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# REVIEW OF *BUKAK API* (2000): PERSPECTIVES OF EDUCATIONAL HEALTH FILM IN INCREASING HIV/AIDS LITERACY AMONG TRANS- AND CIS- GENDER SEXUAL WORKERS AND DRUG USERS

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## ABSTRACT

This article is a reassessment of the film *Bukak Api*, focusing on two key facets. First, it evaluates the precision and fidelity with which *Bukak Api* portrays the complex issues surrounding human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS). In doing so, it assesses the extent to which the film conveys accurate information and fosters a deeper understanding of these critical health topics. Second, the article delves into the film's stated role as an educational film utilising educational film framework, exploring how effectively it fulfils this mission and contributes to public awareness and knowledge of HIV and AIDS.

**Keywords:** *transgender, HIV, education film*

## INTRODUCTION

In 2000, *Bukak Api* emerged as a pioneering effort to educate sex workers in Malaysia, focusing on the vibrant yet challenging streets of Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur. Contextually, Chow Kit is recognised as the red district of KL, symbolising the struggles faced by individuals working in the sex industry. Recognising the urgent need for increased literacy on human immunodeficiency virus (HIV)/acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) among trans- and cis-gender sexual workers and drug users, the Pink Triangle initiative took a step forward by producing an educational health film, *Bukak Api*, to shed light on these critical matters.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

There are numerous literatures surrounding HIV/AIDS awareness in Malaysia; however, there is very minimal scholarship pertaining to health-related films in Malaysia. The most recent and comprehensive effort in approaching the definition of public health films can be found in the edited collection titled “Health Education Films in the Twentieth Century” by Bonah, Cantor, and Laukötter (2018). The authors introduced the terms ‘Utility’ or ‘Message’ films to describe the interchangeable use of terms like ‘health film’, ‘public health film’, and ‘public health education film’. According to the authors, this definition should encompass films created with the intention of either reforming or reinforcing public health beliefs or practices. It should also be understood in terms of specific instrumental purposes, including the various and sometimes conflicting objectives of the organisations and individuals involved in their production, collection, distribution, or exhibition.

Elsaesser added to this idea by suggesting that the notion of intent can be further explored using his three A’s framework, which he believes should be applied when classifying and interpreting non-fiction films. These three questions, according to Elsaesser, are: “Who commissioned the film?”, “What was the occasion for which it was made?”, and “To what use was it put or to whom was it addressed?”.

However, these works—which emphasise the concepts of commission and intent—exclude a broad range of fictional films and television dramas such as soap operas, which may have addressed health subjects explicitly and, in some cases, had been studied within the public health context. This is not to imply that these studies or texts cannot be understood within the realm of public health, as they undoubtedly contribute to the public’s understanding of health issues. Rather, it emphasises that the filmmaker’s intent to influence public health behaviours can serve as a valuable criterion for distinguishing these texts. The filmmaker of *Bukak Api* intends to produce an educational film about HIV, as explicitly claimed in the film’s opening with subtitles in Bahasa Malaysia and English. In other words, the filmmaker intends to create an educational health film, in line with Elsaesser’s notion of public educational film. From our observation, this makes it an ‘educational health film’. Nevertheless, we contend that ‘intention’ constitutes only a single facet out of the multiple components required for a film to be deemed ‘educational’. To educate, it is only natural to meticulously and accurately ascertain the facts.

*Bukak Api*’s primary intention is to educate and increase awareness on HIV and AIDS management in targeted groups, primarily cis- and trans-sexual workers and drug users. HIV and AIDS are sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Most STDs are asymptomatic in nature, encompass a diverse array of bacterial and viral pathogens, and can have far-reaching consequences for individuals and communities alike. Symptomatic STDs may emerge in the form of genital warts, ulcers, sores, rashes, pelvic inflammatory disease (PID), and in some cases, long-term complications such as infertility or an increased risk of certain cancers (e.g., cervical cancer associated with human papillomavirus or HPV).

Common STDs include HIV/AIDS, syphilis, chlamydia, gonorrhoea, and HPV. The consequences of STDs in individuals and communities are dire. Untreated STD patients may remain infectious to others. Psychologically, STD-diagnosed patients may develop feelings of shame, guilt, anxiety, and depression. Furthermore, the stigma associated with certain STDs can exacerbate these emotional challenges. On a community level, STDs can impose economic and public health burdens by incurring high healthcare costs and spreading infectious diseases to society.

