

From Mousedeer to Mouse: Malaysian Animation at the Crossroads

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Since long-form animation began commercially in 1995, there has been an unprecedented production of animation for television and cinema. However, Malaysian animation is at the crossroads. Even though foreign sales have been made, it is not cost-effective for producers to continue making animation. The problem is further compounded with the large number of graduates entering the industry. What needs to be done so that Malaysia will not lose out in the production of animation films and TV series featuring local stories and characters that can effectively reach out to young people, and at the same time, be able to appeal to a global audience?

I hope that we never lose sight of one thing: that it all started with a mouse.

Walt Disney

Introduction

Malaysia's first animated television series was screened in 1995. In less than ten years, the industry has produced numerous ongoing animated TV series, feature films and telemovies. This is an unprecedented feat among the ASEAN countries, considering that Malaysia does not have established studios as in the Philippines, Thailand, Vietnam and Indonesia. Though these countries offer animation services to foreign studios, none of them have their own ongoing feature films or TV series. It would seem, then, that the Malaysian long-form animation industry is on the threshold of greater things to come. However, the general consensus among producers and practitioners is that the industry is not headed anywhere. Breaking into the global market is the possible answer, but this is easier said than done. Except for the output of a few studios, quality is substandard or just average. The majority of the producers are satisfied with supplying animation series only to RTM, as it is the only

TV station that pays about RM40,000 for a half-hour animation episode. All other TV stations only offer about RM1,800. A common complaint among producers is that animation graduates are only trained in animation techniques but lack knowledge in areas such as story, *mise-en-scene*, cinematography, editing and acting. There is no specialization in local studios, and animators have to double-up as writers, directors and designers. With this kind of scenario, the Government's objective to create more local content an "especially" content that reflects a national identity "appears to be compromised.

This paper will, firstly, look at the state of the long-form animation industry and its development. Secondly, it will look at animation training, and whether students are being properly prepared for the real world. Lastly, this paper will look at the foreign influences on narrative, design and techniques of Malaysian animation, and whether a uniquely Malaysian identity is being forged.

A Brief History of Malaysian Animation

Animation in Malaysia began with the setting up of the Malayan Film Unit (MFU), in 1946. Due to the availability of animation equipment then, titling and simple animation were done for documentaries. Some early examples of commercial work are the present titles for Cathay Organization and Cathay-Keris Film Productions in the early 1950s. It also produced Malaysia's first animated short film, *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (A. Xavier, 1978). In the 1980s, MFU produced five more animated short films. The establishment of two animation studios, FilmArt in 1984, and Lensamation in 1987, led to the training and creation of more animators. Cinema and TV commercials were animated more and more in the country rather than overseas, as had previously been the case. A number of Japanese animation TV series were post-animated at one of these studios (Lensamation). Live action feature films like *Mekanik* (1983) and *Mat Gelap* (1990), began to include animated titles and animation sequences.

The Turning Point

When Dr Mahathir Mohamad came to power in 1981, he immediately pushed for the use of digital technology. What had once been the domain

of a handful of people was now open to anyone who was familiar with animation software. The long-form animation industry came into being with the Government's decision in 1994 to promote locally-made animated TV series. The aim was to cut down on foreign imports and increase local content. In 1995, *Usop Sontorian*, the first TV series appeared, setting the stage for the industry. To date, three cinema features, thirty-two TV series, and four telemovies have been produced: Malaysia's first animated feature, *Silat Legenda*, appeared in 1998, followed by *Puteh* in 2001; *Kartini* (1997), one of the four telemovies, was based on a comic strip in a humour magazine; *Kumang* (2003), was developed into a TV series; *Nien Resurrection* (2000), the first 3D effort, was followed by *Skyland* (2001), also 3D and went direct to VCD. Their films were targeted at young adults, featuring stories that blended Eastern mystical figures with modern elements. The films seem more popular with a Chinese audience locally, and in Hong Kong. However, they are marketed overseas as Made in Japan! Local animation films, like serious live action films, do not sell in Malaysia. The problem is further compounded when reviewers turn film critics, and pan local films instead of encouraging audiences to at least see them.

