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Watching a Singapore Drag Comedian: A Semiotic Analysis of Kumar in a YouTube Video

En observant un comédien travesti de Singapour: une analyse sémiotique de Kumar dans une vidéo sur YouTube

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Watching a Singapore Drag Comedian: A Semiotic Analysis of Kumar in a YouTube Video

"Sir, you can smile...the joke is over"Kumar 2012 ²

Introduction³

While drag queens as a social group are a part of Singapore society, especially in the 1950s-1980s, research on them reads like a rare report of an odd sibling rediscovered by the press. The memoir of a Singapore drag queen, Milly from Bugis Street⁴, who admitted defeat and ended her life in suicide (Eckardt, 2006), represents an initial account of a local drag personality dealing with the politics of everyday life. That the script of Milly's story was written in the 1970s and kept for 30 years before printing testifies to the rarity of documentation on drag in Singapore. Here is an observation of Milly's boyfriend which shows his attitude towards her (Eckardt, 2006, p. 155):

I felt a piercing stab of sympathy for Milly. No matter how beautiful she looked and how much I adored her, she was always worried about her appearance... She was always aware — balls stuffed up her body cavity and dick tucked backward into her crotch by a tight

1. Centre for Language Studies, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences, National University of Singapore.

2. This line is a comment Kumar made to the audience (Nur Fasihah, 2012: 01:10-01:12).

3. This analysis is based on Kumar's stand-up comedy performance in *Happily Ever After*, which was recorded and uploaded to YouTube by Nur Fasihah (2012).

4. According to Aaron Ho (2012), Bugis Street is an iconic space where the local drag queens and transsexuals solicited in 1950s-1980s. The area, in southeast Singapore, was popular with sailors and soldiers of the Vietnam War who went there to seek comfort and relaxation.

elastic G-string — that she was a fraud. I simply saw Milly, the beautiful object. She was the tightly constrained subject. The joy was mine, the pain hers.

In his narrative, Jim, her married boyfriend portrays Milly in a way that suggests that a drag personality can be constantly dealing with an awkward existence, even when the person has secured a relationship with a devoted admirer. Below we report that the mainstream heterosexual world, operating on a gender binary of female/yin and male/yang qualities, generates scornful address terms for discriminating against drag.

The use of disparaging terms against cross-dressing indicates a lack of social tolerance, let alone social support, for drag queens in society. The epistemological pragmatics of the condemning words underlines a divisive logic that degrades drag personalities (*them*) as opposed to straight males and females (*us*). Plotting *them* against *us* in terms of gender difference is certainly not an experience unique to Singapore drag queens. The construction of the *Mak Yah* (Malay transsexuals) as a social group is couched in such binary logic (Ng, 2012). Similarly, the cross-gender group *bissu*, shamans of the Bugis community in Sulawesi, are described as *calalai*, a Bugis term denoting *false woman* (Davies, 2010)⁵.

Striving for a positive shift towards tolerance and acceptance for personalities who cross-dress, it is timely to celebrate local drag artists who succeed in building their livelihood, and developing self-resilience from performing in a cross-dress mode.⁶ As an alternative to the defeatist recounts of social bias against deviant gender expressions, this article examines a celebrated cross-dress artist to identify aspects of cultural semiotics regarding a skillful drag life. This discussion highlights the work of Kumar, who has had a long and illustrious career as a drag comedian in Singapore.

Constant Drag

The brilliant accomplishments of drag comedians throughout the world of show business are in sharp contrast to the attitude of mainstream society on transgenders in Singapore. Evidence of prejudice exists in the local address forms, i.e. the vernacular terms used for addressing a transgender. The pejorative social linguistic signs are examined in an anthology of narratives recorded from non-heteronormative Singaporeans, *I Will Survive: Personal Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual & Transgender Stories in Singapore*. In particular, the section, *Avoiding Offensive Language* contains personal names deemed insulting

5. Literature on queer studies in Southeast Asia is available in *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* (<http://intersections.anu.edu.au/>).

6. Among all the non-normative gender groups in Southeast Asia, the Thai male-to-female transgender, or *kathoeys* seems to enjoy much more tolerance. According to Saisuvan (2016), a number of Thai films feature *kathoeys* as main characters not least because many *kathoeys* are well-known celebrities and prominent figures.

against homosexuals and transgenders as they perpetuate negative stereotypes of these people in Singapore. The vernacular terms listed include *ah kua*, *bapok*, *dyke*, *faggot*, *homo*, *kedik*, *pondan*, *ren yao* and *tranny* (Leow, 2013: 45). Table 1 contains the address forms invoked by the local speakers as pejorative references for the local gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgender (LGBT) community.

