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Theorizing the 'Indies:' The Market Place, Ideology and the New Malaysian Cinema

John Hill (1986) argues that cinema is not just simply an economic industry. In his work on British Cinema, he emphasizes that we need to understand the idea of the relations of production or the political economy of the industry in which the products are produced. The film industry we had earlier (circa 1930s – 1970) was one of the main culture industries in Malaysia. The industry however is a structure that comes out of a competitive liberal market, which in turn is due to the expansion of capitalism and the process of colonization. This paper argues that film industry is an economic institution and in the case of the Malaysian film industry, economy was a crucial factor which determined its development. Another essential factor is the function of the state in regulating and controlling the industry. In a neo-capitalist state like Malaysia, the interplay between capitalism and its forces, the function of the state, and the legacy of the dominant ideology are important and should not be underestimated and I would argue that any analysis of Malaysian cinema must be located within and grounded on a wider analysis of the capitalist economic and social system, politics and the role of the state. Based on this line of argument this paper is set to examine and locate the film industry against the historical background which gives rise to a new kind of direction and a new form of cinema, loosely termed as the 'independent' production. The term 'independent' however, seems to be problematic. With the new kind of development in the industry that happened in the last 5 years or so, spearheaded by the production of short films and feature films that are 'different' in comparison to the mainstream production, the term 'indies' has changed significantly. The 'indies' are not merely producing commercial mainstream films, it has moved into something more socially, culturally and politically significant, wide

ranging in its subject matter and much more localized and deeply embedded within the context of multicultural Malaysia.

Introduction

Analysis of cinema as an industry and institution should provide a holistic view which will explain the phenomenon as a whole, not merely as an industry with autonomous social and economic power. Thus, this paper argues that film industry is an economic institution and in the case of the Malaysian film industry, economy was a crucial factor which determined its development. Another essential factor is the function of the state in regulating and controlling the industry.

In a neo-capitalist state like Malaysia, the interplay between capitalism and its forces, the function of the state, and the legacy of the dominant ideology are important and should not be underestimated and I would argue that any analysis of Malaysian cinema must be located within and grounded on a wider analysis of the capitalist economic and social system, politics and the role of the state. Hence, the whole historical process of Malaysian cinema needs to be addressed beyond the more superficial questions, such as technological development, its superstars, and the films produced. As part of the larger cultural industry, the surrounding issues of the economic, political and social contexts are much more imperative and must be explored before we can proceed to examine the product of the industry.

Politics, Economics and the Film Industry

At first instance, this basic underlying argument seems to bury the subject of cinema under the vague and vast sphere of the economic and the social. However given the fact that the industry was first developed and then declined because of the logic of capitalism, it is crucial to place cinema under a close examination within the economy and its related features. Furthermore cinema is not an autonomous institution. It operates within a larger social system of the society and not in a vacuum. The product of cinema is also partly a reflection of the social system and the norms, values and ideas that exist in the society. Hence, it is essential for us to look at cinema as a mode of communication and cultural expression determined by the structured relations of the economic and the social.

Before turning the discussion towards the idea of politics and economy, it is necessary here to provide some idea about capitalism. According to Garnham (1992, p. 21), "capitalism is a model of social organisation characterised by the domination of an abstract system of exchange relations". It is abstract in the sense that the working class has to sell its labour power to the capitalist class "in exchange for the means of their livelihood" (Giddens, 1980, p. 33). These are the exchange relations which, according to Garnham (1992, p. 22), will provide the society with "a concrete material reality." Under capitalism, the working class or the labour is reduced from an integral human being to the state of a commodity. Class domination is a preordained characteristic in capitalism and through domination of one class over the other; the whole social relationship is constantly being reproduced. At the same time it widens the gap between classes by enhancing the unequal distribution of wealth and more importantly the distribution of power in society.

Capitalism as an economic and social system based largely on class relations. However, it is also important to say that the class which dominates and holds the realm of the economic might not be the ruling class. Hence the class, who controls political power i.e. the ruling class, might need to formulate policies which will either run parallel with capitalist interest or is manifestly supportive to the activities of capitalist class. Giddens (1980, p. 34) has argued, "capitalism depends upon the negative reciprocity of economy and polity, the domination of the bourgeoisie as a class is secured by political freedoms", and therefore, capitalism needs a market sphere which is free from any form of political control. That is why a ruling class and a state that can determine this sense of freedom are needed in order for capitalism to develop. Briefly this is the system in which the Malaysian cinema exists.

