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<th>Title</th>
<th>Asian cinema: the way ahead</th>
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<td>Author(s)</td>
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In Indonesia, the 32-year regime of President Suharto is on the brink of collapse. In India, nuclear tests are being done inspite of international protests. In Cambodia, a power struggle continues to divide the war-weary country. In most parts of Asia, the economy is predicted to undergo a second round of financial crisis, compounded by the climatic havoc wreaked by the phenomenon of El Niño. And here I am, talking about the movies - cinema or film, if you will, to give this presentation a semblance of importance.

I am reminded of the First Biennial Southeast Asian Film Festival in Cambodia which was held in 1997. The French organized the festival with the end in view of resuscitating the cinematic culture in Cambodia, aside from stimulating the development of film in the region. On the first day of the festival, a hand-grenade throwing incident happened not too far from the festival venue that reminded everyone of the continuing conflict between the two warring political parties. The festival of films which was designed to signal the return to normalcy could not screen the bigger political conflict.

What is cinema in Asia? After Suharto, I am certain that Indonesians will go back to the cinema. Moviegoing signals normalcy - or, at least, a break from life outside the darkened theater. Cinema is entertainment - a respite, a medium of relaxation in between political upheavals, in between
floods and droughts, a seemingly innocent form of spectacle. But, of course, we know that it can be something more.

What is cinema in Asia? I think the question remains relevant to our task of finding the way ahead. I am not going to pretend to know "the way ahead." The best thing I can do is to read the signals that may serve as guideposts if we are to direct or re-direct "the way ahead" for Asian cinemas.

In this presentation, I would like first to look into the phenomenon of globalization in relation to cinema. Secondly, I consider the present slump in the Asian film industries. Thirdly, taking a macro-view of the film world, I suggest to look into another sphere of filmmaking outside the mainstream of the global market. Finally, this would bring me to a consideration of what filmmaking could be in the Asian context.

1

Globalization in cinema can refer to the extension of the film market to cover international situations. In theory, the world is the filmmaker's market. In practice, the global market is meant for the Hollywood film commodity. This condition has practically dictated the kind of film that should be made.

In terms of box-office returns, the global market offers millions of revenue dollars. For the Hollywood commodity, the market promises as much as 50% or even more of the film's possible gross returns. To illustrate, here are the top ten grossers for 1997:
Notice that seven out of these top ten grossers gained more than 50% of their total revenue from the overseas market. The overseas revenue ranges from 41% to as high as 76% of the gross returns. What do these numbers tell us? First, there are millions of dollars in movies. The latest overseas revenue of *Titanic* has reached $1.08 billion. Secondly, there is a huge global market out there that is being dominated by Hollywood.

These numbers, of course, support the rising costs of production. The rule of thumb is that the production company gets a third of the gross. With the prospect of earning hundreds of millions of dollars, Hollywood studios could invest millions into the production of the commodity.

The first quarter of 1998 shows the following top ten returns:
<table>
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<th>Movie</th>
<th>U.S.A.</th>
<th>Overseas</th>
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<tr>
<td>(1) <em>The Man in the Iron Mask</em></td>
<td>$54.0 M</td>
<td>$52.4 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) <em>The Wedding Singer</em></td>
<td>$74.7 M</td>
<td>(no data)</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) <em>Sphere</em></td>
<td>$37.0 M</td>
<td>$22.5 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) <em>Lost in Space</em></td>
<td>$52.3 M</td>
<td>$3.3 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) <em>U.S. Marshals</em></td>
<td>$55.2 M</td>
<td>(no data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(6) <em>The Borrowers</em></td>
<td>$22.0 M</td>
<td>$16.6 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) <em>Great Expectations</em></td>
<td>$26.3 M</td>
<td>$10.5 M</td>
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<tr>
<td>(8) <em>Primary Colors</em></td>
<td>$35.2 M</td>
<td>(no data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(9) <em>City of Angels</em></td>
<td>$34.1 M</td>
<td>(no data)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) <em>The Replacement Killers</em></td>
<td>$19.0 M</td>
<td>$2.2 M</td>
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*The Man in the Iron Mask* has since then increased its overseas box-office total to $77.9 million. In its four days of showing, the returns in Hong Kong amounted to $419,000.

