

# **CHALLENGING GRAND NARRATIVES ON THE NATION: ASEAN INDEPENDENT FILMMAKERS' INDIRECT PARTICIPATION IN DEVELOPMENT DISCOURSE**

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## **Introduction: Filmmakers as inadvertent development communicators**

As a specific field within communication studies, Development Communication (DevCom) conceives of the different forms of mass media as integral to development plans or efforts. Informed by different disciplines and theories, DevCom as a concept is far from being unproblematic and unambiguous. Despite the numerous permutations that it has undergone, it remains to be an umbrella term to designate communication interventions designed to improve the economic, social, political, and cultural conditions of peoples and societies in the non-Western world. It is an indigenous response to challenges besetting newly-independent developing nations that emerged at the end of World War II including widespread poverty, social inequality, and ecological and environmental deterioration (Jamias, 2007). From a process whereby ideas are transferred, transmitted or disseminated from a source (change agents) to a receiver (target beneficiaries) with the intent to change behavior, it has evolved to a process where participants (source and receiver) create and share information in order to reach a mutual understanding, and to a process whereby individuals and communities are empowered to counter dominant ideas, intervene and transform their own situation. It recognizes the importance of media in raising awareness, creating knowledge, and stimulating dialogue at the level of the community, thereby activating social networks. As groups and

societies progressively and increasingly interpenetrate each other due to globalization, the advancement of which had been precipitated by the synergy of information and communication technologies, the concept of DevCom continues to evolve and reinvent itself.

Unlike the non-fiction documentary film, the fiction narrative film has been underutilized for disseminating development messages. The former has been utilized more extensively to disseminate modern ideas and to transfer technology that would improve agriculture, health, and education; to warn against practices that destroy the environment; to transmit information that can result in pro-social behavior; to shape public debate on political issues; to elicit sympathy for indigenous aspirations; to satirize or parody practices, policies, ideas promulgated by the status quo; etc. Nonetheless, recognizing that educating need not be dull, narrative films have also been employed to deliberately create characters whose stories could inspire and whose socially desirable behaviors and attitudes could serve as models. With these films' capacity to attract large audiences, it is believed that they could trigger interpersonal communication on issues and motivate individuals to at least consider changing their behaviors or support recommended changes.

Narrative films have never been just about entertainment. As popular cultural products, they have an important role to play in molding consciousness, forming identities, and promoting development. They can be and they have been a powerful force in both reflecting and stimulating an appetite for social change. To many filmmakers, tackling controversial societal problems and issues, in a way that undermines hegemonic and/or official discourses, is almost second nature.

However, filmmakers make films for a variety of conscious reasons. Making films with the precise intent of influencing and changing attitudes and behaviors or improving conditions in society is the least of these conscious reasons. This is not to say that their medium cannot possibly achieve these. The social and political have oftentimes been the narrative focus of countless films, as filmmakers respond to and comment on the problems, contradictions and dilemmas in their societies. As intellectuals who grow organically from the ranks of specific groups in a given society within a specific historical, socio-cultural, and political milieu, through their films, they may convey ideas enmeshed with the aspirations of the groups to which they belong. However, as Dr. Tolentino (personal communication, March 5, 2008) pointed out they are not overtly nation-builders. He added,

what filmmakers are conscious about in their film is their own negotiations with the nation – what they want to say – even as they hide it with public-relations line, “it is up to the audience to decide... .” If they are avant garde filmmakers, they are conscious and can articulate their positions ... . If they fall more into the category of commercial independent filmmakers, they would be more showbiz-zy in their engagement, making negotiation with the status quo always part of the imperative of their filmmaking.

As storytellers, most filmmakers are far from being development communicators, much less conscious and active change agents. They do not take on the task of direct facilitation, mediation, and consensus-building. However, as intellectuals they are not insulated, but are very much in touch with local and global events, and are nourished by ideas coming from different sources. Many of them are well-traveled, and therefore, are exposed to the thoughts and works of visionaries, scientists, and fellow artists from all over the world and to the many realities that other people only hear or read about.

Because of this, they tend to be more daring in representing realities that others find uncomfortable or unsettling.

### **Development as a Contested Notion**

Quebral (2007) noted that “in the relationship between development and communication, development has always been the dominant partner, deciding as it does the content of communication. Development is the weightier concept because it sets the goal and provides the message” (p. 140, 144). Development is not just a weightier concept, but it is also more controversial. It is a highly contested term. Not a few social scientists have claimed the dominance of a particular discourse emanating from the West prompting some of them to reject the notion of development altogether. Before discussing how filmmakers or directors somehow contribute to the discourse on development without necessarily intending to bring about palpable changes in society, a brief discussion on development as a concept and a set of practices is in order.