What we need to understand about the film industry in Malaysia is the fact that it is part of the larger capitalist system and therefore films or the products of this industry can only be explained in terms of how they contribute towards the development of capitalism itself. We can never understand why Shaw Brothers had to close its operations in 1967 or why they started their business if we do not see film industry as part of capitalist system. It is interesting enough to know the fact that early Malaysian cinema had been developed what was a real, commercial, industrial arena. Film companies and their Hollywood like studio system were set up and financed by capitalists with motives to enhance greater capital accumulation and these capitalists were 'outsiders' and 'foreigners' to the culture of the society. In this sense, we can argue that their

involvement was merely business and in doing so they managed to capture the attention of the audience, successfully formulating 'popular formula' for their films and drawing a large audience to their chain of outlets.

It also needs to be stressed that in order to explain the decline of the industry in 1970's we need to understand that the whole processes of production, distribution and exhibition are very closely linked to the logic of capitalist business which is based on manipulation and exploitation of the market. The shifting of the function of the production in the context of capitalism played an important role in developing the industry and the process of its decline. Indeed, there are other factors which contributed to the decline of the industry but the main reason was because the market was no longer expandable and the industry was not generating enough profit for capitalist enterprise to continue its operations. In other words, failure to generate profit has forced the capitalists to withdraw from the industry in order to prevent more losses in their investment.

In this situation, the idea of film as a cultural artefact is put aside and, according to Garnham (1992, p. 32), because cultural production is a direct result from capitalist revenue, they directly occupy a subordinate status to the laws of development of capital. That is why when capitalist logic has signified and determined a certain limit for the production of culture in relation to capital, cultural production has to be stopped at this limit. In other words, the film industry is also a cultural industry which falls within the capitalist mode of production. Garnham (1992, p. 32) defines cultural industries as "institutions in our society which employ the characteristic modes of production and organisation of industrial corporations to produce and disseminate symbols in the form of cultural goods and services, generally, although not exclusively as commodities". What is more important in analysing the cultural industry is to realise how the production process and the control of distribution and dissemination of these symbols help to make dominant ideas emerge along with cultural products.

Competition in the market place is one of the essential mechanisms of the capitalist reproduction system and in order to understand this nature, we have to examine the structure of the industry. We also need to establish a linkage between production process, distribution and exhibition. In short, we need to look at the economy, control and ownership of the industry. We need to understand that film production is a risky business, financial risk is the major concern and as part of capitalist industry no one would invest in such a project if it cannot guarantee a fruitful outcome. According to Allen and Gomery (1985, p. 132) "no national cinema,

however large or small, has escaped the need for enormous cost associated with production, distribution and exhibition". We have to accept the fact that filmmaking is a business and the main objective is to generate profit in the process of larger capitalist capital accumulation.

An analysis of the film industry must start with an analysis of a specific historical moment with capitalism as the mode of economic and social production and, inevitably, class conflict, which symbolically has been conditioned to suit the needs of a certain fraction of class in society. This kind of analysis "distinguishes itself from a neo-classical or marginalist approach first by placing its emphasis on production or supply rather than consumption or demand as the determining moment" (Garnham, 1992, p. 7). This approach "never takes the social construction and maintenance of the given system of material production for granted. It recognises that system for the "unstable human achievement that it is, and thus stresses the problem of disequilibrium, the constant threats to the smooth working and continuity of the system, rather than assuming equilibrium"(Garnham, 1992, p. 7). Therefore, the importance of looking at the politics and the economic is to provide an analysis of the social structure of the society and its relationship to the social power of capitalism. In other words the production process is the crucial factor which needs to be examined before any analysis on the product can be undertaken. The social system in which the industry exists is a very complex system and constantly at risk. The system is always under threat and unstable and it is moving on a disequilibrium which can be challenged rather than stressing its stability.