The nature of transmission for STDs depends on social factors, including having unprotected sexual activities, poor awareness and sex education, having multiple partners, asymptomatic patients, sharing needles and drug paraphernalia, stigma and fear of testing, and lack of healthcare (Bassei et al., 2018). Amongst the many types of STDs, HIV/AIDS is one of the most stigmatised illnesses, especially in Malaysia (Balakrishnan et al., 2023).

STDs are most prevalent amongst high-risk individuals including sex workers, trans- and cis- genders, and drug users. In 1990, a prevalence study on STDs among cis-genders working as sex workers in Malaysia reported a high prevalence of chlamydial cervicitis (26.5%), followed by gonorrhoea (14.25%). Other STDs include seropositivity to hepatitis B (66.3%) and syphilis (13.6%) (Ngeow & Ramachandran, 1990). STDs are highly under-reported primarily due to the asymptomatic nature of the infection (Bachmann et al., 2022). One of the other main reasons is due to the social stigma related to STDs (Tripathi et al., 2018). Additionally, lack of awareness and strong cultural stigma on sex work is one of the primary reasons for the lack of prevalence studies and data collection on STDs in Malaysia (Aazami et al., 2021).

Particularly in Malaysia, HIV/AIDS remains one of the most stigmatised illnesses today (Balakrishnan et al., 2023). Stigmatisation risk factors include low knowledge, awareness, attitude, and perception (Burch et al., 2018). In a scoping review by Balakrishnan et al. (2023), Malaysian students were noted to possess high levels of knowledge about HIV/AIDS, possibly due to the high exposure to mass media, as evidenced by the high percentage of television viewers exposing to health or sex education-themed media. While other demographic factors play a significant role in determining knowledge, perception, and awareness, it is undeniable that mass media is crucial in increasing visibility and knowledge on HIV/AIDS. To address the stigma related to STDs, particularly HIV/AIDS, sex education and increasing awareness of STDs is warranted. One of the optimal ways of promoting sex education and spreading awareness is via mass media (ibid.). As such, films are influential tools for disseminating health information, promoting health, and constructing health-related narratives. In this case, one of the films made to increase visibility of HIV/AIDS is the film *Bukak Api*. *Bukak Api* was produced to heighten HIV/AIDS awareness amongst the sex-worker community in Chow Kit, Kuala Lumpur, portraying the subculture as honestly as possible through the utilisation of the docudrama genre. The film is a community effort that brought together various agencies, residents, brothel owners, sex workers, film students, and production houses to support the need for community-friendly information. It exemplifies Pink Triangle Malaysia's working approach to community development for HIV/AIDS education, support, and care. *Bukak Api*, or "to open fire", is a street lingo among sex workers that refers to "having sex with a client".

## CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND OF STUDY

In 2022, the Ministry of Health Malaysia released the Global AIDS Monitoring Report, offering an overview of HIV and AIDS in Malaysia from 1986 to 2021. Notably, the peak of the disease occurred in 2002, when almost 7,000 HIV infections were reported. However, interestingly, a decrease was observed post-2002. Specifically, in 2002, there were 6,978 new HIV cases, equivalent to 28 cases per 100,000 population. In contrast, by 2021, the number had reduced to 2,760 cases, equivalent to 8.5 cases per 100,000 population. Furthermore, the estimated rate of HIV incidence per 1,000 uninfected individuals gradually decreased from 0.30 in 1990 to 0.19 in 2021.

These results are the outcomes of extensive efforts, which may include intensive health screenings and distribution of HIV test kits, promotion of safe sex practices, and heightened HIV awareness through campaigns advertised via media. One case in point is the delivery of *Bukak Api*. Collectively, the multi-faceted approach in enhancing education, prevention, testing, treatment, and support for HIV is crucial towards reducing the occurrence of HIV. Ultimately, the role of media is significant in enhancing awareness, as HIV is a highly stigmatised illness. This point is made more robust with *Bukak Api*'s reception. Although the film was banned from public viewing, it has prompted discussions, which arguably contribute to increased publicity towards creating awareness against HIV/AIDS. This intriguing connection has prompted a closer examination of the impact of *Bukak Api*, particularly its role as an educational film.

## METHODOLOGY

*Bukak Api* (2000) unquestionably emerges as the choice for our research, which is grounded on two factors. Firstly, its commitment to education is readily apparent through the disclaimer that precedes the film. This intro, unequivocally and commendably, outlines the film's primary objective—to offer an engaging yet educational fictionalised documentary. This sense of purpose not only sets the stage, but also reaffirms the film's role as a potent tool for knowledge dissemination.

