# Democratisation of Cinematic Space in Malaysia:

## Digital Film Activism and the Freedom Film Festival

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**Abstract:** Digital film activism as a popular alternative platform is used for the publication and dissemination of information, ideas, and views deemed too sensitive for the state controlled mainstream media. Such forms of activism have been actively carried out through the annual Freedom Film Festival (FFF). Held since 2003, the FFF exhibits films and documentaries with hopes of spreading justice, peace, equality, and democracy. The FFF exists not only as a site of exhibition and distribution that bypasses state legislation and censorship in delegitimising the oppressive forces of censorship and state control, it also encourages the production of such films that would either be prohibited or subjected to strict cinematic, cultural or political controls. This paper critically examines the development of digital film activism and the FFF along the theoretical formulation of Third Cinema to analyse if indeed cinematic space in Malaysia has begin to become democratised.

**Keywords:** Digital film activism, democracy, Third Cinema, Freedom Film Festival, KOMAS, Malaysian cinema

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## A New Generation of Digital Film Activists

Film activism is not a new phenomenon in Malaysia. Since the 1980s, independent filmmakers such as Bernice Chauly and Mansor Puteh have been making films about social injustice, political situations, and cultural differences. For example, Chauly's *Bakun* or *The Dam* (1995) highlights the plights of the indigenous *Kayan* community forced to evacuate their land, which was seized for the construction of the Bakun Hydroelectric Corporation Dam in Sarawak, Malaysia. These filmmakers however collectively faced the predicament of producing, distributing, and exhibiting their materials due to legal restrictions, excessive costs, and technical discrepancy. Such circumstances however changed with the new millennium.

The increased acceptance of the Internet and accessibility to inexpensive digital filmmaking technology alongside a background of increased cultural and political repression has led to the growth and popularity of digital film activism. Armed with a mobile digital video camera, video editing proficiencies, and an uncompromising desire of creating a change in society, a new generation of film activists are now contesting issues related to antagonism and oppression in society on an entirely different platform. Their cause for struggle is further facilitated with the emergence of the annual FFF organised by KOMAS (Community Communications Centre). First held in 2003, the Freedom Film Festival (FFF) has been providing an alternative platform for films such as *The Invisible Children* (2006), *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (2007), and *Pecah Lobang* (2008) to contest, criticise, and renegotiate state policies, societal issues, and cultural taboos related to ethnicity, religion, gender, politics, and sexuality. Besides providing a platform for alternative exhibition, the FFF has also become a strategic site and alternative cinematic marketplace allowing filmmakers, politicians, activists, and visitors to meet, promote works, procure funding, and confer deals. According to FFF Programme Director Anna Har, there have been regional and international festival circuits that have offered filmmaking opportunities to conduct trainings, workshops, and documentary filmmaking and to screen films from the FFF overseas (2014). The FFF has therefore catalysed the rise of films providing powerful social commentaries that is currently challenging and

questioning the structures of power, status quo, and hegemony. In order establish if indeed the digital film activism movement through the FFF is leading towards a liberalisation in the Malaysian film industry, this paper will examine the FFF against the theoretical and practical formulation of the Third Cinema. Firstly, a contextualisation of the film industry within the wider structures of media and communication in Malaysia will be discussed together with the theoretical framework of Third Cinema; and secondly, to determine the extent of liberalising in the Malaysian film industry, the role of the FFF focusing on films screened in 2006 to 2009 against the theoretical and practical formulation of the term 'Third Cinema' is examined.

## A Brief Overview of The Media Communication in Malaysia

The media communication industry in Malaysia is very much dependent on the correlation between the political power of the ruling elite and the state-capitalist system. Such patterns and trends of ownership and control of media corporations by the state either through proxy or direct ownership have been extensively examined and established through a vast amount of scholarship (Gomez, 1990; 1991; Mustafa, 1990; Wang, 2001; Zaharom, 1991; 1996; Zaharom and Wang, 2004). In general, the landscape of media communication in Malaysia is characterised by an increase in the commodification of media artefacts while ownership is often centralised in the hands of state technocrats acting on behalf of ruling political parties.

For example, besides the state owned RTM that broadcasts state policies and various forms of entertainment via radio and television, Media Prima remains the largest media conglomerate in Malaysia. This media conglomerate which is understood to be proxies with UMNO, controls a large number of print media, broadcast of both visual and audio, outdoor advertising, event management coordination and even film production companies.[1]

[1]Media Prima controls a large stake in the New Straits Times Press (M) Bhd (NSTP), which publishes English language newspapers *New Straits Times*, and *New Sunday Times*, and the Malay-language newspapers *Berita Harian*, *Berita Minggu*, and *Harian Metro*. Media Prima also owns Sistem Televisyen Malaysia Bhd (STMB) that broadcasts the television channels of TV3, 8TV, TV9, and ntv7.

The media industry in Malaysia is structured along the lines of a corporate-capitalist structure, with greater emphasis being driven into the practice of capital accumulation and profit maximisation. Under this general condition of existence, the Malaysian media generally caters to the interests and demands of a small minority who has the economic and political power that controls the industry, thereby marginalising the demands and needs of the majority. The media in Malaysia also achieves this by enhancing signs, symbols, and meanings that are based on dominant ideological discourses. In short, the Malaysian media, in particular those with state connections are only permitted to report news items that do not interrogate the status quo or challenge hegemony. These policies and practices are in actual fact efforts aimed at creating institutional constraints that simultaneously legitimise economic barriers with the purpose of either limiting the players entering the market or just merely as a method to control and regulate not only the media industry but the film industry as well.