Inspired by the post-structuralist ideas of Michel Foucault, a number of anthropologists have described development as a powerful discourse, a regime of representation, or a hegemonic reality imposed by powerful Western institutions on the Third World, thus, facilitating their control over the latter, the consequence of which is the perpetuation of global inequalities as well as the marginalization of non-Western knowledge systems. They say that this Western perpetrated discourse is so pervasive and powerful making it difficult to imagine alternative discourses (Everett, 1997). These so-called post-development theorists reject the idea of development altogether arguing that it is a particular form of knowledge that does not reflect, but constructs reality. By closing-off alternative ways of thinking, it constitutes a form of power. Since it is discourse that

produces knowledge, not the subject, and since the subject is a product of discourse, the peoples of the Third World are cultural constructions of the West. Development workers from the West are said to have taken over the colonial masters. Not only do post-development theorists claim that the notion of development is a powerful discourse that constructs reality, they also claim that development is a massive failure (Kiely, 1999).

There are other discourses on development, but post-development discourse is the most radical because of its rejection of development. The other major conceptions are dependency theory which raises the question of global inequality; alternative development which focuses on the lack of popular participation; and, human development which addresses the need to invest in people (Pieterse, 2000). Different strategies have been employed to promote development, from a mixed economy approach where the state played a leading role in promoting industrialization, to the strategy of redistribution with growth, to a neo-liberal approach where state intervention is minimized and open market competition is pursued (Kiely, 1999).

To a great extent, post-development theorists are right in pointing out that the above strategies were part of the problem. It cannot be denied that certain strategies had been used to promote the economic, social, and political interests of the West, more than the target beneficiaries. Post-development's suspicion of mainstream development discourse is a strength, but as pointed out by a number of its critics, it fails to translate its critique of development into a constructive position. It is useful in critiquing mainstream development theory and policy, but it does not present any alternative blueprint for social change (Pieterse, 2000; Ziai, 2004). Some of the recurring criticisms against post-development are discussed in the next new paragraphs.

With at least a billion people in the world living in absolute poverty, it is clear that the benefits of development have been highly unequal. However, it is too simplistic to put the blame for this uneven implementation on discourse alone. Moreover, there are undeniable facts which belie the claim that development efforts since the post-war era have been absolute failure. Post-development scholars reject official development indicators seeing these as biased products of discourse, yet they also use these indicators to support their claim that development has failed (Kiely, 1999).

In a conference entitled 'Towards a post-development age,' Rahman (1993, as cited in Pieterse, 2000) was dumbfounded as the notion of development was attacked and asked whether valuable words such as democracy and socialism should be abandoned just because they are abused. Pieterse (2000) noted that nowadays the ambition to 'change the world' meets with cynicism because of the questionable record of several development decades. Social engineering and rationalist planning are seen as exercises in authoritarianism. However, all these cynicism and doubt do not alter the need to change the world for the better. The notion of development remains tied to the idea of changing the world, with all the pitfalls involved.

While it champions cultural diversity and difference as a source of resistance against Western domination, it portrays development itself as a monolithic hegemony implying that its effects are or will be similar throughout the world. The diversity of development experience in the non-Western or Third World disproves this (Kiely, 1999). Moreover, the so-called non-Western people themselves own the idea of development. By using Westernization as a catch-all concept, diverse historical currents are ignored (Pieterse, 2000). Interestingly, Ziai (2004) pointed out that post-development's portrayal

of development discourse as monolithic deviates from Foucaultian archaeology which emphasizes breaks, differences, and discontinuities.

On one hand, post-development texts often demonize industrial modernity, on the other, they romanticize pre-modern subsistence communities. The latter are conceived as spaces untainted by domination and conflict. In contrast, Foucault insisted that power struggle does not only emanate from the state or international institutions, but is to be found in everyday, local and self-evident relations and discourses. Thus, the assumption of power-free spaces is an illusion (Ziai, 2004). This idealization of pre-modern communities is due to or leads to a mistaken assumption that peasants are only interested in maintaining a constant level of living standards and are thereby disinterested in accumulation. By ignoring, domination and conflict within local cultures, post-development has come to serve as a mobilizing ideology for the relatively well-to-do rural beneficiaries of development (Ziai, 2004).

### **From hegemonic discourse determining subjects' thoughts and actions to subjects undermining and defying dominant and official discourses**

Peasant communities are not only constructed by post-development scholars as untainted by domination and conflict, they are also framed as victims of development (Ziai, 2004). Not only does post-development underestimate the desire for and appeal of development, it also undermines the agency of local actors. It tends to portray subjects as incapable of autonomous intellectual thought, as incapable of redefining "western" development strategies. Discussions on how target groups have resisted and reshaped development programs are lacking in post-development texts. The local elites may import and adapt the development discourse in an effort to win foreign funding and disguise

their own political and economic interests. However, there had been cases where resistance from local, non-elite residents has limited the ability of elites, both inside and outside of government, to implement their projects. Local actors are capable of co-opting and reworking discourse to serve their own interests (Everett, 1997).