Ah Kua	“Effeminate male”, used by local Hokkien speakers. The Chinese term connotes gentile demeanor.
Bapok	“Effeminate male”, used by local Malay speakers. The term connotes gentile demeanor and vulnerability.
Dyke	“Lesbian”, used by local English speakers.
Faggot	“A male homosexual”, used by local English speakers.
Homo	This is a simplified form of the term “homosexual”.
Kedik	The Malay word originally means “slanted”. In comparison to <i>bengkok</i> (crooked), this is a less common term.
Pondan	“Males behaving like woman”, used by local Malay speakers.
Ren yao	“Transgender”, used in local Mandarin by combining the character <i>ren</i> (human) and <i>yao</i> (evil spirit) to signify “ugly human devil”.
Tranny	“A transgender woman or man”, used in local English.

Table 1. Elaborations of ridicule names

That *ah kua* is a term of ridicule is precisely the reason in the dispute involving Leona Lo, a transgender woman, and a bus driver from SBS Transit, a local bus company, which erupted in 2012 (Sim, 2012). Demonstrating the nasty impact of *ah kua* further, *SOMEDAY*, an awareness-raising video (Pink Dot 2012), highlights the murmuring of the address form for a transgender woman who seems dazed while she listens from behind the female bathroom door. Riding on the funny impact of *bapok*, however, Kumar exploits the address form to the advantage of his drag performance. Recalling his first ever experience of bra shopping, Kumar informs the audience that he notified the sales person in a whisper that his bra cup is a size ‘B’, a simplistic guess that he derives from the initial alphabet of *bapok*.

The negative impact of the ridicule addresses in Table 1 has prompted Leow (2013) to propose *gay man*, *transgendered woman*, *lesbian*, and *transgender person* as the alternatives. These onomastic resolutions, however,

seem problematic for naming the gender of the actor in specific cases. For example, the Malay woman who tricked another Malay woman into marrying her by impersonating a male would find the alternative terms meaningless (Maznah, Ng & Tan, 2006). The unique gender complexity at stake is richer than the stereotypical reference of the suggested terms. Notwithstanding, the conformist label *trans* in “transsexual”, for instance, encapsulates a reductive and transient understanding of sexuality (cf. Zimman & Hall, 2009). The English terms remain an onomastic dysfunction retaining little discursive currency for the targeted social groups.

The sociolinguistic perspective shows that the first-generation owners of public housing who choose to use such derogatory terms speak limited English. To the local moral vigilantes speaking English, on the other hand, the queerness signified in the suggested terms would be downright offensive (Leong, 2012). Thus, the English terms remain alienating for local vernacular and English speakers when it comes to touting their social intentions. The Mandarin and Cantonese speakers in the LGBT community use the heterosexual address form of *lao gong* [老公] (husband) and *lao po* [老婆] (wife) as the common references for each other. An elderly rumormonger on my block accusingly calls a male who visits a single male’s flat everyday *ang* (husband in Hokkien-Chinese).⁷ In stark contrast, the morphological-mapping view of a researcher is different from the actual cultural logic of gender address in public housing.

Drag Intelligence

A close-up study of transgender people reveals that one of them exercises tact in his negotiation of physical existence inside his home. Using autophotography as a supplementary tool to a series of interviews, Aurora, a 23 year-old male who lives with his parents, has provided visuals of his separate male and transgender identity oscillating between the family spaces (Lim, 2013). In the living room, Aurora routinely plays conventional male roles while socializing with his parents and relatives, yet in the privacy of his own bedroom, he reverts to his female identity using cosmetics and colorful costumes. The various pieces of digital footage illustrates that Aurora’s experience of home is of a multidimensional space, which sets him to alternate between female and an ordinary male. That one expresses and represses the other identity selectively in the different areas of the house illustrates that atypical gender expression is a political contention even in the domestic space.

We now turn to examine Kumar, a drag comedian who has been performing

7. The binary concept of *husband-wife* in same-sex marriage is clearly reflected in the union of two elderly males participating in the so-called symbolic wedding. The visual footage of the gay marriage shows an elderly Chinese male donning a white gown and a veil while the other Chinese male is seen wearing a dark grey suit with a black bow-tie (see the husband and wife role-play in the photograph available in Fan, 2017: <http://www.sixthtone.com/news/growing-old-gay>).

for more than two decades in Singapore. The comedian's biography, *Kumar: From Rags to Drag* states that Kumar was born in August 1968. Kumar's parents divorced shortly after he turned 4 years old. In the narration, Kumar recounts that his father, who was drunk on most nights, would beat him; then he experienced sexual abuse from a male family friend who took advantage of Kumar's desire for affection from a male parent (Lim, 2011: 26). In spite of his turbulent childhood and subsequent rise to celebrity status, it is remarkable that Kumar remains down-to-earth. In his own words, *being a celebrity is also about work...Pure, hard work is what actually got me to where I am today* (ibid. 28).