Film as a cultural arena can be understood as a site where diverse cultural interests and discourses are both contested and manifested. It also exists as a space for various social forces to interact and creates a cultural site for ideological contestations to occur. In Malaysia however, the idea where film exists as a site for the contestations to occur can only exist in theory. This is because censorship laws, bureaucratic procedures, regulative laws, and cultural and religious restrictions continue to confine and impede the Malaysian film industry. For example, films produced by companies such as Metrowealth Pictures, Primeworks Studios and Astro Shaw conventionally conform to the existing demands, structures, controls and policies of the state and the Malaysian film industry. Given the fact that this cultural site is constantly heavily governed, monitored, and regulated by the state makes it hard to envisage the idea that any Malaysian films or the film industry itself could become the site for any forms of political, cultural, religious or even societal contestations to occur. This is also because the mainstream cinema, which also exists as a popular national cinema continues to produce commercially "safe" films that primarily functions at enhancing existing social relations and maintaining status quo. As a result, a typical Malaysian film is conventionally built around stereotypical storylines revolving around the

It also owns radio stations HotFM, OneFM and FlyFM.

tiresome "tried and tested" monotonous elements that contain elements of "*suka*" (love), "*duka*" (sadness), and "*jenaka*" (humour) (Lee, 2012). On the other hand, this situation does not necessarily mean that cinema in Malaysia completely disallows any space for the expression of alternative ideas to occur. This is because of the impossibility that popular cinema is capable of endlessly upholding its hegemony. As an ideological superstructure, cracks and fissures in its hegemony would eventually develop which would enable for alternative ideas to seep through and challenge its dominance.

## THE MALAYSIAN FILM INDUSTRY[2]

The Malaysian film industry remains one of the major contributors to the Malaysian popular culture and was a very successful business from the 1940s to the 1960s. It began as a larger part of an amusement park industry that started off in the early twentieth century in most major Malaysian towns. The ownership of the production studios, distribution networks, and cinema halls were concentrated in the hands of wealthy Chinese businessmen. Even though the movie business was a lucrative capitalist enterprise, its activity initially was restricted to importing, distributing, and exhibiting Western products.

After World War Two, the Malaysian film industry resumed with the Shaw Brothers from Shanghai establishing the Malay Film Productions (MFP) in 1949. Their closest rival was Cathay-Keris owned by Ho Ah Loke and Loke Wan Tho. Early ownership and control of early Malaysian cinema again remained concentrated in Chinese hands for they owned the rights to production, distribution, and exhibition (Mahyuddin, 2008). MFP then brought in notable Indian directors such as L. Krishnan and B. N. Rao. Malays were employed as crossover actors from the *bangsawan* troupes. In essence, Malaysian cinema was founded on Chinese capital, Malay manpower, and Indian creativity.

The fierce rivalry between MFP and Cathay Keris led to the pinnacle

[2]During its independence from the British on August 31, 1957, Malaysia was then known as Malaya. The term Malaysia was only officially coined after the incorporation of Singapore and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak on September 16, 1963. This paper would however employ the term "Malaysian Cinema" to describe the cinema industry in Malaysia.

of cinematic output and a vast improvement in filmic qualities. Occurring during the 1950s to late 1960s, this era is often regarded as the "Golden Age" of Malaysian cinema. During this time, the film industry continued to thrive and remained a lucrative business despite the nation facing political instability and under Emergency rule (Lee, 2012).[3]By the late 1950s, the Malaysian film industry had firmly established itself as a capitalist industry heavily modelled after the Hollywood studio system. Both MFP and Cathay-Keris had built a state-of-the-art studio system and controlled all the major sectors of the film industry. This duopoly gave the studios total control of the film industry and eventually enabled them to capably control all aspects of the industry.

Towards the end of the 1960s, the Malaysian film industry began to display signs of its decline. One of the major factors that led to this decline was the financial crisis faced by MFP and Cathay-Keris (Lee, 2012). The on-going recession, growing popularity of television and video, increased costs of production, and industrial threats by the studio workers and artists were amongst the more notable factors that contributed to the decline of the film industry. Increased strikes and threats carried out by left-winged union workers also forced the studio owners to relocate to a new location and the establishment of a new studio called Merdeka Studio in Kuala Lumpur. This shift in location was carried out in 1964 with the hope that Kuala Lumpur would provide inexpensive labour and a stable political and economical environment. The relocation from Singapore to Kuala Lumpur was however marked with the emigration of talents and problems in hiring capable personnel as the equipment in Merdeka Studios were obsolete and insufficient. Changes in the cinematic tastes of the Malaysian audience also occurred due to the perception that locally made films were of inferior quality to its imported counterparts of Hollywood, Indonesia, Hong Kong, and Bollywood that provided films of the Western, action, comedy, and melodrama genres. This was also based on the fact that Malaysian films constantly featured uninspiring storylines with out-dated actors. In 1980,

[3]The attempts by the Malayan Communist Party (MCP) to establish a Communist nation-state after World War Two was carried out using guerrilla warfare and an armed struggle. This eventually led to thousands of civilian casualties and millions of dollars in damaged infrastructure. In 1948, a state of Emergency was declared to curb this uprising and was only lifted in 1960.

the eventual closure of Merdeka Studios marked the end of the Malaysian studio era. Because the Malaysian film industry is built on a capitalist economic and social system, and when the logic of capitalism signalled that the industry no longer remained economically viable, all forms of production were halted to prevent further losses.

