Jurnal

SKRIN

VOLUME 4 • 2007 • ISSN 1823-1020 Malaysia

Filem di Malaysia perlukan falsafah?

Historical representation in *Gandhi* and *Sardar*

European art cinema narrative

Pengisian budaya dalam filem Melayu

On *Gol & Gincu*

Qualitative audience analysis research

Hisham Dzakiria
Azilah Kasim
Nuraini Yusoff

Understanding & Inculcating Qualitative Audience Analysis Research in Malaysian Screen Industry

In the words of Justin Lewis (1991), any screen production power lies in its encounter with the audience. One cannot exist without the other. As he immediately proceeds to acknowledge, however, this idea is "often difficult to grasp empirically" (p. 61) and the issue of how the idea works in practice remains full of methodological confusion and perplexity. This article reviews the contemporary shift and the importance of understanding of audience preferences, perspectives, behaviours, and routines towards the production of films, movies and television production in Malaysia. It proceeds to examine the comparatively underdeveloped state of Malaysian research about screen production audiences, and the variety of incentives to develop such research. The distance between academic and industry research in Malaysia is discussed, and possible explanations of the gap in our academic knowledge of Malaysian screen and film audiences are offered. Finally, the article considers possible means to approach the meaningful study of the media reception process within Malaysian audiences or viewers. The audience profile is considered as a key factor for programming of screen production. Understanding audience and their preferences could sustain continuous programming and development of new production. This article advocated the need for the professionals in the industry to inculcate such understanding and call for more qualitative research into audience analysis for sustainable development of the industry in this country.

Introduction

The landscape of the screen industry in Malaysia is changing fast. But like any other countries, there is much uncertainty of success and failure of any production within this industry. Will *Qaisy & Laila* (Raja Ahmad Alauddin, 2005), *Sepet* (Yasmin Ahmad, 2005), *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (Saw Tiong Hin, 2005) be a box office movie? No one can be certain of that. There are so many factors that contribute to the success of any screen production. One of those factors is the ability of the industry to understand the audience, their preferences, perspectives and thoughts.

It is important to listen to and understand audience or viewers' *voices* and *perspectives* on films, movies, television programmes in Malaysia because of the complex mix of cultures, languages and urban and rural factors. Additionally, there is a need to reflect on the effectiveness of such production, programmes, and services provided from time to time. In doing so, stakeholders in the screen industry and institutions need to get a balanced picture of what is 'right' and 'wrong' in their movies, films and programmes. Understanding how the films, movies' experience discourages or frustrates the local Malaysian audience or viewers enables the movie makers, producers and institutions, and others to reflect and make constructive changes to create the condition for better screen production in the future.

A study that focuses on audience or viewers' *point of viewing* and experiences in distance learning and their learning interactions is important for several reasons. First, there have been virtually no major studies that have sought the voices of audience or viewers in Malaysia. For this reason, this article advocates and call upon academics and professionals to study, explore and offer an understanding of audience or viewers' perceptions of their preference and perspectives on films, and movies to construct a rich and detailed account of the wide range of factors that might have influence and build the Malaysian audience or viewers' character and behaviour. Audience in many ways are *heterogeneous.* One may have different expectation, social system, believes, culture, educational and family background, and these variables may interact differently with the media and messages generated in movies, programmes, and so forth. As depicted by diagram 1, such variables have direct impact on the acceptance or rejection of any screen production. Some may like a particular movie, others may not. Some

