Historical Poetics, Malaysian Cinema, and the Japanese Occupation

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LITTLE HAS BEEN WRITTEN, especially in English, about the history of Malaysian cinema. Rather than a fully-developed study of Malaysian film, this article is really more of an introduction to the project I am undertaking, which is a study of Malaysian cinema from the "Golden Age" (the 1950s and 1960s), including especially the films of P. Ramlee, but also such genres as the crime film, fantasy film, and *pontianak* (vampire) film, to today's Malaysian cinema, with its own genres, outstanding filmmakers (Aziz Osman and U-Wei Haji Shaari, for example), and performers (most obviously, Sofia Jane).

And this article is as much an introduction to my methodology -- historical poetics -- as it is to my subject. Therefore, this article is divided into three sections: the first deals with the need for a new way of looking at Third World cinema; the second with a general discussion of what historical poetics can tell us about Malaysian cinema; and the third with a more specific area of study within the history of Malaysian cinema, the Japanese Occupation and its influence.

LOOKING AT THIRD WORLD CINEMA

Since arriving in Singapore in 1992, I have become interested in the films of Malaysia, and also in the attitude toward Malaysian cinema I have found among many of my Malay students at the National University of Singapore. On one hand, they dismiss Malaysian films as technologically inferior to those of Hollywood, Hong Kong, and China, and aesthetically inferior to those of Western Europe; when they admit to watching Malaysian films, it is often with a great deal of embarrassment. On the other hand, they *do* watch these films, and, despite their embarrassment, they enjoy watching these films.

Of course, this phenomenon, this ambivalence, is not unique to attitudes toward cinema; it is fairly common for cultural and/or ethnic groups to valorize a more dominant culture over their own, and, unfortunately, to feel somewhat ashamed of their own culture. This is especially true of film and television, both powerful tools for the transmission of culture and ideology, and both dominated by the West, and, more specifically, the United States. And, as we will see, even the terms by which this dominated culture and its products may be criticized are often dictated by that dominant culture and its influence. This is why I have adopted a methodology that rarely, if ever, has been used to approach the films of what is generally called the "Third World" (itself a title imposed by the West, with connotations of some sort of ranking of nations and cultures, and at the very least a label that implies some sort of "otherness": not "the" world, or "our" world, but some "other" world; I am using the term strictly for the sake of convenience, and am open to alternatives).

In order to be as fair as possible in my criticisms, and rejection, of the ways in which Third World cinema has been discussed, I will use the writings of Teshome H. Gabriel, whom I consider to be among the more reasonable and enlightened scholars of Third World cinema. Gabriel divides the histories of the cinemas of Third World nations into three phases; the first of these is what he calls the "unqualified assimilation," during which the film industry of such a nation identifies closely with Western filmmaking industries, especially that of Hollywood.(1) According to Gabriel, at this point "Hollywood thematic concerns of 'entertainment' predominate," and "the sole purpose of such industries is to turn out entertainment products which will generate profits."(2) Any attempts to create film movements that may challenge this industrial national cinema will quickly and successfully be absorbed, or "ingested," by it. Stylistically, "the emphasis on formal properties of cinema, technical brilliance and visual wizardry, overrides subject matter. The aim is simply to create a 'spectacle.' Aping Hollywood stylistically, more often than not, runs counter to Third World needs for a serious social art."(3)

Although this sounds reasonable enough on the surface, a closer look raises a number of questions and objections. To begin with, the emphasis of the classical Hollywood cinema is not now, nor has it ever been, on "the formal properties of cinema"; it has, in fact, been on narratives, clearly told and completely

dominating formal and stylistic aspects of film. Whether or not Third World cinemas have emphasized narrative or formal aspects of film is another matter; I suspect that most such cinemas have adopted, to varying degrees, the classical Hollywood narrative style, but have added formal and stylistic aspects drawn from native (and other) cultural influences. This is certainly the case with Malaysian cinema.

We must also ask another question: If, in fact, Third World cinemas do imitate the narrative style of the classical Hollywood cinema, or if they instead emphasize formal aspects of film, does either case necessarily mean that the result cannot be "serious social art"? What, for that matter, *is* "serious social art"? Does it mean art with a political content? Or does it mean art with a *specific* political content, content usually valued not necessarily by the populations of Third World nations, but instead by Western liberal intellectuals? Must film conform to the political notions of essentially Western radical critics to be of value to its viewers?