The gradual collapse of the studio system eventually led to the rise of an independent form of filmmaking. The end of the studio era gave rise to a new film culture, which has since become the foundation of the existing film industry (Mahyuddin, 2007). This new film culture needs to be understood in a larger social context. As part of the larger communication industry in Malaysia, the film industry is very much under the constraint of the whole interplay between the capitalist social system and the state. On one hand, the capitalist social system provides the artists with the capital to enable them to produce films; while on the other the state functions as a body of legality that provides the industry with a certain degree of control through the extensive use of laws and regulations.

Independent film culture that emerged in the 1970s was largely independent because rich businessmen without any knowledge in filmmaking or any links to any particular film studios financed it. In 1967, the first independent production company, Gabungan Artis Filem Company (GAFICO) was formed. In 1972, the government attempted to fill the void of an almost absent film industry through the setting up of Fleet Communications (a subsidiary of Fleet Group, the investment arm of the ruling party UMNO), as an effort in producing a new genre of Malay films (Zawawi, 2007: 514-515). Founded by then Finance Minister, Tengku Razaleigh, it was a direct involvement by the state in the film industry through means of direct investment and co-production. In 1975, the full-coloured box-office hit *Keluarga Si Comat* led prospective investors to believe that quick returns could be made in the film industry. Directed by Aziz Sattar and produced by Deddy M. Borhan leading an all-Malay crew, its success was seen as the dawn of the Malay film revival (Hassan and Wong, 314). The film revolved around the Malay lifestyle and featured an entire Malay cast, pioneering the way for full-coloured features. In 1976, Perfirma Film Production successfully produced *Menanti Hari Esok* by overseas trained Jins Shamsuddin. The inadequate grasp of filmic concepts of production, marketing and

distribution, however, led to their eventual closures (Hassan and Wong, 314). While an independent film industry emerged, the companies involved in producing films were severely lacking in financial capabilities, filmmaking skills, and filming facilities. The majority of their films were either fully self-financed or partly funded by some loans or grants they received from financial institutions. At the same time, the exhibition sector remained in the control of the Shaw Brothers and Cathay Organisation.

As Malaysian cinema had always been a privately owned enterprise, ownership and control lay in the hands of Chinese entrepreneurs while non-existent governmental support; financing and facilities never hindered the growth of the industry (Mahyuddin, 2008). The state was never actively involved in developing policies for the growth of Malaysian cinema, commonly accepted as a form of popular entertainment. Its focal idea as a commercial enterprise would be the aim of wealth accumulation. Besides the setting up of Fleet Communications, the government only began being involved in the film industry through the establishment of The National Film Development Corporation (FINAS). FINAS was formed through the National Film Corporation Act (1981) and placed under the Ministry of Trade and Industry.[4]In line with the objective of ensuring the continued sustainability of Malaysian films, its objectives were to promote, nurture and facilitate the development of the industry. It also intended to promote the Malaysian national identity internationally by publicising Malaysian culture through its films.

During this time, cinema was used as a medium to help support the growth of the New Economic Policy and the National Culture Policy. During this phase, efforts to nationalise cinema meant the phasing out of Chinese and Indian influences. These efforts were carried out through the dissemination of Malay culture through the emergence of *Bumiputera* independent companies and *Bumiputera* filmmakers (Lee, 2012). Films during this phase were almost entirely built around the cinematic projection of the *Melayu Baru* and have been divided into two movements. The first is a commercial mainstream cinema with filmmakers such as A.R. Badul [*Mr. Os* (1987)], Z. Lokman [*Cikgu Romantik* (1993)], and Zulkeflie M. Osman [*Suci Dalam Debu* (1992)],

[4]In 1986, FINAS was placed under the Ministry of Information. It was then placed under the Ministry of Cultural, Arts and Heritage on March 27, 2004.

and Malaysian 'New Wave' directors such as Rahim Razali [*Abang* (1981)], Mansor Puteh (*Seman*, 1986), Shuhami Baba [*Ringgit Kasorrga* (1995)], and U-Wei Haji Saari [*Jogho*, (1999)]. The second is an independent Malaysian 'New Wave' movement, which borrows its name from the French New Wave emerged to discuss the problems faced by the Malays in a modernising nation. The Malaysian "New Wave" incorporated transnational influences through the lingering Indian cinematic styles, Islamic themes from the Iranian revolution, and foreign influences from Malay filmmakers sent for overseas training. They produced films that discussed realist issues faced by society such as corruption, marginalisation, and poverty. The Malaysian "New Wave" however differs from the New Wave movements of the Western tradition such as the French New Wave as these films remain to be capitalist ventures with focus being placed on capital accumulations. This whole notion of the "New Wave" in Malaysia differs from the New Wave movement coined by François Giroud in the late 1950s which is defined by the new "socially active youth class" (Hayward, 2006: 165-167). Some of the characteristics of the French New Wave are doing away with classical narratives, low-budget and on location shooting, uses non-professional actors, subversion of genres and deliberately disorienting the audience by using editing techniques such as employing jump-cuts, and above all the subject matter of their films quite often questions the established filmmaking conventions and society. Despite the existence of a variety of subject matters explored by these Malaysian "New Wave" filmmakers, the majority of their films only focused on issues that never questioned established filmmaking conventions and society and does not conform to the characteristics of French New Wave.