The State of the Industry

The average price offered by TV stations for a half-hour episode is only about US\$500. Therefore, the only avenue open to producers is RTM, which in 1995, offered about RM45,000. This drew producers into the industry, who thought that by making three or four episodes a month, they could recoup their investments and make a profit at the same time. Without the necessary experience and knowledge, some of them soon ended up in the red, and frequently missing the deadlines for delivery. So as to deliver on time and reduce expenses, some producers cut corners by compromising the animation. RTM recognized the difficulty of producing animation, and overlooked the shortcomings during the early stages.

The economic downturns of the late 1990s caused RTM to cut its budget per episode by 15%. When previously RTM commissioned producers, it now decided to have an open tender system. This created havoc in the industry, resulting in some animation studios not getting any contracts, while studios that had been just set up and without animation production experience, received more than one tender. Some of these

studios farmed out the animation to smaller companies instead of handling it with their own in-house personnel. Others got some of the work done cheaply in the Philippines or Indonesia, defeating the government's objectives to encourage the development of an animation industry using local manpower.

The unsuccessful studios had to retrench their staff as they could not afford the high overheads. And as if that was not enough, the delay in getting the approved tenders resulted in the selected studios temporarily laying off their staff. Many animators and other creative staff were disillusioned by the situation and never came back to the animation industry, and instead moving on to unrelated, but more stable jobs. This was a big loss to the industry as all of them had been trained by these studios, and had had years of experience. The problem recently has become further compounded with RTM commissioning only one season of 13 episodes and spreading it out over many studios. Previously there were only about eight studios and this worked well as they went on to do about four seasons each. James Ooi of Makmur Megah who has produced *Wise Misa*, *Mergastuah* and *Tok Tam*, lamented over this fact: "The cake is now smaller and our overheads are higher. RTM just doesn't understand our problems" (Personal interview, 2005). The only way out for producers like him was to look overseas.

Marketing Woes

The Government was aware that exporting local animation would help to galvanize the industry and make it less dependent on RTM. Many efforts have been made to promote animation globally by the Government through various agencies such as FINAS and the Multimedia Development Corporation. But with the tight deadline and low returns locally, producers were not able to reach an optimum level of quality that would also enable them to sell their animation series overseas. Participation at film markets was also an added financial burden for animation producers as most are only set up to do animation (except for those who had other television programmes to sell). Without an overseas market, producers cannot spend more money to employ skilled personnel who can enhance production values acceptable to an international audience. And quality productions could only be realized with the involvement of qualified animators.

Animation Graduates Woes

These developments have put animation graduates in a quandary. Even when employed by these studios, they are not really able to put their knowledge and training to proper use as all the TV series use cell animation technique, whereas the majority of graduates are trained in 3D animation. Only three institutions of higher learning have formal training courses in cell animation production techniques: The One Academy, GO Academy and Kolej Yayasan Melaka. The rest specialize in teaching 3D animation techniques. Cell animators need a high skill level for figure drawing and animation methodology. This takes many years to master, and so producers end up providing training, slowing down production. Compounding the problem is the absence of specialization of labor. A professional studio requires key staff usually made up of an Executive Producer, Director, Writer, Animation Director, Art Director, and Character/Costume/Props and Background Designers. But in a typical Malaysian studio, this hierarchy is non-existent. The animator is simply asked to double up in most of these roles and sometimes he may even end up doing the cartoon characters voices as well!

The Right Animation Training

The nature of the industry demands that graduates also be well-versed in areas such as narrative and also all aspects of production. Only one institution, LimKokWing, used to provide this specialized training due to its twinning programme with Heridan College in Canada (it no longer does). This course includes film structure, animation history and styles, animation methodology, drawing for animation and life drawing. Drawn motion, character and background design “and above all personality animation (which places a lot of emphasis on body language) – is emphasized. This type of course correctly prepares the student for the commercial world, and he or she is able to fit in at any stage of the production, be it in story, direction, character design, animation, background design and painting. Without this kind of training, animation graduates will find it difficult to be world-class. Another worrying situation is that many lecturers, including heads of the faculties, are not trained in animation. Says Sharkawi Che Din, 3D animator and lecturer at UiTM: Most of the lecturers specialize in graphics or architectural design, which is different from 3D animation and visual effects (Email interview, 2004).

