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Filem di Malaysia perlukan falsafah?

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On *Gol & Gincu*

Qualitative audience analysis research

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The Search for a National Cinema

A new cinema emerged in Malaysia at the turn of the new millennium. It was a different cinema which explored themes of alienation, racial boundaries and socio-political ideologies. Led by Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Ho Yuhang and Yasmin Ahmad, their films have signaled a level of maturity rarely seen before. Although their films have won international recognition and awards, they still face difficulties in obtaining government support through funding, and faces problems with censorship. This paper will look at the problems faced by these filmmakers. It will also look at how these new films are affecting the existing notions of what constitutes Malaysian cinema, and the new challenges that the existing film and funding policies face in building a 'new' national cinema.

Background

The history of Malaysian cinema has always been a history of Malay films, either produced by the Shaw Brothers' Studios during the Golden Era until the 70s, or by the Malay independent producers in the three decades that followed.[1] The stories have always been Malay-centric, in the Malay language, using Malay actors and directors, produced for the predominantly Malay audience. Lacking alternatives, audiences from the Indian and Chinese ethnicities would watch Bollywood, Hollywood and Hong Kong films which appeals more to their sensibilities.

Malay films have always been the sole representation of Malaysian cinema in the absence of films from the other ethnicities. Malay films in the Malay language have been taken as *Filem Kita, Wajah Kita* (literally translated as Our films, Our Faces). Thus a film with a proper story, with Malay actors speaking in the Malay language would fulfill the construct of a Malaysian film or more precisely, *filem Melayu.*

The terms *filem Melayu* and *sinema Melayu* have always been widely used as opposed to Malaysian films or Malaysian cinema. However, in the context of a multicultural nation, the use of these terms,

as we shall see, will become problematic for the new wave of independent filmmakers at the turn of the new millennium.

In addition to that, the film and funding policies of the old millennium which supported commercial filmmaking have become obsolete as it now needs to address the needs of a new breed of filmmakers.

A Brief History of Malaysian Cinema

Malaysian films are generally Malay-centric, in Malay language, with Malay characters and narratives, and patronised by Malay audiences. Chinese and Indian audiences largely watch Hong Kong and Hollywood films. This has been the case ever since the independent era in the 1970s when film making fell from the already defunct Shaw Brothers' control into the hands of Malay filmmakers who started their careers with Shaw like P. Ramlee, Aziz Satar and Jins Shamsuddin who continued with the melodramatic and comedic traditions of the Golden Era.

The 1980s brought about a new era of state support with the establishment of FINAS to regulate and assist the film industry. Notable films of that era include Jins Shamsuddin's *Bukit Kepong* (1982), Rahim Razali's *Matinya Seorang Patriot* (1984) and Othman Hafsham's *Mekanik* (1983), although not as successful as the slapstick comedies by Aziz Satar and A. R. Badul. This dual stream of serious films and commercial comedies continue to pervade the industry throughout the 1990s.

Adman Salleh, Mahadi J. Murat, Suhaimi Baba and Erma Fatima made films with a "profound understanding of the tensions, frustrations and idiosyncrasies that lie beneath the surface of Malay society" (Hassan Muthalib, 2005).[2] Of all these directors, only Suhaimi Baba has been able to traverse between art and commerce more successfully.

This era also witnessed the first RM6 million blockbuster hit *Sembilu II* (1995), a feat unbroken to this day. By simply rehashing old formulas of the bygone era, Yusof Haslam manages to churn out hit films with predictable plots, love tragedies, big bikes and popular singers as actors. All of his films are highly popular but are panned by critics.

Another consistent and commercially successful director worth noting is Aziz M. Osman who has been able to strike a balance between popularity and respect for his films. His films communicate well, with sensitive characterisations and have more well developed narratives – something which is generally lacking in Malay films.

The 1990s also saw the birth of a new kind of art cinema, one which was capable of attracting international attention and funding. U-Wei Haji Saari continues to make his own kind of alternative cinema which dares to defy social norms and thus courting controversy in almost all his films. In 1995, his film *Kaki Bakar* (The Arsonist, 1993) was screened in Cannes' *Un Certain Regard*. He continues to receive international funding for his films.