Since 2000, the arrival of a large volume of affordable and consumer-friendly yet high-end digital filmmaking has led to the emergence of a new generation of filmmakers such as Amir Muhammad, Tan Chui Mui, Deepak Kumaran Menon, James Lee, Yasmin Ahmad, and Ho Yuhang (Lee, 2015). These filmmakers mostly employ DV equipment due to budget restrictions, and their knowledge and proficiency with technology. Their mostly urban backgrounds and overseas education have also exposed them to Western notions of liberalism, free speech, and democracy. Such forms of exposure have led them to better comprehend the current political and cultural suppression

in their own country such as state film regulations and censorship. This has compelled them to move across national boundaries in search of capital, a sympathetic audience, and foreign co-production opportunities. By working around state film regulations, these filmmakers have been undaunted in tackling issues long ignored by mainstream Malaysian commercial cinema.

These filmmakers challenge hegemonic representations by resisting existing theorisations of race, culture, politics and national identity in Malaysia. They achieve this by boldly discussing "taboo" and "untouchable" issues relating to sexuality, race and ethnicity, gender relations and politics (Lee, 2014). This preference of highlighting unconventional topics has led to their being conveniently ignored by the state and has forced them to seek support from abroad. This sense of freedom has allowed these filmmakers to create a greater impact in Malaysian cinema and international film festivals compared to their mainstream compatriots. Examples of such achievements can be illustrated by Malaysia's first entry into the Sundance Film Festival through Amir Muhammad's *The Big Durian* in 2004; Yasmin Ahmad's *Sepet* (2005) winning the Best Asian Film Award at the 2005 Tokyo International Film Festival; Ho Yuhang's Best Director Award at the Nantes Three Continents Festival for *Rain Dogs*, Tan Chui Mui's Fipresci Award and New Current Awards at the 11th Pusan International Film Festival and the VPRO Tiger Award at the 36th Rotterdam International Film Festival for *Love Conquers All* (2006); James Lee's *Call If You Need Me* Silver DV Award at the 2009 Hong Kong International Film Festival; Malaysia's second film at the Cannes Film Festival with Chris Chong's *Camera d'Or* contender *Karaoke* (2009), and Woo Ming Jin becoming the first Malaysian film-maker to have his films featured at the 'big three film festivals' [*Monday Morning Glory* (2005) at the 2006 Berlin Film Festival, *Woman on Fire looks for Water* (2009) at the 2009 Venice Film Festival, and *The Tiger Factory* (2010) at the Cannes Film Festival 2010]. While these digital independent filmmakers do not aggressively confront the current political regime through means of calling to armed struggle, their films represent a struggle towards change in society and cinema.

However, films such as Andrew Sia's *Kopi O Khau Sikit Kurang Manis* (2006), Fahmi Reza's *10 Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (2007), and Soh

Sook Hwa's *Kayuh* (2009) differ with the previously mentioned digital independent films as the general theme and subject matter of all thirteen films analysed from 2006 to 2009 question state ideologies by expressing a new culture of social and political change. These films share a common overarching theme of human rights and specific subject matters such as abuse of power, migrant workers, marginalised groups, political justice and democracy (see Table 1). These documentaries aim at decolonising Malaysian minds in an effort to transform society by creating socially and politically conscious audiences in the wake of growing political, cultural, and social repression in Malaysia. This is similar to Third Cinema which discusses the logical relationship between social existence and cultural practices (Willemen, 1989: 2) to actively create a form of political and radical consciousness aimed at decolonising minds (Gabriel, 1982: 3). As an informal film culture unrestricted by censorship laws, these filmmakers decolonise cinema and culture by highlighting the plights and struggles of its nation through digital film activism.

## THE FFF AND AESTHETICS OF LIBERATION

Film activism is a not a new term in film culture. Various cinemas across the world have posited tendencies towards activism during different moments. These include the Algerian anti-colonialist films and Latin American anti-imperialist Third Cinema movements. Not to be confused with Third World cinema, Third Cinema was launched in 1969 by Argentine film-makers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino through their manifesto *Towards a Third Cinema*, which actively challenged, opposed, and rejected the hegemony of more established forms of cinema. Third Cinema struggles against the decolonisation of culture by distinguishing itself as an alternative to First Cinema (Hollywood) and Second Cinema (European cinema). While the term Third Cinema once referred to films from Cuba, Argentina, Brazil and Mexico, the term has broadened to include non-Latin American cinemas that share the traits of being anti-imperialist and critical in nature.

