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By

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THE INDONESIAN FILM INDUSTRY

Rosihan Anwar

I. Production and Audience trends in the film industry :

All is not well with the Indonesian film industry today. In 1987 the industry produced 54 feature films, as compared to 65 in 1986, 63 in 1985, 70 in 1984 and 71 in 1983. Back in 1974 Indonesia had produced 105 feature films, but those days had long since disappeared. This had its effect on the number of people employed. Last year a total of 995 men and women (599 actors/actresses and 366 professional/technical people) could not get work in any production ; they joined the rising hordes of unemployed. There were 850 actors/actresses registered with the Indonesian Film Artist Association (PARFI) and 796 people with KFT (Karyawan Film Televisi), the organization for directors, script writers, camera men, art directors etc. Out of the 95 film directors, only 41 were fortunate to be assigned to production ; the rest remained idle or as an alternative, part of them went into the production of sinetronics, feature films produced by and shown on television.

What are the causes of this downward trend in production ?

First, the general economic situation, the recession was responsible for the decrease in production and employment ;

Secondly, the role of film distributors which frequently obstructs the sound and regular flow of income to the producers ;

Thirdly, the effect of video cassette whereby video rental operators embarked on pirating Indonesian films currently on show, distributing them illegally, making it possible for people to see films without going to the cinema, thus curtailing revenues for producers.

The production cost of an average Indonesian feature film -- of the B-type, the quickies -- at present stands between 200 and 250 million Rupiah

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(roughly the equivalent of US \$ 119,000 and \$ 149,000), although a "period film" dealing with a historical theme such as Cut Nya Dien (depicting the struggle for independence in Aceh, Sumatra against Dutch colonialism by the turn of the century) which began production in December 1986 and still not yet finished at the beginning of 1988 had already spent over 800 million Rupiah.

Since the nature of producing a film is like drawing a lottery, therefore making it a very speculative one (another metaphor: film producing is like gambling), some producers are lucky and make profits, enabling them to continue production, while others make a flop and fall by the wayside, thus becoming a fly by night producer, never to appear again.

Not surprisingly that although about 100 companies are officially registered with the Association of Indonesian Film Companies (PPFI), only 20 producers were active in the past year, the majority of which consists of Indonesian citizens of Chinese and Indian extraction, while the indigenous producers (pribumi or bumiputera) were just a few, and so this situation is not conducive to the healthy growth of the film industry.

Despite the decline of production, the number of cinema-going people, on the other hand, rose steadily. This was due to the increasing number of cinemas. While in 1965 there were only 400 cinemas in operation in the whole of Indonesia, and with dilapidated equipment at that, nowadays there are 2100 cinemas, out of which 251 are in Jakarta, the capital city with a population of 7 million. In 1984-85 the number of movie goers was said to be 180 million people ; today it is estimated to be more. These movie-goers see imported, foreign films as well as national films. While in 1970 about 800 foreign films were imported, today only 205 titles of foreign films are allowed to enter the country annually, consisting of 125 feature films from America and Europe, 50 Mandarin-Chinese films, and 30 Indian and other Asian films.

A lot of the movie-goers prefer to see foreign films, while national films are seen by less number of people.

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In 1987 the number of audience of national films in seven key cities -- Jakarta, Denpasar in Bali, Surabaya in East Java, Yogyakarta, Semarang in Central Java, Bandung in West Java -- was 10,870,809. Jakarta topped the list with 2,656,475 people. The middle class, the intellectuals in urban centres rarely, if not altogether, see national films, because of their bias, because they regard Indonesian films inferior to American and European films.

The bulk of the audience of national films consists of what is called by the cinema owners "middle-class-below", the social economically poorer people, of which the young generation in the age group of 15 - 25 constitutes the core. The preference of this kind of audience is for entertainment films themes they can enjoy and make them forget for two hours the drabness of their lives or themes they can easily identify themselves with.

No wonder in 1987 the genre that was saleable was comedy, youth films and soap-drama. The box office film in 1987 was a comedy "Makin Lama Makin Asyik" (The Longer the Merrier) starred by Warkop, a group of three comedian who had been around already seven years in the industry and still retain their popularity; this film absorbed in Jakarta alone over half a million movie goers. Films dealing with the lives of the youth such as "Catatan Si Boy" (Notes of Si Boy) and "Lupus" based on a best-selling pop novel, also found an enthusiastic audience. Another film that drew crowds, especially in up-country cinemas, was "Petualangan Cinta Nyi Blorong" (Love adventures of Nyi Blorong) containing all the ingredients of legend, mysticism and sex. "Arini" based on a pop novel, partly shot in foreign location, California, thus heightening the exotic aspect of it, a sentimental melodrama, was also a box office in 1987.