The neglect of the agency behind discourse, the conception of subjects as completely subject to discourse, and the radical conception of language as determining or constructing reality are the key weaknesses in Foucault's thoughts adopted by post-development thinkers. As regards the first weakness, post-development writers do not pin the development discourse on any particular set of actors. Thus, it appears that the agent of this homogenization is discourse itself. By reducing development to discourse, and not seeing it as part of historical processes animated by conscious actors, the many causes and consequences of poverty and inequality may be overlooked (Everett, 1997).

With regard to the last two related weaknesses, since discourse is said to structure the way an issue or event is defined, thought about or understood by subjects or social actors and the way social actors act on the basis of that thinking, the ultimate author is discourse. Discourse disciplines subjects into certain ways of thinking and acting. In short, subjects cannot operate outside discourse (Aitken, 2001; Gilliam, 2001; Louw, 2001). But as pointed out by critics of radical post-structuralism, subjects are capable of autonomous intellectual thought, and therefore, are a source of action and meaning. Subjects can accept, negotiate, oppose, or transcend previous discourses. Since there will always be a struggle between and among different agencies competing to circulate their respective definitions, a less radical post-structuralist formulation that allows for active human choice to converge with or diverge from existing discourses is needed. This notion

of discourse moves away from linguistic determinism by considering knowledge, practices, and representations as mutable because they are the outcome of struggles among active human agencies (Aitken, 2001; Gilliam, 2001; Louw, 2001). This formulation does not deny the influence of social, historical, and discursive contexts on the subject nor does it affirm the radical historicity of subjects where they cannot operate outside or transcend existing discourse.

The so-called avant garde or non-commercial independent filmmakers are the ones who tend to be more conscious in articulating their positions, without necessarily intending to transform or expecting to bring about change in their society. However, since they tell stories that tend to undermine hegemonic or official discourses, their works may be considered as part of a larger discourse on a wide array of issues found within the sphere of development discourse. Thus, this type of filmmakers is akin to indigenous subjects or actors who negotiate, reformulate, or reject the more dominant discourses perpetrated either by foreign agents or local elites. Such filmmakers may be labeled as oppositional organic intellectuals who consciously develop and circulate ideas designed to counter or subvert visions or images of the nation propagated by those in power.

Economics, politics, history, culture play substantial role in the way artists as intellectuals thrive in their own national cinemas. Because of this, as oppositional organic intellectuals, the only thing that non-commercial independent filmmakers (and very rarely commercial filmmakers) belonging to a non-Western region like the ASEAN could have in common is the conscious effort to articulate positions or ideas that counter or subvert official or hegemonic discourses. In everything else, there is great diversity. Within each national cinema, there are films that are allegorical of national concerns or

which explore broad cultural, social, political changes, contradictions, and dilemmas. Dr. Tolentino (personal communication, March 5, 2008) went further by saying that if what one means by allegorical is representation of the conditions of the nation, then all films are allegorical to varying degrees.

### **The agency of ASEAN Independent non-commercial filmmakers in countering state-driven discourses**

#### ***Indonesia***

Morrell (2000) noted that artists in any society are often among the first to confront the challenges of social change. Although this role had been circumscribed during the New Order established by Suharto, many artists risked censorship, bans, and imprisonment to critique government policies and programs by using their respective artistic medium. During the later years of the Suharto regime and following its eventual demise in 1998, film directors along with other visual and performance artists, even those who belong to the so-called urban *wong cilik* or the underclass, engaged in a variety of discourse on *Indonesian-ness* or national identity and development that diverged from the official, hegemonic discourse of the government. The state's imagination of the nation was disseminated and distributed primarily through print and broadcast media, as well as conveyed through publicly staged rituals and officially sanctioned symbolisms. Anything that opposed the regime of representation promulgated by the state was interpreted as an act against the nation because it was imagined as a threat to national stability and as something that turned away foreign investors from Indonesia. In other words, the regime constructed *Indonesian-ness* through political stability and development. The state's vision dictated what was permitted to be taken up in society both at the political and cultural level. It marginalized what it considered as low culture. Drawing from their own

experiences, students, artists, intellectuals, many of whom belonged to the underclass, contested and negated the authoritarian regime's discourse. This alternative discourse was disseminated not only through artistic forms, including cinema, but also through the people's everyday life praxis (Mundayat, 2005).