In Malaysia, the availability of affordable digital technology and the Internet has made it possible for individuals with no formal training in filmmaking to embark on such a project about film activism. The

growing number of digital film activists can be attributed to KOMAS, a citizen journalism centre in Kuala Lumpur. Set up in 1993, this popular communication centre focuses on assisting and organising groups involved in a whole range of issues in contemporary Malaysia and is guided by its vision of empowering the poor and marginalised attain human rights using popular communication approaches. One of its communication approaches is through producing critical films related to society. As the major producer of activist films in Malaysia, its films are seen not simply as 'political instrument but a collective good in themselves as they short-circuit corporate control of public communication and foster democratic communications' (Carroll and Hackett, 2006).[5]To ensure its freedom in dealing with "untouchable" issues meant the need to bypass state regulations and censorship. The films screened in the FFF should also not be part of such jurisdictions because these films do not have any commercial ambitions to be screened to the masses in commercial cinemas but rather in closed door, by invitation and to a small audience of not more than a hundred people at a time (Har, 2014).

[5]KOMAS's strategies can be outlined as: 1. Creating content - freedom film texts are not merely voicing oppositional voice on certain issues but also critically assess and examine the issues; 2. Building an independent, democratic and participatory film culture in which these films try to affect the audience by creating awareness and critical understanding about the issues being discussed in the texts. The films advocate reform and promote democratic practices. They work as counter-hegemonic texts, resisting any urge to give solutions to the problems, instead, using the formal dominant cinematic language to expose the issues from a democratic perspective rather than the narrow minded, orthodox and undemocratic perspective of the official view given by the authority; 3. Reliance on workshop and film festival in order to get the message across their audience. The Freedom Film Fest for example is held at different places all over Malaysia. The '*Bangsa Malaysia*' series of workshops are held from time to time in which issues of forging a harmonious and integrated Malaysian race is discussed – the perspective that is being offered here is it is possible for Malaysians to shed their differences and flourish within diversity. The purpose of this workshop is not to educate but to create critical awareness about the issues. This workshop changes the nature of the relationship between the films texts and audience. The relationship is no longer a one-way communication but as any counter-hegemonic text the films empower the audience with awareness, knowledge and perspective that would not be offered to by the more traditional mainstream media; and 4. The texts also voicing the concern of the marginalised groups in society by highlighting their plights and concerns – such as the rights of the aborigines or the Orang Asli to their ancestral lands.

The name KOMAS has become synonymous with the FFF. The FFF is currently held in six states (including Sabah and Sarawak) and an estimated 5, 000 participants take part in this event. This figure does not include the regional screenings while the online hits for the FFF films can reach up to 80, 000 hits (Har, 2014). The film festival began in 2006 based on the needs of documenting social issues using creative media strategies and highlights works of films and documentaries with themes encompassed by the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) with hopes of spreading justice, peace, equality and democracy. The FFF has been functioning as a site of exhibiting films with "sensitive" issues and subject matters. It has provided filmmakers with a secure zone, which delegitimises the oppressive forces of censorship and state control (Ezra and Rowden 2006, 6). Because of censorship issues, the FFF has not worked with any Federal government agencies but however, in recent years the FFF has been given support by the state governments of Penang and Selangor (Har, 2014). In effect, an increasing number of films that would possibly be prohibited or subjected to strict cinematic, cultural or political controls are being made available at the FFF.

The film festival actually commences with the commissioning of the research phase by KOMAS. During this phase, filmmakers with or without any proper training will be guided through the scriptwriting process and production of their films while funding will be provided for a selected number of scripts. For example, MYR6000 (US$2000) was provided to each filmmaker whose film has been shortlisted for funding[6]. These films would be produced using digital filmmaking technology and focuses on the main theme of human rights. Filmmakers commissioned by KOMAS would have to critically assess and examine a wide range of subject matters related to human rights issues in Malaysia – from rights to land, freedom of speech, to the rights to exist in the society.

Theoretically it is possible to locate and theorise FFF films initiated by KOMAS within the context of Gabriel's (1982) 'Third Cinema'. In replicating the oppositional and revolutionary feature of Third Cinema, the films of the FFF similarly go against the System. These films that confront antagonism and oppression, like Third Cinema, practices a sense of flexibility through its research and experimentation that allows it to

[6]Source: http://freedomfilmfest.komas.org/

adapt to shifting dynamics within social struggles (Willemen, 1989: 10). While Third Cinema uses a style resisting Hollywood (Codell, 2007) and moves against the System, the films of the FFF similarly resist and oppose mainstream cinema by adopting the politics of deconstruction and openly challenges the accepted filmmaking methods of mainstream cinema. It achieves this by utilising the documentary technique of Third Cinema using portable cameras and shooting using available light (Solanas and Getino 1976, 56-60), Marxist aesthetics, Italian neo-realism, and Grierson's notion of the social documentary (Wellemen, 1989: 4). These cinematic techniques are favoured for its potential to present issues in a manner easily identifiable by the ordinary masses (Codell, 2007). This experimentation with subject matter allows the films at the FFF, like Third Cinema, to confront issues neglected by mainstream cinema by expressing a different set of aspirations that form the national cultural space occupied by both filmmakers and audiences. Issues such as the effects of urbanisation, poverty, sexuality, religion, and the marginalised and oppressed are highlighted to decolonise minds through a radical consciousness leading to a revolutionary transformation of society. The FFF has also provided a new system of funding, production, distribution, and exhibition, similar to how Third Cinema filmmakers have raised capital from European film festival circuits (Solanas and Getino, 1976: 54-60). The FFF like Third Cinema aims at creating socially and politicallly conscious audiences by bypassing the system and the law by producing films without permits to avoid restrictions, banning, and censorship by the System.