Capitalism in this sense is a complex system of social integration and because of its own intricacy it is potentially exposing itself to crisis. Marx (1964, p. 67) has underlined a very important proposition in his book 'The German Ideology' – the question of control of the economic and the distribution of ideas which formed the basic philosophy of analysis on the control and ownership of the mass media. Murdock and Golding (1977, p. 15) have suggested that "control over the 'production and distribution of ideas' is concentrated in the hands of capitalist owner of the means of production", thereby the idea that becomes dominant in this distribution system is the one that belongs to this class and, as a final result, the shape of thinking of the oppressed class can be made compatible with the idea of the dominant class. In this complex relation, ideology or the symbolic condition of social life that has been passed to the subordinate class plays an important role in maintaining the very existence of the whole social system.

The most essential task is to locate and understand the relationship between the capitalist social and market structure, and the ruling elite in Malaysia. It is on this axis that the ruling elite's ideology is produced and then dispersed through the superstructure of the society. The Malaysian film industry, therefore, can no longer be seen only as an artistic and aesthetic practice. It has to be realised in terms of its relationship to the economy. Thus film is always political and ideological. It is in the function of ideology in which individual is 'hailed' and then 'assimilated' in the "vague, unformulated, untheorised, unthought-out world of dominant ideology" (Rodowick, 1988, p. 76). This is part of the ruling ideological discourse in which individuals in society perceive their relationship to the real world.

Film and Ideology

While this paper has much sympathy with the political economic approach there are several other questions and problems that need to be clarified. In the first place, Marxist critics tend to blame and put every explanation behind the heavy curtain of ownership and control or the economic, thus creating and reducing the dynamic of Marx's proposal to a merely economic one. In a neo-capitalist state, the dynamic of Marx's proposition needs to be seen beyond the relationship between the class who owns and controls and the class who is being dominated. In many cases, the state and the ruling class are the main actors in ensuring the system of distribution of ideas is in their control.

Marx (1976, p. 425) argues that the superstructure which exists in our society is determined in its existence by the base. The mode of production or economic relationship is the base or the determinant element in our social life, even though the relationship between our social life and society is very complex in nature. The base, as described by Marx is the economic system in the society. For many, it influences the superstructure or institutions and values of the society in a very complicated ways. Therefore, what is needed in any analysis of cultural production is to examine the way the dominant class exercises control through the extensive use of laws and regulations and the general economic condition in which this control takes place.

This leads us to the question of ideology and its relation to the base/superstructure metaphor. According to Marx and Engels, (1964, p. 67) the class who owns and controls the mode of production of a given era

at the same time has control over the production of ideas and their ideas are the dominant ideas of the society. Film as a part of the larger capitalist economic and cultural enterprise plays an important role in dispersing 'ideas' in society, regardless of whose ideas they are and how these ideas affect the people. The Malaysian film industry is part of the society's superstructure and through an understanding of the structure of the industry we will be able to develop a link between the industry and the social system. The industry exists as part of the larger social system that governs the existence of society. Rules and regulations churned out by this social system provide a framework in which the industry exists and Malay films are produced. In the above situation, the ruling elite and the capitalist class might or might not be the same. Even if they are not the same, the ruling elite still has a variety of strategies to control the distribution of ideas. Because of this obvious connection, any analysis on the Malaysian film industry should position the industry in a wider context of the dominant ideological system in Malaysia.

Such an ideological system tries to popularise perspectives such as nation building, national integration, modernisation and rapid physical development. As a system of representation, films or any work of art are dwelling within a particular ideological framework and this cannot be denied even though the concept of ideology is so ambiguous. As Zizek (1994, p. 3) has argued; "ideology can designate anything from a contemplative attitude that misrecognises its dependence on social reality to an action-oriented set of beliefs, from the indispensable medium in which individuals live out their relations to a social structure to false ideas which legitimate a dominant political power".

What exists in the society is a mystification of the real social relation and this very real relation is represented in so many cultural forms including films. The complexity of social relation, political and economic system, cultural and religious system determines the construction of dominant ideology.