In hindsight, Kumar's work ethics might have developed out of his experience as a waiter and performer at Haw Par Villa, a rock garden located in the west of Singapore in 1989. In 1992, Kumar had a stint as a part-time stand-up comedian and the job came with an opportunity to open for a drag cabaret show at the *Boom Boom Room*. In a tongue-in cheek remark, Kumar equates the transition of his career to evolution as he changes *from ape to Homo sapiens to homosexual* (Lim, 2011: 37).

Sharing his personal experience wisely, Kumar makes a distinction between living an ordinary life and becoming the drag queen of the hour (Lim, 2011: 48):

It is for me very important to dress up, but it is also important to dress down, and that is what many entertainers fail to do. Like drag queens, when [they] dress up, they want to stay dressed up. They don't know how to dress down. They don't know how to switch on when it is required for them to be switched on and to switch off when the show is over. So they want to stay on all the time, and that leads to their downfall because it is important to know how the public or your audience wants to look at you.

In 2012, Kumar became the ambassador of the fourth annual LGBT event *Pink Dot*, which is the first time ever that a transgender has had the chance to represent an event as a member of its regular staff in Singapore (Lim 2013). The footage of Kumar speaking at *Pink Dot 2012*, symbolically in a pink sari, is available on *YouTube* (Chor, 2012).

Drag Madness

Delivering a fatal blow, the World Health Organization (WHO) initiates the epistemology of social hate by characterizing transgenderism as a mental illness (Worley, 2016). The medical pronouncement creates a view of transgenderism as pathological, a view which resonates well with the discrimination against Chinese, Indian and Malay transgender people recounted inter alia in Ng (2006), Lim (2013), Lim (2011), Noriah Mohamed and Norma Baharom (2006), Tan (2012), Teh (2001), Zainon Shamsudin and Kamila Ghazali (2011). In contrast to the scorn for transgender as a social malaise, ordinary males and females enjoy a limitless capacity to self-express.

In one *YouTube* video-clip, for instance, a female Asian American vibrates her head via heavy breathing while applying mascara to her eyelashes (Chen, 2010). Despite her behavior, she received positive feedback online with little suspicion of insanity. Playing by the conventional gender dichotomy allows a person to create powerful self-expressions and challenge the human norm with little social suspicion regarding one’s mental health.

Some of the male and female characteristics found in Table 2 inform our dichotomous understanding of the gender matrix. Consequently, the gender matrix based on the corporeal binaries of masculinity and femininity informs the common sense of the masses.

Common Male Features	Common Female Features
Adventurous	Fearless
Brawny	Curvaceous
Charming	Pretty
Gentle	Loving/Caring
Handsome	Beautiful
Hoarse	Smooth/Soft
Hot	Sexy
Muscular	Voluptuous
Sensitive	Tender
Tough	Sweet
Fit	Slim

Table 2. Descriptors of common gender logic

Aligning onto the binary gender matrix, Malay researchers, for example, classify transgender subjects displaying deviant gender behavior and linguistic expressions as the third gender (Noriah Mohamed and Norma Baharom, 2006). The classification implies that the baseline for interpreting one’s identity is a dichotomy of masculinity and femininity. Embodying a hybridity of male and female persona, a transgender goes against the restrictions of the binary gender matrix. Indeed, confined within the restrictive framework of the binary gender matrix, a perplex transgender would find little motivation to align with the common gender logic of the masses.

However, contrary to the social prejudice against the transgender group as discussed above (Constant Drag), Kumar secures celebrity status through his drag career, standing as solid landmark. In a typical performance, Kumar

appears in sequined women's-wear, heavy make-up with jewelry dangling from his ears and neck. His long, black and silky hair is his trademark on stage. An image of Kumar in drag, complete with sparkling diadem, striking earrings and diamond necklace, is available on SAUCEink.com (2015). Kumar's appearance challenges the common logic that defines gender as a socially learned behavior. The binary gender logic is further observable in the four types of gender behavior - masculine men, masculine women, feminine women, and feminine men (Carver, 1998).

The sub-categorizations of the binary gender logic contain an empirical appeal not the least because they are observable throughout the macrocosm. Transcending gender subsets, however, Kumar's drag performances oscillate between a male body and a near-female persona. Kumar's drag act is by default an external projection of female gender on stage because he does not share physical female traits, namely the somatic experiences of menstruation, pregnancy, childbirth, and lactation (cf. Grosz, 1994). Kumar's external projection of femininity is equally atypical because in Kumar's drag performance, one can see a masculine feature incorporated into the design of the female persona.

Cross-dressing in a hoarse male voice, Kumar's act exposes a contradiction between what is *given* and what is *given away* (Goffman, 2001). A paradox is at play not the least because Kumar projects a feminine demeanor, unabashedly conveying his preference for male companionship (see footage of Kumar's performing gig in Pandiyan, 2015); yet by speaking with a hoarse voice Kumar preserves a masculine quality. Such paradoxical gender-representation is similar to that of the American drag comedian, Bianca del Rio, the winner of the 2014 *RuPaul Drag Race* (cf. Rivers, 2014), and Nong Toom, the beautiful boxer (Sew, 2006). In this drag queen with a hoarse voice, who does not quite conform to axiomatic gender binaries, a new gender subcategory, transcending the four subcategories of common gender logic, emerges.