accept the messages posted in a movie, others reject. There are so many dimensions of human behaviour that the screen industry needs to understand. Therefore, this paper advocates that there is no other methods of investigation that work best to understand audience other than performing audience analysis.

```
┌─────────────────────────┐        ┌─────────────────────────┐
│    Human Variables:     │        │     Media/Screen        │
│   Educational & family  │◄──────►│     Production:         │
│ background, expectations,│       │      Movies, TV         │
│    culture, religion,   │        │    programmes, etc      │
│      personalities      │        │                         │
└─────────────────────────┘        └─────────────────────────┘

┌──────────────┐     ┌──────────────────────────┐
│   AUDIENCE   │────►│     REACHING YOUR        │
│   ANALYSIS   │     │      AUDIENCE            │
└──────────────┘     └──────────────────────────┘

                     ┌──────────────┐
                     │   Effects:   │
                     │   Positive   │
                     │   Negative   │
                     │  Acceptance  │
                     │   Rejection  │
                     └──────────────┘
```
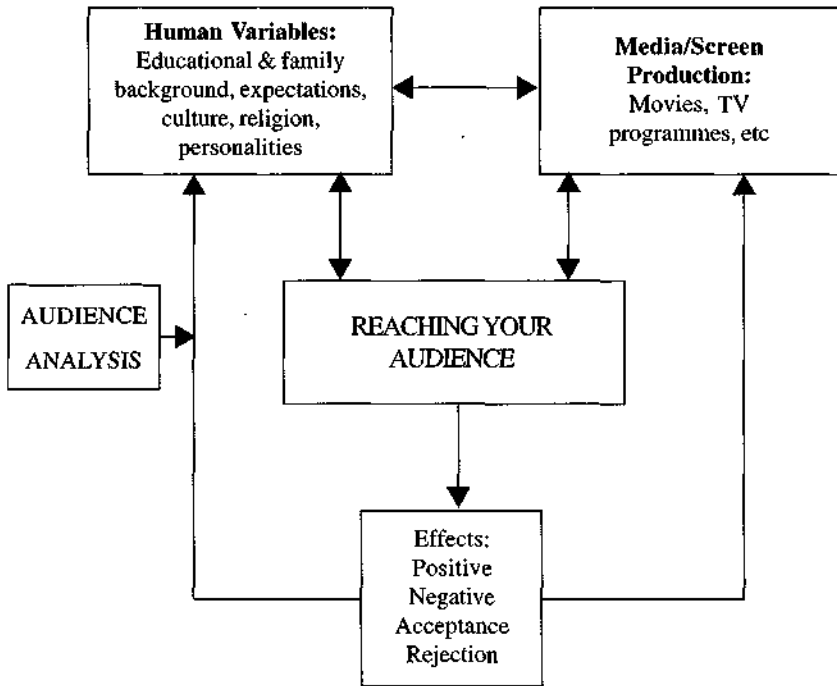
Diagram 1: The Complexity of Reaching an Audience within
the Screen Industry

The primary basis of any screen production influence lies in the nature of the interdependencies between the human factors, the media and other social systems and how these interdependencies shape audience relationships with the movies or TV programmes.

Therefore, performing an audience analysis is paramount. The unpredictability of audience preference is no myth. Nobody knows what makes a hit or when it will happen, since audiences make hits not by revealing preferences they already have, but by discovering what they like. The string of *Scenario movies* could be deemed as 'successful' for some quarters because it was able to position its production as comedy

entertainment for Malaysians. Nevertheless, its latest production of *Scenario XXX* remains to be seen. Audience can and in many cases remains unpredictable. No theater, film and moviemaker in Malaysia or else where, not even Hollywood or Bollywood can and able to ascertain success or box office sales in advance.

The fact remains that there has been very little market research on modern 21st century audiences. Most audience research is based on audience response to a film they have already seen. Predicting a film's box-office success is never an easy business. Many film producers and media miss calculated by basing their decisions on past box-office performance rather than potential audience response. Therefore, it is important for us to realise that it is not just because audiences are flocking to Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000) [Ang, 1996], mean they will flock to see the next Asian martial arts flick. Audience perception and preference are never static. Change in perception happens almost every second. People change. Some audience are similar with another, others are vastly different in personality, attitude, behaviour, thoughts, and routines.

The best means to understand audiences was most clearly and succinctly expressed by Fiske (1987) in his simple affirmation that: "audience is composed of a wide variety of groups and is not a homogeneous mass … these groups actively watch …in order to produce from it meanings that connect with their social experience" (p. 84). Audience for that matter is heterogeneous must always be understood in the *plural*.

In addition, Morley (1974) identified the important characteristics of audiences to be considered in any analysis, must include *social class, gender, age, ethnicity, level of formal education* and *region of residence*. Though Malaysia is fairly small country compared to the United States, India, Australia, though difference among audience preferences between and within states may differ greatly. The southern people perhaps have different perception, preferences towards movies, comedy, than people in eastern part of Malaysia.

All of these characteristics were seen to correspond with different audience groups and subgroups, and likewise with alternative cultural codes and meaning systems. At that very early juncture in the emergence of ethnographic audience research, Morley (1974) wrote: "[W]hat is needed is the development of a 'cultural map' of the audience so that we can begin to see which classes, sections of classes and subgroups share which cultural codes and meaning systems, to what extent" (p. 12). This

is certainly true with a country like Malaysia where cultural plurality and diversity is at the forefront particularly in trying to understand the audience perspectives, preferences and behaviours towards any screen production.