In a country like Malaysia, ideology can no longer be seen merely as false consciousness. It is a system that mystifies the logic of social relations. Hence, any values and practices that we inherit in this social system are real thing. It is real when the society is divided by class; it is also real that this division is held for so long so that the existing social structure will continue to be seen as legitimate. It is also real that the mass representational system works to uphold a specific ideological framework which functions to legitimize the hegemony and the status quo held by the elite. Thus ideology in Malaysia is not merely about who

controls the material production also controlling the mental production of the society; it involves a complex web of cultural forms, political system, economic system and the religious and social system of the society.

The Independent Film Culture

There is no doubt that the Malaysian film industry is a popular national cinema. It is created by capitalist enterprise with the purpose of accumulating greater capital. It is a third world cinema that has the influence of capitalism which is equipped with a complex industrial structure. It is interesting to look at the development of the industry in the context of 'Third Cinema' as formulated by Teshome H. Gabriel (1982). Malaysian cinema however is not a 'revolutionary cinema', it does not use the tactic of 'guerrilla warfare' in which "the camera is likened to a rifle as the inexhaustible expropriator of image weapons and the projector likened to a gun that can shoot twenty four bullets a second" (Solanas & Getino, cited in Nichols, 1976, p. 58). According to Gabriel (1982, p. 3):

"Chiefly film in a third world context seeks to;

- a. decolonise minds
- b. contribute to the development of radical consciousness
- c. lead to a revolutionary transformation of society
- d. develop new film language with which to accomplish the tasks"

On the surface, the Malaysian film industry can never be comfortably placed within these categorisations. However, there is a possibility that there are certain meanings and codes which suggest or criticize the existing social order in society but never try to provoke radical consciousness among the people.

The industrial environment as suggested by Gabriel is an environment in which the national film industry worked very similarly to the practice of western film industry, in particular Hollywood. The main objective of the industry is to provide entertainment to the masses and "the sole purpose of such industries is to turn out entertainment products which will generate profit" (Gabriel, cited in Willeman & Pines, 1989, p. 31). The Malaysian film industry is a popular national cinema and, to a certain extent this industry is a popular 'Malay' cinema, an indigenous film industry which concentrates on the making of one-language films in a multi-ethnic

society. This is because, apart from the language, most of the subjects and themes of the films are concerned with the life and social condition of the Malays, the biggest ethnic group in Malaysia, while other ethnic groups are well underrepresented.

The collapse of the studio system in mid 70s gave rise to a new film culture which became the very basis of the existing film industry today. This new film culture needs to be understood in a larger social context. As part of the larger communication industry in Malaysia, the film industry is very much under the constraint of the whole interplay between the capitalist social system and the state. Capitalist social system provides the artists with the capital to enable them to produce films, while the state functions as a body of legality that provides the industry with a certain degree of control through the extensive use of laws and regulations.

This new film culture also needs to be distinguished and problematised. Independent film culture that emerged in the 70s was largely independent because it was financed by rich individuals without any links to any particular film studios. These individuals were normally businessmen who became producers (example: Deddy M. Borhan founded Sabah Film and Dato' Syed Kechik owned Syed Kechik Production and etc.). Most of their films were either fully financed by these entrepreneurs or partly funded by some loans or grants they received from financial institutions. It is quite interesting to see that the government at that particular time was also interested in the film business by financing some productions via its bodies like Filem Negara Malaysia and The National Film Development Corporation or FINAS.

Apart from these two bodies the Malaysian government is also known to involve indirectly in the film business. Fleet Communications, a production arm of Fleet Group (investment arm of UMNO, the major party in the ruling coalition) was founded by the then Finance Minister, Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah. It was "part of the government's attempt to promote the production of a new genre of Malay films" (Zawawi, 2006, p. 16). The effort was nonetheless a fruitful attempt, the company managed to produce two films by Rahim Razali, a new director at that particular point of time. It was also a success story because both films were different in its genre, narrative strategy and content compared to earlier Malay films produced by the old studio system and other independent companies. Having a close link to political patronage means the company is susceptible to changes and very much influenced by the political climate and according to Zawawi (2006, p. 16) the rift between

Tengku Razaleigh and Mahathir in the 80s “led to the dissolution of Fleet Communications.”

