FILM, CULTURE, AND SOCIETY

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PEOPLE within the same culture share the same pattern in their way of life. Social-anthropologists in fact, see culture broadly as a set of "social rules" influencing the people's way of life - their beliefs, values, moral behaviour, social obligations and attitudes towards related issues, e.g. family interactions, parenting style and attitudes, sexuality, etc.

There have been various attempts to examine the relationship between film and culture. Some workers see films as being a "reflection" of culture; others see them as "representations of the realities" in the culture. Genre films can be viewed as having a function almost equivalent to a "myth" of a culture. (Sobchack V, 1982). Gupta (1981) sees all-India films as a reactionary cultural adjustment after independence.

Cross-cultural comparisons are thus essential to examine how much and how uniquely do films mirror each society, otherwise we may attribute to a particular culture tendencies that are more widely shared. Wolfenstein (1959) suggested that the way American and France films reconcile goodness and badness in their dramatic heroines may be different according to their cultural differences.

One way is to examine the theme in the film. The repeated themes would characterise the variables in the culture. For instance, the moral superiority of a son to a father is a theme of American films, whilst the moral superiority of a father to a son is a theme of British films. The two themes represent the different values placed by the two cultures to the common variable of father-son relationship.

Film from the east including the Malay films also tends to present a theme of moral superiority of a father to a son.

A recurrent theme of British films is the image of a bowed blonde head, implying a significant relationship to the recurrent temptation of men destroying the women they love (Wolfenstein, 1950). The good-bad girl of American films tend to fit in with the larger thematic construct of a pervasive trend of denying painful experiences such as love disappointments. French films, however, portrayed less of this denial - e.g. even though the prostitute becomes devoted to the hero, her previous involvement with other men is not forgotten and in fact, recognised. These recurrent themes tend to reflect that probably there are distinguishable ways of coping with frustrations in reality in the two cultures, the American using more denial while the French are closer to the reality principle. These are, however, only suggestive evidence, and may not be true evidence of the quality of relationship in a large part of the society in the two cultures.

In American films, he police were often mistaken, and the private investigator usually solved the mystery, whilst in British films, the police are almost always right (Wolfenstein, 1950). In both cases, there tend to be a similar psychodynamic

understanding of the image of the police corresponding to the image of father. Films in the east, too, tend to reflect a similar authority father figure in police roles.

Wolfenstein, (1950) examined the character of the onlooker and the couple and tried to relate this to the resolution of the Oedipal conflicts. According to her analysis, there is distinguishable different way of resolution between the French and American films. She illustrated some of the most recurrent themes dealing with the onlooker and the couple in American films as the following:

1   The hero sees the heroine with another man and suspects that there is some intense relationship between them. He learns that the relation he imagined between them never existed (*Gilda: Big Sleep*).

2   The hero observes the couple together but what happened between them is repulsive or pitiable rather than enviable. For instance, the hero sees through the window that the husband shoots the wife then commits suicide (*The Strange Love of Martha Ivers*).

3   A comic character sees the hero and heroine together and mistakenly imagines they are having an illicit affair, or sees the hero or heroine with another partner and again imagines an illicit relation. Nothing is really happening between the observed couple (*She Wouldn't Say Yes: Great Wife*).

4   A friend of the hero observes the hero and heroine and assumes a bored, little boyish attitude towards their being so romantic: "Do I have to listen to all this mush? " (*Pardon My Past*). This is closely related to the instance where a kid brother not yet eligible for romance, finds the amorous entanglements of an older brother and sister "all very dumb" (*Kiss and Tell*).

5   A friendly onlooker promotes the relation of the couple. This may be an elderly parental character, but it may even be the heroine's rival for the hero's love who, having lost out, quickly shifts to becoming a friend of the family (*Love* Letters: The Bells of St. Mary's Adventures).

French films frequently present the following themes in the treatment of the onlooker and the couple:

1. The hero first sees beautiful woman alone, think of her as pure, and falls in love with her. Later he sees her together with another man with whom she is seriously involved. The disastrous discovery does not undo the hero's attachment to the woman, which proves fatal for him (*Panique: La Passionelle: Martin Roumagnac*).

2. An onlooker who is debarred from love sees an amorous couple and reacts with despair or rage. A precocious bespectacled twelve-year-old girl, for instance, sees her aunt enters the aunt bedroom. As the door closes, she bursts into a storm of tears (*La Corbeau*). A hideous dwarf or an embittered spinster may react to their experiences as onlookers of others' happiness with vindictive fury (*L' Eternel Retour; L'Amour Autour de la Maison*).

3. A man who suffered disappointment in love distracts a play in which the woman he loves and his successful rival appear as happy lovers while he looks on (*Les Enfants du* Paradis; Le Silence Est d'Or).

The main tendencies expressed in American films were that the observed couple do not do anything or if they do, there was no jealousy or envy evoked. Where as in the French films, the onlooker experienced great suffering in observing them. Using the knowledge of resolution of Oedipal conflict being a major way affecting an individual's personality development, the observation above tended to reflect French and American filmmakers handled and resolved these painful experiences and conflicts differently. The American films tend to portray more use of the defense of denial (e.g. denying hostility towards father). The French films seemed to re-evoke feelings of disappointment of the child and used less or no denial in dealing with painful conflicts.

Applying the above knowledge to some of the Eastern films that I had viewed, there tends to be a closer similarity to the French films. In many instances, the painful experiences of jealousy and envy evoked extreme hostility leading to vengeance and fatal resolutions.

