

Singapore 2001

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SINGAPORE INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL 2001: CROUCHING TYRANTS, HIDDEN TALENTS

For a young island-state that once saw a "golden age of cinema" in the 50s and 60s, it was bittersweet to witness, after a score of idle years, a rise in the number of local film productions in the 1990s. But where local movies of the past triumphed in forging an indigenous film culture, recent Singaporean films have all but ignored the significance of maintaining such an objective.

History, in this instance, has indeed repeated itself. Just as the thriving industry that had once characterised the "golden age" succumbed to the escalating popularity of Hong Kong and Taiwanese films in the 60s and 70s, the haphazard accomplishments of Singaporean films this past decade look set to remain in subordination to a longer-standing nemesis: that of Hollywood's domination.

The consequence of this status quo has only served to highlight the problematic use of the "film industry" referent that has become an indispensable refrain during the last few years. There is no bona fide resurgence of a film industry in Singapore to speak of, for what is an "industry" if it isn't a structural network composed of reciprocally competent interconnecting disciplines, where output and supply are unwavering and fiscally sustainable? Hubristic banter notwithstanding, there has been, more accurately, a resurgence in filmmaking activity. But while the good news is that the number of film productions is rising steadily the bad news is that the equation is sadly in need of an elusive ingredient: substance.

In their publication *Latent Images: Film in Singapore*, Jan Uhde and Yvonne Ng Uhde note: "The technical quality of some local movies reveals the shortage of trained film actors and camera operators; the many inadequate scripts reflect the dearth of experienced film writers. Such shortcomings limit the filmmakers' means of artistic expression. Remedying these weaknesses requires developing an educational infrastructure capable of producing skilled technicians, producers, directors, cinematographers, scriptwriters, actors, sound-people, stage designers and crew."

Indeed, education promises to be the springboard that will thrust the current state of things to the echelons of maturity and respectability. If full-fledged film schools are non-existent here, then this is compensated by the choice of film curriculum that Singapore's tertiary institutions present. A problem to this, however, arises from an ironic disparity in existing syllabi planning. Filmmaking is acknowledged as a concord of science and aesthetics. Yet educational institutions here profess, by and large, a motivational inclination towards one or the other and the inevitable corollary is a dichotomous sum that is smaller than its parts.

In July 2000, Ngee Ann Polytechnic's School for Film & Media Studies - one of the pioneers in the training of media professionals in Singapore - initiated the two-year Advanced Diploma in Film Production (ADFP) course. Third in line to the centre's Mass Communication and Film, Sound & Video diploma courses, which are heavily invested in technical discourse, and which cater especially to Singapore's reputable broadcasting industry, the ADFP's itinerary is designed to foster the aesthetic temperament in students so as to aid their understanding of the varying devices and methodologies communicable through the art of narrative filmmaking. Each year, it accepts only six students for each of its four specialisation tracks: Producing, Directing, Cinematography and Editing, with a pre-requisite that they possess at least a recognised three-year diploma and are at least 21 years of age.

Explaining the gravity of the ADFP's stringent admission policy with regards to age, Vijay Chandran, a lecturer and ADFP's course co-ordinator says: "The fact that the students are coming in at a mature age of 21 ensures their capability of handling independent work. What's also interesting is that the types of people who have applied for (this) course originate from a scope of different professions - lawyers, engineers - and hence bring with them expertise from these respective life experiences." He adds: "Like graduates of the two other film and media courses, those from the ADFP are also equipped with the basic training to enter a range of professions in the media industries, particularly in the field of broadcasting."

In contrast, over at the National University of Singapore (NUS), film is not available as a major academic subject, but courses in Film Studies are offered, mostly by the Department of English Language and Literature, and are open chiefly to Literature majors and graduate students. Fundamentally academic in nature and critical in perspective, these courses are decidedly theoretical and are premised on the inference that students are already "cineliterate" but unskilled in articulating their comprehensions; such an endeavour is by no means a pushover, since it involves an earnest attempt at resetting conventional mindsets towards film appreciation.

Senior Lecturer Dr. Timothy R. White calls his style of instruction "Historical Poetics", one that emphasises film analysis in a historical context. "I teach students to look at how a film compares to other films made at the same time and at other historical periods; what is the film like, and why is it the way it is." But he concedes: "In general, I think that the courses offered at NUS contribute more to the general film culture of Singapore, rather than to the industry itself because, first, they are designed that way, and second, because we teach no film production here. It is true that some of our students do find their way into the industry... however, because of the division of courses here in Singapore - academic film study here...film production at Ngee Ann and other polytechnics, I believe it makes it more difficult to turn out really well rounded film people for the industry."

Granted that film schooling in Singapore is young and not as yet a time-honoured tradition, the problem with the bigger picture certainly does not end at a mere criticism of arts education standards; learning is merely an axiom in a sacrosanct cycle: Education nurtures an industry, which produces values and standards, which in turn, inspires education. It is one thing if Singapore desires to be the "Cannes of the East" [*The Straits Times*, 28/4/98], but another altogether when conflicting interests arise between players in the field. Comments director Sherman Ong, who believes that Singapore views film mainly as a commodity: "From the onset, economic forces have been a major factor in determining the development of filmmaking activity here. Every move is so calculated that the content that matters ultimately just doesn't get produced." Sun Koh, a diploma graduate in Mass Communications and a freelancer in the post-production industry here, agrees. "There is no real film industry here", she says, expounding that "if a local film fares badly at the box office, confidence gives way to cynicism on all levels, and it would be bad to enter a stage of inactivity, as has been demonstrated in the past."

"Singapore should have a proper film school that can straddle the science and art of filmmaking such that it becomes a catalyst for those who cannot afford an overseas education," Ong insists. Yet he is quick to point out a plausible counter-argument. "One doesn't need film school to learn how to make films. They may be good for technical grounding and networking contacts, but for me, life experiences matter more as creative fodder." In a similar vein, Dr. White offers: "I think that the best thing to do would be to have a "real" film program somewhere in Singapore, combining both the academic study of film and training in film production. This is the way it is done in the US, but it may be a while before it is accepted in Singapore, largely because I suspect film production is not seen as a "real" subject to be taught at a university."

So has the local filmmaking flurry thus far arrived at nothing more than a zero-sum game? As Ong quips: "Does a spate of feature film releases to date reflect a viable industry, or has this merely meant that a deluge of investors has got their fingers burned while trying to reap profits?"

Author Information

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