Despite replicating certain characteristics of Third Cinema, films produced by KOMAS and Malaysian films in general have never existed as a 'revolutionary cinema' for they do not employ the tactic of 'guerrilla warfare' whereby 'the camera is likened to a rifle as the inexhaustible expropriator of image weapons and the projector likened to a gun that can shoot twenty four bullets a second' (Solanas and Getino, 1976: 58). In addition, Third Cinema seeks to: decolonise minds; contribute to the development of radical consciousness; lead to a revolutionary transformation of society; and develop new film language with which to accomplish the tasks (Gabriel, 1982: 3). As the films of the FFF do not call for a military revolution, it would be rather unreasonable to label its films as 'Third Cinema' for they do not strictly follow the aesthetic and

stylistic forms of this revolutionary concept. FFF films do not fit within this label as they do not call for the radical transformation of the existing social structure; do not project any aggressive calls and criticism towards the political regime and capitalism; and are not revolutionary like the Cuban Cinema of Revolution or the anti imperialist and anti capitalist Brazilian Cinema Novo. FFF instead exists as films that document issues pertinent to the development of society and make filmmaking as a signifying practice into a new and much more powerful social and political practice (Pines and Willeman, 1989: 4). As such, FFF films could be best labelled as social documentaries that employ certain strategies of guerrilla cinematic warfare, which are the usage of cheap digital technology and low budgeted filmmaking, uncensored film screenings, and documentary as a genre.

## Freedom Film Festival, Digital Film Activism, and Low-Cost Guerrilla Filmmaking

The usage of cheap digital technology and low budgeted filmmaking employed by participating filmmakers in the FFF can be characterised as a low-cost method of guerrilla filmmaking. As the popularity of affordable digital technology has inspired the emergence of many young filmmakers to start documenting contemporary events in Malaysia today, KOMAS has utilised the development of digital filmmaking technology to their advantage. Using limited funding procured through private and foreign funding bodies; KOMAS then initiated the FFF that has emerged as an alternative site of contestation. The films screened at the FFF share a common objective of calling for social, political, and cultural reforms in Malaysia. As activist films, these films seek for a democratic sense of a 'more equitable sharing of political, economic, social, cultural and informational resources and status' (Carroll and Hackett, 2006: 84). In order to better engage with the audience, it is mandatory for films to be produced in either *Bahasa* Malaysia or subtitled in the national language, while a properly facilitated discussion is held after every screening (Har, 2014). The emergence of the FFF and low-budget filmmaking thus meant that Malaysian filmmakers who aim at producing films critical of the state no longer needed to be subjected to the forces of state-control.

Besides financial constraints, Malaysian digital film activists also face other institutional, structural, and regulatory constraints. For example, on September 19 2013, KOMAS coordinator Lena Rasathi Hendry was charged under Section 6(1)(b) of the Film Censorship Act 2002 for screening an uncensored film *No Fire Zone: The Killing Fields of Sri Lanka* at the Kuala Lumpur and Selangor Chamber of Commerce Hall. If convicted, she can be sentenced with a jail term of up to three years or a fine of up to MYR30, 000 (US$10, 000) or both (source: http://www.themalaysianinsider.com). As such, the FFF provides a site of exhibition for filmmakers who have made films without obtaining the necessary production FINAS permit required before any production can occur. The FFF also allows films to be exhibited without the risk of being censored by the Malaysian Film Censorship Board or Lembaga Penapisan Filem (LPF). This is because any film planning to be screened in public requires a certificate from LPF and the failure to do so would deem the screening as illegal. According to Har (2014), 'LPF had issued us a warning once in 2008 and we met some members of the censorship board at KDN (Kementerian Dalam Negeri). They said they would not censor our films unnecessarily although they mentioned that representatives from the police and religious authorities also watch and determine if a film can be screened or must be censored. Our stand has been that our films are screened in context of human rights education and discussion and there needs to be flexibility in this context'. The FFF has therefore been screening outside of government institutions and schools while its outreach has been mostly done online (Har, 2014). As such, participating filmmakers have since 2003 been employing filmmaking approaches and methods similar to that of guerrilla filmmaking as they consciously chose to bypass and elude these state and cinematic legislations.

The films screened at the FFF are mostly from the documentary genre. Based on our observation, nine out of the thirteen films screened at the FFF from 2006 to 2009 are documentaries while the others are docudrama/satire with dramatised elements. In line with the characteristic of guerrilla cinematic warfare, this particular generic preference is preferred as the documentary presents itself as a realist genre that provides filmmakers with the opportunities to explore the subject matter and issues with depth. The usage of documentary styled shooting allows for a sense of an 'amateur cinema' that allows for the documentation and

witnessing of the immediacy of contemporary events and an enhanced cinema verite-style through video (Zhang, 2007). This creates a strong 'on the spot' experience with the cameras functioning as witnesses to on-going events in accentuating immediacy and objectivity (Mo and Xiao, 2006: 152). As such, the documentary genre preferred by FFF filmmakers allows their films to be presented as pragmatic and down to earth.

