

In 2004, Malaysia's independent film industry was in its infancy. Keen filmmakers were plunging into production, self-financing low-budget shorts and features, seemingly with or without training, motivated by a sheer DIY drive. Many of the talents involved now work in the advertisement and gaming industries or film production houses. Others returned to the theatre and visual arts, or continue to work behind the scenes. Four years on, and the industry is more mature - the envy of its Southeast Asian counterparts - and built on solidarity and a collective mode of working.

From 'Doghouse' days to 'Limitless Space': independent filmmaking in Malaysia

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A core group has formed out of a loose coalition comprising of James Lee, Ho Yuhang, Yasmin Ahmad, Amir Muhammad, Tan Chui Mui, Deepak Kumaran Menon, Woo Ming Jin, Liew Seng Tat, Azharr Rudin, Hardeh Singh, Albert Hue and Khoo Eng Yow. They work on each other's films as actors, editors, producers, musicians, composers, camera and crew. Not only that, but they have shown generosity and support by funding each other's films: Tan Chui Mui's monetary prize from the Pusan International Film Festival 2006 for *Love Conquers All* (2006) went on to fund Liew Seng Tat's *Flower in the Pocket* (2007) on the condition that if he won, he would help to finance someone else's work. After Liew's win in Pusan last year, it was confirmed that the prize will fund Tan's next film.

Amir Muhammad and James Lee are the two most frequently named for spearheading the Malaysian digital or indie filmmaking movement. The story begins when Amir, a film and book critic (but lawyer by training), decided to turn his hand to filmmaking. He recruited James Lee, a graphic designer who also worked in theatre, to act in his first feature *Lips To Lips* (2000). The film, whether it was good or bad, inspired Lee and others to make films.

Ambitious manifesto

Lee quickly became a prolific filmmaker, churning out short experimental films that displayed his empathy for theatre and dance. An ambitious manifesto appeared on his website, Doghouse73 Pictures, which demonstrated both a knowledge of and affinity to alternative cinema, American

Pragmatic indie filmmakers, who realised the economic value of digital video, stated a preference to produce several digital works rather than work on one expensive 35mm film for the same budget. However, a desire to present visual stories - and Malaysian ones at that - was the key motivation. And, not all indies make digital films.

Yasmin Ahmad, Osman Ali, and those who may have the opportunity to produce mainstream films for Malaysian audiences work on 35mm (since there are only two digital screens in commercial cinemas in Peninsula Malaysia). The millennial wave of films from non-commercial Malaysian filmmakers gets categorised in ways that can only be described as contentious since there is such a plurality of styles, modes of production, genres, formats, and individual personalities. Since the studio system ended by the mid-1960s, technically all Malaysian films are independent. 'Independent' in the current Malaysian context reflects a propensity for the digital format (though not always), it represents Malaysia's ethnic diversity more fully than commercial Malay cinema which catered mostly to the ethnic Malay majority in its use of Malay language, Malay actors and stories about Malay society. These films may be multilingual, feature a multiethnic cast or focus predominantly on Chinese or Indian characters. Uniquely then, the face of post-2000 Malaysian cinema is no longer only Malay. Yet, such indie offerings if not mainly in the Malay language are not considered local and may instead be shown on the international screen at Golden Screen Cinema (GSC). Moreover, they are also not eligible for a tax rebate. The relationship between the indies and state institutions is tenuous, since the National Film Development Board is mostly filled with bureaucrats rather than those who are knowledgeable about film.

requires that each ethnic group can only represent and defend its own communal interests. Thus Yasmin's interracial films have been labelled 'culturally polluting' by Malay ethno-nationalists. Her trilogy (or quartet, depending on whether we include her first telemovie *Rabun* (2003) which also revolves around the same family) while deconstructing ethnic stereotypes of Others, is similarly critical yet compassionate of small-minded and hypocritical Malay characters. However, cosmopolitanism also focuses on the individual subject that transcends identity politics: ultimately, the young protagonist who initially seems a blank slate in *Rain Dogs* (Ho Yuhang, 2006) must come to selfhood through his own means after making several mistakes along the way. Likewise, it is Ah Ping's psychology that fascinates the audience when she makes certain irreversible decisions in the name of love in Tan's *Love Conquers All* (2007).

In terms of the style and aesthetics of features, some members of the Malaysian Independent Filmmakers (MIF) favour slow pacing, long detached takes, minimal dialogue and music, and minimal acting with a focus on everyday life. Critics have remarked on the theme of alienation whether it is of urban youth, marginalised working class or mindless capitalist consumption (*Beautiful Washing Machine*, James Lee, 2004). What interests me is that spatially, indie filmmakers are now moving out of Kuala Lumpur to shoot on location, bringing Malaysian small town life to the big screen in *Rain Dogs*, *The Elephant and the Sea* (Woo Ming Jin, 2007) and *The Birdhouse* (Khoo Eng Yaw, 2007), or revisiting sites where former Malayan Communist Party members have traversed or inhabit (Amir Muhammad's *The Last Communist*, 2006 and *Village People Radio Show* 2007).