The Emergence of a New Problem: The New Independent Cinema

In Malaysia as in other parts of Southeast Asia, the new millennium is marked by the digital technology revolution which has changed the face of communication, lifestyle, business and entertainment. Visual communication has become more convenient as the graphical interfaces and digital content become more easily accessible through the internet and mobile telecommunication devices. The new generation of youths are tech-savvy and they speak a new language in the age of ICQ, SMS, Blog, Friendster and YouTube. Digital video cameras, animation, graphic and editing softwares become more commonplace, user-friendly and affordable. The mushrooming of multimedia courses are also equipping the younger generation with a new set of language and skills. No it seems that anyone can attempt to make a film, or at the very least, to communicate through digital video.

Ideologically, a new generation of young Malaysians, who has been schooled and taught with the concept of *muhibbah* (goodwill) and *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Race), has come of age. This new generation is a product of the ex-Prime Minister Mahathir's vision for a united, multicultural identity mainly consisting of the Malay, Chinese and Indian ethnicities. Thus exists an awareness of multiculturism in every aspect of Malaysian life, governance and politics.

This fixation on multi-culturism and race, together with the ease of filmmaking, could have resulted in the proliferation of independently made films[3] which carried either optimistic multi-cultured films such as in the films of Yasmin Ahmad and Teck Tan, or ethno-centric disaffection such as James Lee, Ho Yuhang and Deepak Kumaran Menon's[4].

At this point in time, a new problem starts to surface. In the past, Malaysian cinema had always been Malay films only. How does one define a Malaysian cinema now? For pragmatic reasons, this definition

is important as it qualifies a film to be eligible for state support in terms of loans, schemes and other assistance[5]. Films in any other language other than the official language of Bahasa Melayu is not considered a Malaysian film, and cannot qualify for the *Skim Wajib Tayang* (Compulsory Screening Scheme) and the Entertainment Tax Returns. However, even more importantly, a redefinition of Malaysian cinema to include locally made films in other languages would mean a change in the existing policies and mindset to accommodate more openly for the 'other'. The question is, is Malaysia ready for the 'other'?

Ramani (2005) implies that some quarters feel that the 'national' representation is threatened by the 'heterogeneity and hybridisation of the nation portrayed in films.' A series of recent events illustrates this discomfort.

On April 23, 2006 Radio Television Malaysia (RTM) broadcasted a live forum programme called Fenomena Seni (Art Phenomena) which discussed two of Yasmin Ahmad's films *Sepet & Gubra*. The forum was entitled '*Sepet* and *Gubra* – Corruptors of Malay Culture' and hostile comments came from two of the guests (a film producer and an assistant entertainment editor of a local Malay daily) towards certain scenes portrayed in the films as unrealistic, unnecessary and corruptible to Malay culture[6]. Part of their disagreements were directed towards the taboo relationship between the Malay female character (Orked) and a Chinese boy (Jason) in the film. At the end of the forum, the Malay producer claimed that "Malaysia belonged to the Malays. That's why it was called Tanah Melayu before."[7]

This discomfort was again expressed in almost similar tone towards the film *Gubra* and the director Yasmin Ahmad by a few academicians in a discussion forum held by a public university in Malaysia later in the same year.[8]

Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* (2005)[9] and Teck Tan's *Spinning Gasing* (2002) explicitly addressed issues of race, culture and religion by exploring the inter-racial relationships between its main characters of different racial backgrounds. Thus the films used different ethnic languages such as Malay, Cantonese, Hokkien, Mandarin and English to correctly capture a slice of real Malaysian life as opposed to a sanitised version favoured by certain bureaucrats.

The situations that Yasmin puts her characters into, and the questions that arises from those situations seem to create a sense of insecurity in the social, cultural and political contruct of Malayness. When *Sepet* and *Gubra* went on to win the Best Film Category in the 18th and 19th

Malaysian Film Festival, there was dissent amongst individuals from the film community and the Malay press about the eligibility of her film to qualify for the awards, and that her film was not Malaysian.

In a separate case, James Lee and Ho Yuhang's application for funds to transfer their digital video to film format in order to participate in an international film festival was partially rejected, 'on the ground that the quality is bad, because it's a video. Second[ly] because there's no *muhibbah* element of multi-cultural in the film... [The film is] all about Chinese. So [the application] was rejected based on that."

