deeply collaborative, richly minimalist

mike walsh on emerging malaysian cinema

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EACH YEAR THE PUSAN AND TOKYO FILM FESTIVALS PRESENT THE OPPORTUNITY TO SIZE UP NEW DIRECTIONS IN ASIAN CINEMA. IT WAS SIGNIFICANT THIS YEAR THAT BOTH FESTIVALS DEVOTED SO MUCH SCREEN TIME TO MALAYSIA WHICH IS STARTING TO LOOK LIKE THE NEW REGIONAL CINEMA OF NOTE—FOR LOCAL FILMMAKERS AND AS LOCATION OF CHOICE FOR CHINESE FILMMAKERS.

Malaysia had a studio-based entertainment cinema in the 1950s and 60s which withered as Hong Kong, Bollywood and Hollywood took its place. Its problem—and perhaps now its opportunity—came from the way that Malaysia comprises a range of races and ethnicities: Malay, Chinese, Indian and the lingering influence of colonialist Britain. With the reduction in costs associated with digital technologies, the ability to work around the government’s Malay-based ‘bumiputera’ (sons of the soil) policy, and the decline in Hong Kong production, Malaysia is starting to look like a good bet as a cheaper centre for films which can appeal to a mix of people across Asia.

Local Malaysian filmmaking over the past few years has been deeply collaborative with James Lee (My Beautiful Washing Machine) and Amir Muhammad (The Big Durian) heading a group who work in different roles on each other’s films in order to maximise the amount of material they can get made cheaply. This approach is now starting to bear fruit. Not only did Lee and Muhammad have new films this year, but there was a range of work by their collaborators.

Tan Chui-mui’s Love Conquers All, which was produced by Muhammad and shot by Lee, came away from Pusan as the major prizewinner. A young woman moves to Kuala Lumpur and falls in love with a man who pursues her relentlessly. He warns of the exploitation and degradation that lies down this path, but to no avail. The title is both ambiguous and ironic in the sense of a Fassbinder melodrama. Love conquers not adversity, but those who love.

The stylistic influence of filmmakers such as Jia Zhangke (see p22) and Hou Hsiao-hsien is central, as it is to so much Asian cinema at the moment. Tan works hard against melodrama in setting forth the harshness of her observations. Moments of stillness are more telling than actions. Silence is preferred over dialogue or the emotional manipulations of music. The cruelty of the world should first be faced in a clear-eyed way, and only then should emotional engagements come forward.

Another spare, de-dramatised film is Rain Dogs, directed by another Lee-Muhammad collaborator, Ho Yuhang. This is the story of a young man who doesn’t have the viciousness in him to make a success of the transition from the kampong to urban life. “Don’t think so much while you eat”, his mother tells him, and the line makes sense in the context of the film. Ho has worked out how to employ the minimalist style in a remarkably controlled fashion. There is some small element of camera movement in just about every shot. Often it is a slow track in or back, enough to suggest a contemplative storytelling presence without being ostentatious. Scenes are generally done in single takes, and crucially dramatic moments are either elided, played out in long shot or with characters turned away from the camera. In every way, this is a reversal of the Australian cinema’s prioritisation of dialogue-driven scenes which set the stage for actorly performance. The triumph of Jia Zhangke’s Still Life at Venice this year means that we can expect to see a big increase in this severely restrained and distanced form of storytelling.

If its rise as a production centre in the 1960s contributed to the decline of Malaysian production, Hong Kong’s cyclical decline has had a direct effect on the revival of Malaysian production. Rain Dogs is part of the First Cuts series of low budget digital films funded—and more significantly, distributed—by Hong Kong star Andy Lau’s company Focus Films.
Focus is also distributing the new film by Yasmin Ahmad, another of Lee-Muhammad’s collaborative group who acts in Rain Dogs. Her own films were the subject of a retrospective in Tokyo. Ahmad’s four features are all autobiographical, linked by the character Orkid. Her most recent film, Mukhsin deals with the tomboy, Orkid and the boy who develops a crush on her during school vacation. Ahmad (who works in advertising) is a little more mainstream than many of her colleagues and she prominently rejects the art cinema convention of silent, interiorised characters. She sees families bound together by playfulness. Her parents’ love is measured by their ability to joke, sing and play with each other as they age. Seriousness of demeanour is one of the unfortunate consequences of the fall into adulthood with its fraught sexual entanglements.

Ahmad also stresses that her characters are Muslims, and that this is in no way incompatible with a deep human warmth and cosmopolitan tolerance. In Mukhsin it is the family’s more strictly moralistic neighbour who has the tables turned on her when her husband decides to take a second wife. Ahmad sees no contradiction between her faith and the embrace of Western culture. Mozart accompanies kite-flying just as Nina Simone’s version of “Ne Me Quitte Pas” is used playfully on the soundtrack as Orkid races for a final glimpse of a first love that she never recognised as such.

The way that Hong Kong is becoming important less as a place than as a point of productive relationships is also brought out by Patrick Tam’s return to directing, After This Our Exile. Tam was one of the leading figures of the Hong Kong New Wave in the 1980s, and was the mentor of Wong Kar-wai, whose 2046 he edited. Tam has taught for years in Malaysia and hence shot his comeback film there. HK heartthrob Aaron Kwok stars as a violent loser who drives away his wife (Charlie Young from Seven Swords) and then leads his son into petty crime.

The English title (in Chinese, it is simply called Father and Son) encourages a more abstract reading, and while there are a few moments of stylistic flourish and the film is shot by Hou Hsiao-hsien’s cinematographer Lee Ping-bin, there isn’t much to sustain this approach. Maybe the son is paradoxically the villain? In his childish innocence he refuses to countenance any kind of long-term solution to his dysfunctional family situation.

Perhaps the most important thing is that the use of stars such as Kwok and Young signifies an increasing willingness on the part of Chinese cinema to draw Malaysia more prominently into its range. Tam’s film, taken together with Taiwan’s Tsai Ming-liang’s decision to return to the country of his birth to shoot I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone in Kuala Lumpur indicates that something interesting is happening in another of our near-northern neighbours.

So finally, why Malaysia and what might we in Australia learn from this? Australian filmmakers have shown a desire to work cheaply on digital video over the past couple of years, but the key thing that is missing is the ability to tap into international styles that will generate interest in regional festivals and markets. Australia’s adherence to theatrical models of filmmaking looks increasingly conservative in the context of what is going on in Asia now. Not only does Australia need to absorb international styles, our filmmakers and institutions need to expend more energy on international marketing and co-production, finding ways into the distribution pipelines that are emerging within the region.

Pusan International Film Festival, Pusan, South Korea, Oct 12-20; Tokyo International Film Festival, Tokyo, Japan, October 21-29

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