The other option for graduates of 3D animation is to pick up the correct skills needed to serve the industry. A number of them have been providing animation services for foreign TV productions, but this is only on a seasonal basis. Once the contract is over, animators are left high and dry until the next job. Though they gain valuable experience working under foreign professionals, they only provide services, as the productions are fully designed overseas. It remains to be seen if they will be capable of being content creators themselves, and involved in a production from start to finish.

Forging a National Identity

Forging a national identity that reflects the art, culture and traditions of the people of Malaysia has been problematic, given the many races in the country, but it is something that the Government has been addressing. But how far this can be achieved is not easy to determine. Students, practitioners and the general public, are bombarded with foreign films, TV series, books, magazines and merchandise that are aggressively being marketed. This influences their lifestyle, including the work that they do. And it shows. *Keluang Man* (1997) is a prime example. The main characters are based on the comic book creations of *Batman and Robin*, and do not represent anything familiar to Malaysians. Only the dialogue gives any indication of its local origin.

Malaysian folktales and legends abound with superheroes and most are well known among locals. Perhaps for this reason, the two local animated feature films have tended to rely on well-known characters in Malay legends. *Silat Legenda* portrayed the legendary hero, Hang Tuah and his companions of old Melaka. *Puteh* was an adaptation of the legend, *Bawang Puteh Bawang Merah*. Only two TV series, *Tuah* (1998), and *Badang* (2000), have any reference to ancient warriors and stories. The rest are all set in the present, set in the city or the village.

Legendary characters will catch on only when they enter the collective memory of the populace, such as Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, and Bugs Bunny have done. One series that showed a lot of promise was *Anak-anak Sidek* (1999). It was the first and only series which portrayed real (badminton) heroes. Based on their early lives, it showed how they were molded by their father to become the badminton stars that they were. However, no further series was forthcoming, and the producer has moved on to producing dramas. The Malaysian mousedeer,

the Sang Kancil, had every potential to become as popular as Mickey Mouse or Pluto. It appeared in only three episodes (all done by Filem Negara), and was never seen again on TV after 1987. It was hugely popular at the time of its release, and many adults today fondly remember the episode of *Sang Kancil dan Monyet* (1984). Because of its small size and agility, Sang Kancil has acquired a certain mystique, and at the same time, become a metaphor for the little guy who has to survive in the cruel world. If the character had been taken up by the private sector, it could have generated income in many forms, including merchandising. Advertisers, too, would have scrambled to the TV stations to sponsor the show as ratings would have been high. Sang Kancil could have easily gone into the collective memory of the nation and become an icon just like Hollywood's cartoon characters.

Foreign Influences on Malaysian Animation

A tendency to copy foreign animation, especially *anime*, can be seen in the design and animation of TV series such as *Anak-anak Sidek* (1999), *Yokies* (1997), and *Sang Wira* (1996). One of the reasons is that most of the animators who were involved were once trained by Japanese animators. *Anime* has its own unique characteristics, and is very different from Western animation and design. The character of *Sang Wira* was a modified copy of *Doraemon* while one of the sub-characters in *Edi and Cici* looks like *Pikachu*. *Ngat dan Taboh* (2002) has much better animation than the majority but the storyline had obviously been modeled after *Tom and Jerry*. However, *Kampung Boy* (1997), based on the characters of the internationally-known cartoonist Lat, is seen as one that best portrays the country's image in terms of its culture and traditions. This was mainly due to Lat's personal involvement in the project, which was developed in the USA and animated in the Philippines. *Silat Legenda*, too, has strong *anime* influences in its character design and background styling.

Learning from the Masters

The production of *Kampung Boy* merits comment as to why it was not made in Malaysia. This series featured not only kids in a traditional village setting but also adults (obviously targeting a wider age group). It had the

typical Hollywood story structure of story and a story. The story related to the kids and had physical action. This connected to the story which had to do with the adults' problems and towards the end of an episode, the two stories would converge. Not a single local animation TV series uses this method. The reason – no one knew of it! (it is now being taught in Akademi Seni Kebangsaan). The standard of local animation at the time, too, had much to be desired. But perhaps marketing *Kampung Boy* overseas (especially Northern America), must have figured prominently in the decision to have it developed by the masters of animation.