The preference for the documentaries however does not mean that other generic orders are being side-lined in the production of digital activist films. KOMAS for example has produced a number of short films. These films, which were produced from 2005 – 2007, are part of its "Bangsa Malaysia" film series and are short dramas, experimental dramas, comedies, or satires. Short films such as *Ayah kenapa tebang pokok pisang* (2007) and *Laundry* (2007) are short dramas; while *Jalan-jalan* (2007) and *Training Video for Keris, Wushu, Bow and Arrow (2006)* are comedies. Despite being produced in different genres, these films share the similarity of criticising certain issues and occurrences that have occurred in society. Another example of a short video criticising certain issues in society is Fahmi Fadzil's *Training Video for Keris, Wushu, Bow and Arrow* (2006). This short video is a strong criticism of the so-called "*keris"* incident that occurred during the General Assembly of the dominant Malay political party called UMNO in 2006. During this incident, a "*keris"* or Malay dagger was unsheathed and waved in the air by an UMNO leader as a reminder about not challenging the concept of "*Ketuanan Melayu"* or Malay supremacy.

In dealing with the thorny issue of race and ethnicity, the FFF and KOMAS have taken the measure of educating Malaysians about the need for the acceptance of diversity through films such as *1957.1969.2006* (2006), *Ada Apa dengan Cina* (2005), and *Antara Cinta dan Bangsa* (2006).[7] The need to explore the complexities and intricacies of co-existence in Malaysia then resulted in the production of a feature film *Gadoh* (2009). Co-directed by Brenda Danker and Namron, the film criticised the issue of racism in Malaysian schools by exposing the racial and religious fissures repressed by the Malaysian media and mainstream cinema using a 'no holds barred' method. *Gadoh* then took matters

[7]As KOMAS has been prominent in anti-racism advocacy, they have been working with government agencies such as Jabatan Perpaduan Negara and Human Rights Commission of Malaysia (SUHAKAM) (Har, 2013).

further by directly criticising the national education system for its failure in inculcating education and values as students are taught not to question nor think critically for fear of reprimand. As such, students have been infused with a sense of fear that limits critical thinking and freedom of speech while criticising the increased polarisation and sectarian misrepresentation of society. While the film proposed the *Bangsa Malaysia* or the establishment of a 'Malaysian Race' equal in every aspect as an idealised solution in eliminating racial and ethnic prejudice, this vision of equality regardless of ethnicity, religion or creed would allow for the cultural identity of each ethnic community to be maintained.

The film is one of the best representations of a FFF film that incorporates guerrilla filmmaking methods as it was filmed over almost twelve months without state funding, permits from FINAS or the approval of LPF (Chan, 2010). Despite not obtaining these permits, it premiered at the HELP University College in Kuala Lumpur and has been screened at various public screenings and fundraisers. The Malaysian police however, twice blocked the screenings of the film. While *Gadoh* has been widely exhibited and distributed for over a year without any proper licenses, the police claimed that the film was stopped from being exhibited because it was a possible threat to public order. The first occurred on July 27, 2009, when the police deemed the screening an illegal gathering and prevented the organisers from screening the film at an open-aired location in Penang. The second incident occurred in Malacca on August 31, 2010, the police had prevented the organisers from screening the film to commemorate *Merdeka* Day (Malaysian national day). As such, the producers of *Gadoh* then decided to distribute and exhibit the film on the Internet, seminars, film festivals and workshops. This has allowed *Gadoh* to escape censorship and reach wider overseas audiences.

Another reason why the documentary is the preferred genre by FFF filmmakers is because of its capability in exploring complex issues. Incidences of police brutality, issues concerning the general elections, and the need for freedom of speech and expressions, and democracy in general are some of the commonly discussed socially significant issues. Philosophically and aesthetically the texts of these films are not grounded in any perspective – they are more grounded on political and social realities faced by Malaysians today. These films are also committed to

the objective of trying to create and nurture critical understandings of the social dynamics in the Malaysian society. Films such as *Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka* (2007) revealed the other aspect of an untold Malayan history, which never made it into the history school textbooks.[8] Other films such as *Pecah Lobang* (2008), *She is My Son* (2007), and *Rainy Day* (2006) concern themselves with the plight of the marginalised, the often misunderstood and abused transgender individuals, and the unfortunate estate workers living in dilapidated condition with meagre salaries. The usage of documentaries also allows these filmmakers to command greater control while preserving their artistic qualities.

In terms of aesthetic qualities, the usage of a documentary style of filmmaking allows FFF films to offer slightly less conventional and dramatic stories. While the production quality and technical capabilities demonstrated in some films are severely lacking, the focus of these films is not so much about its aesthetic qualities. Without running the risk of sounding utopian, the only aesthetic these films are concerned with is the aesthetics of 'liberation'. The aesthetics of liberation aims at creating social changes by examining issues and other social problems in society using a critical and open-minded manner; with the hope of its audience adopting the same progressive approach towards social issues in society. These are films arguing for the liberation of democracy in society by providing a lucid aspiration of an oppressed social space wanting to break free from oppression.