During the Doghouse days, the Malaysian Shorts and Malaysian Documentaries screenings twice or three times a year used to be the pre-eminent event as film students and film graduates from the various academies and universities would submit their works to be screened. Despite the apparent demise of the annual Malaysian Video Awards which was a major screening channel, more screening spaces have opened up: since 2003, an annual Freedom Filmfest organised by KOMAS (a community communication centre); a new arts venue The Annexe (2007); small scale local set-ups like Sense Club; Kontot (a Short Film Convention); and corporate-sponsored competitions such as the BMWshorties Short Film Competition, and the Astro Kirana Short Film Competition with awards in the form of prize money or production services. While this swell of support and space is positive encouragement for filmmakers, they may have taken some wind out of the sails of the *Kelab Seni Filem* screenings. However, the *Kelab* maintains links with these corporate events. The *Kelab* has also lost the help of dedicated curators such as Bernard Chauly and Amir Muhammad, who are both busy with their own projects and work.

As for the future, questions abound as to the impact of Da Huang's overseas reputation on the local scene. Does it mean that the generation who has made their names abroad will focus on consolidating their own films or will they pass the baton on? Will international fame bring recognition and grudging acceptance from local industry stalwarts? Does 'Limitless Space' spell a liberation that is filled with endless possibilities, or one that is concomitantly directionless? Does it force up-and-coming indie Malaysian filmmakers to adopt only a particular kind of aesthetic? Meanwhile, contributions like Yasmin Ahmad's *Gubra* (2006) and *Mukhsin* (2007) ensure that the big Malaysian wind blowing over Europe and Asia is, in turn, fresh and warm and that there is much room for diversity.

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Scene from *The Elephant and The Sea*, Woo Ming Jin, 2007.

independent filmmaking and the desire to use the digital visual media to provide space for non-commercial films. Under his production house, Doghouse73 Pictures, Lee directed numerous pictures and also produced the early films of Amir Muhammad, Ho Yuhang, Ng Tian Hann and David Ngu. In 2004, Da Huang Pictures (meaning Big Space) was established by James Lee, Amir Muhammad, Tan Chui Mui and Liew Seng Tat. Da Huang essentially continued to provide the same kind of support work that Doghouse had begun for this small group of indie filmmakers.

The advent of new Malaysian cinema may be attributed to several factors that involved the pro-high technology government policies of the 1990s under former Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad such as the establishment of the Multimedia SuperCorridor, the Multimedia University, and other neo-liberal development policies that encouraged Malaysians to become more integrated into globalisation. Easy availability of pirated videos (including non-mainstream and foreign films) also opened up possibilities of what cinema could be for film buffs. The Asian technological craze saw a quick embrace of the digital film medium for its democratisation of film production. Digital video sparked not only art films by those who are better known overseas, but also low-budget genre films such as horror (Micheal Chuah, *Seed of Darkness*) or drama (C. Kumaresan with *Ethirkaalam* 2006, Shunmugam Karuppannan with *Sweet Dreams*, 2006) with a more local circulation.

Cosmopolitan narratives

Discussions about Malaysian independent films usually focus on ethnicity, since many of the digital filmmakers are ethnic minority Malaysians whose films portray and represent the diversity that is more reflective of Malaysia than the mainstream Malay films playing in the local cinemas. Yet, unlike Amir Muhammad and Yasmin Ahmad whose films have touched directly on politics, history and race relations, most filmmakers eschew making political statements and focus on more universal (or what I call 'cosmopolitan') narratives. Cosmopolitanism is a useful theory when applied to the indie filmmakers' modus operandi and their global outlook and influences because it encompasses an attitude that is open to, yet critical of, other cultures. Witness the multiethnic collaboration in Da Huang films and within the *Kelab Seni Filem* (The Art Film Club based in Kuala Lumpur) which has done much to promote film in the country over the years. In *Sepet* (2004) and its sequel *Gubra* (2006) - part of Yasmin Ahmad's trilogy about a Malay school girl named Orked - Orked's family embraces multiculturalism and is typically cosmopolitan: her middle-class mother watches Cantonese television serials, her Malay maid listens to Thai songs, and Orked who is infatuated with the actor Takeshi Kaneshiro falls in love with a Chinese VCD black market trader. Cosmopolitanism implies constant transgression of racial borders that in Malaysia are policed by state authorities and ordinary people through years of institutionalised racialisation. Such racialisation (call it 'official pluralism')

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Malaysian independent filmmaking will be highlighted during the *New Malaysian Cinema* film festival, staged by Amsterdam-based theatre Rialto. Some 40 shorts, features and documentaries provide a survey of recent developments in Malaysian cinema. Festival visitors can meet the filmmakers during Q&A's, panel discussions and masterclasses, and Malaysian food, drinks and music will turn the whole theatre into a festive venue. *New Malaysian Cinema* will take place October 29th – November 2nd 2008 in Rialto. www.rialtofilm.nl.