Gabriel's second stage in the development of the cinema of a Third World nation is what he refers to as the "remembrance phase," in which a film industry undergoes "indigenisation and control of talents, production, exhibition, and distribution."(4) According to Gabriel, many Third World nations are now at this point, which features, thematically, the "return of the exile to the Third World's source of strength, i.e. culture and history. The predominance of filmic themes such as the clash between rural and urban life, traditional versus modern value systems, folklore and mythology, identifies this level."(5) Certainly, most, and probably all, of the national cinemas of Southeast Asia are currently at this point. Going beyond this description of the second phase, Gabriel stresses the point that "there is a danger of falling into a trap of exalting traditional values and racialising culture without at the same time condemning faults."(6) He goes on to argue that "to accept totally the values of Third World traditional cultures without simultaneously stamping out the regressive elements can only lead to 'a blind alley'...and falsification of the true nature of culture as an act or agent of liberation."(7) Gabriel uses as an example of this sort of filmmaking Hector Babenco's 1981 Brazilian film *Pixote* arguing that although the filmmaker seemed to have made a film criticizing conditions for street children in Brazil, he paid his star only US$320, and went on to make *The Kiss of the Spider Woman* "in collaboration with producers in Hollywood."(8)

It is obvious that here Gabriel is using a politicized definition of the term "culture." There may be a number of different ways to define and describe culture, but to claim that it is *necessarily* "an act or agent of liberation" seems to go beyond most accepted definitions of the word "culture." This is fine if Gabriel feels that this is what culture *should* do, of course, but I would argue that it too severely narrows a term that is more useful when used descriptively, not prescriptively. And, I would argue that it is mistaken to evaluate a film based on the salary paid to a performer or the subsequent collaboration of the filmmaker with Hollywood filmmakers, or with anyone, for that matter.

Gabriel's third stage is the "combative stage," at which a nation's film industry is a "public service institution," owned by the government and "managed, operated and run for and by the people."(9) Thematically, these films deal with "the lives and struggles of Third World peoples," and this phase is "distinguishable from either Phase I or Phase II by its insistence on viewing film in its ideological ramifications."(10) Stylistically, films of this phase are also used as "ideological tools," and "one element of style in this phase is an ideological point-of-view instead of that of a character as in dominant Western conventions."(11)

Gabriel's description of this phase is problematic in a number of ways. For one thing, it is not at all clear how style is used ideologically, or what constitutes a stylistic ideological point-of-view, or why using film to perpetuate one ideology is necessarily better than using it to perpetuate some other ideology. And a film scholar would be hard pressed to find any film industry that is a "public service industry," supposedly operated for and by the "people," that also has the support of any significant percentage of those people. Although Gabriel's first two stages are observations based on the past, the third seems to be more wishful thinking about the present and future. With the fall of communist Eastern Europe and the "capitalizing" of China, along with the apparent coming collapse of Cuba (one of Gabriel's best examples of a Third World nation with a "people's cinema"), any significant national cinemas resembling Gabriel's vision seem unlikely.

I should add at this point that just what constitutes "legitimate" radical or revolutionary activity has also been called into question in recent years, not just due to the fall of communism, but also due to the rise of the Muslim world. Radical socialist revolutionary activities find approval from Western leftist intellectuals, and anticommunist revolutionary movements are approved by Western intellectuals on the right; Islamic

Figure 1: Star, director, singer, and composer P. Ramlee (1929-1973)

revolutionary activities, however, scare the hell out of both, and have contributed greatly to the confusion in the West as to just what sort of radical filmmaking should be valorized.

In light of these developments and of the decreasing usefulness of essentially ideological approaches to film, and with a desire to respect both the filmmakers of Third World cinema and the peoples who watch their films, I think it's time to get "back to basics." Film scholars (perhaps like others in the Western world) need to get down to the work of describing and understanding national cinemas, not prescribing to these industries, filmmakers, and audiences what they "should" be doing, nor applying standards that rarely are applied to the films of Western nations. Let's assume that the filmmakers and audiences of these nations know what they are up to, and study what they do, not what we may want them to do. Before I go on to describe my own methodology, allow me to quote, at some length, a recent observation by the Iranian film critic and scholar, Houshang Golmakani: "The image of the Third World in the outlook and unconscious of Western intellectuals is one of poverty, violence and disaster based on elements known as "oriental" (carpets, clay and straw walls, antique shops, carriages, camels, deserts, miniatures) and sometimes mixed with fantasy of the *1001 Nights* kind. Western critics, of course, emphasize the visual and cinematic values of such works. However, in these films, they look for those elements and signs which ratify their subjective images of the Third World. For them, if an Iranian filmmaker makes a film in the style of Antonioni or Coppola, it is not attractive to them even if it is itself beautiful. The Western critic and intellectual does not expect or like a film by a Third World filmmaker about, for example, the crisis in the relationship of a couple unless the relationship derives from a social or political background and not from human or psychological conflict."[(12)]

So, if we reject traditional, essentially Western liberal intellectual prescriptive approaches to Third World cinema, with what can we replace them? Specifically, how can we approach the cinema of Malaysia, a national cinema that even its detractors acknowledge is different from the cinemas of Hollywood, Hong Kong, and India, whose films dominate Malaysia? I suggest that we use the approach to the study of film known as historical poetics.

Historical poetics of cinema is an approach to film study introduced by David Bordwell and Kristin Thompson of the University of Wisconsin, and has its roots in the work of the Russian Formalist critics of both literature and film.[(13)] At its most basic, historical poetics asks the following questions of a film, an aspect of film, a film genre, a national cinema, et al.: What is it? And how did it get that way? And, importantly, it is descriptive, not prescriptive.