Secondly, the film's affiliation with a non-government organisation specialising in HIV and AIDS further bolsters its significance. The Pink Triangle, now known as the PT Foundation, was established in 1987, before the film's production. The backing of an organisation deeply immersed in the subject matter not only lends additional credibility to the content, but also underscores its relevance to the issues we seek to explore in our research. This strategic partnership lends a degree of expertise and authenticity that is crucial for education and advocacy.

The research methodology adopted in this study is text analysis, a systematic approach for the comprehensive examination and extraction of valuable insights from extensive textual data. Within the text analysis framework, screen media is considered as Text (Flick, 2018). This perspective recognises that screen media – encompassing television, film, and digital content – constitutes a multifaceted communication medium. It conveys meaning through a rich tapestry of visual and auditory elements, making it a suitable subject for in-depth analysis.

Examining screen media as text allows us to explore the layers of meaning woven into the content, promoting critical thinking and fostering media literacy. This approach is essential in understanding the profound impact of screen media on contemporary society.

The decision to regard screen media as text is rooted in its inherently semiotic nature (Eco, 1980). Visual and auditory elements displayed on the screen can be semiotically decoded, with each image, sound, dialogue, and composition acting as a sign that conveys meaning. Moreover, screen media often adheres to narrative structures, where stories unfold, characters interact, and themes explored. These narrative elements form the foundation of textual analysis, enabling a critical examination of plot development and the underlying messages and ideologies embedded in the content. In other words, media can be considered as text in academia because they can naturally be translated (read: explained) in text.

The creation and reception of screen media are heavily influenced by cultural and social contexts. Frequently, the content reflects the values, beliefs, and norms of the society in which it is produced. This contextual backdrop enriches textual analysis by considering how societal factors shape content creation and, conversely, how the content influences culture and society (Kelner, 2003).

The process of textual analysis is a meticulous one, especially in the case study at hand, which focuses on the film *Bukak Api*. This examination unfolds scene by scene, explicitly focusing on the presentation of HIV/AIDS and its accuracy within the narrative. Throughout this scrutiny of disease portrayal, the analysis incorporates opinionated discussions, culminating in a comprehensive evaluation of the film treatment of this pivotal theme.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### Film mode of *Bukak Api*: Fictional ‘Observational’ Cinema

*Bukak Api* (Osman Ali, 2000) narrates the life journey of Jelita, a transgender woman in her thirties, hailing from Alor Setar, Kedah, a northern state in Malaysia. Jelita embarks on a transformative voyage to Kuala Lumpur, often seen as the city of hope and liberation. The film is prefaced with an important disclaimer, emphasising its educational and documentary-like nature, focusing on HIV/AIDS education and specific issues faced by the transgender community, female sex workers, and drug users. Notably, the film is banned from commercial screenings in local theatres due to its widely acclaimed explicit visuals. Furthermore, the film’s ban is attributed to its departure from the Home Ministry’s Film Censorship Board’s requirement for a narrative conclusion involving expressions of regret. As articulated by Mohammad Hussain, the chairman of the Film Censorship Board: “Those characters must either repent or come to a wrong end” (Gooch, 2010). In defiance of societal pressures and stigmatisation, Jelita defiantly declares in the film’s closing scene, “I will not regret”, reaffirming her unwavering commitment to her chosen path as a transgender individual, despite facing discrimination.

The film is curated to mimic an observational documentary, also known as direct cinema or *cinéma vérité*. It is a type of documentary filmmaking that aims to capture real-life events and situations as they unfold, without intervention or manipulation by the filmmaker. It is characterised by an unobtrusive and unscripted approach, often using handheld cameras and minimal equipment to record candid moments and authentic interactions. The observational documentary aims to give viewers a genuine and unfiltered look at the documented subjects or topics.

One of the key references for observational documentary style is the work of Jean Rouch and Edgar Morin, who co-directed the influential documentary “Chronicle of a Summer” (1961). In this film, the filmmakers explored the lives and thoughts of ordinary people in Paris, using a direct and unscripted approach. The film is often regarded as a pivotal example of *cinéma vérité*, a movement in documentary filmmaking that emphasises truthful representation and avoids traditional documentary techniques, such as voiceovers and re-enactments. Another essential reference is the work of filmmakers like Robert Drew, Richard Leacock, and D.A. Pennebaker who are pioneers in the development of direct cinema in the United States. They used lightweight, portable equipment to film events as they happened, such as the ground-breaking documentary “Primary” (1960), which followed John F. Kennedy and Hubert Humphrey during the 1960 Wisconsin Democratic primary. Observational

documentary style often contrasts with more traditional documentary approaches involving extensive scripting, narration, and staged re-enactments. It seeks to capture the essence of reality in a raw and unmediated form, offering viewers a front-row seat to real-life situations.

