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Asian Films: Prospects For The Future

By

Sarith Amunugama
The largest number of films in the world are made in Asia. India, which is the world's largest film producing country, makes about 800 films a year—approximately three times the number of films made in the USA. Japan produces about 500 films annually while a small country like Sri Lanka produced, just five years ago, 80 films a year. Almost all the countries in the region have developed their own film industries. Special attention has been focussed in recent years on film production in China which, prior to the revolution, was one of the largest film producing countries in Asia. China now promises to resume a similar position in the contemporary film world.

Though raw statistics of film production show the predominance of Asia it is clear that the Asian cinema industry has begun to exhibit certain problematic trends which have long term implications for its survival. In this paper I propose to discuss some of these trends.

Asian Film: the popular style

A significant aspect of the Asian film which is not highlighted by production statistics is the cleavage between its artistic and popular styles and the predominance of the latter. As far as mass audiences are concerned the Asian film is a vehicle of popular entertainment. It has not found acceptance as an art form which expresses the artistic sensibility of the film director. (Here I subscribe to the theory of the
film as principally the creative product of the film director as has been highlighted by the 'Auteur' school of film appreciation).

To illustrate, let us turn to the Indian film industry. The largest number of films produced in Bombay, Madras and Calcutta and indeed now even in the regional cinema are formula films. These formula films (which have been dubbed 'Masala' or 'Spicy' by Indian film critics) have many characteristics in common. The plot is melodramatic. Unlike Western films which have a linear narrative form here the narrative is diffuse and meanders into several subplots which provide for fights, songs and dances, nightclub scenes, cops and robbers, religious sentimentality, sex and low comedy. These ingredients appear in almost every film. Some critics have tried to explain this particular structure of popular Indian films by looking on them as outgrowths of traditional theatre and poetry. Sanskrit aesthetics for example identifies Nava Natya Rasa or the nine aesthetic pleasures (rasa). A popular film will encompass all these rasas.

A more sociological approach would focus on the undifferentiated 'mass market' for these Bombay films which cut across regional, linguistic, cultural and socio-economic barriers within India. The basis of the appeal to this wide audience (estimated to be 13 million viewers per day) is found in the ingredients of the formula: fights, nightclub scenes, car chases etc., which are highly dramatic. As Aruna Vasudev has written "But if one is prepared to sit back and suspend disbelief, what comes through is zest and vitality and sheer, uncontrollable exuberance. Unless one is to be supercilious, there is literally no time to be bored. One might be irritated by the obviousness of some of the sequences, disturbed by the inaccuracies or distortions,
and appalled by the gratuitous violence, but that comes later.
For the duration of the film the pace is so relentless that
it sweeps you along, leaving no room for rational thought or
reaction".

Hindi film music also performs a similar function. Though a
sugary hybrid of Western and oriental music, it again appeals
to a mass market while exploiting traditional poetic elements
such as love, (prem) and separation (viraha). There is no doubt
that this 'formula' has enabled the Indian film to make a
deep impression on the popular consciousness. The Indian
film which began with Hindu mythology as its principal
subject matter soon entered into the area of protest and
social reform, particularly in the period of struggle for
independence. Today 'populism' is its major characteristic.
While presenting the overt symbols of modernisation (fast cars,
western clothes, modern apartments) it defines the Hero
(rarely a Heroine) as 'the man on the white horse' who
single-handedly fights against social evil. This role
of the saviour who battles against evil has been ingrained
in mass consciousness. The public does not distinguish
between the 'persona' and the person. Film actors like
M.G. Ramachandran, Amitabh Bachchan and N.T.Rama Rao have
gained political advantage from this fusion. This is an
aspect of the Indian cinema which has to be analysed in
greater depth in terms of sociology and social psychology.

The success of the Bombay movie has had an inevitable
impact not only on the regional cinema in India -
regional remarks of popular Hindi films and vice versa is
well known - but also on the production styles of films
in Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka. They may
all be considered, if not actual copies, different
language versions of the Bombay formula.
Asian film: the artistic style

Notwithstanding the predominance of popular cinema in Asia, we can also discuss another trend - the artistic cinema. Here the Asian film market works in a framework which is comparable to the best efforts in cinema in other parts of the world.

Indeed Asian film directors like Kurosawa, Ozu and Oshima (Japan) Satyajit Ray and Mrinal Sen (India) Broca (Philippines) and Lester James Pieris (Sri Lanka) have created works which have depicted with great sensitivity the lives of their chosen characters in their own social and cultural milieu. They have taken a western created technology, studied the masters of the world cinema, evolved their own idiom yet created masterpieces which are faithful to the social fabric and values of their own cultures. In this perhaps the best example is Kurosawa who has taken the plots of western classics (Macbeth; King Lear) and created films with an astonishing cultural integrity, showing us thereby in the most concrete way possible the universality of the human condition. In Ran Kurosawa reworks the tragedy of Lear in the context of an aging Japanese warlord and his three sons. (Daughters would not have been credible in the society he depicts). It is a superb human drama suffused with a Buddhist vision of life which he makes explicit in the final scene. For a variety of reasons, which space do not permit us to examine in detail in this paper, these Asian masters have been marginalised vis à vis their own indigenous masses and have had to depend on foreign, particularly western support by way of both film financing and critical appreciation. The tragedy of our popular cultures is that these artists have become an endangered species.
Having recognised the duality of film cultures in Asia let us now look at some of the challenges that confront the medium.