More specifically, historical poetics looks at the ways in which aspects of theme, form and style have been

used in different ways at different times for different reasons. It assumes that different options have been available (or forbidden) in various cinemas at various times in history. Some options are considered standard, or norms (for example, continuity editing in the classical Hollywood cinema). Some options are available and are used, but are not standard (they are considered unusual or deviations from the norm, but are not forbidden or unknown; for example, in Hollywood films of the late 1960s and early 1970s, the "non-redundant" flashback was seen in such films as *In Cold Blood*). Some options are known, but are not available because they are avoided or forbidden by common consent (for example, positive portrayals of homosexuality in contemporary Malaysian films). Finally, other options are not available because they are not known or are not feasible (for example, such technological innovations as wide-screen, color, sound, etc.).

What is interesting about film, or about any art form, according to poetics, is the ways in which these options, or parameters, are used. Are they "stretched" by some artists? Do some artists use the parameters in more interesting or unique ways than others? What are the parameters of a particular cinema at a particular time? How and why do these parameters change?

How does an artist choose among options; where do they come from? For example, some options are imposed by the artist and the norms of his or her personal style. Others are imposed by rules of genre, style, mode, etc. Some options are dictated by the needs of the industrial structure of a film industry (the studio system and genre films of the 1930s and 1940s, for example). And other options are the result of culture (national, political, ethnic, etc.).

The object of study of historical poetics is, of course, films. But more specifically, historical poeticians look at three aspects of film. The first is thematics. Although many approaches to film look primarily, or even exclusively, at theme (and this is often true of approaches used by literary scholars who study film), for poetics theme is merely one aspect of film, neither more nor less important than any other. As with aspects of style, themes are options; some are norms, others forbidden, etc., and these options change over time and across national and cultural boundaries.

The second aspect of film is constructional form. For my purposes, the most important constructional form is narrative, because it is the dominant form of popular cinema. Narrative form itself dictates certain parameters of options (those required to tell a story, as opposed to those needed to explain a process or to convey some other sort of information). However, the parameters of narrative form are far from universal. Obviously, the ways in which a story may be told are different in, say, Indian cinema, than they are in Hollywood cinema (for example, the sorts of musical numbers, with drastic changes of costume and setting from shot to shot, common to Indian films are not found in even the most extremely different Hollywood musical).

The final aspect of film dealt with by historical poetics is stylistics, specifically cinematography, editing, sound and mise-en-scene. As with the other aspects of film, stylistics fall within parameters of options, subject to technological development (for example, color, sound, and lighting), individual artistic preferences, economics, fashion, etc.

Before discussing these aspects in terms of Malaysian cinema, let me make clear some of the things that historical poetics does *not* do. It does not seek to establish that film is a "serious subject" by applying an already-accepted scholarly approach to the study of film, nor does it evaluate films based on their relationship with or similarities to other art forms. Nor does it offer interpretations of films, or offer symptomatic readings of films; it does not seek to explain to the viewer what a film is "really" about. Finally, it is not concerned with the ways in which film may or may not perpetuate capitalist, communist, sexist, religious, or any other sort of ideology, or in the ways in which film affects society. It *is* concerned, however, with the ways in which these may affect films themselves. In other words, historical poetics reverses the usual priorities; it seeks to know more about culture in order to understand films better, not the other way around. This is not to say, however, that historical poetics ignores the viewer; instead, in better understanding films and the uses of cinematic devices, we may better understand what they mean to the audience.

HISTORICAL POETICS AND MALAYSIAN CINEMA

Now I would like to turn my attention more specifically to Malaysian cinema, and the ways in which we may map out an approach to Malaysian film using historical poetics. In general, the more important influences on

these films include the native popular musical theater form known as *bangsawan* Indian cinema (especially Tamil language films); transplanted Chinese culture; Japanese cinema of the Occupation (especially the films of such directors as Kurosawa, Ozu, Naruse, and Mizoguchi, as well as the films of popular Japanese film genres such as the *shomin-geki* (comedies about the lower-middle class), and *nonsensu-mono* ("nonsense" comedies); Islam; and, perhaps most important, Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s (especially comedies, film noir, and monster movies). In the following discussion of a few of these influences, I will draw on examples from four films of Malaysia's "Golden Age," the 1950s-1960s, all produced at the Shaw Brothers' Malay Film Productions studio in Singapore: *Anak Pontianak*, directed by Ramon A. Estella in 1958; *Bujang Lapok* a comedy directed by P. Ramlee in 1957; *Ibu Mertua Ku*, a drama directed by P. Ramlee in 1962; and *Sergeant Hassan* directed by Lamberto Avallena in 1955, but starring P. Ramlee.