As far as the art-films are concerned, that is to say films with social relevance, which show "the face and soul of Indonesia" or have a literary weight, such as "Nagabonar", a comedy depicting the Indonesian Revolution in 1945-49, which won the Best Film Award at the 1987 Indonesian Film Festival, not many of them turned out to be a commercial success.

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II. Mechanism and economics of film distribution :

Film distribution in Indonesia is often likened to a jungle where there are no rules, everyone has to mend for himself, and the adagium survival of the fittest prevails. Others say that there is a "mafiosi" sphere in that area. Whatever it may be, one thing is clear, there is not much precise information in the field of distribution.

In the 1950s there existed a single distribution organisation, AMPAI (American Motion Pictures Association in Indonesia) supplying the cinemas with American films. The cinemas exhibited the films which were acquired on a rental basis. AMPAI had been abolished in the early 1960s as a result of political agitations against American imperialism by the Indonesian Communist Party (PKI).

Today there no longer exists a single, comprehensive body to regulate film distribution. In its stead there appear many organizations and individuals, making the distribution of film rather wieldy to handle, because of the conflicting interests involved. Film import at present is undertaken by three associations, respectively for European-American films, Chinese-Mandarin films, and Indian and other Asian films. Each association has several members namely companies engaged in the importation of foreign films, and is formally recognized by the Ministry of Information, consequently possessing a position of monopoly, the sole rights for the importation of films. The three associations are allowed to import 205 titles of foreign films annually (125 American-European films, 50 Chinese-Mandarin films, 30 Indian and other Asian films). Some of the members of the association are also owners of a chain of cinemas, thus they are in the position to impose on cinemas to give priority to their own imported films rather than to national films.

In order to protect national films against this sort of discrimination, in 1975 a collective decision had been adopted by three cabinet ministers, to wit the Minister of Home Affairs, the Minister of Culture

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and Education, and the Minister of Information. The objective was that there must be obligatory showing of minimally two titles of Indonesian films in the cinemas every month. To implement this decision a distribution organization was established, the PERFIN (Peredaran Film Indonesia) with shareholders from the movie industry, such as the producers' association, the professional people's association, a Film Foundation created by the National Film Council (DFN - Dewan Film Nasional). PERFIN was entrusted with the task to ensure screen time for the national films.

However, in practice PERFIN had only succeeded to make its authority felt in the capital city Jakarta, whereas in the rest of the country, PERFIN was not properly treated by the distributors and cinema owners. A lot depended on the whims and interests of distributors and cinema owners whether to run an Indonesian film or not.

The cinema owners have their own association namely GPBSI (Gabungan Pengusaha Bioskop Seluruh Indonesia) and to ensure a regular and sufficient supply of films to be run, they usually get in touch with the middleman, called "booker". This booker or distributor negotiates with the association of film importers and with the producers of national films the price for each film, which is sold on a flat basis, no longer on a rental basis, like in the days of AMPAI in the 1950s. Because of his leverage and bargaining power, the distributor/booker can dictate the price, more often than not pushing the price down to the detriment of the producers. Added to it that the booker sometime is closely connected with the importer or frequently acts as the financier of the production of national films, the picture then becomes complete, namely the producer is on the losing end, the cinema owner does not have much choice in running what kind of films in his theatre. The cinema owners can, of course, pursue their own way, if they are strong enough. Indeed, there are some owners, like an Indonesian-Pakistani in West Java and an Indonesian-Chinese in Central Java, who own and control hundreds of theatres, in which case the cinema owners can always

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make a "happy arrangement" with the booker and the importer to promote their mutual interests.

There are about 100 distributors/bookers in the country, a far too large number which explains the utter fragmentation and near-chaos in the field of distribution. This is so because of the peculiar characteristics of the bookers. According to J.B. Kristanto, film critic of the daily Kompas, these bookers/distributors "have the mentality of little kings who do not trust each other, envious of each other, and cannot tolerate that a booker might grow big". These bookers have, in reality, other businesses as well beside film distribution. They have the mental make-up of a huckster, a wheeler-dealer style, and this will never develop into operating ventures of economics of scale. They do not show to be bona fides towards the producers : paying with uncovered checks or delaying payment to the detriment of producers.

There is also an interesting aspect with these bookers, in so far that they can influence the producers in deciding what kind of movie should be made, which stars to use, and so forth. They are able to do so by acting as proxies for the cukong, the money-man that can foot the bill for film production. As to be expected, the cukong plus the booker do not have a high regard for quality films. And so the usual trash of films, with sex, violence, continues to appear.