This is by no means the end of government’s participation in the film industry. As I mentioned earlier FINAS which was established by the government in 1981 resumed the role of promoting, nurturing and facilitating the development of the film industry in Malaysia (N. Balaraman, 2005, p. 13). Today FINAS plays a very active role in providing assistance and grants for any aspiring directors to start their directing career. Having said that does not mean that any proposal or script will be given the necessary assistance and funding. As a government body it has a certain set of rules and guidelines that must be met before these production proposals can be granted such help. This form of ‘early censorship’ works to filter out elements which are normally deemed as unsuitable or contradicting the values of society and the nation. Thus what were being produced are films that are safe, unquestionably popular and commercial in its nature.

The Aesthetics of the Malay Imaginings

The independent production of the 80s and 90s however was a positive development with regards to the generic order and the aesthetic style of the products. Spearheaded by highly educated filmmakers (such as Rahim Razali, Othman Hafsham, Othman Puteh, Mahadi J. Murat, Uwei Hj Shaari and etc.) the independent production tried to steer the direction of the industry far away from the earlier melodramatic style of the studio system. A more realist approach towards the subject matter had been adopted by these filmmakers while at the same time they tried to sustain the commercial values of the products.

Having said that does not mean that the early independent production managed to completely disavow and disengage itself from the old tradition especially in the context of genre. The melodramatic order is still a predominant genre although it is not melodrama in its original form where the story revolves and organised around a confrontation of good and evil and bourgeois moral system is blatantly espoused and gets re-centred in the end of the narrative. The majority of the films produced in the 80s and 90s are generically recognisable and largely fall into two major generic orders which are the variants of melodrama and comedy. It is also interesting to observe that women’s participation in the industry has increased significantly during this period. Women are actively involved

in the production process as producers (Julie Dahlan and Hajjah Ruhanie Abdul Rahman) and directors (Rosnani Jamil, Shuhaimi Baba, Erma Fatima and etc.), a scenario unheard of before in the old studio system.

The attempt to break away from the old tradition has resulted in a new form of aesthetic expression being articulated in the cinematic space. Generically, realist tendencies become much more prominent. Sadly there was no vertical development happened in the context of the subject matter of the film produced. In a multicultural society like Malaysia, the discourse of National Economic Policy (NEP) and National Cultural Policy (NCP) which espouse Malay subjectivity received a greater and extensive treatment in the majority of films during this era. Both early films by Rahim Razali (*Abang*, 1981 and *Pemburu*, 1982) are heavy on these Malay imaginings, reflecting very much the inspirations gathered from policies mentioned above. The exclusion of multiculturalism points out the fact that the early independent industry is still largely a popular Malay national cinema. A few other hugely popular films such as *Adik Manja* (1980) and *Mekanik* (1983) both by Othman Hafsham treading on the ever popular genre of comedy, also did not provide the kind of cinematic treatment that gives balance representation towards multicultural aspect of society.

Some would argue that the imaginings of the new Malay under the NEP and NCP is an appropriate subject matter of the time, given the fact that the Malay was on the verge of changing, economically and politically. Furthermore these filmmakers are themselves Malay and they were probably felt more comfortable dealing with their own ethnic rather than representing the other. They are indeed a new breed of filmmakers who did not have any sentimental link to the old industry. These filmmakers had very different style of narration but the scope of their subject matter was still very much confined by the social system of the society, thus leaving them with very little options than treating the changes of the Malays which at that point coincided with Mahathir's style of transforming the Malays and Malaysia.

There are a number of issues can be raised with regards to these representations of the Malays; first and foremost the politics of inclusion and exclusions that is employed by these films wiped out the larger working class Malay and their struggle for livelihood from cinematic representations and replaced it with the discourse and the imaginings of the middle class Malay. Malay modernity as envisioned by the NEP was largely to create a sound economy for the Malays by supposedly distributing the economic wealth of the country more evenly among the

various ethnic groups. But in practice the core of this restructuring programme was simply "to increase Bumiputera capital ownership and personnel shares in more attractive occupations". (Jomo, 1990, p. 154) Thus, this economic restructuring programme was mainly an effort to create and further enhance the Malay middle class and the Malay bourgeoisie's position by using the state machinery as the platform to assist, consolidate and monitor the growth of Malay capital. Although Malaysian society is multi-ethnic, this fact is hardly represented in the texts. Quite often other ethnic groups are represented with a narrow conception of stereotype images which is deeply embedded within the social relations between ethnic groups in Malaysia.