The term “observational documentary” may also encompass various subgenres and approaches within documentary filmmaking. However, the core principle is the unobtrusive and observational portrayal of real-life events.

Since *Bukak Api* involved staging, scripting, and professional acting, by no means it could be labelled as an observational documentary. This is why we would like to stress the use of the term ‘mimics’. The observational documentary elements can be seen in the film student components such as cinematography, editing, and mise-en-scene. With regards to the cinematography, the shots are mostly considerably wide without any noticeable movements. The overall tone of lighting applied in the film is dimmed, mimicking the landscape of the real location, Chow Kit. The editing is also very minimal with a very steady pace throughout the whole film. Most of the discussions in regards to mise-en-scene are based on real life. This means that the locations and props including the condoms are real and that most of the actors are real-life sex workers. The film attempts to steer away from having cinematic values which could jeopardise the authenticity of the message, but no way near the label of an ‘observational documentary’.

### **Context of sexual workers in Kuala Lumpur**

The film begins with a simple yet impactful visual—a blank black screen—and a soliloquy delivered in a husky female voice, expressing the audience’s sense of arrival in the city of hopes, dreams, and freedom, Kuala Lumpur. Throughout the film, Kuala Lumpur is portrayed as a place where dreams can be realised, a sentiment echoed by the supporting characters who readily express similar sentiments. For instance, Manisha shares her perspective in a monologue, viewing the Kuala Lumpur Twin Towers from a distance: “Kuala Lumpur is a beautiful and colourful city”. In a conversation with Jelita and Kak Tipah, Kak Su reinforces this sentiment, stating: “You can do almost anything in KL as long as you have the wish”.

Despite having a positive connotation at the beginning of the film, the aesthetics of the film convey a different message. It showcases the gritty and dark side of Kuala Lumpur through cinematography and art design, leading us to question its suitability as an educational film, as it claims at the start of the film. The second question is whether it suits the Malaysian sociocultural landscape.

In subsequent scenes, the film’s protagonist and colleagues engage in sexual acts with clients, including foreplay and oral sex. These scenes are followed by a pivotal moment that explains the transmission of STDs, focusing primarily on HIV/AIDS. The modes of transmission highlighted here are sexual contact via sexual work and needle-sharing by drug-users. Multiple scenes conveyed correct factual content regarding STDs and the reality of a sex worker.

The main protagonist, Jelita, secures a client in a significant plot development. Before proceeding with intercourse, she persuades the client to use a condom, underscoring the importance of safe sex practices. The client’s response reveals an intriguing aspect of the sex work industry—some clients resist using condoms, often based on their perception of the

sex worker's appearance. Based on this conversation, it appears that sex workers judge their clients' appearance and would not worry about practising safe sex if their clients look 'healthy' and 'clean'. The client then explains his reluctance to use a condom despite knowing that without it, they are at risk of contracting STD. Furthermore, the client's explanation touches upon a common barrier to safe sex practices—physical discomfort. This element adds depth to the narrative, illustrating the challenges and dilemmas surrounding discussions of safe sex within the context of the film.

### **Importance of healthcare support for transgender and cisgender sex workers**

The role of Pink Triangle in *Bukak Api* offers a multifaceted approach towards reaching and supporting sex workers. Beyond providing a platform for sex workers to engage in outreach activities and socialise within a safe and non-judgemental environment, the centre promotes safe sex practices, which is frequently emphasised throughout the movie. In one particular scene, 'Pink Triangle' elaborates on the correct use and distribution of condoms to sex workers with an emphasis on practising safe sex. Jelita's candid admission that she has never used condoms is striking. This admission underscores the need for comprehensive sexual education and HIV prevention strategies, especially within marginalised communities. A friend's response, highlighting that HIV transmission primarily occurs through blood, highlights a critical aspect of HIV awareness. However, Jelita's curiosity regarding the proper use of condoms hints at the gaps in knowledge and misconceptions that persist, even among sex workers. Jelita's quip serves as a reminder of the importance of targeted and comprehensive sexual health education. The subsequent teaching session on condoms offered by Pink Triangle further underscores the commitment to harm reduction and safe sex practices. Covering aspects such as checking condom expiry dates, observing proper usage for both men and women, and understanding the significance of counselling before surgery for HIV prevention are significant efforts in addressing the specific needs and risks faced by sex workers.