One of the more obvious features of Malaysian films of this era (as well as most recent Malaysian films) is the ubiquitous musical number. Certainly, the inclusion of these musical numbers was influenced by the films of other national cinemas, and especially by Indian films. To a less extent, we can see the influence of Hollywood musicals also; although by the 1960s the Hollywood musical had almost disappeared, it was common during the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, the years during which Malaysia's future filmmakers were forming their ideas about what films should be; it is not surprising that this influence is seen in Malaysian films of the late 1950s and 1960s. We should also keep in mind that after World War 2, Hollywood used the backlog of films that had not been seen in occupied countries, including Malaya, to flood these countries with these films. This had the effect not only of stunting the growth of native film industries, but also of saturating filmmakers (and future filmmakers) in these countries with the classical Hollywood style, just as Asian nations had been saturated by the style of Japanese cinema during the Occupation.

But the musical number in the Malaysian "Golden Age" film is presented in ways that are not quite the same as the ways in which its Hollywood counterparts are presented. Although the Hollywood musical is most often either a romantic comedy or an adaptation of a Broadway musical, that is to say a musical film as opposed to a film that includes some musical numbers, the musical number in Malay films often appears in films and at moments that seem, to the Western viewer, quite inappropriate. It is not unusual for a perfectly serious Malay drama to include songs, and often comic songs, at the most serious and dramatic moments. For example, *Anak Pontianak*, a vampire movie, includes a song called "The Satay Man," sung by the satay man himself, with the accompaniment of a group of *kampong* children. This number serves absolutely no purpose in terms of narrative cause and effect. Instead, it serves as a break for the audience, a moment at which tension is released, after which tension is once more increased. This seems to be the result of the direct influence of *bangsawan* theater, which included this sort of musical number not just to release tension, but also to lengthen the performance and give the stage crew time to change the set. Although it was not needed for such practical purposes in film, it seems to have become part of what audiences, and filmmakers, expected to experience during a dramatic performance.[(14)]

Other Malay films, however, seem to adhere more to the model of the 1930s and 1940s Hollywood film. P. Ramlee's musical comedy *Bujang Lapok* for example, incorporates musical numbers that are not realistically motivated by the narrative (they are not part of performances within the story); but, unlike the *bangsawan*-influenced songs, they further the narrative by revealing characters' emotions, desires, intentions, etc. In the same director's dramatic film *Ibu Mertua Ku* musical numbers are realistically motivated, as the main character is a professional musician. And, just as in the Hollywood musical, in both of these films non-diegetic background music accompanies the songs; the audience (or at least most of it) simply suspends its disbelief.

Other influences from Hollywood can be seen in the mise-en-scene of the films, particularly in the lighting. Although the extensive three-point lighting of the typical Hollywood film is rarely seen in Malaysian films of this era, the comedies, in this case *Bujong Lapok*, tend to adopt the much "flatter" two-point lighting of the Hollywood comedy. In this system, back lights are rarely used, and key lights and fill lights tend to be of almost equal intensity. The result offers the advantage of more clearly illuminating the foreground action (and these films often rely on visual humour) and masks the disadvantage of a lack of depth in the setting. An equally important advantage to two-point lighting is that it is much less expensive, in terms of both equipment and electricity, than is three-point lighting, which requires far more lights, more technicians, and more time to set up; for Malaysian films, with their relatively small market and small budgets, this was, and

still is, an important consideration. The dramatic films, on the other hand, tend to use the low-key lighting often seen in Hollywood horror films and in films noir (for example, detective and crime films). This style of lighting, seen in *Anak Pontianak Ibu Mertua Ku*, and *Sergeant Hassan* eliminates the fill light, relying on a low-intensity key light and, sometimes, a back light. The effect is to create a darker, more dramatic mise-en-scene, and, as with two-point lighting, this system is far less expensive than is three-point lighting.

However, unlike Hollywood films, Malaysian films tend to switch fairly freely between different styles of lighting, as well as from studio to outdoor location shots, without much concern for consistency of mise-en-scene between shots. For example, shots in *Anak Pontianak* frequently alternate between dark interiors and brightly lit outdoor shots, all of which supposedly take place at night. This sort of inconsistency is not unusual in Malaysian films; obviously, one reason for this is economic, but its acceptance is indicative of a culture that, unlike most Western cultures, does not seek absolute verisimilitude in the consistency of mise-en-scene. Such cultures tend to value performance, or presentation, over "realistic" representation (another Asian culture in which this is seen is that of Japan, whose arts, including *kabuki bunraku*, as well as film, also tend to emphasize performance over Western-style verisimilitude).

This brings us to the final influence I wish to discuss, that of the films of the Japanese occupation of Malaya; this is an influence that I think should not be underestimated.

MALAYSIAN CINEMA AND THE JAPANESE OCCUPATION

The Japanese Occupation of Southeast Asia generally (and understandably) has been regarded as an unfortunate interlude in the history of that region's nations. However, in at least one cultural aspect, the Occupation had a lasting, important and, in some ways, beneficial influence. This aspect is cinema.[15]

The influence of the Japanese Occupation, and the Japanese films exhibited in Malaya during and after the Occupation, can be seen most clearly in the films of Malaysia's "Golden Age," the 1950s and 1960s. In this section of this article, I will examine this influence, and discuss primarily the influence of the films of Yasujiro Ozu, Kenji Mizoguchi, and Akira Kurosawa, as well as the films of popular Japanese film genres such as the *shomin-geki* (comedies about the lower-middle class) and the *nonsensu-mono* ("nonsense" comedies), on the films of Malaysian cinema's Golden Age, and especially on a young Malay movie fan who would become Malaysia's most-loved film director, P. Ramlee.