This multi-racial society is one of the legacies that the British colonial administration had left to the country. Within this legacy, society is not only divided by class but also by racial segregation. Each ethnic group has its distinctive history that differentiates it from the other. From their geographical position to their mode of existence, these ethnic groups have lived together under the ruling eyes of colonial power and this relationship cannot be considered harmonious. These texts conform to the ideological discourse that projected a modern Malay world. They hold together the idea of development and modernity with the Malays as the 'superior' race able to achieve a modern lifestyle, a sound economy and better social status. In other words, it contains several discourses which are neatly wrapped under bourgeois idealism, while at the same time undermining other discourses. In this particular context, the representation of ethnic others can be regarded as a process of structuring absences and presences. In a way, this system of representation is a very selective process. In this process, we have the Malays at the centre while other ethnic groups remain at the periphery and most of the time the representation is confined to traditional stereotypes.

Secondly the imaginings of the New Malay with economic prowess relegated the issues of gender and sexual politics to a level of insignificant and hardly ever discussed in any films of the time. Although women's participation has increased significantly in the process of making films but there are hardly any films that gave the correct kind of representation towards women. The construction of the 'other' (including women) in the mode of representation of early independent films is related to what Homi Bhabha argues as 'fixity'. According to Bhabha (1994, p. 67) "the sign of cultural/historical/racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation; it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic

repetition.” The nature of this relation is articulated through both the body politics of racial and sexual difference. In the context of filmic representation, it can be argued that the ‘other’ has become ‘doubly othered’ ¾ the ethnic other remains at the periphery and the woman becomes the source of enjoyment, a source of iconic pleasure in which both the dominant ethnic and the dominant male enjoy and consume.

The New Millenium Indies: *Filem Kita Wajah Kita?*

The new millennium presents a very different and a much more positive outlook to the film industry. The development of digital technology and the emergence of new breed and educated film artists create a culturally vibrant industry. The availability of relatively cheap digital technology made it possible for young and aspiring film artists to venture into productions. It is a fact that the technology has enabled the new indies to develop and most of the new indie films were shot using this technology. The young indie artists also worked in a close-knit group, helping out in each other’s productions and mostly were self financed or by grants secured from overseas.

It is important now to differentiate the mainstream independent film industry and the ‘new wave’ independent industry which is spearheaded by the production of short films and feature films that are ‘different’ in comparison to the mainstream production. In this context the term ‘indies’ has changed significantly. The ‘indies’ are not merely producing commercial mainstream films, it has moved into something more socially, culturally and politically significant, wide ranging in its subject matter and much more localised and deeply embedded within the context of multicultural Malaysia.

Started with a production called *Spinning Gasing* (Teck Tan) in the year 2000, the new indies began to explore and question discourses which were hardly touched by early Malaysian films. The indies in other words are no longer confined to the generic order, aesthetic and narrative style of the earlier independent industry. They are also much more liberal and are not confined by the social order of society. Hence it has the liberty to project issues such as sexuality, racial and gender relations and politics with more guts and openness. *Spinning Gasing* as an example of the new indies is still a popular commercial film but it manages to include discourses such as homosexuality and racial relations in its cinematic representations. Using English as the main language and being a

commercial enterprise made the film easily accepted by the middle class audience in Malaysia. Unfortunately it was the last commercial production of Teck Tan who after the commercial success of the film has stopped making films in Malaysia.

The success of the film jumped start the film industry in Malaysia which for the most part the 90s was sluggish with only a handful of films worthy to be mentioned. Most of the new indie artists (such as Amir Muhammd, Deepak Kumaran, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, Ho Yu Hang and etc.) started with short films and video before they started making feature films. They are also active in producing advertising films. Artists like Ho Yu Hang and Yasmin Ahmad honed their skills by producing these kinds of films.

