

## Mass Media in Singapore and Asia 20<sup>th</sup> March 2002

Lecture: Singapore Film: Reeling from past to present  
with nisar keshvani

### Introduction:

- Legalities: Singapore Cinema
- Golden Age of Cinema
- Western Influences
- Film Classification
- Local Films today
- Future-casting

### Legalities

- The Theatres Enactment Act 1910
  - required all theatres to be licensed & undergo censorship
- Ordinance No. 200 of 1923
  - required all films to be screened by censors
  - **1925:** 90% of films censored & 12% banned

### Legalities II

- Cinematograph Films (Control) Enactment
- Designed to further increase control over films. In 1927, over 128 films banned for:
  - i) Western women dressed “immodestly”
  - ii) Portrayal of gambling & criminal activity
  - iii) Showing inter-racial marriages & attachments

### Golden Age of Cinema

- Film distributors: Shaw Bros/Cathay Organisation go into production
  - Malay Film Production/Cathay Keris Films
  - Instead of Chinese direction turned to Malay/Indians imports.
  - Malay films had song/dance themes. A clear Indian influence
  - Laila Majnum: first film made was in 1933
- Film distributors: Shaw Bros/Cathay Organisation go into production
  - Golden Age of Cinema – 50s
  - Introducing mega star: P Ramlee
  - Philosophy: i) Humour ii) Good Music iii) films with soul

### Downfall of local cinema

- 2<sup>nd</sup> half of 60s saw decline of cinema goes. Why?
- Educated locals wanting better quality films
- Loss of Indonesian market
- TV became a less expensive alternative
- Shaw Bros closed its studios in 1967
- Cathay folded in 1972

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## Western influence

- “They Call her Cleopatra Wong” (1978)
  - blend of kungfu & Bond.
  - Dubbed in US english for marketability
  - clearly influenced by western action films
- “Dynamite Johnson”
  - based on bionic boy & Six million dollar man

### **\*\* An indication that audience's film diet was changing**

## Film Classification

- Introduction of Film Classification ('91)
- First – the ® rating. (Over 18s)
- **Liberalisation of local cinema.** But films like 'Erotic Ghost Story' emerged
- Important Lesson/Change : R(Artistic)
  - i) Change in age limit to 21
  - ii) provided contextual judgment & artistic films

### **\* An indication of an upcoming mature local audience.**

## Laying the foundation

- Singapore International Film Festival (estd 1987)
  - In 1992 introduced the Singapore Short Film Competition
  - Breeding ground for potential film-makers
  - Had a positive impact on Singapore film
- Case in point: Eric Khoo
- Won a number of awards, and with financial support went on to make Mee Pok Man

## Mee Pok Man (1995)

- Tells the tale of a dim-witted noodle-seller's bleak relationship with a prostitute
- Non-commercial & dark subject matter
- Made it through Singapore censors intact
- “A real Singapore film” – Derek Malcolm
- Screened at 30 international festivals worldwide
- Prides itself in having truly local cast & crew

### **\*\* Rebirth of Singapore film**

## Army Daze (1996)

- Story of five recruits undergoing Basic Military Training as seen through the eyes of one of the recruits, Malcolm Png, the middle-class mummy's boy.
- Landmark film: Cathay re-enters film production
- “Singaporeans like to see themselves on film”
- Marks the new generation film-makers:
  - \* The Road Less Travelled, God or Dog, Forever Fever, 12 Storeys, Money No Enough

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## Money No Enough

- "... Singaporean film centres around three individuals from different backgrounds, reflecting the different living standards of average Singaporeans, and how they cope with endless problems in life."
- An indication of co-relation between local mass appeal with movie takings \$\$
- Slice of life depicting man on the street
- A film everyone would laugh & cry at
- An easy film to watch compared to...

## In sum ...

- Landscape overview seems to indicate:
- A local industry could thrive
- Sometimes 'foreign' cultures/influences don't always work
- There is a market/room for local productions
- Local language/culture is important
- Foundation/support can have a positive impact over time

## Future-gazing

- 1998 – Singapore Film Commission. Platform/\$\$ support for local films
- Step towards developing a national film industry
- **Gourmet Baby: 20min short, screening before Opening Film at 15<sup>th</sup> Singapore Film Fest**
- Local production houses producing for TV. Eg Stories about Love for Arts Central
- Local TV company produces: Raintree
- Establishment of a national cinematique & film institute
  - to house film archives, museum, showcase arthouse films

## Extras

- keshvani@np.edu.sg
- Latent Images: Film In Singapore by Jan & Yvonne Uhde
- From Kachang Puteh to Popcorn (4-part documentary)
- They Call her Cleopatra Wong, Dynamite Johnson, Mee Pok Man, Army Daze, 12 Storeys, Money No Enough