First, a few words about influences seem in order. Influences can be both positive and negative, although I don't mean this in a judgmental way. If we look at animation, for example, it is obvious that the products of Walt Disney have had a positive influence on much of the animation produced internationally, in that many animators have attempted to copy the style (and financial success) of Disney's animation. On the other hand, Disney products have had a negative influence on such animators as Ralph Bakshi or those of the Zagreb School, who, in order to differentiate their work from that of the mainstream, have reacted against it, and have purposely attempted to avoid, and at times offer a critique of, the Disney style. As we will see, Japanese cinema had both positive and negative influences on Malaysian films.

We must keep in mind also that influences can be very difficult, and often impossible, to prove. Some influences are relatively obvious and clear cut, as is, for example, the influence of German Expressionism on Hollywood films, especially horror films, of the 1930s. After all, they were often made by the same directors, technicians, and actors (Fritz Lang, Karl Freund, Peter Lorre, etc.). Others are more difficult to pin down, especially in a film industry such as that of Malaysia, in which records are scarce, films not always preserved, and about which very little has been written. Therefore, much of what I have to say is based on evidence that is circumstantial at best, and may well be proven wrong by further research into Malaysian film history.

On 8 December 1941, Japanese forces invaded Malaysia, and with the surrender of Singapore ten weeks later, on 15 February 1942, Malaya was occupied by the Japanese. The Occupation force set out immediately to establish control over almost all aspects of life, including cinema. Film production, which had begun in 1933 and by 1940 was dominated by two fairly prolific studios, Cathay Productions and the Shaw Brothers,[16] came almost to a halt at this point. There were a few films made in Singapore during the Occupation -- *Bermadu Hancur Hati*, *Ibu Tiri Mutiara*, *Terang Bulan di Malaya Topeng Syaitan*, and *Mata Hatu* -- but little is known about these films or the circumstances under which they were produced.[17]

All film exhibition came under control of one of the "kaishas," or official Japanese Occupation government monopolies; the movie exhibition monopoly was given to *Eiga Haikyu Sha* (the Japan Film Distribution Co.), with its headquarters in Singapore, and which took over all the theatres throughout the country.[18] Japanese films were used in the campaign of "Nipponisation" carried out by the Occupation forces, who recognised the power of cinema for propaganda purposes and for building the *shinchitsujo* or "New World Order."[19] Given a choice, the Malaysians preferred British and American movies to those of the Japanese. Because they realized the influence these Western films had on the Malaysians, the Japanese banned Western films, and in fact banned all but Japanese films in Malaya.[20]

Figure 2: Malay film star Zaiton (ca. 1960)

Interestingly, film exhibition was one of the few areas in which the Occupation forces were successful in eliminating the English language in Malaya; the Japanese found that without the use of English, government and commerce came to a standstill, and therefore reluctantly allowed its use.[21]

Because the Japanese initially lacked enough Japanese films to fill Malaya's screens, the *Sendenbu*, or department of propaganda, authorized the release of some of the 50,000 reels of British and American films they had seized, but only after censoring and re-editing them. This lasted until 1943, when a regular supply of Japanese feature films was available.[22] Because Japanese films were the only ones available to the Malaysians, they patronized them and, apparently, appreciated and enjoyed them, at the same time realizing that these films were being used for purposes of propaganda. According to contemporary accounts, few Malaysians refused to see Japanese films.[23] Reserve and first-class seats were taken by the Japanese and newly-rich black marketeers; formerly wealthy Malaysians purposely sat in second class seats to avoid being conspicuous.[24]

The *Bunka Eiga Gekijio* or governmental propaganda film unit, screened only newsreels and educational films. According to Chin Kee Onn, who, in his book *Malaya Upside Down*, has described life in occupied Malaya: "The films were designed to emphasize the rare qualities of the Japanese spirit, the thoroughness of Japanese patriotism, the supremacy of the Japanese Armed Forces, the efficiency of Japanese light and heavy industries, the vastness of Japanese material resources, the capabilities of Japanese organizing skill, the quickness of reconstruction in conquered regions, [and] the willing cooperation of the "freed peoples" [of southeast Asia]."[25]

More standard "popular" cinemas, however, showed Japanese feature films designed to familiarize the Malaysians with Japanese culture. This Japanese culture included, according to Chin Kee Onn, "the excellence of Japanese family life, the harmony of the Japanese social system, the "modernness" of Japanese civilization without the sacrifice of the finer points of ancient culture, the fine qualities of Japanese art and

music, the nobility of filial devotion and the greater nobility of devotion to the Nation and the Emperor."[26] Chin goes on to observe, however, that these films seemed to reveal that "many features in [the Japanese] factory systems, their cinema-industry, their film-acting and film-directing technique, their college life, their sports, their magazines, and their advertising methods were highly influenced by the very Americanism which they bombastically condemned."[27]