What is the way out ?

It is suggested in some quarters, that in order to have a healthy system of film distribution, the number of distributors/bookers should be drastically reduced from the present 100, and be limited to five and six only, each in charge of supplying films to about 400 theatres ; also one should return to the rental basis and reject the flat basis principle for running a film.

However, whether such an ideal situation can be attained is pretty doubtful.

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III. Impact of new media on film industry :

The decline in production of Indonesian films, according to producers, had been partly due to the impact of video. What happened was that no sooner their films had been released and began running in the theatres or promptly the video cassettes of the film were distributed by the video rentals. The cassette was made illegally, and distributed without obtaining video rights from the producers. Efforts were made to eliminate this piracy, control by authorities more stringently observed, but ^{no} to avail, so far little result has been achieved.

In a country with a population of 170 million, with about 5 million television sets and less number of video equipment, it's hard to tell whether the piracy of Indonesian films by the video operators had really made such a dent into the production process, as claimed by the producers.

Still, this remains cause for a lot of frustration among producers. The government, meanwhile, is doing its utmost to enforce laws and regulations on video such as the observance of copyright laws, licensing, preventing piracy, and so forth.

The Indonesian Television (TVRI) does not seem to pose much of a problem to the film industry. TVRI's program with its canned products -- American serials like "Hunter", "The A-Team", "Dynasty" -- is not considered to be a serious competitor to the industry. In fact, TVRI is regarded as an ally of the industry in promoting interest of the society at large towards Indonesian films with its monthly program "Film Appreciation" which gives samples of scenes of the latest movies and introduces film stars and directors.

What worries some of the producers, though, is the impact of TV stations of neighbouring countries which can be viewed by Indonesians because of its proximity. A case in point is TV-3 of Malaysia which is popular in the city of Medan, the East coast of Sumatra, and the Riau Islands

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*By using low-cost aid devices, Indonesian viewers can see Indonesian feature films broadcast by TV-3. As these films are currently on show, naturally there will be less desire on the part of the public to visit the cinema and pay admission tickets to see them. There is nothing much producers can do about it, and they just have to live with this situation of diminishing revenues.

Then of course there is that small group of upper middle class of Indonesians, equipped with the latest technology such as parabole antennae and other direct satellite broadcast devices, enabling them to see programs of TV stations around the world, including the newest American movies. As the number of this kind of people is not big, and as anyhow they never see and appreciate Indonesian films, no problem arises from there for the Indonesian film industry.

IV. Marketing in Asia :

Indonesian films, from the point of view of language, can easily be understood by the Malay speaking population of Singapore, Malaysia and Brunei Darussalam. This is equally true with regard to the Southern part of the Philippines (Mindanao) and Thailand (Patani) ; the people there, if they have the chance to see an Indonesian film , can easily follow the dialogue in Bahasa Indonesia.

On the other hand, films in Bahasa Malaysia can be just as easily understood by the Indonesian audience. Theoretically, there is ample room for marketing their respective films in the region. In practice, it proves to be somewhat difficult.

Indonesian films are shown in Singapore and Malaysia. How they come there, by which channels of sales and distribution, in what quantity, is not generally known to the lay man. It is strictly a commercial transaction between individual businessmen on both sides, based on the law of supply and demand. Probably the conduit is what is often referred in Jakarta as the

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"Singapore connection" and the "Bombay connection". What it means exactly, one does not know.

At any rate, over the years Indonesian films through shall we say the mechanism of a free market economy keep flowing to Singapore and Malaysia and not only get exhibited, but apparently appreciated too.

Not all Indonesian films can be shown. They are subject to restrictions by the Board of Censors in Singapore and Malaysia. As custodian of public moral, the Malaysian censorship, for instance, does not approve Indonesian films that are thought to be too liberal with sex interpretation or contain too many violent scenes or treat themes that are sensitive issues to the Muslim community. Nevertheless, not a few Indonesian B-pictures, containing vulgar entertainment, and not very helpful in projecting the image of the real, day-to-day Indonesian society, are offered to the public in some of the cinemas in Kuala Lumpur.

What about the Malaysian film's prospect to find a market in Indonesia. In the 1950s Malayan films featuring the late actor P. Ramlee were quite popular in Indonesia. P. Ramlee had a steady core of fans there. Today Malaysian films are hardly shown in Indonesia, because according to the film importers, they are simply not saleable. Times have changed since P. Raml days. A new generation has sprung up. The present Indonesian audience, on the few occasions when it has the opportunity to see Malaysian films, comes to the conclusion that Malaysian films are not attractive enough.