With masculine voices and husky laughter permeating the entire stage, Kumar and Bianca del Rio are drag comedians that have an impressive presence. Their drag acts appropriate a special type of *gender femaling* (Ekins, 2002), which sets them apart from contemporaries such as Jack Neo and Dennis Chew. Current efforts to theorize transgenderism may benefit from the family resemblance model to (re)conceptualize it along a male-female gender polarity (cf. Goertz, 2006; Gerring, 1999). By illustrating that the hoarse voice feature may become a significant criterion in the drag design, this discussion expands the breath of conceptualization on gender in general and transgenderism in particular. In turn, the gender subcategorizations may expand to include a classificatory system for transgenderism, which manifests a hybridity of identity by preserving the male voice within the female persona as a new addition to the gender matrix.

Mediating Drag

Observing Kumar's act enables this discussion to ascribe the etic and emic gender views in drag design to the distinctive variations of performativity. An emic gender approach to drag performance would incorporate the original voice of the male performer. The male voice in Kumar's drag persona is a core gender he was born with, and which is sanctioned in the logic of the binary gender matrix. Preserving the male voice as an identifiable baseline within this matrix positions the emic drag actor on par with the 507 Malay male transsexuals in a study by Teh (2001).

A mere 19, or 4%, of the subjects had had sex-change operations and these transsexuals share the wish to have a male burial as sanctioned in Islam. That many Malay transsexuals had returned to wearing men's clothing as they grew older (as discovered in the study) correlates with a second study of four Malay male homosexuals between the ages of 19 and 21 years old (Zainon Shamsudin & Kamila Ghazali, 2011). The interviewees of the latter study reveal that there is a possibility for queer Malay male undergraduates return to heterosexual normativity and assimilate back into mainstream society when they are in their forties, or fifties. Similarly, Kumar makes it clear in his autobiography that his drag identity is task-based, not least because he dresses down after the performance. Dressing down is important for many drag actors, such as Jack Neo and Glen Goei to pursue their directing careers, and Denis Chew to resume his job as a disc jockey for a radio station.

The two studies on Malay transgenderism and Kumar's emic drag approach collectively suggest that the inclination among the local males to maintain a drag persona lessens with increasing age. The drag persona may be task-based because the actor dresses down to blend in with looming heterosexual normalcy. Kumar dresses down as a host for a television program that provides an overview of specific jobs such as a pest controller, high-rise window cleaner, firefighter and crane operator. At the micro level, the plight of Leona Lo, harassed with the ridicule term in public, highlights the fact that males who go against dominant heterosexual society face sociolinguistic coercion. At the macro level, pro-family policies are constant reminders to any transgender of the social discriminations they suffer. For instance, the pro-family public housing scheme in Singapore offers subsidies that offset the price of the properties for married heterosexual couples. Another scheme, which focuses on procreation as the priority in Singapore is the graduate mother scheme that offers tax incentives, reduced hospital charges and school registration priority for the children of graduate mothers (Leong, 2010). Finally the Penal Code section 377A, which provides a legal means to punish acts of gross indecency between males in public or private with up to 2 years imprisonment, constitutes a concrete deterrent to any male attempting to go against the heterosexual norm (Hor, 2012).

An etic gender view on drag, on the other hand, would find the drag performance modulating the male voice in order to establish a complete feminine persona. Dennis Chew, in his portrayal of Auntie Lucy, speaks in a pitchy feminine voice and thereby constitutes an etic approach to drag that he comfortably displays on the television and silver screen. The reason for complete feminine drag is to maintain a relationship with others who solicit one's desire. According to Cameron and Kulick (2003), there are two objects in one's desire, the spoken (object) and the unspoken (relationship). Raising the pitch of one's voice to maximize one's feminine persona is symbolic of femaleness (Ohala, 1994), thus the effort to establish an interaction with the male audience. Feminine tonalities generate attractive speech tones, which may be an intention to uphold an unspoken desire (cf. the analyses of teenage girls in Eckert, 2010), thus Ivan Heng and Jack Neo spoke in fake high-pitched voices when portraying a Peranakan Nyonya and a single mother, respectively. In the same vein of etic drag, Los Angeles drag celebrities, RuPaul, Kimchi, and Naomi Small also communicate with a soft-feminized tone in their voices (Rodriguez, 2016).