The films of the FFF also do not conform to the aesthetics commonly used by commercial and feature films. This is simply because aesthetics are viewed as inappropriate or even damaging to their political objectives. The production values in some films are severely lacking; while the actors employed are non-professionals but are the actual individuals who are affected by the issues being discussed. As such, aesthetics has been side-lined as the objective of these films is to promote social consciousness. These films therefore analytically inform the understanding of the social formation and directing it towards a socialist perspective. This is because such films ultimately aim at creating a

[8]Before its independence from the British on August 31, 1957, Malaysia was then known as Malaya. The incorporation of Singapore and the Borneo states of Sabah and Sarawak on September 16, 1963, then led to the official formation of Malaysia.

critical audience who are conscious about social issues and problems plaguing the society.

The narratives in these films disregard the use of a linear causal chain and have a looser and ambiguous narrative structure. By using ambiguity and uncertainty, the audience is placed within a moral/political position that enables the construction of an ideal positive or negative figure for emulation or criticism (Berry, 1994: 101). Such forms of ambiguity create a reflective space that invites the audience to individually interpret and examine their own critical understanding, or the subjectivity of the film's development and meaning. In *Kayuh* (2009) and *Al-Fatehah Memali* (2009) for example, the narrative systems in these films are developed from a variety of perspectives. No single dominant point of view exists in helping the story unfold and highlight the issues at hand. The majority of films screened at the Freedom Film Fest from 2006 to 2009 also promote uncertainty in the form of an open-ended quest that leaves the film without an ending. By keeping it open-ended without any narrative closure, these films are rebelling against the system of narrative aesthetics commonly employed in commercial cinema. Most of the time, the films attempt at bringing the subject matter closer to the audience rather than projecting them in a dreamlike quality commonly seen in commercial films. As such, films of the FFF can be described as an activist movement that strives toward creating social consciousness by being an 'aesthetic' force that distances itself from commercial mainstream cinema.

## CONCLUSION

The introduction of affordable digital filmmaking technology, Internet accessibility, and encouragement from KOMAS, and the organisation of the FFF have collectively led to the emergence of courageous young Malaysian filmmakers who dare to challenge the System. These filmmakers aim to achieve this through the cinematic strategies of their films that point towards a signifying practice that strives for the deconstruction of hegemony, state policies, inequalities and injustice in society, and race and ethnicity. Their films contain the 'politics of deconstruction' that is opposed to institutional cinematic

dominant regimes that prefer certain types of signification systems while excluding and marginalising other types of aesthetic and narrative strategies (Pines and Willeman, 1989: 7). Their films focus on issues and subject matter that have been long ignored or have been prohibited from being discussed by commercial Malaysian mainstream cinema.

This emergence of digital film activism is therefore vital to the sustenance of democracy in a society that is experiencing increased cultural and political suppression. The films screened at the FFF not only aim at democratising the film industry, it also aims to on a larger perspective, democratise society through social change by questioning state ideologies through challenging films that represent a struggle towards change in society and cinema. While these films are not as revolutionary as the Latin American Third Cinema calling for an armed struggle, films from the FFF aim to decolonise minds to create a larger number of socially and politically conscious Malaysian audience who are critical of their political, cultural, and social surroundings.

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Table 1: Films Analysed for Freedom Film Fest 2006 – 2009

| Title/Year/Director | General Theme | Specific Subject Matter | Generic Order |
|---|---|---|---|
| The Invisible Children (2006) (Hariati Azizan) | Human Rights | Questioning the treatment given by the authority to the children of the refugees in Malaysia. | Documentary |
| Kopi O Khau Sikit Kurang Manis (2006) (Andrew Sia) | Human Rights | Criticising the abuse of power of the Malaysian police force. Questioning their abilities to fight crime as crime rate is rising in Malaysia. | Docudrama/ Satire |
| Rainy Day (2006) (Rajan Paramesran) | Human Rights | Workers rights – struggle of estate workers for better wage and working condition. | Docudrama |
| Twelve 11 (2006) (Loh Yin San and Claudia Theophilus) | Human Rights | Rights for safe living space – criticising authorities on uncontrollable hillside development. | Documentary |
| She is My Son (2007) (Indrani Kopal) | Human Rights | Advocating the rights of marginalised group – the transgendered. | Docudrama |
| "Bo Lang Chai" (Forgotten) (2007) (Ong Boon Keong) | Human Rights | History of the clan jetties in Georgetown, Penang. | Documentary |

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|---|---|---|---|
| Sepuluh Tahun Sebelum Merdeka (2007) (Fahmi Reza) | Human Rights | Narrates the struggle of Malayan people against the colonial British for the independence. | Documentary |
| Who Speaks for Me? (2008) (Justin Johari Azman) | Human Rights | Freedom of expression and who defines what can be said in Malaysian society. | Documentary |
| Pilihanraya Umum Malaysia ke-12: Demokerasi atau Rebutan Kerusi (2008) (Abror Rivai) | Human Rights | Questioning the meaning of democracy in a highly regulated Malaysian society. | Documentary |
| Pecah Lobang (2008) (Poh Si Teng) | Human Rights | Advocating rights of marginalised groups – the transgendered sex workers. | Docudrama/ Satire |
| Al-Fatehah Memali (2009) (Rahmat Haron) | Human Rights | Police brutality and abuse of power by the authority in Memali conflict. | Documentary |
| No Silver Lining: The Perak Crisis (2009) (By S-Ploited) | Human Rights | Political justice and democracy | Documentary |
| Kayuh (2009) (Soh Sook Hwa) | Human Rights | | |