Need for Ethnography Approach

Together with the more contemporary work of Morley (e.g., 1980, 1986, 1992), Ang's work (e.g., 1985, 1991, 1996) has contributed very importantly to the continuing debate about how 'audiences' should, or should not, be investigated. In Desperately Seeking the Audience (1991), Ang made a powerful case for the necessity of the ethnographic approach. She claimed that our knowledge of audiences had been formed and shaped by what she called "the institutional point of view." This institutional point of view is the way in which industry and mainstream academic research were inclined to perceive audiences. Evidently, such approach had in fact prevented a true understanding of the audience. In Ang's view, only "a perspective that displays sensitivity to the everyday practices and experiences of actual audiences themselves" can supply any true insight into viewers (see Ang, 1991). We feel that such approach is timely and suits the screen industry in Malaysia. Only when we understand the composition and preferences among the richly diverse population of viewers in Malaysia that perhaps better programming and production could be made.

Institutional knowledge, according to Ang, is formed by the industry's need to "get" an audience. The audience as seen by the industry is a group of individuals with identifiable and categorizable attributes: age, gender, and so forth. Ang demonstrates that this view of "the audience" (singular) is a discursive construct and therefore does not match any actual audience. This in turn explains why broadcasting organizations are bound to be "desperately seeking the audience." Despite all of the sophisticated methods of audience measurement-for example, the people meter-the industry is never truly certain of actually "having" an audience. Actual audiences are unpredictable, constantly changing their preferences, and therefore the attempt to describe the audience in terms of neatly defined categories is in itself absurd.

She proceeds to describe the uncomfortable relationship between both private and public broadcasting organizations and their audiences. Although the two types of organizations differ in their conceptualizations. Private broadcasters like TV3, NTV 7, ASTRO and others see audiences

as consumers to be sold to advertisers while public broadcasters like RTM see audiences as citizens to be educated and informed-both lack insight into the behaviour of their viewers. Ang provides detailed and useful insights into institutional conceptualizations of audiences and the difficulties encountered in their efforts to attract viewers. Finally, she points out that communication researchers have often too easily adopted the institutional point of view. She argues that mainstream communication research, with its search for generalizations, is totally in contrast to the ethnographic approach that she advocates. Rather than seek to generalize, ethnographic research under the rubric of qualitative research method asks how specific audiences differ in the social production of meaning within their daily lives and especially in view of the diverse social settings in which media are received. Practically, such analysis requires qualitative empirical methods including in-depth interviews and observations of audiences in the primary settings where viewing occurs.

The Communicative Dimension of Audience Research

The key focus as depicted in diagram 1 was on the realisation that we are, of course, dealing with human communication that is rich with signs and symbols, which only have meaning within the terms of reference supplied by codes (of one sort or another) which the audience shares, to some greater or lesser extent, with the producers of messages.

The premises of encoding/decoding model were:

- The same event can be encoded in more than one way.
- The message always contains more than one potential "reading". Messages propose and "prefer" certain readings over others, but they can never become wholly closed around one reading: they remain polysemic (i.e. capable, in principle, of a variety of interpretations).
- Understanding the message is also a problematic practice, however transparent and "natural" it may seem. Messages encoded one way can always be decoded in a different way.

The message in any product of screen production is treated here as a complex sign, in which a "preferred reading" has been inscribed, but which retains the potential, if decoded in a manner different from the way in which it has been encoded, of communicating a different meaning. The message is thus a structured polysemy. Your perspective and

experiences of watching *Puteri Gunung Ledang, Sepet,* would possibly be similar or vastly different than other viewers. It is central to the argument that all meanings do not exist "equally" in the message: which is seen to have been structured in dominance, despite the impossibility of a "total closure" of meaning. Further, the "preferred reading" is itself part of the message, and can be identified within its linguistic and communicative structure.

There will be no necessary "fit" or transparency between the encoding and decoding ends of the communication chain. It is precisely this lack of transparency, and its consequences for communication which we need to investigate qualitatively. Having established that there is always a possibility of disjunction between the codes of those sending and those receiving through the circuit of mass communications, the problem of the "effects" of communication could now be reformulated, as that of the extent to which decodings take place within the limits of the preferred (or dominant) manner in which the message has been initially encoded.

Screen theory was centrally concerned with the analysis the effects of cinema (and especially, the regressive effects of mainstream, commercial cinema) in "positioning" the spectator (or subject) of the film, through the way in which the text (by means of camera placement, editing and other formal characteristics) "fixed" the spectator into a particular kind of "subject-position", which it was argued, "guaranteed" the transmission of a certain kind of "bourgeois ideology" of naturalism, realism and probability.