Becoming female in Kumar's drag performance (Connell & Pearse, 2015) results in an active redesigning of a binary gender matrix to result in hybridity. The hybridity constituted by the male voice with a feminized appearance actually works to the advantage of drag performers because it generates a comical gender effect – bizarreness (Sew, 2007; 2009a). In *becoming* a political female persona, Kumar's hybridity encompasses mixed modes of gender marking that transgress the common gender matrix (Sew, 2012a). Going against the grain of common sense, Kumar's gender hybridity uses its bizarre appeal to raise social awareness, by embedding in his funny political views into the staging of an impactful performance.

Method

This study analyzes the significance of Kumar's performing semiotics on aging in Singapore, poking fun at Toh Yi Drive residents' initial reactions to a government-proposed nursing home construction in their estate. The selected video clip⁸ consists of frames comprising prototypical photo shots in accordance with the atomization approach for yielding a series of base units (cf. Kong, 2013, Bateman, 2008). An advantage of fragmenting the video clip into base units is to accommodate multiple analytical viewpoints (Sew, 2015a). The detailed analysis undertaken in the atomization approach does not warrant a lengthy video as the research operandi. Segmenting the video clip, *Happily*

8. The details of the YouTube video containing Kumar's drag stage performance, examined in this discussion, are available in Nur Fasihah (2012).

Ever Laughter yields fourteen visual frames; each one provides a visual grid for scrutinizing the semiotic hybrid. The transformations from one visual grid to another form the dynamic component in the video-viewing experience, because the transitioning phases between grids introduce repetitive visual progressions viewers recognize (cf. Baldry, 2004). Interestingly, the digital footage translates into atomic content describable through visual analysis aimed at understanding the aging dilemma that is part of Kumar's comedic design.

The visual frames suggest that the collective laughter elicited by watching and listening to Kumar's performance is a shared experience, which leads to awareness of a social issue. Experienced as unique by the local audience, the delivery of the message happened through comedy that utilizes a dynamic visual-audio experience, combining various semiotic modes including language, dress, bodily gestures and loud voices. The power of Kumar's humor is contingent on the enunciative modalities of *different ways in which subjects are accorded the right to speak because of their recognized training and specialization* (Howarth, 2000: 53). The audience's identification with Kumar's story lines runs parallel to the manner in which a particular speech group aligns itself on a collective mythical consciousness such as the Ramayana, Superman, and the Monkey God, among others. This reiteration discursively creates a sense of self, in accordance with one's cultural norms and belief systems (Lakoff, 2008, Sew, 2012b; 2015b). Similar mythic consciousness is observable in the Malays of Kelantan who share a collective memory of semi-mythical icons - Cik Siti Wan Kembang and Puteri Saadong. According to Shakila Abdul Manan (2011: 69), the recounting of folktales about these female rulers, and especially their roles as competent leaders, facilitates "the understanding of Kelantanese men's psychological acceptance of the assertive role of their women, especially in trade and commerce".

Kumar's declamatory performance suppresses self-identification with a visual chain containing exotic displays of direct and indirect signals. The audience's receptivity based on applause and laughter underscores the signification of Kumar's drag act. That the audience watches Kumar until the end is a sign of collaborative dialectics between like-minded social actors (cf. Blackwell, Birnholtz & Abbott, 2015). Visibly, Kumar challenges the binary gender logic by transgressing the existing gender norms with cross-dressing (Butler, 1990). Incorporating an exotic style into his performance, Kumar's drag persona oscillates between masculinity (signaled by the masculine voice) and femininity (indicated by the feminine appearance in the gowns and female accessories he wears). This hybridity of self creates a terra incognita for gender reinterpretation, which, by virtue of Kumar's charisma, makes for a powerful communicative analysis in visual studies. Fans of Kumar who are aware of his sociopolitical subjectivity are prepared for the dialectics generated in his drag comedy. The following subsections provide an analytic breakdown of Kumar's drag performance.

Dress

Dress forms a major part of Kumar's discursive gender performativity. In this particular performance, Kumar wears a sleeveless white dress. The strapless dress has a knee-length skirt designed with a playful cascading form. The revealing design gives a full view of his white-stockings clad legs and the shiny pink shoes accentuate his lanky legs. The white dress symbolically characterizes Kumar's queer stance as that of a *femme extraordinaire* with a body type that is the envy of many females. A queer stance is anything at odds with *the normal, the legitimate, the dominant* (Milani, 2015: 435; see also Halperin, 1995).

Drawing attention to the power of attention-grabbing ornaments, Kumar wears dangling earrings, bangles and a necklace. That is, with a sense of generic realism the viewers' judgment of the communicative object per se is involved in one's experience of watching Kumar (Chandler, 2012). Kumar's every movement onstage is a willful transgression of the common gender logic. Leaving the prototype of a muscular and sturdy male body behind, Kumar's slim body and white dress appropriate the popular expectation of a woman's physical attributes in show business. Gaining weight is a negative behavior for women in popular culture, equivalent to laziness, a lack of discipline and unwillingness to conform (Holmberg, 1998: 249). A skinny body wins half the battle for Kumar, allowing him to focus on perfecting his verbal delivery.