*Bukak Api* also depicts the environment and atmosphere of rehabilitation centres for sex workers, transgender people, and drug addicts. In a critical scene set at the Ikhlas Community Center or 'Pink Triangle' clinic, the focus appears to be highlighting awareness and delivering information on healthcare support for sex workers. While the narrative addresses the importance of non-judgmental healthcare for sex workers, some notable concerns exist. The dialogue exchange about the Ikhlas programme's success and spreading the word suggests a positive initiative, emphasising the need for awareness and outreach within the sex worker communities. However, the subsequent discussion regarding STD symptoms and the reluctance of sex workers to seek medical advice highlights the challenges and stigma faced by this marginalised group. In the scene, the sex worker mentions that one of her friends is showing STD symptoms and asks for advice. The clinic worker says that she should see the doctor to seek medical attention. The sex worker replies by saying that sex workers do not like to be lectured, highlighting the stigma for sex workers in seeking healthcare support. The worker at the clinic continues to imply that safe sex is essential and that sex workers should use condoms. She emphasises that without condoms, sex workers would not only be infected with STDs, but would also be exposed to an increased risk of spreading the infection to others.

In the following scene, a conversation effectively conveys the compassionate and non-judgmental approach of the Drug Users Programme at the Ikhlas Community Center towards drug users. Manisha questions the purpose of providing food to drug addicts to one of the workers in the community centre. This quip serves as a relevant point of inquiry, highlighting the multifaceted support offered to this vulnerable population. The response, emphasising the centre's commitment to providing care and education on HIV, underscores the importance of harm reduction and addressing the unique needs of individuals struggling with addiction. The worker mentions that the centre helps teach safe needle practices to drug users. Additionally, limitations due to financial constraints paint a realistic picture of the challenges faced by drug users in seeking healthcare services in such settings.

Manisha's query about the transmission of HIV through kissing adds an educational dimension to the scene. The response clarifies that while kissing does not transmit HIV, it is essential to avoid situations where blood exchange may occur and this accurately portrays the mode of HIV transmission. Previous literature has extensively discussed the possibility of acquiring HIV through passionate kissing. While the general transmission mode for HIV is understood to occur through bodily fluid and blood transfer, open-mouth kissing can be associated with considerable transfer of saliva. In epidemiological studies, intimate kissing is confounded with sexual intercourse, which makes it challenging to determine the precise role of each in the transmission of infection (Petricciani, 1987).

Nevertheless, recent work by Lomelí-Martínez (2022) outlines the risk of transmission by exposing mucous membranes to blood and body fluids. Approximately 30% - 80% of HIV-infected people have at least one oral manifestation. The most frequently occurring oral manifestations include pseudomembranous candidiasis, oral warts and thrush, canker sores, and linear gingival erythema. These oral manifestations typically portray the potential of HIV acquisition during oral sex or deep-mouth kissing (Lomelí-Martínez et al., 2022).

### **Condom resistance and public health implications**

The mention of condom usage and the risk of disease transmission underscores a crucial message about safe sex practices and the potential health risks associated with the profession. However, the scene shifts abruptly to a personal account of urinary tract infection (UTI). The conversation shifts when the sex worker mentions that she had STD symptoms and urinary tract infection in the past. She mentions that urinating was painful, and to treat these symptoms, she bought roadside medicine but did not get better. She eventually went to the doctor to get proper treatment and finally recovered from it. The worker then reprimands her, saying that roadside medicine is not clinically approved and might not be safe for consumption. This diversion from the primary theme of non-judgmental healthcare support for sex workers may indeed dilute the intended message and impact of the 'Ikhlas' project. The abrupt shift in focus and the introduction of the urinary tract infection narrative may detract from the central objective of highlighting the importance of accessible and non-judgmental healthcare services for this vulnerable population. In another scene, the dynamics of condom usage among sex workers and their customers are discussed. Murni debates with one of the house managers regarding condom use among sex workers and their clients. The house manager claims that not using condoms is vital for the business. Such resistance against condom usage reflects the challenges that sex workers face in negotiating safe sex practices with clients. Murni's perspective adds depth to the discussion. She expresses concern about



the new girls in the house who may not be aware of the risks associated with unprotected sex, particularly the risk of HIV transmission, and highlights the importance of education and awareness within the sex work community.

