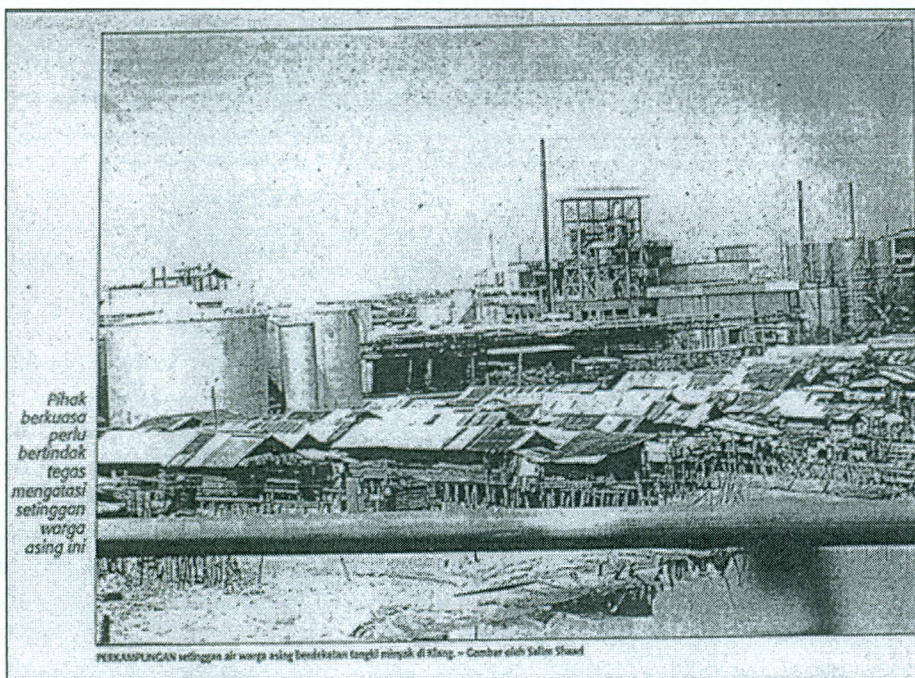


Figure 5. Illegal PATI squatter built on stilts next to an oil refinery complex in Port Klang, Selangor.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.phrases.org.uk/meanings/come%20what%20may.html> 20/7/2006

The image in Figure 5 is published in *Berita Harian*, another press that has strongly supported the ruling government. This image is certainly 'different' than those in *Utusan Malaysia* for a number of reasons. Images taken during PATI amnesty and deportation that appear in *Berita Harian* tend to focus less on the behaviour of human beings. Rather they tend to bring to light 'structural' perspective as oppose to human agency. This means that visual representation of Indonesian PATIs takes the mode of a discursive practice and less visible as evident in Figure 5. Using a long shot, the 'characters' and setting become established to inform the reader of this newspaper especially, the very structure that provide shelter for PATIs from weather changes, comfort and safety to their families.

Actually, there are two different sets of structure. Possibly taken from a bridge or flyover, this PATI squatter which was built on stilts inside a strategic enclave that cannot be easily seen is perhaps more structurally commonplace in other coastal settlements in East Malaysia's Sabah and Sarawak and in certain parts of east-coast Malaysia. Houses are built on stilts to accommodate inland tidal flows. However, one may contend that the visuality of such edifice alone may not have triggered its identification with PATI squatters *without* [my emphasis] the aid of the 'verbal' text. It may have been easily perceived as just an ordinary fishing village somewhere in Klang based on its proximity to the sea. Its proximity alongside a huge, looming petroleum refining infrastructure, a very important national industry indeed, is said to have given local authority more cause for concern in dealing with the issue of illegal migrant workers. However, it must also be pointed out that this cause for concern has never been explained, whether it is security, cosmetics, environmental or social.

This image suggests that there is a symbiotic relationship between two key signifiers, the industry and the squatter, in the broader picture of labour economy in Malaysia. One has to admit the fact that there is a synergy between the 'industry' and the 'squatter' because it is precisely what this image seems to represent. Malaysian economy in the last 10 years has been surviving on this symbiosis and there is no better semiotic representation than this visuality. In actual fact, it is the looming image of the infrastructure that has provided the 'protection' to numerous PATIs including perhaps from Indonesia living in this squatter. In return, it is the squatter that provide manpower to labour-intensive industries. Thus, the 'verbal' text may have influenced a brooding visual interpretation may be more than one hundred percent, but in retrospect, this peeping long shot has cleverly camouflaged the essential issue of interdependency between the industry and the squatter in a country like Malaysia. However, a seeming rupture in this interdependency is perhaps best encapsulated in Figure 6, at the point of parting.