Gesture

The fourteen visual frames affirm that Kumar's persona and body dynamics are indeed a contested site of meaningful messages (cf. Grbich 2004) because the audience constantly reinterprets the meaning of his onstage gestures and bodily movements. The co-speech gestures work well to successively highlight the storyline, thus facilitating the delivery of the drag comedy. The unified responses to Kumar's jokes suggest that the audience is more likely to glean information through the co-speech gestures accompanying the act (Goldin-Meadow, 2014). Kumar uses physical cues to direct the audience's attention to the units of information delivered in his narrative. From holding the microphone with his left hand to raising his right hand as signal for the start of a gag about driving a posh car and moving his hand in circles to signify a rotating wheel chair, Kumar continues to mesmerize the audience with physical expressions and words.

In a different frame, Kumar flexes his left palm to indicate the location of a government initiative that uses an upward-moving right-handed gesture to diagrammatically signify the object of reference - a whole block of nursing home. Kumar exposes his right palm to the audience as a sign of honesty while saying that senior citizens are the beneficiaries of the project. Immediately after that, Kumar lifts his right hand as he broaches the issue of the residents'

negative reaction. In another frame, Kumar’s right hand is seen pointing outwards at an alternative location the residents desire. Subsequently, we see Kumar’s right palm as he shakes his hand to express the residents’ indifference regarding the senior citizens’ welfare.

In yet another frame, we see Kumar create suspense when he questions the rationale of blocking the project by raising his right fist. Kumar mimics cluelessness by repeating the same interrogation as his right palm moves upwards, and he immediately responds with a second hyperbolic claim that an old man might break into a house to steal porridge as a second reason for denying the construction of a nursing home. In the final frame, Kumar imitates the action of breaking the window with his right fist. The array of interactive possibilities using the body of the drag comedian is in resonance with the current interest in diverse bodily material as a significant component in communicating meaning (Bucholtz & Hall, 2016).

Visual-affective rhetoric

Refining the analysis of performing semiotics further, this section proposes a table of Kumar’s lines verbatim, alongside the visual-affective rhetoric of his performing styles (Howells & Negreiros, 2012). The visual and affective appropriations incorporated by design into the act lend more weight to Kumar’s rhetoric, as these intelligent modulations appeal to human intelligence, forming a visual rhetoric act capable of influencing one’s beliefs (Sew, 2017). The visuals in the video footage show how Kumar’s discourse works collectively through his gesturing and gazing at the audience. In many ways as indicated in Table 3 Kumar is tapping into the Multiple Intelligences (MI) of the audience, namely the linguistic, visual, spatial and rhythmic intelligences in order to get his argumentative messages across as visual-affective rhetoric (Gardner, 1993).

Kumar’s comedic turns on stage	Semiotic Analyses of Kumar’s turn
One minute you’re driving your Lamborghini	Kumar’s hand gestures suggest a change from turning a steering wheel with both hands to powering a wheel chair with one hand. The up-down bodily movements increase the vividness of haggardly operating the wheel chair. The visual-affective rhetoric reinforces the belief that age is a weak bodily existence.
Next minute you are driving your wheelchair	

That's why nursing homes are very important	Kumar's left hand making up-down movements repetitively towards the audience as Kumar bows, signaling affirmation.
Even our government recently...	Kumar's left hand points outward to the audience before swinging to the left side and subsequently moving pointedly upward then downward. The gestures establish two parties, namely the authority in power and a community. The actions create a visual-affective-rhetoric awareness of the subject and object identified in the act.
... suggested that Toh Yi Drive...	
... they want to build the whole block...	Kumar's right hand rushes upwards from below, indexing a vertical block. The length of the building is in iconic relation to the hand movement.
... just for senior citizens.	Kumar's right palm vibrates into a series of quick chopping moves. Symbolically, this hand movement indexes the populous reference.
What did the residents say?	The audience's attention is captivated by an abrupt move of sudden inward pulling by Kumar's right hand, which comes in from the outer right.
Put your senior citizen somewhere else.	With fingers in a grip lock, Kumar pokes his right thumb downwards before flinging his palm to the far right, creating a jerky rejection gesture as the visual-affective rhetoric expresses the rude treatment the elderly outcast are implied to have suffered.
Is this how we treat our senior citizens?	Kumar's right hand points outward and shakes up and down as though making a visual-rhetoric demand for an answer from the audience.
What are the residents of Toh Yi Drive afraid of?	Kumar shows a series of lifting actions with his right hand as visual-affective rhetoric in synchronizing the flow of thought according to his enunciations.

Too many old people, what, increase in crime rate ah?	Kumar’s right hand stretches out before moving upwards to depict a diagrammatic increase of crime rate; the audience laughs in response.
WHAT ARE THEY AFRAID OF? [Upper case indicates loudness in voice]	Kumar’s right hand points outwards as though to amplify a point with visual-affective rhetoric.
What? The old man come to your house, break your window, steal your porridge... eh? [sic]	Kumar’s right hand thrusts downward and scooping inward to his chest in an attempt to depict the visual-affective rhetoric of breaking and stealing; the audience laughs and claps, signaling a complicit response in return.

Table 3. Visual-affective rhetoric of Kumar’s act.
Happily Ever Laughter, Kumar (Nur Fasihah, 2012: 03:33-04:12)

Visual-affectively, Kumar expresses his position on the nursing home in two ways. Firstly, Kumar raises a question, *is this how we treat our senior citizens?* The question reflects a debate that Singapore has been having for many years. In 1984, the Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew exhorted Singaporeans to cultivate a sense of belonging. A strong national foundation is only possible because “active nation building (that) has given Singaporeans a deep sense of personal pride in the progress of Singaporeans as a whole ... It is these invisible ties that make for the sense of belonging, a sense of security in life in Singapore” (Wee, 2015: 463 quoting speech excerpts by Lee Kuan Yew).

Secondly, in stating his discontent, Kumar invokes a message of disapproval with verbal repetition, *What are the residents of Toh Yi Drive afraid of?* Paradoxically, this self-repetition generates a pragmatics of persuasive speech that enthralles the flow of thought (Tannen, 1989). In a recent discussion, David Gruber (2016: 38) reminds the readers that, *concise turns of phrase with repetitious words and sounds...appear easier for the brain to absorb and/or provide a kind of pleasurable effect*. The open question raised may possibly invoke self-reflection since a visual-affective rhetoric is never a fixed or complete strategy, but operates as an open contestation and negotiation (cf. Martin, 2014: 120).

Strategic Turns

As a strategic turn, Kumar’s right palm is open with fingers pointed outwards as he proposes an antithetical suggestion to the denial – the increasing number of senior citizens may result in a rise in crime rates. In terms of rhetoric, Kumar’s nonsensical remarks resemble a form of *strategizing* in speech.

“Strategizing is thus a distinctively rhetorical activity: it entails formulating interpretations of a situation such that audiences are moved to respond in certain ways rather than others. Sometimes this is done in relatively closed, elite settings; very often it is much more public” (Martin, 2015: 30).

Iteratively, the repetitive speech style captures Kumar’s belief that building a nursing home is necessary for the senior citizens. Kumar’s jab on the residents’ fear is visual-affectively powerful in that it generates political awareness on a heritage issue. The analysis of Kumar’s visual-affective rhetoric differentiates speaker meaning from sentence meaning in that the linguistic difference lies between the conceptual and constructional levels of language. Conceptually, there may be a disparate classification of sentence-meaning as the outcome of speaker meaning. Colin McGinn clearly highlights this aspect of sentence meaning in his explication of Grice’s theory of speaker meaning:

Words come to mean what they do in virtue of the fact that we mean various things by them. We confer meaning *on* them by meaning something *by* them. Linguistic meaning thus comes from us – we create it by acts of speaker meaning (McGinn, 2015: 192, original italics).

In communication, we distinguish sentence meaning from speaker meaning in the same way we would distinguish semantics (dictionary reference) from pragmatics (language use). As an accomplished drag performer, Kumar uses visual-affective rhetoric to convince his audience that nursing homes are important and necessary and he does this with humorous hyperbolic propositions. This is a performative speech act *par excellence* (cf. McGinn, 2015: 199).

Rationalizing Kumar

The human body is a useful tool for making a standpoint, especially when the carefully designed body takes to center stage for displaying strategic visual-affective rhetoric. Enfield (2009: 4) reminds us that meaning does not begin with language but with *context-situated composites of multiple signs, part conventional, part non-conventional*. The message delivered is much more enjoyable and convincing when executed with well-rehearsed gestures, as a process of *a body affecting other bodies* (Probyn, 2004: 37). Each of Kumar’s actions on stage is decodable into a series of semiotic relations involving chained action, visual-linguistic reaction, iconic transaction, or non-transactive composition (Kress & van Leeuwen, 1996). A visual grammar of sociopolitical humor is, thus composed from interlinking disparate semiotic modes, signifying that nursing homes do not equate to an increase in crime rates but in increased safety for housing estates. Kumar’s use of words such as *afraid*, *crime rate*, *break* and *steal* highlights the ambiguity and contestation of their meanings, not least because *the meaning of a word consists in how the word is used* (Schaffer, 2014: 185-186). Furthermore, the use of select words is

inseparable from the bodily gestures of the speakers and hearers participating in the interactive communication (Blumenthal-Jones, 2004; Enfield, 2009; Lazear, 1999; Sew, 2009b). Naturally, the visual-affective rhetoric of Kumar's sociopolitical repertoire is contingent on the projection of his bodily repertoire in combination with the meaning, thus reminding us that a person *is* his or her body (Schatzki, 1996: 45).

Kumar combines indexical gestures and bizarre statements to express his political displeasure in the drag comedy. Significantly, Kumar's acts constitute a political statement with incisive social significance because his visual-affective rhetoric reinvigorates the collective memory about the possible neglect of filial piety as the society progresses towards prosperity. In fact, the denial that the residents' wishes constitute a meaningful collective action hinges on a Weberian account of rationality reflecting the calculative economics of capitalism without moral values:

Meaning, rationality and freedom, however, have a different significance in reference to a human life as a whole than they do in reference to a single action. Morally neutral when applied to a single action, they become morally charged when applied to life as a whole. Thus for an individual action to be meaningful, it is sufficient that it be consciously oriented to some purpose, however insignificant. Swatting a fly is every bit as meaningful, in itself, as rescuing children from a burning building. A meaningful action can just as well be morally indifferent or even blameworthy as morally praiseworthy (Brubaker, 1984: 94).

Examining the audience's appreciation of Kumar's drag comedy shows that using humorous lines to address a social issue reveals a clear sociopolitical stance. Certainly, Kumar's reputation as a sharp-tongued comedian who dares to poke fun at local issues precedes him, thus allowing a dissenting voice to speak out against the existing order by appealing to the visual-affective aspect of human intelligence. Suggesting that too many old people might increase crime rates to elicit laughter demonstrates that Kumar uses comedic impression to tackle a modern affliction. Further framing the issue with an illogical equation, Kumar engages in a hyperbolic extension of the paradox that the rising crime rates may be caused by old folks breaking in to steal porridge. The humor lies reflexively in the irrationality of the original denial of the local residents.

Replacing the negative notion of crime by means of collective reassessment is effective visual-affective rhetoric. The reassessment process, framed as metaphorization, differentiates meanings by abstracting the diagrammatic features of our world using conventional modalities, including semiotic signs, gender features, mimetics and gesticulation (Konings, 2015: 55). Kumar undermines Max Weber's notion that rationality leads to capitalist calculations, which are the basis of Toh Yi Drive residents' value systems. Since Weberian rationality does not recognize moral values, the residents' collective decision is a meaningful action toward some purpose, even if this purpose is a mythology (Barthes, 1957/2012; Sew 2016). When collective action reinterprets the

communal notion of home, however, a modern social institution fraught with an individualistic ethos that prioritizes the economization of life emerges. Pressing for introspection, Kumar adopts a visual-affective rhetoric of illogical equation that sets the audience thinking about aging as a current social issue.

Concluding Remarks

Delicate issues concerning human behavior require careful analysis in order to achieve the aim of self-reflection. This discussion shows that creating bizarreness through the transgression of the binary gender logic combined with the visual-affective rhetoric of humorous reasoning is capable of influencing the audience. From staging a daily gender war, as it were, Kumar as a drag comedian shows a command of good tactics for conveying the message on aging, thus creating a political impact on the social issue in Singapore. Kumar demonstrates that well-crafted visual-affective rhetoric makes it possible to enunciate his strategic argument to halt individualization. Indeed, a drag comedian with a mesmerizing effect may increase social awareness in the audience.

Strategic visual rhetoric is significant for harnessing social political awareness in the stand-up performance. Visual-affective rhetoric illustrates that the style in which the information is shared is more important than the content. In Kumar's drag act, visual-affective rhetoric amplifies the words reshaping the content with iconic, indexical, imitative and symbolic gestures. We draw a parallel with the aftermath of Jimmy Fallon and Justin Timberlake's hashtag exchanges on the *Late Night with Jimmy Fallon*, which has garnered 23 million *YouTube* hits (Scheible, 2015). While the audience was already aware of the prevalence of hashtags, it was the celebrities' reactions that kick-started an online furor. While aging has received wide media coverage, a drag comedian such as Kumar may reinitiate self-reflexivity on what it means to be a community. In this respect, drag comedy is a good strategy for achieving political reconciliation.

Framing the issue in a humorous and absurd manner presents a controversial issue in a more palatable light. It is precisely in this manner that Kumar's stand-up act leads to a possible laying bare of the group psyche that was against the idea of building homes for senior citizens. The logic reveals a minimal-self psyche of this very group of naysayers that is similar to Lasch's concept of minimal self (1985), underscoring a new type of individualization. Following Elliot and Lemert (2006), Jeffrey Weeks (2011: 29) argues that the new individualism is a phenomenon related to rampant consumerism that depletes human relationships, leading to the replacement of authentic subjectivities with narcissistic and hedonistic values. As a reconciliatory note to the social issue discussed, the aforementioned housing project planned for the elderly is near to completion (Ho, 2015), and there is a keen interest among senior citizens in Singapore (Chua, 2012).

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Photo of Kumar « courtesy of Benjamin Mr. Miyagi Lee »

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