In its effort to manage Indonesia's cultural diversity and following its own unitary ideals as signified by the slogan "Bhinneka Tunggal Ika" or Unity in Diversity, Suharto's New Order ignored ethnicity, even to the extent that census did not record ethnic origins. Nationalist ideals and the exigencies of economic development defined the boundaries of acceptable ethnicity, simultaneously celebrating and subjugating indigenous groups. This often reduced cultural differences to a superficial promulgation of traditional costume, architecture, dance and other art forms. Most Indonesian artists were required to work within art institutions established by the bureaucracy, and therefore, had no autonomy from state ideology. These organizations, which disbursed funding and arranged art activities and publications, only allowed works that were acceptable to the state (Morrel, 2000).

A major student demonstration triggered the fall of Suharto's regime and paved the way for *Reformasi* or Reform. State control on the arts, including film, gradually loosened. New generation of Indonesian filmmakers began to enjoy more freedom. They began to criticize and discard the myths of cohesive nation through various narrative strategies. They began to interrogate the state's vision of the nation by showing ruptures in national memory, by foregrounding urban subjects that are dismissive of national issues, and by revealing anxieties about present realities.

### ***Singapore***

Chua and Yeo (2003) noted the pervasive presence of the People's Action Party (PAP) government, which has ruled Singapore since 1959, invading every aspect of Singapore's social and cultural life. Thus, it is not surprising that political criticism is common in the artistic spaces of Singapore, especially theater. A critique of authoritarian politics is embedded in the works of artists. Since conventional media cannot play the role of public watchdogs as they are stringently regulated, literature, theater, and cinema have emerged as privileged spaces for critical reflections on society. For filmmakers like Erik Khoo and Jack Neo, the critique of PAP government is too good to pass up given its pervasive presence.

Embarking on a close reading of two of Khoo's most well-known films in the international circuit, namely *Mee Pok Man* (1995) and *12 Storeys* (1997), Chua and Yeo (2003) concluded that his critique of the government or state is oblique. Although there is no explicit mention of repressive policies and no direct representation of the state, through specific visual and aural cues, he subtly censures the government's elitist policies on education, suggests the state's omnipresence, subverts the state's triumphal discourse or construction of Singapore as a nation characterized by global economic wealth, material success, and social well being, and challenges the neo-Confucian ideal of self-fulfillment through well-defined community duties.

The construction of marginalized, dysfunctional, and ready-to-be discarded characters who have fallen out of step of Singapore's success story and are struggling to cope in a rigid and fast-paced society deflates the state's triumphalism. By capturing the grittier, less sanitized, less successful images of Singapore's underbelly which are well-hidden under the projected images of order, affluence, and success, audiences are allowed

to have a peek into a different Singapore and see beyond promotional materials designed to entice tourists. Finally, through extreme characterizations and plot developments, the idea that individuality is possible is driven home even when the space that Singaporeans inhabit is tightly monitored and owned by the state (Chua and Yeo, 2003).

Compared with Khoo, Neo's critique of the government is more direct. Humor and satire are basic ingredients in his films. However, by representing the problematic aspects of Singaporean society, his films provide more than just entertainment. Instead of constructing already marginalized and failed characters, he shows ordinary Singaporeans struggling to be part of Singapore's success story, thereby providing insights into the obstacles that come their way as a result of explicitly rather than implicitly represented government policies. Policies that show preference for "foreign talents," that marginalize non-English educated and speaking graduates or students that do not do well in other substantive subjects like math and science, and that ban the use of Chinese dialects. He constructs Chinese adult characters whose careers are either stalled or destroyed by English-educated competitors and young characters who contemplate suicide as a way to escape the pressures of Singapore's rigid education system. To defy the ban on the use of Chinese dialects, Hokkien, otherwise known as Taiwanese language, is used extensively in his films (Chua and Yeo, 2003).

### ***Thailand***

Although politics has influenced the development of Thai cinema, two pillars or institutions, religion and monarchy, are revered, and therefore, never criticized in Thai cinema. Thailand's censorship law protects these two institutions. Film was used to promote the absolute monarchy then later on the policies and programs of the government when Thailand became a constitutional monarchy. The October 1973

people's uprising which paved the way for democracy gave birth to social problem films or *nang sathorn sungkhom*. Although these films presented the problems besetting Thai society, the criticism of bureaucracy, shown as responsible for many of the problems, was not as strong as the critique of underground political films associated with the Left. While the so-called *nang bu* or action films represented the state as solving problems like communist oppression and crimes perpetrated by local gangsters, *nang sathorn sungkhom* represented the state as causing the problems. In the former, the nation was constructed as a territory that needs to be protected from enemies such as communists, local gangsters, and Burmese troops (Sungsri, 2004). These films tend to accommodate and support national political agenda (Harrison, 2005). The October 1976 massacre at the Thammasat University brought to a halt the production of social problem films until the 80's. As political tensions waned, these were again produced but declined in popularity in the 90's. While the communists ceased to be the villains in the 80's action films, local gangsters and Burmese troops continue to be so until today. After these political events, a new period emerged that foregrounded the harmony of village life and the significance of rural tradition (Sungsri, 2004).