*U.S. Marshals* has so far earned an overseas total of $26 million, including $954,000 in South Korea and $768,000 in Thailand.

Another observation that we should note is the participation of Asian talents in some of these Hollywood movies. Among the top ten grossers for the first quarter of 1998 is *The Replacement Killers* which features Chow Yun Fat, a movie star in Hong Kong who has appeared in action films directed by John Woo who has himself done movies in Hollywood (*Broken Arrow*; *Face/Off*). Chow Yun Fat's predecessors in Hollywood include stars Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan and directors John Woo and Tsui Hark.
Tomorrow Never Dies, one of the top 10 grossers for 1997, also stars Hong Kong's Michelle Yeoh as the new Bond girl.

Hercules, an animated film from Disney, includes the participation of Asian artists in various stages of animation work.

These situations indicate that talents in Asia are recognized by Hollywood. However, it should be noted that while Asian filmmakers - actors and directors and animation artists, alike - may break into Hollywood, the product is unmistakably Hollywood. The industry has found action films profitable; therefore, the Hollywood gates have been open to Hong Kong filmmakers who are known to excel in this genre. Asian artists have been found to reach the standards; therefore, they are hired to work in big studios like Disney. The hiring of Asian talents is simply wise business practice. Although the terms of employment are certainly better, the practice is akin to the hiring of Asian workers to work in Nike assembly lines. By hiring Asian talents/workers, the cost of production becomes relatively cheaper.

The global market is a market for the Hollywood commodity. In the process, this commodity, which has been developed through the years since the institutionalization of the studio system, manifests a certain aesthetic that has become the dominant form of cinema. The Hollywood commodity has become the global cinema, the master cinema, as it were, that has colonized other cinemas around the world. Globalization, according to Uma Magal, "has stood for the impact of Hollywood cinema on the cinemas of the developing world." In effect, it has dictated how films should be done.
The Hollywood dominance of the global market has created a slump in most Asian film industries. Political instability in some situations, coupled with the economic crisis in the region, has created a conducive environment for this dominance.

Hong Kong, the base of the Asian film industry that has developed an international market for its action films, is reeling from a work rate that has been drastically reduced to less than 20%. Someone has even suggested to stop showing Hong Kong movies for awhile in order to stimulate the viewer's appetite for Hong Kong movies.

In most Southeast Asian countries, the film production output has dwindled. In Indonesia, from a high of 115 movies in 1990, production has been reduced to an average of 33 between 1991 and 1996. The present crisis in this area would certainly reduce this production output.

In Malaysia, production is consistently limited, ranging from 10 to 14 per year.

In Thailand, production is a little over 50 movies per year.

In Vietnam, production is less than 20 theatrical feature films per year, with more features done on video and some documentaries on film.

In the Philippines, despite a slump in the industry, the output each year goes over 100 movies. From a high of 134 movies in 1990, the output declined somewhat to 111 movies in 1994. However, the industry rebounded to 129 movies in 1995. Movie insiders say that the industry is undergoing a slump; if it is true, then it has not affected the number of movies being produced.
In most of these Southeast Asian countries, the competition from the Hollywood commodity is great. The local movies are no match to the grand concept films from Hollywood that offer attractive spectacles of images and sounds. The commodity is a function of investment put into it. Because of the availability of a global market, Hollywood producers are able to use the latest technologies in producing incredible images and sensational sounds.

The slump in these Asian film industries is compounded by the proliferation of movies on video for rent and the availability of cable systems which feature nonstop movies. It should be noted that this situation is brought about by the local entertainment industry itself in each country. After all, the local entrepreneurs are the ones responsible for the importation of foreign movies, the establishment of video rental shops and the construction of cable systems. The colonization of the film industries in various parts of Asia does not merely happen and is not done by force, but with the consent of the business elite - and authorized by the government bureaucracy.