This is an interesting observation, as it may be that at least some of the stylistic and narrative features of the classical Hollywood cinema, which had a strong impact on Japanese films before the outbreak of World War 2, may have entered Malaysian cinema through these Japanese films seen during the Occupation. In fact, *Nankai no Hanataba* (Bouquet in the Southern Seas, 1942), a film about the bravery of the Japanese pilots who paved the way for the invasion of Malaya, and which was made exclusively for screening in Southeast Asia, was directed by Abe Yutaka, who had been known as "Jackie Abe" in Hollywood when he worked there (as an actor, production assistant and, in lean times, a butler) in the late teens and early 1920s.[28]

Certainly, the experience of the Occupation itself had a negative influence on the subject matter of Malaysian films made after the Occupation. Such films as *Sergeant Hassan* (1957) were made showing the cruelty of the Japanese and the bravery, as well as the suffering, of the Malays. But what I am more interested in are the positive influences of these Japanese films on Malaysian cinema. For, just as the Japanese films showed the influence of Hollywood films in terms of style, narrative technique, and subject matter, Malaysian films of the postwar era show the subtle influence of Japanese films, especially in terms of narrative style and cinematography. An important area of investigation, therefore, is the nature of the Japanese films shown in occupied Southeast Asia.

There is some documentation of the documentary propaganda films shown in the occupied nations of Asia,[29] and some information concerning the feature films that were made by the Japanese films in Southeast Asia during the Occupation. In addition to Abe Yutaka's *Nankai no Hanataba* other Japanese films made in and for Malaya and Singapore Asia include Shima Koji's *Shingaporu Sokogeki* (All-out Attack on Singapore, 1943) and Koga Masato's *Marei no Tora* (The Tiger of Malaya, 1943).[30] Some animated cartoons were made for exhibition in Southeast Asia also. One very popular cartoon character was *Momotaro*, the "Peach boy," who appeared in a number of cartoons designed not just for domestic consumption within Japan, but for propaganda use in occupied countries as well. For example, *Picture Book 1936* (*Momotaro vs. Mickey Mouse*) resented fanged Mickey Mouse look-alikes riding giant bats, attacking peaceful Pacific islanders (represented by cats and dolls, for some reason); the hero Momotaro jumps out of a picture book, repels the American mice, and cherry trees blossom throughout the island as the grateful natives sing "Tokyo Chorus." In a more ambitious cartoon, *Momotaro's Sea Eagle*, released in 1943, Momotaro leads the attack on Pearl Harbour, then "liberates" Southeast Asia; although Momotaro himself is a human boy, the "liberated peoples" are presented as animals (cute little rabbits, mice, ducks and bears, who willingly and sternly fight behind Momotaro, their liberator and leader), while the Americans and British (and especially General Percival, who surrenders Singapore to Momotaro) are huge, hairy, ugly demons, complete with horns and drooling fangs.[31] *Nippon Banzai* another animated propaganda film designed for use in the occupied nations employed, along with an almost avant-garde mix of line animation, shadow animation, and live-action footage, the following commentary (in English!): "The peaceful Southeast Asian countries have been trampled underfoot for many years, their inhabitants made to suffer by the devilish British, Americans, and Dutch. In the midst of this hardship, in their hearts they (the inhabitants) have waited for a ray of light, a strong soul. That light, that soul was Japan."[32]

But aside from this handful, we may never have a very clear idea of exactly which Japanese feature films were screened in these nations. However, we may make some general hypotheses concerning these films, given the types of films made in Japan in the years leading up to and during the war, and the films that were made in Malaysia after the war by such young filmmakers as P. Ramlee, who spent the Occupation years watching these films.

The genres of the *shomin-geki* (comedies about the lower-middle class) and the *nansensu-mono* ("nonsense comedy"), which were quite popular in Japan in the 1930s, were also probably fairly common, along with Japanese propaganda films, in Malaysian theatres during World War 2. These films, and especially the so-called nonsense films, are slightly racy comedies, often featuring a group of about three young men seeking

to meet women and make money with a minimum amount of effort. They include many sight gags, jokes built around mistaken identity, mothers-in-law, and girlfriends with angry fathers, and usually conclude in ways that are implausible, at best. Fans of P. Ramlee movies, especially *Bujang Lapok* (1957) and his other comedies, should have no trouble recognizing this pattern in these movies. (As we saw above, the influence of Hollywood comedies of the 1930s, especially the *Three Stooges* series, is another important and obvious influence on these films; in fact, they also influenced Japanese comedy as well.)[33]

In addition to this narrative influence, we can see in the films of P. Ramlee, and in the comedies in particular, the probable stylistic influence of the films of Yasujiro Ozu. Ozu, who directed a number of nonsense comedies, some of which were almost certainly seen in occupied Malaya, is known for his unusually low camera height, usually about three feet off the ground. This low height is duplicated by Ramlee, but often with a low angle, especially when characters are standing, as opposed to Ozu's straight-ahead shots, even when characters are standing, as Ozu simply moved the camera back further in order to capture the full figure in the frame. This low camera height may be seen extensively, for example, in the comedy *Bujang Lapok*, in shots of the characters sitting on the floor, but also often when they are standing up. In fact, at times entire scenes are shot from a single low camera position, with only slight tilts and pans to reframe the action.