For the moment, the international success of *Kampung Boy* has set some kind of a benchmark. However, if uplifting the standards of the industry had been one of the objectives of making this series, some local artists and animators could have been involved in the production from start to finish. The transfer of knowledge and experience would have been invaluable for the industry. The series was developed and led by Matinee Entertainment of Los Angeles, and directed by an American, Frank Saperstein. The local advertising agencies or production houses could have easily handled *Kampung Boy*. All that was needed was money. And for the money that was spent on *Kampung Boy* (reputedly RM800,000 per episode), it could have easily been made locally and the money could have remained in the country. So much for nationalism!

The New Wave of Animators

Local training institutions do emphasize study and research for final-year students' animation projects. A number of these works reflect the various races' and nation's heritage and identity. Works that stand out are Zhang Kong Wah's student project, *Bunga Karang* (1993), the earliest full-length student project, about the tragic death of a Malay fisherman who becomes obsessed with sunken treasure. This film was manually-animated and painted. Another student, Alan Aziz, studied animation in Poland but came back to Malaysia to develop a local story for his *Singapura Dilanggar Todak*, (2000). The story was based on the legend of a fishing village and how a boy saved the villagers from the attack of swordfish. It was manually animated but finished digitally. Tan Jin Ho's 3D film, *A Malaysian Friday* (2001), became the rave of the industry and won some awards, including the Prime Minister Merit Award.

Many other students from Multimedia University, UNIMAS, The One Academy, and GO Academy have also shown their mettle with their final year projects. All these films are Asian in character and make use of Malaysian stories and characters, with some of them reflecting the racial, social and religious backgrounds of the filmmakers. Some of the recurring motifs used are batik and *wayang kulit*, the Malay shadow play.

Whither Young Animation Filmmakers?

These animators can rightly be called animation filmmakers, as compared to those involved in commercial long-form animation. Their narratives and design are a reflection of their feelings, aspirations and sometimes, their frustrations. Though some of them have garnered international awards, the general public has yet to see and appreciate their talents. If this generation of animation filmmakers are given a chance to go mainstream, perhaps only then will Malaysian animation be on the right road to the development of a proper industry, successful both locally and globally – and at the same time, be truly Malaysian. If the animator is taught correctly to present information clearly and in an entertaining manner, this could make the animator's skills as important to the developing world as the skills of the doctor (Film Animation for Development UNICEF Report, 1990).

Conclusion

The entertainment industry in South Korea has for a long time now been rightly designated as a cultural industry. Malaysian works, be they film, video or digitally-created, will one day be the national heritage. And it is all the more urgent now to create local content, as more very well-made foreign productions are swamping TV stations, targeted at children. In 2004, ASTRO, the satellite station, launched more than 600 new animated TV series on its Disney Asia channel. It is important to understand that a cultural production, business, and the government are inextricably connected, and, in fact, it is frequently the common interests of business and government that produces culture (Smoodin, 1993).

Animation is an international art, and has reached all corners of the world. In 1994, Neill McKee and George McBean warned in a keynote speech: “The child of the future will spend more time in its formative years watching cartoon animation on TV than it will spend on a college education later in life”. Entertainment sells, and it is the best means by which to appeal to the emotions that drive decisions. To strike deeply into the value systems upon which we build our lives, we must appeal to those emotions. This is precisely the role that animation has been playing for more than eighty years world-wide, and will continue to do so for generations to come.

A seminar in *Film Industries Models in Asia and Europe* held in December 2004, jointly organized by the Ministry of Arts, Culture and Heritage, the French Embassy, the Goethe Institute and the Animation Society of Malaysia brought together for the first time all the players of the animation industry. The locals were given guidelines and advice on how to package and market their productions for a global market by foreign experts as well as locals who were market savvy. This resulted in many successes including the sale of some local animation productions to a company in France. This proves that there may still be light at the end of the tunnel for the animation industry.

For its part, the Malaysian Government, through various agencies, have done all it can by preparing the infrastructure, providing financial initiatives and facilitating the processes required to establish new businesses. Its intention has always been for the private sector to take it from there. For this to happen, the players in the animation industry need to take stock of the situation and perhaps initiate the much-needed paradigm shift for the future. But for the moment, it appears that the Government is still required to continue playing an important role in order for the industry to survive.

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