The new indies however counters a number of restrictions and controls placed by the state. The newly formulated National Film Policy (2005) which among others a “catalyst and prime movers towards reviving and reinventing the development of the local film industry” and supposedly to be a guideline to create the Malaysian national cinema but in effect it is just a reverberation of the 1952 Film Censorship Act. The latest case is the banning of two Amir Muhammad’s controversial films, *The Last Communist* (2006) and *Apa Khabar Orang Kampung* (2007) both are looking at the other side and longing to be forgotten Malaysian history. Besides the rigorous banning and censoring, the state also imposes other kind of restrictions.

One of the conditions set under the film policy is the idea that only films using Bahasa Melayu can be considered as Malaysian film. It is clearly contradicting the multicultural aspect of society. This however did not hamper the indies which took the task of producing films in other languages, representing the multicultural aspect of Malaysia. Films like *The Gravel Road* (2005) and *The Dancing Bells* (2007) by Deepak Kumaran are predominantly in Tamil while Ho Yu Hang’s *Rain Dogs* (2006) is in Chinese. It is ironic when some of these films competed in international film festival representing Malaysia and hoisting the Jalur Gemilang when at home they are not considered as national film or not even recognised as Malaysian film. Apart from that the tax incentive that is given to local production is not applicable to these films. The 25% tax rebate will be given to the producers to encourage them to produce more films but as these films are not using national language this incentive is clearly useless.

In its effort to promote film culture in Malaysia Finas as a government body came up with a slogan; ‘*Filem Kita, Wajah Kita*’, literally means

'Our Film, Our Image'. It is very interesting when this slogan was put against *Sepet*, (2005) a film by Yasmin Ahmad which won the best film award in the Malaysian Film Festival 2005. Its portrayal of a Malay family and inter-ethnic love affair and using three different languages is seen as being 'unmalaysian'. Hamzah Hussein (2000, p. 8), a film critic once argues that national film in Malaysia should present and dramatise national issues, rather than thinking whether these kinds of representations could satisfy international audience. Thus *Sepet* as a film that dramatises the inter-ethnic issues and the idea of Malayness that is confronting the Malay society is being criticised. It is criticised because it did not represent the 'real' aspirations of the so called Bangsa Malaysia. It also runs contrary to the images of national unity, the imagined community envisaged by the NEP and the NCP.

Malayness that is portrayed in *Sepet* is also different in comparison to Malayness represented by the early independent productions. As a matter of fact in most of these new indie films the 'Malay imaginings' inspired by the NEP and NCP are no longer the concern. The representation of the Malay middle class, their lifestyle and their businesses are gone. What are being represented are the ordinary Malaysian people themselves (for example in *Sepet* the lower middle class Malay family, in *The Gravel Road* and *The Dancing Bells* the working class Indian family and in *Rain Dogs* the working class Chinese family). I am not saying that cinematic representation represents reality but if dramatising the history of the people is what national film is all about than most of these productions are representing and reflecting the Malaysian society. Most of the new indie productions also reflect and represent hopes and dreams of the younger generations in Malaysia. It does not matter who is being represented or what language the films use, the most important thing the new indies are trying to bring to the fore the hopes for a better future that is common to all Malaysians despite being different ethnically.

Conclusion

The recent development of capitalism poses new kinds of challenges to a neo-capitalist state like Malaysia. New kinds of control, regulations and business practices are taking place in the global capitalist system, increasing the power of corporate institutions over the old state-regulated business bodies. However, the trend in Malaysia can be understood as a

process of total social control that is increasingly dependent on state power, the ruling elite's decisions, and the state capitalist corporate structure which commands and controls the existence and well being of society. The implication of this globalization process on a highly regulated society is varied. Apart from widening the social gap between the rich and the poor, it also creates imbalance of power between the dominant group and the subordinate group. In terms of cultural industries, the threat of globalise culture and homogenous cultural values stemming out of this globalization process is seen as a negative aspect of capitalist expansion. Globalized cultural products are seen as a threat to local culture, but at the same time the ruling elite is promoting what can be termed as undemocratic cultural policies that undermine the development of alternative ideas. Film, in this context, is always seen as a medium with powerful social influence. Thus, like other mass media it has to be controlled and regulated. While controlling the content of the mass communication industry, the state also promotes cultural products and practices which do not question the existing social system, safe products that will ensure the continuity of the existing system.

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