Gaik (2005) summarises the reason for this situation very well:

[The new indie filmmakers] encountered discrimination when dealing with state bodies that were ideological remnants of a Malay-centric NEP (National Economic Policy, 1971–1990) and National Cultural Policy. Such a policy emphasises assimilation to Malay language and culture rather than a practice of the politics of multiethnic inclusion. While many would deny that an intentional gatekeeping on the basis of race is occurring – since gatekeeping may also function due to ignorance and fear of those who may be more successful or have film school training compared to apprenticeships, the heated debate and discussions in the media and on the internet (weblogs, Malaysian-cinema@yahoogroups.com email discussion list and kakiseni website) illustrate the deep-rootedness of racialisation in Malaysian public discourse and our collective consciousness.

The Big Problem: Malay or Malaysian Cinema?

As discussed earlier, the emergence of the new independent cinema raises questions on what constitutes Malaysian cinema. Malaysian cinema has always been synonymous with Malay films[10] which have sometimes been taken to uphold the sovereignty of the Malay race, language and culture.

The emergence of the new films which focused on the 'other' than the Malays seem to throw the status quo into imbalance. The simple definition of national cinema before has now become complicated. Immediately, this creates problems as the new cinema of cultural diversity can no longer fit into this narrow perception of national Malay cinema.

Films are a reflection of culture, and in Malaysia it is one which is diverse. A true Malaysian picture can only be described when the other

ethnic races are represented. This does not mean that every film made must have representations of this diversity. Instead, it means that every componential ethnic group should be allowed to express its own culture that contributes to the total whole of the meaning of being Malaysian.

The main ethnic groups of Malays, Chinese and Indians form just the surface of the matter. There is also a need to encourage films and stories from the indigenous *Orang Asli*, as well as the various groups from the Borneo island in East Malaysia. The thriving Iban music and VCD movie production industry which started in the late 1990s in Sarawak illustrates the need for such cultural expressions. Although the production standards are very basic, it gives these ethnic groups a voice and opportunity to participate in the process of nation building, as opposed to being just the subject of an exotic ethnographic documentary.

Globalisation and National Cinema

The notion of national cinema is not one which is without problems. It is in fact complicated and has been heavily debated amongst different scholars who approach the discourse from different perspectives.

The concept of national cinema is closely related to the idea of a nation. However, the very idea of the 'national' itself has been taken to be imaginary, or as defined by Anderson (1990) as "an imagined political community [that is] imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" (p. 15). Nevertheless, the national, even as a socio-political construct, has its function in the search for meaning, national solidarity and maintaining social order within its imagined borders. Similarly, the pursuit of national cinema concerns proprietorship, identity and independence (Heath, 1991).

To further problematise this discourse of the national, globalisation has been steadily eliding nation-state imposed borders. The digital revolution, internet and the resulting flattening effect[11] have certainly made the world today much more open to economical and cultural mobility through international trading, financing, migration of workers and exchange of cultural goods and influences like films.

It is becoming more and more difficult to define the cultural specificity of an identity, nation and its cinema in a transcultural, transmigratory and transcorporation environment today. Globalisation has been taken by some traditionalists to be a threat to the existing culture (cultural specificity) and identity of a nation. This implies that the notion of the national and its

national cinema are not able to stand firm in this context of change. This is because as globalisation intensifies, the definition of the national also changes as a new socio-economic-political composition emerges. As Hayward (1993) puts it succinctly, "National cinema fluctuates historically. Cultural specificity changes according to economical (globalization), political & social factors" (p. 16).

Nevertheless, it should become apparent by now that a nation and its people, culture, identity and cinema cannot and does not exist in a vacuum. It will forever be caught up in the vortex of global influence and change. Instead of being a constant, the national and its cultural specificity will always be in a state of continual transformation. They will not be "eradicated by globalization; rather, ethnic, regional, and national identities are being reconstructed in relation to globalised processes of intercultural segmentation and hybridization" (Canclini, 2001, p. 94).

National Cinema and the Multicultural Identity

In every nation, there exists a disparity of cultural dominance even with uniformly homogeneous nations such as Japan (eg. the Ainu minorities in the north). The struggles between these different ethnic and regional cultures within a nation complicates the process of national identification even more so in multicultural nations such as Canada and Australia. In Malaysia, this struggle is also apparent between the three major ethnic races of Malays, Chinese and the Indians.