It is also crucial to highlight that, although there is still no vaccine available for HIV/AIDS, HIV is a preventable disease provided that there is proper behaviour modification such as safe sex practices and condom use (Abbasi J., 2018). *Bukak Api* clearly educates its audience about condom use. However, existing studies show that the stigma and psychosocial effects of condom use are complicated and deeply rooted. Numerous studies show that despite awareness programmes, condom use remains poorly practiced especially among those with the highest risk (Lammers et al., 2013). Other contributing factors such as the lack of financial independence and the threat of violence and cultural norms are also highlighted throughout the movie.

### **Demographic authenticity**

The portrayal of STD transmission dynamics in *Bukak Api* offers an intriguing perspective that can be further analysed and related to real-world epidemiological data. Most of the portrayals of STD transmission are between transgender workers and men. In a retrospective epidemiological study spanning from 2019 to 2021, 67.7% of the identified patients were females while 32.3% were males (Yusof et al., 2023). This disparity contradicts the film's depiction and suggests that STD transmission is not confined to a specific gender or group. Nevertheless, while the sexual orientation in the work of Yusof et al. (2023) is unclear (transgender people are not explicitly mentioned), it is evident that there is a higher prevalence of STDs in females than males – possibly stemming from the fact that up to 80%-94% of sex workers are females (Wang et al., 2023). Studies have shown that STDs are transmitted more efficiently through penile-vaginal intercourse or penile-anal intercourse (Everett, 2013), as reflected by the relationships of the sex workers and their customers in *Bukak Api*.

### **Lack of HIV/AIDS literacy amongst sex workers**

Some of the scenes in *Bukak Api* reflect the low awareness of STDs amongst sex workers. In the following scene, Julita admits to never using a condom before coming to Kuala Lumpur. Her behaviour reflects a common issue in some communities where individuals engage in unprotected sex, often due to a lack of awareness about the risks associated with it. Multiple studies have identified unprotected sex as a significant risk factor for contracting STDs, particularly HIV/AIDS (Anore et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2018). She states that she has been working for five years but has never contracted an STD, and that she believes none of her customers wear condoms. Her statement highlights a common misconception amongst sex workers and reflects low awareness (Nguyen et al., 2019). The asymptomatic nature of STDs has been shown to be a factor in treatment delays. Many individuals incorrectly assume that they are not at risk for STDs, especially if they do not exhibit any symptoms. This underscores the importance of regular STD testing. A recent study on female sex workers showed a similar scenario whereby only 30.1% of the study participants displayed willingness to use HIV self-testing kits, which is an indication of low HIV awareness and strong stigmatisation associated with the disease (Kim et al., 2023). In a similar study on transgender sex workers, the participants also displayed low willingness to test for HIV (46.7%) (Shrestha et al., 2020).

Jelita continues to express her belief that she might have an STD while not being concerned about pregnancy. She also expresses her lack of knowledge about the fatal nature of AIDS. All these contribute to the stigma surrounding the disease and deter individuals from undergoing testing, seeking treatment, or taking preventive measures. Additionally, patients with STDs might infect other people; due to poor awareness, this becomes a public health concern as it can hinder efforts to control the spread of the disease.

### **Hope for transgender HIV-positive patients**

*Bukak Api* also portrays the lives of people with HIV, as exemplified through Riena's narrative. A harrowing incident occurred in which strangers abducted Riena and dropped her off in front of the sex house the following day. The procurer, Kak Su, says they need to take her to hospital. Riena's revelation of being raped by ten men and her HIV-positive status is a heartbreaking disclosure. This draws attention to the trauma and violence often endured by sex workers. Her account of sexual violence experienced in prison, without condom usage, underscores the urgent need for comprehensive healthcare services and sexual violence prevention strategies.

She also admits her reluctance to acknowledge her HIV status for a long time. She admits that after she got out of jail, she was never worried about AIDS and was only concerned with making a living by stealing money from her customers. Her confession reflects a typical response among individuals confronting a potential HIV diagnosis. The narrative illustrates people's struggles in accepting a life-altering medical condition and its associated fears.

Riena's journey took a positive turn when Kak Su said that she too is HIV positive and that she can live normally. The ensuing scene shows Riena entering a care centre for HIV positive patients. The scene shows her interaction with a compassionate individual who provides her with essential information and support. Riena's realisation that living with HIV has given her a new perspective on life is a profoundly moving moment. This narrative is further strengthened with the introduction of Manisha, another person living with HIV. Manisha shares her experiences and encounters at the HIV centre, fostering a sense of camaraderie and resilience. Having shared trauma, Riena reveals that she has renewed strength to live after going to the centre and that she wants to undergo medication for HIV. Riena also reminisces a traumatic childhood with her brother, suggesting potential risks for leading a risky lifestyle. She finally admits that having HIV gives her a new perspective on life. This scene underscores the potential for positive HIV individuals to regain hope and purpose in their lives, even in the face of significant physical challenges.