This unusual use of the camera can be seen, to varying degrees, in all of P. Ramlee's films, but especially in the comedies photographed by his frequent cinematographer, Abu Bakar Ali. A closer examination of the films Ali photographed for other directors will help us know if this probable influence of Ozu's movies was on Ali, Ramlee, or possibly both. The fact that Ali also photographed *Sergeant Hassan* which was not directed by Ramlee and features, in general, more conventional cinematography, seems to indicate that the unusual camera-work was more likely due to Ramlee, who often indicated his interest in Japanese film, and, in fact, spoke Japanese.[34]

However, an important difference should be noted between the films of Ozu and Malaysian films. Ozu used this low camera height systematically, as a strictly stylistic feature of his films; he shaped his film content to fit his style of shooting. In the Malaysian films this low camera height, and in fact most stylistic aspects of these films, are more often used to further the narrative, to help tell a clear story. We see this, for example, in a scene in *Sergeant Hassan* featuring a small boy, in which the camera height is motivated by his point of view. Likewise, at the end of the film, we get a low camera height in order to see the action better, as the hero fights on the ground with a soldier who had collaborated with the Japanese. After the death of the traitor, we get a shot of the hero and his love interest from a low height, this time motivated by the point of view of, oddly enough, the dead soldier. Even when not motivated by a point of view (and they usually are not), these shots are used to make the narrative easier to understand; at least, they don't interfere with our understanding of the narrative, as they often do in Ozu's films. Another example of this difference is the slight movements of the camera I pointed out in *Bujang Lapok* to reframe the shot, highlighting objects, faces, etc., that are important to an understanding of the story; unlike Ramlee and his colleagues, Ozu would never have tilted or panned his camera to reframe the shot.

Although not as pervasive as the influence of Ozu's cinematography, that of Japanese director Kenji Mizoguchi also seems apparent in some Malaysian films, especially, again, the films of P. Ramlee. This can be seen, for example, in Ramlee's 1962 film, *Ibu Mertua Ku*, in which we get highly unusual crane shots, including one that begins over a set of a house (without a roof, in order to accommodate the crane) from an acute, extremely high angle, then snakes through the house following a character as she walks through the house. Although more common in dramas such as this one, these high angle shots can be seen scattered throughout even the comedies, as, for example, in Ramlee's 1962 comedy, *Labu dan Labi*. Although never motivated as point-of-view shots, these high angle shots nevertheless function to give the viewer a better understanding of the narrative. In this film, these shots are freely combined with both low angle shots and shots that are typical of the classical Hollywood to tell a relatively clear narrative (the confusion that a Western viewer may experience is due more to a lack of knowledge of Malaysian conventions and the fact that many of Ramlee's films rely on the viewer having seen previous Ramlee films). Interestingly, the use of cinematography and editing that is more typical of the classical Hollywood cinema occurs most often in the dream sequences, which are parodies of American film genres (gangster films, westerns, Tarzan films, etc.), although the mise-en-scene is highly stylized in these sequences (as, for example, when animals are portrayed by actors in costumes).

The influence of Japanese films does not seem limited to the films seen by Malays during the Occupation. During these years, an interest in Japanese cinema was established in these young future filmmakers, and we can see in their films the influence of later Japanese directors as well. The strongest influence was that of the films of Akira Kurosawa (which is hardly surprising, considering his influence on filmmakers all over the world). It is ironic that even in *Sergeant Hassan*, a 1955 film critical of the Japanese, we see what appear to be obvious references to Kurosawa's work, especially *Rashomon*, which was made in 1951. The long tracking shots, the shots in the forest looking up at the sun filtering through the trees, and the tracking shots of the characters walking with a screen of branches between them and the camera, all recall Kurosawa's masterpiece.

Certainly, the Occupation was an unfortunate time for the Malaysians, as well as for the rest of much of Asia. However, the influence of the films seen by young aspiring filmmakers during the Occupation tempered the influence of Indian cinema, and led to a rich, fascinating stylistic and narrative mixture in Malaysian films, resulting in what we know as Malaysian cinema's Golden Age. Unfortunately, much of this influence was relatively short-lived. By the mid-1970s, Malaysian film had come to rely on a not always satisfactory combination of the styles and conventions of Hollywood, Hong Kong, and Indian cinema, along with, frankly, rather crude religious and nationalistic propaganda. Although there are a few Malaysian filmmakers -- for example, U-Wei Haji Shaari, who made *Perempuan, isteri dan Jalang* in 1993, and Aziz M. Osman, who made *XX Ray* in 1992 -- who have made interesting films that are stylistically and narratively innovative, the chances for another Malaysian Golden Age are bleak indeed. Let us hope that it doesn't take another world war to bring some life back to the *filem Melayu*.