In order to change this situation, it was thought that more opportunities should be given to show Malaysian films in Indonesia. With the help of the National Film Council (Dewan Film Nasional -- a semi official body) in the early 1980s an agreement was signed between PERFIN (Indonesia) and FINAS (Malaysia) stipulating that a number of Malaysian films will be obligatory shown in commercial theatres, with the aim to foster appreciation and sympathy towards Malaysian films. However, this agreement could only be partly implemented, due to all sorts of misunderstanding on both sides.

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Another effort is undertaken in the form of joint productions with Malaysian actors/actresses taking an important part. It is hoped that then the Malaysian artists will become better known to the Indonesian public, thus paving the way to a smoother market outlet for Malaysian films in the future. So far three joint productions have been made, and it is too early to tell whether this experiment will attain its objective. Box-office wise these joint productions, at least in Malaysia, turn out rather successfully.

Turning to the other Asian films such as Mandarin-Chinese and Indian films, because they have been around already for so long, there is no problem at all with regard to showing them in Indonesia. There exists a core of faithful fans who are appreciative of Chinese films, particularly the Kung-Fu type, and of Indian films with their standard ingredients of song, dance, music and tear jerking. They are imported under a fixed quota system, and seem to be profitable for the association of film importers. As at present the Kung-Fu films are no longer en vogue -- in fact Sir Run Run Shaw in Hongkong had said that he stopped producing Kung-Fu films due to diminishing interest in the world market -- and the Hongkong studios turn to other genre like dramas pertaining to specific social problems, similarly followed by the Taiwan studios, it remains to be seen whether the fans of Chinese films will adjust to this change, and keep seeing Chinese films in the future.

Thai and Philippine films are totally unknown to the Indonesian public because no association has ever imported them. Interestingly enough, in the early 1950s a few Philippine pictures managed to be screened in Indonesian theatres, and the well known actor Fernando Poe was quite popular or the film "Zamboanga" was shown widely in the country. Today that is no longer the case.

How can this be overcome? Is there any prospect for a better exchange of Asian films? The answer seems to be negative. The Asia-Pacific Film Festival, for example, has tried to organize a film market each year, but there are no takers and no transactions. Japan, Korea may have produced pictures worthwhile to see, but they never get shown in Indonesia's commercial theatres

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V. The software and the hardware :

In February 1982 at the Berlin International Film Festival, this writer had proclaimed in a press conference: "We have come to Berlin to put Indonesia on the map of world cinema". This statement, of course, sounded more like hollow propaganda rather than having a real substance. The truth of the matter was that the Indonesian films were inadequate in terms of technical and artistic aspects.

Today the situation remains more or less the same. Indonesia will not be able to produce good pictures from the technical point of view so long as its studio equipment (camera, sound, etc.) is not up to standard. Compared with Singapore and Malaysia, Indonesia is years behind in the field of hardware. The wonder is that Indonesian film-makers somehow have managed to come up with a finished product that is not too bad at all.

Next to hardware, sufficient interest must be devoted to the software aspects that go into film-making. In this respect, Indonesia is also rather weak. Except for one or two mavericks or geniuses, the picture across the board is not very encouraging, in the sense that Indonesia must do a lot to train cadres in the field of directing, script-writing, photography, sound, editing, acting and the like.

Since the mid 1970s on the initiative of the Jakarta Art Council an Academy for Cinematography was founded. The school has churned out a number of directors, cameramen, script-writers, editors, but still not good enough. One of the weaknesses of Indonesian films is that there are not many able and creative directors and script-writers. This explains why Indonesian films are regarded by some people more as Kitsch rather than as Art. Naturally this statement does not negate the existence of some articulate film-makers like Teguh Karya, Arifin C. Noer, Ami Priyono, Slamet Raharjo, or scenario-writers like Asrul Sani who are also known in the outside world, but it is certainly true that Indonesia does not yet have cineasts of the stature of Akira Kurosawa or Setiajit Ray.

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Apart from the Film School in Jakarta which is being maintained by private organizations, there is also a government-run Multi Media Training Centre (MMTC) in Yogyakarta, established with Japanese technical aid in 1984, and equipped to train future cineasts, especially for television, and to train broadcast people.

No doubt it will take many years more before the efforts of the Film School and the MMTC will bear fruits, good and solid enough to take the Indonesian movie industry into its next stage of a truly Indonesian cinema with its own identity, by which time one can perhaps say "Indonesia is on the map of international cinema". Insha'Allah, God willing.- (* * *)

Jakarta, 21 January 1988