3

The Asian filmmaker finds himself/herself in a situation which is dominated by the Hollywood commodity. And the audience, having developed a taste for this commodity, craves for more of the same. The question, therefore, for the Asian filmmakers is how to survive this situation.

"Think global" is the usual advice to Asian filmmakers, to aim for a market beyond the country's boundaries. If by market is meant the center
or mainstream of the global market, then to "think global" is tantamount to
telling the Asian filmmaker to do a Hollywood movie. To break into the
global market, a film, from any part of the world or the United States for
that matter, has to morph into the Hollywood mould. This means that the
film has to meet the standards characterized by polished cinematography,
crisp sound, quick pacing, single-focus narrative within a three-act
structure, meaning a clear beginning, middle and end, with English
dialogue. Aberrations of these standards do happen but they remain as
aberrations and are exceptions, rather than the rule. However, getting into
the global market does not mean that the film loses its cultural specificity.
As Hong Kong filmmaker Ann Hui says in an interview, "An international
market does not mean that the film has to be nondescript in terms of cultural
identity. A very different cultural identity, in fact, would help make it more
international, because what people are interested in is cultures different
from their own." Another sphere of the global market is more open to this
kind of films - the independent film market.

An increasing interest in Asian Cinemas has opened the art houses,
particularly in the U.S. In the 1960s, even up to the 1970s, the study of
Asian Cinema was limited to the cinemas of Japan and India, and these
studies were focused on the well-known masters like Kurosawa and Satyajit
Ray. In the 1980s, a wider interest in Asian Cinema studies grew in
American campuses; film curricula included courses in Asian Cinema;
moreover, the organization of an Asian Film Society in an American
campus was no longer unthinkable.
Another bright spot is the international film festivals that have shown an interest in Asian Cinemas. Aside from the well-known festivals in the West - Cannes, Berlin, Venice, New York - festivals in the Asian region itself has opened greater opportunities for the Asian filmmakers - e.g. Hong Kong, Calcutta, Tokyo, Fukuoka, Singapore, Shanghai, Pusan. These festivals provide Asian Cinemas the exposure they need. From these festivals, the door to the film theaters of the world is not too far away. Mira Nair's *Salaam, Bombay*, Chen Kaige's *Farewell, My Concubine*, Lino Brocka's *Macho Dancer*, Ang Lee's *The Wedding Banquet*, Wayne Wang's *Joy Luck Club* followed the route from international film festivals to worldwide distribution. Some of these films may have crossed over the mainstream market; however, what I would like to point out is a market outside the mainstream.

The mainstream is just one sphere of the global market, albeit the greater market. But the sphere of independent films is the area of the global market that may be more receptive to Asian films. Independent films suggest independence from the conventions of the mainstream. Different ways of doing films are explored. There is space for experimentation, not only in form, but also in the content that can be dealt with on film. The farther the independent filmmaker is from the center of the mainstream, the freer he/she is from the demands of the mainstream. Asian cinemas, to avoid morphing into another Hollywood commodity, can aim for the independent theatrical circuit in North America and Europe.

Ironically, another market that has not been explored as much is Asia itself. Unfortunately, the filmmakers' sights are directed towards the West.
Getting exhibited in an international film festival (New York, Cannes, Berlin, or Venice) seems to be the desired stage; getting accepted in the West is tantamount to a stamp of approval. Getting an award in the West would be the height of accomplishment. Anyway you look at it, it is the colonial mentality at work. But, of course, getting a theatrical release in the West and benefitting from all the ancillary markets, namely television, cable, and video, offer the Asian film producers a margin of income that they can pour into future productions. Be that as it may, the dominance of Hollywood in Asia itself has made the distribution of Asian cinemas in the region more difficult. Anything un-Hollywood has become unpalatable to most moviegoers who have developed a taste for the Hollywood commodity. Weaning away these moviegoers from Hollywood is virtually impossible. Another problem is language. On the other hand, if the independent market in the U.S. and other Western countries can enjoy subtitled films, the same should be possible in Asia. Remember, we are not talking about the mainstream, but the market outside the mainstream. The object, perhaps, is to develop a new audience for the region's cinémas.