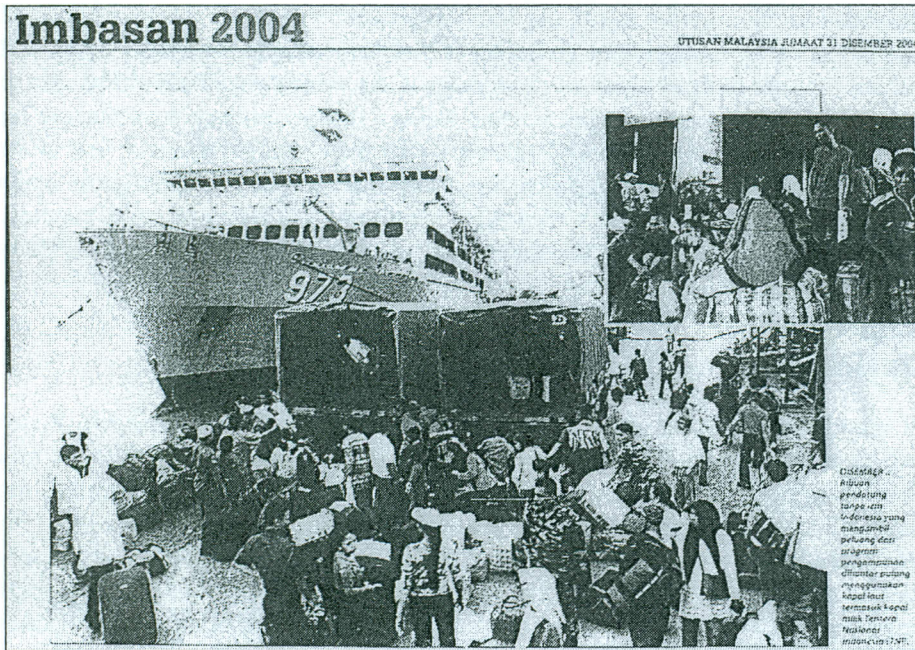


Figure 6. The point of embarkation for Indonesian PATIs as they prepare to board an Indonesian navy warship. (inlet photograph to be ignored)

It is at this embarkation point that the Indonesian government decidedly introduces itself into the visual discourse of Indonesian PATIs. This too then elevates the level of signifying practice from that of human agency to sovereign states as an Indonesian warship makes its presence on a Malaysian wharf. Using a medium shot with a high angle of visual articulation, this photograph presents the reader the final stage of PATI deportation from Malaysia. Again, figures of Indonesian PATIs ‘litter’ in the foreground as they, with their backs mostly turned against the lens, unload their possession from the trucks. Chaos now becomes an understatement. At most points of embarkation whether land, sea or air, the most common thing one would do is probably to observe the motions around him / her. Similarly, it is not surprising if the angular shot provides the reader a sense of realism, of actually observing the typical commotions at the pier.

It is from this vantage point of view that the reader can see the huge Indonesian navy warship docking in to carry home its Indonesian countrymen. As mentioned before, from an Indonesian government viewpoint, their illegal migrant workers have always been regarded as and assimilated into a pool of Indonesian work force or TKI. In this image, these migrant workers assume a duality which they have to negotiate with – as part Indonesian PATIs, part TKIs - for as long as they remain at the point of embarkation. What is more interesting is that such duality is actually

accorded to them by the signifying warship because it assumes the sovereignty of Indonesia as an independent government that has come to negotiate, assist and ensure the safe transportation of its workers. A discerning reader should be able to interpret that the visibility of the warship marks a foreign military 'involvement' as a means of responding to forced repatriation by the home government, and all its defensive innuendos – power, aggression, protection and war. Ultimately, this image is coloured with ambivalence – while the Indonesian navy shows its good intention, at the same time, its 'vice' is also conspicuous to the reader. Interestingly, nowhere can the Malaysian military authority be seen in this image at all.