Another significant characteristic of Thai cinema is that it constructs national identity in reference to "otherness." Thus, *farang* is a well-known adjective and noun that refers to the West without specifying the nationality. All films from the West are called *nang farang*. "Otherness" not only conveys the idea of someone or something different from *Thai-ness*, but also the idea of an enemy; an enemy that assumes different forms – a foreign country, a race, an economic or political doctrine, an event

precipitated by foreign institutions or individuals, a way of life, certain behaviors or practices, etc. (Sungsri, 2004).

An economic event that triggered the filmic construction of the West as threat to the Thai nation was the 1997 cataclysmic economic crash, popularly known as the Asian financial crisis. Popular animosity towards Western financial powers, coupled with a rising sense of nationalistic defiance in the face of economic adversity that harnessed Thailand's pride in its status as the only South East Asian nation never to have fallen to imperial powers typifies several of the films that were released immediately after the economic crash (Harrison, 2005).

For example, the earlier feature films of Pen-ek Ratanaruang, one of Thailand's avant garde young directors, namely, *Sixty-nine* (1999) and *Fun Bar Karaoke* (1997), without being politically overt, communicated a "yearning for the preservation of an unsullied Thai tradition, associated both with the countryside and the idealism of the functional family unit." In these films, Pen-ek dealt with the cultural impact of global economic boom and crisis with humor, irony, and rich social commentary. His approach was clearly different from the more overtly nationalistic films produced during the same period such as Yuthlert Sippapak's *Killer Tattoo* (2001) and Thanit Jitnukul's *Bang Rajan* (2000). In the former, unemployment is shown as soaring as a result of a workforce dominated by Westerners, thus, Thai city dwellers are forced to relocate to the countryside. The film also reproaches some Thais for preferring anything Western, venerating those who come from the West, and even adopting *farang* nicknames and foreign ways (Harrison, 2005).

Some Thai films like Pen-ek Ratanaruang's *Monrak Transistor* (2001) and Prachya Pinkaew's *Ong Bak* (2003) tend to idealize the countryside as a place where Thai tradition is maintained in its purity unsullied by the corrosive modern influences from the West, influences that have gripped the cities like Bangkok. The city is pessimistically represented as morally bankrupt with its dwellers engaging in all sorts of urban vices and committing all sorts of petty crimes. The spiritual depravity of city life is often epitomized by the broken home it provokes (Harrison, 2005).

More significantly, contemporary Thai filmmakers' desire, on one hand to appeal to an international audience, and their wish, on the other, to adopt a defined cultural stance that extols the traditions of Thailand, has led to an ambivalent yet more interesting and complex representation of "Thai-ness." By depicting an imagined past characterized by a nostalgic rendering of what it means to be a Thai, and at the same time representing the present as something associated with the corrosive cultural effects of Westernization, the dilemmas Thais face in the context of a rapidly globalizing world are brought to the fore (Harrison, 2005).

### ***Malaysia***

Not a few Malaysian filmmakers have challenged, subverted, or countered the state's grand narrative or hegemonic discourse on nationhood in its effort to manage or govern a multi-cultural, multi-racial, and multi-lingual nation. Zawawi (2003) explained that

the stability of Malaysia was grounded primarily on a delicate 'ethnic bargain' between the more economically dominant non-Malays (especially the Chinese) and the economically weaker but politically stronger indigenous Malays in which certain special privileges were constitutionally provided for the latter in exchange for the former's rights to citizenship and economic wealth. In 1963, with the entry

of Sabah and Sarawak into Malaysia, the ‘bargain’ was extended to ... Sarawak and Sabah indigenous populace, and together with the Malays, they share the ‘bumiputera’ (sons/daughters of the soil) status, which differentiates them from the ‘non-bumiputeras’ — these new dichotomies subsequently becoming the new bases for defining and contesting identities among citizens in the Malaysian nation-state (p. 146).

The discourse on ethnic rights from the 70’s to the 80’s in Malaysian politics which emphasized the preservation of ethno-linguistic and cultural rights was replaced by discourse on development in the 90’s as predominantly ethnic-based minority political parties lobbied for greater economic share. Chinese and Indian race-based parties within the National Front coalition withdrew from controversial and ethnically sensitive issues because of the popularity of Mahathir’s idea of ‘Bangsa Malaysia’ regarded as a more inclusive and multicultural concept of the nation (Loh, 2002, as cited in Cheng, 2007).

The National Cultural Policy was formulated by the state in 1971 after the 13 May 1969 bloody racial riots. In an attempt to regulate the so-called unregulated features of Malaysian multiculturalism, said policy was meant to transcend the multiculturalism and provide an overarching national identity that integrates all the different ethnic/cultural communities into a Malaysian nation-state. This led to an idealized notion of Malay *keperibadian* or character which became manifested in different fields of arts and culture (Zawawi, 2003).

Given this political and economic background, not only does mainstream Malaysian cinema provide films with formulaic content, Hollywood imitations, and illogical plots, it also excludes or ignores diversity by catering primarily to Malay-speaking audiences. Thus, films are produced and directed by Malays and tell stories about Malay society and culture, featuring Malay actors in Malay language. Non-Malays are represented in a stereotypical and sometimes in derogatory ways. Films that are not in

Bahasa Malaysia are often denied incentive aid and have difficulty securing local screening (Cheng, 2005). Malaysian mainstream cinema is notable for not reflecting the ethnic and cultural diversity of Malaysia (Muthalib, 2005; Cheng, 2007).

Non-commercial independent Malaysian filmmakers seek to challenge and problematize homogenizing narratives and open up space for ethnic minorities marginalized by the state and mainstream cinema. Many of these indie filmmakers are Chinese Malaysians who, as an ethnic group, have been inevitably excluded from the Malay film industry because of the National Economic Policy (Cheng, 2007). These films contribute to the most critical discourse in Malaysia, that of race. They foreground a particular ethnic minority's community and history, subtly raise issues related to ethnicity such as systemic and structural racialisation sustained by corrupt crony politics and laws that stifle freedom, and construct significant characters of ethnic backgrounds other than Malay (Cheng, 2005). Celebrating Malaysia's diversity and pluralism, they are clearly opposed to the state's homogenizing conception of Malay culture. Marginalized subjects are privileged, foregrounding not only their origin, but also articulating sub-cultural meanings and nuances specific to their social existence and struggle (Zawawi, 2003).

### *Philippines*

The 2006 Cinemanila International Film Festival paid homage to the late Lino Brocka who personifies the struggles and aspirations of independent Filipino filmmakers. Just like Brocka who, through his films brought Philippine cinema to the attention of a global audience, the frontrunners among indie filmmakers have brought *Pinoy* films back to the international arena. In remembrance of what Brocka stands for, Cinemanila has instituted the Lino Brocka award.

Although Brocka made many films at the center of the mainstream industry, his noteworthy works were done outside the industry (del Mundo, 2002). “He straddled the boundary between commercial and non-commercial films quiet comfortably” (Francia, 2002, p. 355). Just like Brocka, many of today’s filmmakers’ are not purely non-commercial independent filmmakers. Many of the indie filmmakers who are gaining international recognition started via mainstream commercial filmmaking.

The experience of Brocka’s generation had shown that better films can be made outside mainstream. However, del Mundo (2002) noted that as the lure of commerce is increasingly more difficult to resist, post-Brocka filmmakers, in general, tend to compromise to the detriment of their art.

With the declining annual output of the Philippine film industry, some have said that the film industry is dead or at least dying. For film critic Francia (2002, as cited in del Mundo, 2002), what is dying is Philippine national cinema and not the Philippine film industry. He noted that “if a national cinema is the nation’s collective output of films that image the country and give voice to the people, then the products of the Philippine industry are a failure. ... Making sensible films becomes more and more difficult. The industry is engaged in business, in making movies that make money. ... The filmmaker who wants to be free of the constraints that the industry imposes has to find his/her freedom elsewhere. ... (p. 377).

The further filmmakers like Brocka moved away from the commercial system, the better. The claim made by not a few that the hope of Philippine cinema is independent filmmaking is not surprising. Independent producers, whether mainstream or alternative, have been infusing new life into local filmmaking for the past several years. Some

independent filmmakers who go mainstream manage to make films that provide socio-political critique within a popular genre like melodrama, which was the case with many of Brocka's films. Although many, if not all the socio-political problems that existed during the time of Brocka, particularly poverty, persists to this day, fewer and fewer films are overtly political or engage in a direct critique of state-driven discourse or imaging of the nation. Moreover, not a few among the present crop of filmmakers like Lav Diaz claim that they have been inspired by Brocka, but their way of confronting socio-political realities is very different from that of Brocka.

Dr. Tolentino (personal communication, March 5, 2008) noted that since the political economy of filmmaking has changed, the modes of expression are also changing and have become more diverse. The explosion of digital Pinoy indie filmmaking from 2005 to present is due to a number of factors including the granting of seed-money to a growing number of young writer-directors by both mainstream and independent production companies (some have managed to source funds on their own); the awarding of cash prizes to winners in a number of competitions, enabling winners to produce more films; the growing number of respected actors and veteran film professionals who are willing to work for indie productions for little or no money; the creation of awareness and interest in indie films through communication technologies like the internet and through international film festivals; the improving quality of digital filmmaking equipment at more and more affordable prices; and, the close collaboration and even friendships among indie filmmakers themselves (indeed, they have formed a tightly-knit community). The last is especially true among non-commercial indie filmmakers who have more limited resources because earning is not a priority, but substantial articulation

of their positions on socio-political realities. Although this drive is something that they share, the articulation is far from being uniform. Their works display unique and varying aesthetics. Also, being non-commercial, they have more difficulty getting their films screened and distributed more widely. Although they do get a lot of attention in local alternative film fests and in international film festivals, they still feel marginalized.

### **Lino Brocka's counter-narratives: a case in point** \*

The films of Brocka, namely, *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975), *Insiang* (1976), *Jaguar* (1979), *Bona* (1980), and *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (1985), drew the attention of the intellectuals to the plight of the marginalized. With the production of more and more “intelligent” films, i.e., films that are sensitive to Philippine socio-political realities, a new film culture began to emerge. Through his films, the world saw images of poverty which Filipinos see everyday, but which the ruling regime tried to hide. He represented lived realities not taken up by commercial films, which driven by profit, offer images that do not address viewers’ lived experience, or which do not allow them to confront reality and reexamine themselves. He aimed to liberate people’s minds from “fantasies” by loosening the grip of “the establishment.” He faced up to the challenge of raising audiences’ social consciousness. This mission, which he imbibed as a PETA artist, implies faith not only in the artists’ capacity to make a difference, but also in the masses’ capacity to raise themselves up.

His exposure to the growing political ferment at U.P., his involvement with PETA, and exposure to avant-garde ideas certainly had an impact on his consciousness.

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\* This part was based on the author’s dissertation, entitled “*Representations of the Urban Poor in Lino Brocka’s Films.*”

Thus, although he may not have openly pronounced his adherence to the ideology of the Left early on in his career as a filmmaker, his socio-cultural analysis of Philippine society as manifested in his films from the mid-70's to early 80's, is consonant with the Left's politics. His films indirectly propounded the value of equality, which is paramount in the ideology of dominated groups. By showing the impoverished conditions of most Filipinos, he set himself in opposition to the Marcos regime's effort to project an image of a society that is prosperous, "true," "good," and "beautiful." By rising above prevailing cultural forms that did not provide a critical awareness of social realities because of their romantic and escapist character, he ushered in a new discourse that redefined audiences' perception.

Although it took a while before Brocka became more politically involved, he never backtracked in his concern for democracy where power is distributed to various sectors of society. At the height of repression, immediately following the declaration of Martial rule, as PETA's executive director, he strongly discouraged members from staging hard-hitting, propagandistic plays not because he was against political plays per se, but because he did not approve of the setting up of underground cells within PETA. The threats from the military were real and he did not want to endanger the lives of members whose politics was different or who joined PETA simply to act. He played the role of a pacifier and at the same time maintained a strong sympathy for underground activists.

The assassination of Ninoy Aquino was the turning point in Brocka's political life. He actively joined protest actions and spoke in rallies, enjoined others to participate in efforts to expose the abuses of the Marcos regime, co-founded political groups, and

urged people to boycott Marcos machineries like the MIFF and the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines. His denunciation of the Marcos regime through his films increasingly became more open and direct. The groups that Brocka joined or co-founded were some of the many so-called “political blocs,” that have embraced ideological belief systems that are considered as alternatives to the paradigms of those who hold state power. These groups are also often referred to as “revolutionary groups,” “ideological forces,” or “groups belonging to the Philippine Left.”

The social and political environment in which he moved partly explains why his early films, though essentially political, fell short in political advocacy or militancy. Besides Brocka’s own predilection for psychological drama, strict censorship conditioned his representations. Politically motivated censorship is just one among the many repressive measures that were put into effect by the Marcos regime to crush political dissent and to control media and aggressively disseminate its own productions. As soon as censorship became less stringent, he made *Bayan Ko*. It is this same adaptability that enabled him to make *Orapronobis* later on.

He constructed characters with little or no human agency and whose struggles are on the personal and individual level. However, since the characters’ extreme situation emanates from clearly implied social inequities, this allowed him not only to indict an abusive regime that delimits the possibility of individuals or denies individuals viable means to realize their potential, but also to induce viewers to question reality and reexamine themselves.

The reality of the urban poor is more than what Brocka or any other filmmaker had represented or will ever represent. Brocka’s discourse is inescapably limited by his

own perspective as well as the internal logic and conventions of his aesthetics. However, given the socio-political environment in which he had to work, what Brocka managed to achieve is certainly significant.

## **Conclusion**

The oftentimes counter hegemonic discourse found in the works of independent, non-commercial filmmakers is parallel to the anti-mainstream or anti-Western and/or anti-local elite discourse of post-development thinkers. This is not to say that they make films always with a clear intent to counter Western-dominated discourse on development, although Westernization is oftentimes seen as a threat. In most cases, they are simply articulating positions on specific socio-political realities that they have experienced or observed; positions that usually contradict rather than reinforce state-driven discourses. They do not necessarily reject the idea of development, which is the case with post-development, but they simply present an alternative view, subvert a dominant view, criticize a prevailing opinion, show the opposite of what those in power claim, highlight certain realities that are ignored in the public forum, etc. to create awareness, raise consciousness, provoke questions, and not necessarily to effect substantial changes in society. Moreover, although they oftentimes demonize industrial modernity imported from the West because of its corrosive impact on traditional culture, they do not always over-romanticize rural communities by ignoring the power struggle that also take place within local cultures, which is the case with post-development. It is not unusual for many filmmakers to indict their own countrymen for adopting even the less savory aspects of Western culture like consumerism and materialism. The locals are not always framed as victims, but as willing participants in the quest for success and better life as defined not only by the state, but also by both local and foreign mass media products. Most

importantly, what independent filmmakers manage to accomplish prove that subjects can operate outside discourse, transcend and subvert it. No matter how powerful and pervasive certain discourses are, filmmakers as indigenous actors are autonomous beings, capable of independent action.

Development is not just a target to reach, but a path to follow. There is genuine development when persons are put in a position and given the opportunity to follow their most important aspirations. And since an enlightened mind is essential to following that path, they must be informed of their rights, of the economic options open to them, or of the political actions that are within their reach. This is precisely what filmmakers should at least aim for – enlighten minds. By heightening audiences' awareness of dehumanizing conditions in society, concerned individuals and institutions are persuaded to go beyond vague feeling of compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of so many people, while those in the margins are encouraged not to adopt a purely passive attitude or one that is destructive of the social fabric. In view of this, it is important that cultural workers capture both the lights and shadows of social realities, connect individual realities to larger social realities, and social problems to their structural causes.

A more extensive and intensive analysis of cinematic representations of national concerns is certainly needed. The longing for freedom, justice, equal opportunity, dignified living, physical and psychological well-being, etc. is something that all human beings feel deeply. When certain policies and programs are enforced that make it difficult for certain sectors to achieve or enjoy these basic human aspirations at particular moments in a country's history, filmmakers along with other artists are one of the first to question or critique these state-driven policies either overtly or obliquely. Through their

works, they provoke a much needed dialogue not only between and among groups within a nation, but also between and among nations.

The above assertions relate significantly to the idea of cosmopolitanism which urges a worldwide community of humanity committed to common aspirations and values based on mutual respect and universal rights. As noted by Cheng (2007), cosmopolitanism, with its underlying humanism, is useful when it comes to framing a discussion of independent films produced particularly by young filmmakers precisely because these films are brought to international film festivals and have global audiences. Because of these films' deep humanism and innovative visual aesthetics, a viewer or critic from any part of the world, who may not be familiar with a specific country's cultural and political context, can still appreciate these films. To quote Anderson (1998, as cited in Cheng, 2007) 'cosmopolitanism endorses reflective distance from one's cultural affiliations, a broad understanding of other cultures and customs, and a belief in universal humanity.' Cosmopolitanism is open to the more positive aspects of globalization to account for ways of thinking and action that already transcend national, ethnic, religious and other boundaries (Anderson, 1998, as cited in Cheng, 2007). Thus, although young independent filmmakers tell stories of their own people, they prefer to be known for their contribution to the medium of film and visual story-telling rather than be representatives of their nationality or ethnic group. They are also open to exploring how their own culture intersects with other cultures. This disposition of openness towards the world and others can be seen in their diverse styles, approaches, and subject matter as they draw bits of culture from diverse sources (Cheng, 2007).

Finally, representing one's own and others' complex social, cultural, and political realities is certainly no easy task. Nonetheless, this is a challenge that filmmakers must face squarely by continually developing their historical, political, cultural, moral, and aesthetic sensibilities. Theirs should be a sensibility that combines intuition, emotion, and reason so that they somehow contribute to the transformation of people's self-perceptions and attitudes, who in turn, will play a more active and integral role in defining and developing themselves.

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