A nation-state constructed national identity, language and culture have the tendency to be partial, even if it is there to achieve a higher purpose, to maintain social order, solidarity and a common identity. This process comes with a price, as outlined by Higson (2002b), it represses "internal differences, tensions and contradictions – differences of class, race, gender, region etc. National cinema cannot but help in the oppressive process of nationalism since by its very definition it is a cinema of the nation rather than its diverse sub-groups. [It] upholds a fictional unity [...] insensitive to the real differences of people within the nation, their needs & desires" (p. 62).

However, in today's world, few nations are being spared from the transforming forces of globalisation. Traditionally, a nation's common identity is predetermined by the officially recognised dominant culture in power and imposed on the rest of the 'other'. In today's constant flux of globalisation, this approach is no longer realistic.

Hill (1993) proposes that it is quite possible "to conceive of a national cinema which is *nationally specific* without being either nationalist or attached to homogenizing myths of national identity. [...] From this point of view, it is quite possible to conceive of a national cinema, in the sense of one which works with or addresses nationally specific materials, which is none the less critical of inherited notions of national identity, which does not assume the existence of a unique or unchanging 'national culture', and which is quite capable of dealing with social divisions and differences" (p. 16).

Conclusion

Generally, there is a misconception of 'national cinema' to be prescriptive (prescribing what it is supposed to be) rather than descriptive (describing what is already there) (Higson, 2002). Thus, the term 'national cinema' should not be used to refer to a set of requirements that must be full-filled by a film to be considered as part of national cinema.

Therefore, 'national cinema' in this paper proposes the collection of culturally diverse films which are available that gives a collective picture of the cinema in a particular country, thus illustrating the rich and diverse components of its culture. This is similar to Britain's search for its own identity and culture[12]. Cooke (2001) suggests that "for the UK, a national cinema needs to be a pluralistic cinema, reflecting British cultures and British identities in their diversity, rather than conforming to an idea of national cinema that is uniform and nationalistic." Ramani (2005) questions "whether it is the job of cinema to participate in the construction of "national identity", or to read representations of intercultural and inter-religious relationships as a response to the nation's concerns about multiculturalism and national integration.

It is important to be aware that a 'national cinema' has the tendency to marginalise other social communities to become a singular, hegemonic 'national' identity. Thus, the redefinition of national cinema should not be one of exclusivity but one that is as widely and variedly inclusive as possible. This notion needs to be considered when formulating new film and funding policies which require more efficiency, effectiveness, transparency and professionalism in its implementation and administration.

Notes

[1]   Hassan Muthalib (2005) recounts Dr Anuar Nor Arai's 5 voices of Malaysian cinema to give an overview of the developments in the Malaysian cinema.

[2]   Hassan Muthalib (2005) recounts Dr Anuar Nor Arai's 5 voices of Malaysian cinema. *Voices of Malaysian Cinema._*http:// www.criticine.com

[3]   Gaik (2005) describes the conditions for the emergence of this alternative cinema and how they operate.

[4]   Williamson (2005) insinuates that the common theme of alienation and disaffection as a result of marginalisation in Malaysia runs in all the Chinese-centric indie films.

[5]   Gaik (2005): 'indie filmmakers whose films secure local cinema screenings may realise their films are not "truly Malaysian" after all when they are later denied the incentive aid (to recover the entertainment duty they have to pay upfront) on the basis that their film is not a "local film" because it is not in Bahasa Malaysia (this policy is under review now).'

[6]   Read Yasmin's reactions to these attacks at http:// yasminthestoryteller.blogspot.com/2006/

[7]   Read more about the forum in the article *One reality to rule us all* written by Jacqueline Ann Surin for the Sun (Thu, 23 Nov 2006) at http://www.sun2surf.com/article.cfm?id=14019

[8]   The forum entitled "Film as Ar-Risalah: Viewpoints on Gubra, Does it Qualify to Win the 19th Malaysian Film Festival's Best Film Award?" was held at Universiti Malaya on September 1, 2006. Four of the panelists agreed that the film demeaned Malay race and the Islamic religion.

[9]   For more details about the film, read Williamson's (2005) review on *Sepet.*

[10] See Gaik's (2005) article for an interesting overview on race in the new Malaysian independent cinema. *Art, Entertainment and Politics* at http://www.criticine.com

[11] Friedman, T. (2005). The World is Flat. Farrar, Straus and Giroux, USA.

[12] See Cooke. Britain's cultural identity has been pluralistic since the 1960s and further fragmented by the multiplicity of Irish, Welsh and Scottish nationalism.

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