Having understood the psychological processes underlying conflicts portrayed in the different films, it would still be difficult to make a direct interference that the American character is more regressive to the id impulses, while French and the Malay characters more dominated by the reality principle. However, the different in coping with painful disappointments and conflicts tend to suggest the possibility of a cultural difference of using ego-defenses to resolve a common emotional problem.

Observation of the British character in films as being pre-occupied with protection of the weak through tenderness and being over-concerned tend to suggest a defense of reaction formation against their aggressive impulses to destroy. Whereas in American films, violence appears much more often as an attack on the hero and for protection, the hero uses toughness rather than tenderness. This may either reflect the different British and American personality or different values on "toughness" in the two cultures (Wolfenstein, 1950).

If one examines the kind of *family relationship* portrayed in various films, there tend to be a recurrent theme which reflects the real-life situation. American films show children being encouraged to outgrow and surpass their parents - they tend to achieve independence and have their own minds at a younger age compared to the French or the Eastern children - the theme of the French films usually relate to the difficulty of detaching oneself from the "umbilical cord" of parents and family. Films produced by China, Japan, India, Indonesia and Malaysia generally portray *filial piety, which* is very much a social obligation in these countries. Scenes of the son expressing his own views different from the father's are far less seen compared to the American films. If ever the plot reveals one, the son will usually be in a position "he's never right" and he can be ostracised by the family or even the community. This tends to reflect some aspects of the social rules and obligations pertaining to interactions between child and his family and other adults in general, vary in different cultures.

Close observations on Western and Eastern films tend to reveal not only the different kinds of child-adult relationship, but also the different values and attitudes towards issues like moral behaviour, including manner of dressing, and sexuality. The portrayal of sexual references more overtly in western films compared to those produced in the East e.g. Malaysia and Indonesia tends to reflect the different cultural boundaries

and acceptability towards "openness" of such issues. Indeed, many of cultural beliefs, values and attitudes in this part of the world are largely dominated by religion.

Conflicts and crises are portrayed in all films. Interestingly, glancing at how different cultures deal with crises (within the films) tends to reflect a similar situation in real life. For instances in most American films, the family psychiatrist or analyst plays an important role in helping to resolve the individual's conflicts. Whereas, in many film from the East, the mystical model of explaining crises, including illness, is still dominant. A Malay family or individual, for example, will consult as first choice a traditional healer, who almost always "resolve" the crisis by chasing away evil spirits imposed by the individual's or family's enemy. This obvious difference in resolving a similar crisis tend to reflect, in reality the different predominant cultural belief system in explaining conflicts and crises. It also reflects a more significant interactive model between the Malay individual and his community when dealing with crises, as compared to Western individual who usually deals with its in a more private manner with his analyst or psychiatrist.

One of the most striking characteristics of the British cinema towards the end of the 1950s was its increasing concerns to deal with social problem issues such as juvenile delinquency, prostitution, race, etc. The problem of youth became a preoccupation, thus giving rise to titles such as "My Teenage Daughter" (1956), "Spare The Rod" (1961), etc. A similar trend tend to affect cinemas in other parts of the world as well, including Malaysia.

These changing themes may simply reflect either a social change in the culture, if not, a breakdown of traditional values attitudes.

C.D.Gupta (1981) criticised Hindi film (all-India films) as a "conformist, reactionary film, out to prevent social revolution rather than encourage it." Not only these films not reflect the true culture of India by portraying a middle class films, it is also pretentious. He believes the regional films have a greater sense of reality and cultural integrity and a clearer sense of Indian identity.

Close observation on Malay movies from the early 60s to the early 90s, few comments is worth mentioning here. Mainly Indian directors, who subsequently created a Malay film with an "Indian flavour" in its melodramatic and excessive sentimentality, directed films of the 50s. It did not reflect the true Malay culture of dealing with frustrations and disappointments by means of rationalisation and submission to it being God's fate. Nevertheless, these films did reflect the consistent cultural variable of filial piety and moral superiority of father to son in their relationship.

The Malay films of the 70s and mid 80s by directors whose" school of thought" came from the earlier Indian film directors - where they first worked as assistant director, interpreter and script supervisor - expended further distortion between the real-life and the film culture.

The Malay films of the 90s carry a "new wave" in portraying contemporary social problem issues like drug addiction, juvenile delinquency, prostitution, etc. But sadly very few of them reflect the true Malay culture or has roots and identity. For instances, Malay films now permit co-habituating, free heterosexual relationship, pre-marital sex, which are all elements not reflective of the dominant values held by the large population of the Malays. In short, they do not reflect the true cultural values and attitudes. On the other hand, this may suggest an initial breakdown of traditional values in a changing society.

In analysing the relationship between films and culture, it can sometime be difficult to conceptualise the text and the context because of its close inter-relations. It is not only

what films tell us about the society which is important, but also an understanding of the society can tells us about the films and the nature of its representation (Hill, 1986).

In his book Mirror of England, Raymond Durgnat simply assumed that conclusion about the British society can be made on evidence of the films alone. According to him, films are a "reflection" of the society, which makes them. Graeme Turner (1988) sees this "reflectionist" approach as too primitive and unsatisfactory because between the society and the "mirror" there are a whole set of competing and conflicting cultural, sub-cultural, industrial and institutional determinants. Films do more than just "reflect". Films can be seen as a "representation" of what goes on in the society. However, what is viewed by films does not necessarily correspond to those of the society as a whole.

To a certain extent, films may reflect the culture e.g. character of people, its belief system, and attitudes towards certain issues. However they cannot be just accepted as "evidence", but must be explained and interpreted in terms of the context of the issue portrayed and the viewpoints connected to it.

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