Undoubtedly, one of Screen theory's great achievements, drawing was to restore an emphasis to the analysis of texts which had been absent in much previous work. In particular, the insights of psychoanalysis were extremely influential in the development of later feminist work on the role of the media in the construction of gendered identities and gendered forms of spectatorship (see, Kuhn, 1982; Modleski, 1984).

Proponents of Screen theory argued that previous approaches had neglected the analysis of the textual forms and patterns of media products, concentrating instead on the analysis of patterns of ownership and control.

In Screen theory, it was the text itself which was the central (if not exclusive) focus of the analysis, on the assumption that, since the text "positioned" the spectator, all that was necessary was the close analysis of texts, from which their "effects" on their spectators could be automatically deduced, as spectators were bound to take up the "positions" constructed for them by the text (film).

Fundamental & Issues of Audience Analysis

Much of the methodological complexity derives from the initial discovery that specific readings of media texts originate in both macro-social factors such as class, ethnicity, gender, age, and so forth as well as in micro-social or interactional/contextual relations such as household dynamics, which impose their own influences and at the same time serve to mediate the larger macrosocial factors that are operative (see Schroder, 1994).

What further complicates any research design is the reality that media reception occurs in a variety of settings, of which the household is but one and only dominant-setting, and it is mediated and negotiated in a yet greater variety of multiple social settings. Schroder (1994) strikes home the fundamental reality that even research which summons together naturally interactive social groups (such as families or peer groups) is problematic in the sense that each member of such a group or "interpretive community" is simultaneously a member of many other social groups or communities. Just by virtue of the act of selecting one of these as the unit of analysis, the researcher unavoidably accords priority to that unit, to the necessary exclusion or neglect of all of the other interpretive communities to which the individual belongs.

If, say, we wanted to explore the receptive of *Scenario* productions for example on Malaysia audiences and its social signifying processes among the population of the country, it would be impossible to do justice to the vastness of this subject through a study of one interpretive community. To interview families/households, for instance, is clearly insufficient if one wants to capture the multiple interpersonal discourses through which people make sense of the message and story line that Scenario projects to deliver.

As qualitative practitioners and researchers we feel that the best solution is to use the individual interview in the informant's home as the research setting that best does justice to the whole array of cultural discourses that the individual inhabits. After all, one need not directly observe the individual in each and every possible social setting; while the individual is situated in the household setting, one can also freely explore the multiple sociocultural circumstances which contribute to the individual's readings and uses of television or other media. As Schroder states, "this is ultimately an empirical question" (p. 342), and a research design can be formulated in such a way as to capture the experiences of subjects in other settings.

A preliminary step in the formulation of any research design is the need to first sketch out the variety of households that are contained within Malaysia as a country case and to assemble some of the available data regarding their respective patterns of media usage. It can be seen that the "overseas" contributions of those such as Ang, and Morley do provide fruitful fodder for the empirical exploration of the reception process as it operates here. Since the dominant setting of ethnographic audience research is the household, what can add to the fodder are the potentially useful linkages between discussions of households in the family studies literature and discussions of household media reception in the media studies literature. There is, in other words, much to be gained from an attempted integration or at least intersection of family studies and media studies along several counts, particularly if one is concerned, like most ethnographic audience researchers, to unravel the operation of the media reception process within its everyday household context.

For example, there is a tendency within ethnographic audience research to treat families and households in a monolithic manner, to consider so-called "nuclear" families almost exclusively, and to overlook the extensive and increasing diversity of family forms and household types-including solo-parent families, childless couples, gay and lesbian couples, multigenerational households, one-person households, and so forth. There is, in other words, a tendency to overlook the variety of ways in which households are differentially structured, which in turn leads to differential configurations of interactional dynamics, and which in turn can be expected to lead to differential patterns of media usage and differential outcomes of the media reception experience.

There are also several components of media usage patterns that can be distinguished, including: the type and quantity of media available within a household, the extent of usage, gendered patterns of usage, and, not unrelatedly, power and control over media usage as it is exercised within the social-interactional dynamics of family media experiences. Unfortunately, the available Malaysian data are largely limited to those regarding the extent to which Malaysian households are equipped with communication and information technologies. These data are indeed extraordinary, and reflect the tradition whereby Malaysians have tended historically to be ravenous consumers of media technologies.