### Afterthoughts: Photojournalism and Ethics

It may be argued that, other than Malaysia's national Film Censorship Board which always runs its gauntlet on the film industry without fail though sometimes with debilitating consequence at the expense of local filmmakers, there has not been any personal or public outcry against any known malpractice vis-a-vis photojournalism. In recent years, still photographic hegemony is apparently enjoyed by photojournalists who largely work for various local newspapers ranging from Government-linked press like *Utusan Malaysia*, *New Straits Times* and *Berita Harian*; to the Opposition-linked print media like *Harakah* and *Siasah*; to sensational visual exposition and exploitation run by tabloid newspapers and magazines. The growing interest in the opportunities offered by new media applications through the Internet such as blogs, photoblogs and websites have only strengthened the hegemonic status of Internet photojournalism as an important form and practice of visual culture.

Again, does it mean that the 'governance' of photojournalism in Malaysian print media is thoroughly *bona fide*? One should not forget that the predatory nature of photography in general remains unperturbed today. Quite astutely, Valeria Alia (2004:101) reminds us to the fact that "when a stranger brings a camera into a community, the intrusiveness is obvious". She reiterates that "anytime a camera is used – no matter how sensitively and unobtrusively – it is intrusive". Susan Sontag (1977) cited in Alia (2004:102) explains on the implication of photographic intrusion:

Photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at, and what we have a right to observe. They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing ... they fiddle with the scale of the world ... get reduced, blown up, cropped, re-touched, doctored, tricked out.

John Hulteng while not disagreeing with Sontag's suggestion, makes an equally important caution on photojournalism and news worthiness. According to Hulteng (ibid. 102-103), "we must consider the image's potential impact in the light of the proliferation of images that can desensitize as well as sensitize viewers. Images



can [indeed] anesthetize". However, Parrish (2002:167) contends otherwise, as he suggests that "immediacy and intrusion are defining aspects of spot news coverage – you must be there when the event is happening and you usually intrude on people in time of stress".

In recent times, significant intrusions into people's lives in by the Malaysian photojournalists, often have strong humanizing message to the readers as can be observed from the massive coverage in local dailies on for instance, the impact of the Asian tsunami on Malaysian shore, the numerous landslides and environmental destructions in the country, the plight of homeless or helpless peoples whether they are local, foreign or migrants. But it is also fair to comment in light of the vilified visuality of Indonesian PATIs, that we also tend to forget whether or not they and the circumstances which they belong to want to be pictured. Malaysian photojournalism, as perhaps anywhere else, continues to thrive on spot news coverage on human conditions – "accidents and fire victims, bank robbers, witnesses and onlookers" – which are main fodder for the so-called "insurance shots" as oppose to the "ideal picture" (ibid. 169). Once again, Schirato and Yell (2000:181) remind us, that despite the powerful humanizing tendency mediated by still photography, it is "however, [always] selectively reproduce[d], rather than faithfully mirror, reality".

### Conclusion

The Russian semiotician Valentine Voloshinov, once said: 'Whenever a sign is present, ideology is present too'<sup>11</sup>. In this study, Voloshinov's maxim becomes a constant resonance in each reading of these photographic images of Indonesian PATIs as they are arguably strewn with ambivalence and ambiguity despite assuming to be representations of human reality. In fact, it is suggested that photography can (re)write and manipulate our cultural identities by the sheer power of the 'light', which is not a farcical idea at all. It has far-reaching impact on building new insights and concepts in the wider pursuit of visual literacy to make us increase our awareness of the ideological operations and signifying practices that mask themselves as 'the way things are' in our everyday lives.

In trying to avert this hegemony, Mierzoeff's concept of the death of photography, though perhaps less invoked in the analyses, is an important voice of resistance to the 'everyday-defined' photographic hegemony representation that one tends to subscribe to; whereas Foucault's Panopticism remains useful as ever in deconstructing the *mise-en-camera* and its imaginative content. Though far from convincing, all analyses and interpretations must be seen as attempts to

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/S4B/sem10.html> 20/7/2006



demonstrate how the visibility of the Indonesian PATIs can subconsciously colour the perception of the reader against itself; and in echoing Barthes, this process is only plausible if the photographs have been “worked on, chosen, composed, constructed, treated according to professional, aesthetic or ideological norms”<sup>12</sup>.  
*Veni, vedi, vici.*

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.inst.at/trans/15Nr/08\\_4/velica15.htm](http://www.inst.at/trans/15Nr/08_4/velica15.htm) 20/7/2006