This is not to say that steps have not been taken towards this direction. Film festivals in various parts of Asia, as I have cited, have become showcases for the best films in the region. However, the distribution of Asian films has to go beyond the confines of film festivals and diplomatic exchanges of films. A wider audience could be reached only by extending the exhibition circuit. The Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC) has been organized and this can be a force in marketing Asian cinemas in the region.
It is now appropriate to turn to a consideration of cinema in the Asian context. What is cinema in Asia? So far, we have seen two possibilities, two areas of filmmaking - the mainstream and the sphere of independent work. Each country has its kind of local mainstream that competes directly with the Hollywood commodity. But the mainstream of the global market is Hollywood territory. We can attempt to break into this global mainstream, but it means re-casting our films according to the Hollywood mould.

The other market that several Asians have explored successfully is the world of the independent. The successful filmmakers have crossed their national boundaries without morphing their work into another Hollywood commodity. The product is not a monolithic Asian Cinema, but multicultural Asian Cinemas.

In both instances, there is a certain direction that leads toward crossing national boundaries, creating international markets, increasing revenues that can make filmmaking a more feasible enterprise. However, in light of the urgent situations in various areas of the region, is there another conceptualization of what cinema may be in Asia?

Of course, there is. And there are filmmakers in Asia, and other parts of the world, who conceive of film beyond Hollywood and the film festivals. I am thinking of the committed filmmakers who believe that the medium could be used as an instrument, as a weapon even. The idea stems from the concept of Third Cinema that started with the work of Argentine filmmaker-theorists Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino in the late 1970s. The idea emerged from a specific period in Argentine history; however, the
message is relevant still to filmmakers anywhere, everywhere - where there is a need to change the exploitative status quo.

In this concept, Hollywood is First Cinema, the cinema of the capitalist, the product of the studio, the commodity. Second Cinema is the cinema of the bourgeois, the cinema of the auteur. Independent films which are centered on directors fall under this category. These independent films and filmmakers are not a satisfying alternative to the mainstream, according to Solanas and Getino, because they are appropriated eventually by the system. Thus, there is a need for Third Cinema. This is the cinema that is not dominated by one filmmaker; it is the cinema of filmmakers with the object of using the medium for change. Third Cinema investigates the condition that has disappeared in the polish of First Cinema; it is not a means of escape, but an attempt to capture truth. The theater is a liberated space and not occupied by the ideology of the system. Film is not a spectacle, but an act. Because film itself is an act, the desired reaction from the spectator is not passivity but activity. Eventually, the spectator ceases to be a spectator; he/she becomes uncomfortable in the theater, because he/she wants to participate in the act of struggle. This is why Third Cinema is imperfect, incomplete. Third Cinema is open, simply because its fulfillment depends on the action of the viewers. This kind of cinema, although it has not taken over the First and Second Cinemas obviously, has found some committed practitioners in various parts of the world and has acquired various labels - radical cinema, guerilla cinema, cinema of liberation, cinema of decolonization.
When the smoke of conflict has settled in Indonesia, I wonder what kind of films Indonesian filmmakers would do? Not being affected by political upheavals and economic crises may be unthinkable. Although, it is conceivable that filmmakers could remain detached, uncommitted, irrelevant. The mainstream, capitalist cinema would make this certain. I do not have to look far for an example. The mainstream of Philippine Cinema after the people power revolution is a classic example. The euphoria of ending a dictatorship has left a new generation of filmmakers without a cause to rebel.

The technologies we use in cinema will depend on the directions we pursue. The closer we are to the mainstream of the global market, the more we have to depend on the high technologies of image and sound production, and the more we have to mould our products according to the language of the Hollywood commodity. The farther we are from the mainstream, the more independent we become as far as technology and language of the medium are concerned. If we choose to be radical and committed to the cause of change and decolonization, then we become even freer. It becomes not a question of technology, but a question of commitment.

The Hollywood marquee may light up brightly the way ahead; however, it is not the only light signalling a certain direction.
Communicating Risks: Health & Environmental Issues

Dzulkifli Abdul Razak
Marie Mater