From a medical perspective, the World Health Organisation intends to make antiretroviral therapy (ART) available in resource-poor settings. Additionally, there have been major scientific advances in the HIV treatment landscape. Over the past decade, 16 new antiretroviral drugs and combinations of them have been approved by the United States Food and Drug Administration, with new age-appropriate formulations in development for children. According to a report (Ford et al., 2018), efforts in enhancing HIV testing have been implemented by extending support beyond the clinic settings and delivering ART to key-risk populations and remote locations. By increasing ART support and diversifying HIV testing methods, an estimated 7.8 million deaths and 30 million new HIV infections have been averted in low- and middle-income countries between 2004 and 2014 (UNAIDS, 2017).

Today, in Malaysia, the National Strategic Plan for Ending AIDS (2016-2030) highlights its intention to halt and reverse the AIDS epidemic by 2030 on the back of meeting the 95-95-95 strategic targets or objectives, as a means to realise the country's vision of securing the "Three Zeros", i.e., zero new infections, zero discrimination, and zero AIDS-related deaths. This strategic plan aims to get 95% of the critical population to have their HIV status diagnosed and be notified of the results; 95% of those with HIV to begin antiretroviral therapy (ART) treatment, and 95% of those who have started the ART treatment to adhere to suppressed/reduced viral load treatment (Awani, 2023). In line with this vision, several issues have been pointed out in the media including the issue of stigmatisation and discrimination. A recent column in Awani (2023) stated that the welfare of the HIV community has been overlooked and neglected by politicians as policymakers. The columnist highlighted an article in which the Selangor Mufti Department prohibits the administration of pre-exposure prophylaxis (PrEP) medication for homosexual couples in the state (See "S'gor Mufti Dept: Giving anti-HIV drug to LGBT is colluding in sin", Malaysiakini, January 19, 2023), implying that such discrimination could potentially increase HIV transmission in the state.

### **Importance of sex scenes: Visual [de]pleasure**

The aforementioned critique of *Bukak Api* reveals that the film is densely packed with valuable health education content, extending its relevance far beyond its intended audience of transgender individuals and sex workers. Explicit scenes are unsuitable for the Malaysian cultural landscape, but there must be an exception especially for educational films such as *Bukak Api* as they make all the sex scenes visually motivated.

All explicit scenes in *Bukak Api* are justifiable as they serve the purpose of directly conveying essential messages to the audience. For example, in one of the scenes, Manisha is shown to have intercourse with her client. As they entered foreplay, Manisha opens a condom packet using her teeth; this implies that even in the heat of the moment, Manisha prioritises safe sex. She is then seen to apply lubricant to her customer before continuing to have intercourse with him. Notably, Manisha does not ask her client to wear a condom because there is a possibility that he would decline. This explicit scene is crucial as it highlights the dynamics and reality of how a sex worker tries to get their clients to use a condom.

To discuss the explicitness of this film, we shall reference the framework by Laura Mulvey as presented in her essay titled "The Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). This framework allows us to analyse whether the explicitness of certain scenes in the film serves an educational purpose or instead evokes the male gaze, as mentioned by Mulvey. The goal is to investigate whether the inclusion of explicit content in the film is motivated by educational intentions or conforms to Mulvey's idea of women being objectified and sexualised in cinema.

The "male gaze" is a term used to describe the visual perspective in which women are typically presented in cinema. Mulvey argues that the camera, controlled by a male filmmaker and often representing the male audience, portrays female characters in a way that emphasises their physical appearance and objectifies them. This objectification is typically evident in the camera's lingering focus on the female body, primarily through shots that emphasise particular body parts or attire. It reduces female characters to objects of desire, serving the voyeuristic fantasies of the presumed male viewer.

Mulvey also delves into how the narrative structure of many films complements the “male gaze”. Female characters often serve as passive, ornamental figures or as objects of desire for male protagonists, reinforcing traditional gender roles and expectations. This narrative dynamic not only objectifies women, but also reinforces the idea that women exist primarily for the pleasure and consumption of the male audience.