Although this has been far from an exhaustive look at Malaysian cinema, I hope it will serve as a starting point, not only for me but for other scholars of Asian cinema as well. Much more work needs to be done, preferably by those more knowledgeable than am I about Malaysian history and culture; the concepts of the *pontianak* the *polong*, and the wise and sometimes talking mousedeer are all new to me, as are the concepts of Islam and the ways in which they find their way into Malaysian films. And I hope that at least some of this work will utilize historical poetics, focussing more on the films themselves and less on political polemics and prescriptions, as an approach to exploring Malaysian cinema.

Figure 3: Poster for the Japanese propaganda documentary *Fall of Singapore* (1942)

Notes

1. Teshome H. Gabriel, "Towards a critical theory of Third World films," in Jim Pines and Paul Willeman, eds. *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989), 31.

2. Ibid. 3. Ibid. 4. Ibid., 32. 5. Ibid. 6. Ibid. 7. Ibid. 8. Ibid., 31-32. 9. Ibid., 33. 10. Ibid. 11. Ibid.

12. Houshang Golmakani, "Beyond the Shadow of a Doubt," *Cinemaya* 22 (Winter 1993-94): 55.

13. For more on historical poetics, see David Bordwell, *Making Meaning* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), especially pp. 263-74.

14. For a more detailed discussion of the relationship between Malaysian films and *bangsawan*, see Chan Chih Min, "Malay Films: A Cultural Background," unpublished paper, National University of Singapore, 1993.

15. Joseph Anderson and Donald Richie made this point in their seminal text on Japanese cinema: "[T]he Japanese were responsible for accelerating the rise of the Asian film industry as a whole, and without Japan's occupation of these countries the production level would not be as high as it is now. In a military-campaign history studded with horrors it is a pleasure to be able to discover this one small constructive effort" (Joseph L. Anderson and Donald Richie, *The Japanese Film: Art and Industry*, expanded edition [Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982], 158).

16. John Lent, *The Asian Film Industry* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 187-88.

17. Sharifah Zinjuaher and Hang Tuah Arshad, *Sejarah Filem Melayu: The History of Malay Motion Pictures* Kuala Lumpur: Penerbitan Sri Sharifah, 1980), 18.

18. Chin Kee Onn, *Malaya Upside Down* (Singapore: Jitts & Co., Ltd., 1946), 86-87; and Michael Dennis Baskett, "The Japanese Colonial Film Enterprise 1937-1945: Imagining the Imperial Japanese Subject" (M.A. thesis, University of California -- Los Angeles, 1993), 57.

19. Yoji Akashi, "Japanese Cultural Policy in Malaya and Singapore, 1942-45," in *Japanese Cultural Policies in Southeast Asia during World War 2*, Grant K. Goodman, ed. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1991), 119.

20. Lent, 188; and Chin, 156-57.

21. Chin, 156. 22. Yoji Akashi, 132-33. 23. Chin, 151. 24. Ibid., 192. 25. Ibid., 151. 26. Ibid.; see also Lent, 188. 27. Chin, 160. 28. Baskett, 59-61; and Anderson and Richie, 40, 130.

29. See, for example, Yoji Akashi, 132-33; for a thorough discussion of the use of documentary films by Japanese in Java, see Aiko Kurosawa, "Films as Propaganda on Java under the Japanese, 1942-45," in Goodman, 36-92.

30. Ibid.

31. Ueno Toshiya, 76-77; Komatsuzawa Hajime, "Picture Book 1936 (Momotaro vs. Mickey Mouse)," in *Media Wars*, 212-14; and Komatsuzawa Hajime, "Momotaro's Sea Eagle," in *Media Wars*, 241-46.

32. Quoted in Komatsuzawa Hajime, "Nippon Banzai," in *Media Wars*, 253.

33. These "nonsense" films and lower-middle class comedies are actually quite conservative, and, at the conclusion of these films, order was always restored and established as preferable to the nonsense that had proceeded it. These films would have had the effect of showing the Japanese as fun-loving and tolerant, as well as stable and serious, much in the way that Hollywood's screwball comedies showed Depression era audiences that the rich were just like they were -- but with more money. For a discussion of these genres, see Anderson and Richie, 51-53; and Noël Burch, *To the Distant Observer: Form and meaning in the Japanese cinema* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), 152-53.

34. Zakiah Hanum, ed., Sepanjang Riwayatku (n.p.: Utusan Publications & Distributors Sdn. Bhd., 1984), 83; Baharudin Latif, "P. Ramlee: Satu Legenda," in *Cintai Filem Malaysia* (Selangor Darul Ehsan, Malaysia: Perbadanan Kemajuan Filem Nasional Malaysia, 1989), 64-65.

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