Lull's (1990) discussion of cultural variations in family viewing and the rituals and rules of social interaction and communication within households moves further towards a comprehensive and contextualized

understanding of the media reception process. His notion of "cultural variation" extends to three levels of analysis: by "the culture" he refers to characteristics of a social context beyond the microlevel parameters of the household; "the household" encompasses the structure of family relations as well as the physical location or place in which television is experienced; and the third level of analysis is "the person." He acknowledges that television viewing occurs most commonly and most fundamentally within the household: what is understood to be a complex, very intricate mix of persons, social roles, power relations, ritual activities, processes of interpersonal communication, and physical factors that characterize the household environment, as well as the technological equipment contained within it.

Television, as the dominant medium towards which attention is directed in these discussions, is seen to serve a variety of purposes in everyday family relations. In households with children, it can be called upon to alleviate somewhat the burden of childcare by occupying the attention of children while other household labour chores are completed. In solo-parent households, it is sometimes called upon in order to play out symbolically the role of the second parent. And in all but one-person households, it can be incorporated into strategies to avoid physical or emotional contact with other household members.

As Morley (1980, 1986), Rogge & Jensen (1988), and others have demonstrated, the uses and patterns of television viewing may be highly routinized, yet are not at all static or invulnerable to change. Where household circumstances change-for example, where the composition of the household changes or where a member becomes unemployed-family viewing patterns can be dramatically affected with respect to the amount of viewing, the content of viewing, and the linkages between viewing and other household activities. In the case of a household struck by unemployment, communication and relations between members can be expected to change as new viewing patterns are negotiated in order to arrive at a viable arrangement that will work within the nexus of prefigured social relations in the household.

Conclusion

This paper advocates the need for all stakeholder in the screen industry particularly film producers, directors to conduct audience analysis by segmenting their audience to target their messages. This article suggests,

in a highly exploratory and tentative fashion, that it is timely for the industry to realize the importance of gathering qualitatively existent knowledge of Malaysian audience, Malaysia family structures and family dynamics, alongside and together with existent knowledge of family media consumption and culture in order to begin to address questions of screen production reception in Malaysia in a truly comprehensive and contextually sensitive manner.

Such work might call upon a variety of methods, but this paper advocated the use of qualitative approach to better understand the Malaysia audience preference, perspectives, believe system, and behaviours towards screen production. We believe that such powerful research method could help the industry and allow the viewers or audience to express their views freely, and such informed knowledge could make it possible for the stakeholders in the industry to fully understand how the social characteristics of viewers shaped their responses.

References

Ang, L. (1985). *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination.* London: Methuen.

Ang, L. (1991). *Desperately seeking the audience.* London: Routledge.

Ang, L. (1996). *Living room wars: Rethinking media audiences for a postmodern world.* London: Routledge.

Fiske, J. (1987). *Television Culture.* London: Methuen.

Kuhn, A. (1982). *Women's Pictures.* London: Routledge.

Lewis, J. (1991). *The ideological octopus: An exploration of television and its audience.* New York: Routledge.

Lull, J. (1990). *Inside family viewing: Ethnographic research on television's audiences.* New York: Routledge.

Modleski, T. (1984). *Loving with A vengeance.* London: Methuen.

Morley, D. (1974). *Reconceptualizing the media audience: Towards an ethnography of audiences.* University of Birmingham, Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, Stencilled Occasional Papers.

Morley, D. (1980). *The Nationwide audience: Structure and decoding.* London: British Film Institute.

Morley, D. (1986). *Family television: Cultural power and domestic leisure.* London: Comedia.

Morley, D. (1992). *Television, audiences, and cultural studies.* London: Routledge.

Rogge, J., & Jensen, K. (1988). Everyday life and television in West Germany: An empathetic-interpretive perspective on the family as system. In J. Lull (Ed.), *World families watch television* (pp. 80-115). London: Sage.

Schroder, K. C. (1994). Audience semiotics, interpretive communities, and the 'ethnographic turn' in media research. *Media, Culture & Society, 16(2),* 337-347.

HISHAM DZAKIRIA, PhD is attached with the Faculty of Communication & Modern Languages at Universiti Utara Malaysia. His areas of interest are distance & life-long learning, language and communication, use of qualitative methodology. Hisham in numerous occasion has conducted workshops and training on the use of qualitative methodology and approach in research.

AZILAH KASIM, PhD, Associate Professor, is attached with the Faculty of Tourism, Hospitality and Environmental Study. Apart from tourism and hospitality, Azilah is also an avid user and practitioner of qualitative method and approaches in social science research.

NURAINI YUSOFF, PhD, Associate Professor, is attached with the Faculty of Communication & Modern Languages. She is an expert and trainer in the area of language and communication, and has been acknowledged as leading consultant in those areas.