In terms of the marketing and selling of films, sexualised and objectified women are used as a means to attract the audience. Sensationalising and sexualising female characters or using explicit sex scenes can pique viewers’ interest and draw them to the cinema. This strategy has been used to generate buzz and increase box office revenues, as sex and desire have been proven to be practical marketing tools.

How does the portrayal of sex scenes in *Bukak Api* diverge from the concepts explored in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”? Notably, *Bukak Api* sets a different tone by focusing primarily on educational elements. In this film, the shots, especially those involving sex scenes, predominantly employ wide angles with minimal camera movements almost mimicking an observational documentary approach. This departure from the “Visual Pleasure” concept is evident in the absence of lingering shots that typically emphasise the female body with the aim to generate sexual sensation.

Furthermore, *Bukak Api* features an all-female-transgender ensemble as the main protagonists, starkly contrasting the essay’s suggestions of a predominant male character focus. While there are instances where the male characters appear to assert themselves, it is the female characters who effectively maintain control, especially in their interactions with the male characters who often play the role of clients. This shift challenges gender dynamics and narrative expectations, aligning with the film’s educational objectives and differing from the male-centric portrayal highlighted in the essay.

The core of “Visual Pleasure and Cinematic Cinema” revolves around the objectification of females, serving both artistic and commercial ends. *Bukak Api* distinctly deviates from the concept put forth by Laura Mulvey. Thus, the label “educational” in *Bukak Api* is justified.

Within film studies and health, the prohibition of an ostensibly educational film prompts significant questions that warrant careful consideration. This inquiry primarily revolves around three key aspects: the film’s claim to academic freedom, its conscious efforts to validate itself as a scholarly work, and its use of explicit content as a means of effective visual education. As previously established, the film contains explicit sex scenes that are, nonetheless, intended for safe sex educational purposes. Furthermore, it is essential to note that Malaysian school children have already been introduced to sexual education as early as Form 3 (children aged 15) in their Science curriculum. Therefore, labelling the film as “18+ parental advisory” should be adequate to deter unintended or inappropriate consumption.

Overall, the banning of this film raises significant questions about academic freedom, the deliberate efforts to establish its legitimacy, and the inclusion of explicit content for educational purposes. The film’s status as an educational resource should be acknowledged and evaluated within academic freedom, recognising its potential to contribute to health education and the broader discourse within film studies.

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion, *Bukak Api* employs a fictional ‘observational’ cinema mode to provide a realistic glimpse into the lives of sex workers in the context of Kuala Lumpur. The film underscores the critical importance of accessible healthcare support for both trans- and cis-gender sex

workers, shedding light on the unique challenges they face. The narrative also touches on the issue of condom resistance and its profound implications for public health, emphasising the need for effective prevention strategies particularly among these targeted groups.

*Bukak Api* also highlights the lack of HIV/AIDS literacy among sex workers and their fear of judgement in healthcare settings and from the public which hinders them from obtaining healthcare support, ultimately underscoring the urgency for educational initiatives within this community. Despite the hardships depicted, the film leaves us with a glimmer of hope, particularly focusing on the healthcare support provided by Pink Triangle for transgender HIV-positive patients. The support and education aspects of the movie suggest that even in the face of adversity, be it being a HIV-positive patient or coming from a poor socioeconomic background, proper healthcare support can provide better outcomes for sexual workers.

Moreover, the film's demographic authenticity in portraying the current demography of sex workers in the region adds to its realism. The explicit scenes, though seemingly unsuitable for Malaysian culture, are justified for educational films like *Bukak Api* as they visually motivate discussions about safe sex practices. Explicit scenes are acceptable as they convey crucial messages such as promoting condom use in the heat of the moment. Such scenes highlight the dynamics of a sex worker's need to convince clients to use condoms. *Bukak Api* adopts an observational documentary approach and features an all-female-transgender cast. This approach serves the purpose of emphasising educational objectives rather than conforming to the concept of the "Male Gaze" as suggested by Laura Mulvey.

The prohibition of a film ostensibly designed for educational purposes raises fundamental questions about academic freedom and the deliberate inclusion of explicit content to serve educational goals. Given that sexual education is already integrated into the Malaysian school curriculum from a young age, it seems appropriate to allow access to this film to individuals aged 18 and above. This measure ensures that the film's educational potential is maintained while preventing unintended or inappropriate consumption.

*Bukak Api* serves as a powerful medium for raising awareness and fostering empathy for the marginalised individuals it portrays, ultimately contributing to a more informed and compassionate society through a provocative and educational approach.

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