Impact of New Technologies:

UNESCO now refers to film, TV and video by the generic term "moving images". As we have seen earlier the first of these moving images created by a new technology was the film. The film has been followed by television and video. A distinction is made here between TV and video because though they both use video technology (except in the very infrequent usage of 16 mm film by TV) 'stand alone' video i.e. as medium of communication has on its own right implications for both film and TV.

The advent of TV has brought the "family serial" to Asia. These 'soap operas' which are usually beamed on prime time have had an impact on local film industries. In many countries such as Japan and India the acceptance of TV 'soaps' has led to a drop in attendance in cinema halls. Faced with dwindling cinema audiences and spiralling urban property values many cinema halls have been closed down.

Secondly many Asian artistic film directors who were kept out of film making due to their inability to turn out financial 'blockbusters' have been able to stage a comeback through the screen. Satyajit Ray and Lester James Pieris were able to continue working, perhaps against their inclinations, through TV. They have been able to infuse a higher set of production values thereby contributing to a greater acceptance of the TV medium in Asia as a serious art form.
Thirdly the advent of TV and video has threatened the film industry through video piracy. At a recent seminar in India G.P. Sippy a leading producer of popular Indian films had this to say; "The weekly collections of cinemas have been going down, because before a film is released, video-tapes of the film are already in circulation. Video parlours have sprung overnight and they are even being advertised in the newspapers. Even state-owned hotels hire video-tapes from pirates. These pirates neither pay copyright fees to the producers nor taxes to the Central and State governments. No doubt, the Copyright Act has been amended, but the State governments must ensure that the spirit of the law is enforced and the offenders are brought to book. Unlike in the United States and the Western countries, there is no timelag(in India) between the release of films in the regular theatres and their availability through video-tapes".

New Trends in Film Making

The impact of TV and video is creating a transformation of the film industry which will have long range implications.

Firstly, there is emerging in Asia a broad demarcation of functions between TV and cinema. Based on the specific characteristics of TV viewing in the region - proliferation of TV sets, the interest of the whole family in TV programmes, development of community viewing and a stricter code of ethics (due to the fact that TV stations are generally state owned) television programmes concentrate on "family entertainment". With TV entertainment being primarily dedicated to the whole family, the cinema has begun to create its own constituency which is different from the TV target group. We have to bear in mind that the cinemagoer has to be persuaded to leave his home to go to the movies, pay everytime he goes to the cinema, pay ancillary charges and often not get comfortable environment he can create when he watches TV.
The cinema meets this challenge in a variety of ways.

Pornography

A major reaction of the Asian Cinema to the preponderance of family entertainment in TV is the use of pornography. This becomes a clearly specialised field not susceptible to the TV challenge and strong enough to attract the mass audience to the cinemas. It is estimated that nearly 70% of the 500 odd films made in Japan fall into the soft-porn category. As Wimal Dissanayake says "more and more film makers are turning towards soft porno films, which enjoy a wide measure of popularity. These films are not so costly to make, and some of the most accomplished technicians in the industry are associated with them. Therefore it is hardly surprising that in terms of their technical finish they are deeply impressive".

Even in traditionally-conservative markets of South Asia cinema of soft-porn is catching on. The regional cinema of India, for example Kerala and Karnatakam has switched to this type of production as a means of drawing a mass audience. The Bombay film has also moved in the direction of overt and covert sex.

Censorship, Violence and Sex

This trend in Asian film making has called into question the existing censorship policies. Many of these censor Boards have been set up on a British model of the past. They are not in operation in Europe today. Usually these Censor Boards provide for representation from concerned organisations such as the Police, Cultural Bodies, Narcotics Control Board etc., which tend to view the film in terms of their special interests. Film makers have asked for a more liberal censorship policy so that they could explore "adult themes". Some Asian Censor Boards however have now adopted a more differentiated classification and guidance system which while being more helpful to the cinemagoer also gives greater freedom to the artistic film director. They
have passed many films with the "strictly for adults" classification.

A related phenomenon is the differentiation of cinema houses. Unlike the all categories cinema houses of the past there is growing tendency to concentrate adult movies in specialised theatres. While this is largely noticeable in the case of pornographic films, it also provides for cinema houses specialising in children's films, foreign films, etc.

From the artistic angle however a beneficial result of this trend towards less censorship is the opportunity it provides to serious film makers to tackle adult themes. I find in Sri Lanka for instance that film directors like Dharmasiri Bandaranayake, Vasantha Obeysekera and Gamini Fonseka have been able to depict the violence, sex and sadism that lies beneath sinhala society in a much less inhibited manner. Their films have not only a serious artistic intent, they have also been successful at the box office. The conclusion to be drawn from their experiences is that Asian Cinema, in its attempt to find its own market vis a vis TV, seems to be moving in the direction of "adult themes" with less inhibited approach to sex and violence. The demand for more liberal censorship policy is related to this survival strategy of the film makers.

New Funding Sources

The advent of new technologies has upset the traditional economics of film making. In Japan for example several of the older film companies like Toho and Mikkatsu faced bankruptcy. Some leading Japanese Directors such as Kurosawa and Oshima however have managed to find backers from Europe and the US. Kurosawa's Ran was financed by...
the French. Oshima's *Merry Christmas Mr. Lawrence* was a coproduction with the British. Minal Sen was supported by the French in the production of his *Genesis*. Such coproductions are likely to be an important area for Asian film directors with an international reputation.

It has to be recognised however that such support is hard to negotiate. Film makers - particularly serious film makers - will have to look to government support to develop the industry. The film Development Corporation of India is an example of such intervention. Similar attempts can be seen in Nepal, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka.