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ALTERNATIVE DOCUMAKERS: STRANGE FORCES AT WORK

Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan, Roslina Abdul Latif

ABSTRACT

Documentary film has established itself as an important spatial extension of this nation's historicity. This paper explores the terrains of this critical transformational space which in recent years, has been dominated arguably increasingly, by a cohort of 'socialist' filmmakers. That such an 'alternative/independent' group of documakers - a label it is often associated with - edges over the 'mainstream' ones in terms of its worthiness, timeliness and relevance of an issue, debate or perspective, is a claim or perception that needs to be qualified in this paper. Notable documakers gave in-depth interviews on their creative works and issues of nation building both in shaping the trajectory of 'alternative' documentary, hence, sustaining a potentially transformative public sphere. This paper will engage in analyzing critical and defining documentary works as its mode of inquiry followed by the discourses gleaned from the interviews.

Keywords · Alternative documentary; epistophilia; social engagement; web 2.0; transformative public sphere;

INTRODUCTION

This brief paper looks at one of the terrains within the landscape of the nation's creative industries allegedly 'occupied' by the community of independent or 'indie' filmmakers, with a particular interest in a trio of documentary filmmakers (henceforth documakers), namely, Poh Si Teng, Indrani Kopal and Fahmi Redza, with reputations as winners the Pusat Komunikasi Masyarakat (KOMAS) annual Freedom Film Fest, an important platform for the indie documakers in Malaysia. The paper is generally concerned one of documentary's classical purposes: an engagement with the social reality of the world and its discourses. A brace of basic questions thus follow: What subjectivity of the Malaysian community of alternative documakers are they documenting? Have they responsibly fulfilled their duty to construct and inform a 'transformative' Malaysian public sphere with constructive social inquiry on the nation's social, historical and political discursive practices? In the process of seeking the answerable truths to these questions, we have found that the Nicholsian notion of 'epistophilia' (1991) which denotes the documentarist's desire to know and to inform, whereby the reciprocity of both actions are intentionally central to his or her praxis of social engagement, as fluid and informative for the

purpose of analysis and discussion of the selected documentary texts. In the final analysis, this paper will be deliberating on why and how the indie documakers' community of practice should 'occupy' the critical transformational space as a collective but rational voice of enlightenment in a critical state of modernity that not only makes an epistephilic force suddenly something to be desired for; but also appreciates and desires worthiness, timeliness and relevance as bases for documentary's social engagement across varied social subjectivity.

CONCEPTUALISING EPISTEPHILIA

A factual, expository documentary film is informed by what Bill Nichols (1991:178) has termed, an epistephelia, which he has conceptualised as "a pleasure in knowing, that marks out a distinctive form of social engagement [which] stems from the rhetorical force of an argument about the very world we inhabit". He asserts that "[w]e are moved to confront a topic, issue, situation or event that bears the mark of the historically real [which] has a less incendiary effect on our erotic fantasies and sense of sexual identity, but a stronger effect on our social imagination and sense of cultural identity". The desire-to-know is perhaps a socioculturally sanctioned behavior if one considers the factual, expository documentary as essentially a public good that is functioning like a public service announcement. Perhaps more significantly, Nichols' socially-situated practice is informed by the ethics of the great British documaker, John Grierson, who insisted upon all documakers to engage themselves within the epistephilic mode of subjectivity so that the society at large could become one of "informed citizenship – an active, well informed engagement with pressing issues such that progressive, responsible change could be accomplished by governments".

EPISTEPHILIC FORCES AT WORK

As shall be shown, this ethical perspective seems to fit in perfectly with the framing of the 'historically real' which the trio in question seeks to problematise, incendiary or otherwise. Based on two main issues in documentary filmmaking, production and content, we focused on three basic questions during our in-depth interviews with the trio. These range from funding issues; 'alternative' subject matter and its context; critical receptions and future projects; and implication for sociocultural and political reflexivity. As a form of 'public' inquiry, we argue that their following the trio's epistephilia may have resulted in their audiences (read the people) gaining some degree of "power and responsibility" besides "a sense of pleasure, satisfaction, and knowledge" (Nichols, 2001:41) about the contemporaneous historicity of this pluralistic society. Based on the selected works below, we hope to be able demonstrate the ways in which such works are quite ostensibly, part of an 'epistephilic culture', that nurtures and lends itself rather steadily into postcolonial and gendered discursive practices in and across both traditional and alternative public spheres in the country today.

PECAH LOBANG (DIR. POH SI TENG, 2008) AN EXPLORATION OF MALAY-MUSLIM TRANSGENDERISM;

Pecah Lobang is the first documentary film directed by Poh Si Teng (or Poh Si henceforth) that clearly marked her interest then in exploring sexuality issues in Malaysia, especially amongst transgendered Muslim working in the capital city's seedy vicinity. *Pecah Lobang*, also a phrase in colloquial Malay which literally means 'busted', was shot, of course, in the red light district of Chow Kit and its story revolves around Natasha, a Muslim *mak nyah* or transvestite, who refused to live out his life like other normal man. Unable to secure employment, apparently if not generally due to, a unilaterally directed but misinformed discrimination against *mak nyahs*, Natasha invariably succumbed to the oldest profession in the world, luring men for gainful survival and yet living in constant fear of being raided by the police and religious authorities. The discovery of Natasha was the result of patience and persistence that Poh Si had showed for in this epistemic journey of hers. Whilst she met with as many sex workers plying around Chow Kit's most infamous of alleys known as *Belakang Mati* (lit. the Alley of Death), Natasha was the one who had agreed to tell 'her' story though only after a lengthy process of soliciting. As a matter of fact, to put a different 'spin' to such an endeavour, this was a film project focusing on unrepentant, AIDS-infested Malay *mak nyahs* in Chow Kit by a curious female Chinese filmmaker. Curiosity did not always kill the cat for it lived another day to tell its story. Accordingly for Poh Si, it was a time when she felt that this was a story worth telling and we should also add, worth thinking about because the muscles of the Islamic Syariah laws are being flexed to prosecute men who physically posed as women.

As Poh Si had found out, cross dressing was a crime under the Syariah law for Muslims and the penalties were severe although these laws were not always enforced in the land. One has to admit that the dogmatic logic of such laws remains a 'faux pas' until now when in actual fact, there are other higher objectives of the Syariah like upholding justice and equality which should have become its priorities. One may do well to wonder if the same ruling would be applicable if say, a group of Muslim men were to be seen walking about in women shoes to perversely render their solidarity with women victims of domestic violence? Would a wig and a pair of stilettos put such signifying 'trickster' into liability (but) as a 'fake' Muslim transvestite (so who is the 'real' one)? Whether one's society is homogenous or otherwise, humanism should rise above all other fundamental considerations, including an Islamic one, even if it cannot be allowed to transcend all humanity in certain circumstances. This is perhaps why we see *Pecah Lobang* as a tremendous individual initiative to shed light on this much misunderstood and scorned community that continuously finds itself pressed hard against the Establishment's moralizing wall. Thus, Poh Si's intervention into the discursive practice on the subject of transgenderism is an important social praxis. This was made more interesting as she was a younger non-Muslim Chinese filmmaker then who had to oscillate between the murky world of Malay-Muslim *mak nyahs* and a certain terrain of the Islamic laws that safeguards the honour of Islam and the Malay-Muslims.

HIGH CHAPARRAL: THE TALE OF THE VILLAGERS (DIR. INDRANI KOPAL, 2009) COOLIE' NARRATIVES OF DISPLACEMENT

The whole 'works' by Indrani may be grouped into 3 distinct foci of interest: the individual, community and national. Two documentaries that have been chosen represent the sensitive issue of land rights and land acquisitions within the Indian-Hindu community in two locations in the peninsular. Indrani's investigations were motivated by her desire to get to the core of the much publicized resistance by these communities to so-called 'development plans'. We see their resistance as signifying from two perspectives: that it informs us of many untold stories of ethnic displacement that is evocative of the discourse of coolie or indentured narrative (which we shall elaborate soon), on the one hand; but on other hand, it seems to have nurtured both a strong ethical commitment to expose social injustices and a 'Web 2.0' creative-critical style of leadership in Indrani, whose videographic tenacity in pursuing truth gets the support of her employer, *Malaysiakini*.

Briefly, the coolie or indentured narrative has a historically global currency though specific discursive practices may vary and dependent on the expansive grid occupied by western colonial enterprises throughout the centuries. Like the Chinese, the Indians were indentured labourers brought into the colony as a result of British colonial enterprise for whom agrarian economy was seen as equally profitable as the mining industry. Arguably, Indrani's Indians in both films are descendents of the agrarian coolies who cleared, planted, tapped rubber trees on those estate plantations. One of the crises of identity concerning such communities, as Indrani's numerous works have so courageously testified, is one of invisibility. Who comes to these estates and actually speak to them? Today, as we speak, it appears that it is the prime minister of the country who must answer the question. The invisibility of the agrarian Indian communities have not only made some of them homeless but half a million of them 'stateless' without identification documents such as the MyKad – a fact derived from the government's MyDaftar campaign "to rebuff allegations by the opposition regarding stateless Indians"¹.

In this documentary, Indrani's exposure to issues of land rights in Malaysia concerns the residents of an estate called Kg. Buah Pala, in Georgetown, Penang, who had been served with a notice of eviction by the authority. Understandably, the people were reluctant to evacuate from the land which has been gazetted as one of Penang's heritage sites since they were under the impression that they, as promised by the previous state government, would be granted a collective rights to the land as its inheritors and guardians. As the rest of the land was gradually encroached by contractors and bull dozers, there was no other choice for the villagers but to hold on to a stretch of the land and wait for the decision of the newly elected government on their future. Being a video journalist, the story of Kg. Buah Pala offers an interesting challenge to Indrani: how to unlock their tight-lipped but deafening silence that had sent away other journalists and reporters without any 'estate stories' to write up. During our interview with her, Indrani recalled a particularly poignant moment below, a critical insight into her praxis of

¹ Emilia Ghazali and Nabila Sabri. New Straits Times. Govt intent on aiding Indians. 11 December 2012

communicating with the disenfranchised that finally managed to sway her audiences to confide in her:

So when I wanted to speak to that lady in green, she didn't want to talk to me because she spoke to so many of them [reporters]... When I touched her shoulder and I told her to sit down, she looked at me for the very first time; she looked up and she saw my eyes. It was so important for them just to have someone to tell their story to... Everybody was speaking for them but none of them spoke to them.(The interview: 1st March 2012)

Indrani apparently has deployed the same communication strategy that had been so critical to making her informants want to share their 'estate stories'. Accessibility to her corpus of coolie narratives means that the Establishment and the society at large are more than sufficiently informed now as these marginalized subalterns are no longer hidden from the recesses of our minds. Indrani's short documentaries effectively sustain the trope of the indentured coolies to force a powerful power structure that the Establishment cannot ignore. Collectively, they contextualize the struggle of the agrarian community against the potential stakeholders of the technocratic and bureaucratic kinds. It is in essence, a class struggle and Indrani has been able to access such contestations and listening to the disenfranchised folks as attentively and patiently as possible.

SEPULUH TAHUN SEBELUM MERDEKA (DIR. FAHMI REZA, 2009) –THE PROJECT OF RECLAIMING/REWRITING NATIONAL HISTORY

The documentary's main objective is to 're-open' the events that culminated in the Malaya-wide 'Hartal' day of protest against the undemocratic Federation of Malaya Constitutional Proposals devised by the British Colonial Government and the UMNO and the rise of the people's democratic movement in Malaya, ten years before independence. The film covers up a critical lacuna in the historical narrative predating independence, where specific facts and knowledge have been apparently if selectively 'ignored' almost *in toto* by our nationbuilders - historians and politicians, of course. In contrast, Fahmi was adamant to ensure that the circumstances in which the struggles of the forefathers - unknown and unnamable Malayan heroes - were not forgotten..

I feel that to understand the present, you have to study the past. I am particularly interested in the history of the Malaysian progressive movement because it was very vibrant, yet it does not have much of an influence on current generations. And that's a great pity.

(The Star: November 2007)

A freelance graphic designer by profession, Fahmi managed to put together this documentary with much effort covering events that happened in the period after the Japanese surrender on August 15, 1945 and before the Emergency that was declared by the British on June 18, 1948 in their efforts to fight the Communist threat. Fahmi felt that it was an intense period of political activity – a vacuum after the Japanese surrender, which led to the independence being declared

in countries like Indonesia and Vietnam. At that point, the British was in a haste to regain their pre-war position in Malaya and Singapore but dejectedly discovered that they were rejected by the people. Putera-AMCJA (Pusat Tenaga Rakyat-All Malayan Council of Joint Action) was an alliance comprising Malay nationalist groups impressed by the leadership of the influential Sukarno, the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM), a fledgling Malayan Indian Congress (MIC), the pre-Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) leader, Tun Tan Cheng Lock, and local trade unions.

This documentary focuses solely on the aspirations of that time, which peaked with the publication of a People's Constitution drafted by Putera-AMJCA and a general strike called 'hartal' or general strike on October 20, 1947. This movement saw significant parts of the country stop working for a day in a potent show of political dissent when the British refused to acknowledge the 'alternative' draft of the country's constitution.

"It's true that our school history books, for the most part, highlights the role that is played by just one party or group. Other groups are mentioned but are not given focus or are labeled anti-government or anti-something. This happens because, any history at all and this can probably be applied to any country, history is always written by those in power".
(The Sun: November 2007)

Fahmi also mentions that the strike pushed for equal citizenship rights for all who considered Malaya their permanent home, regardless of race or place of birth. Another example of progressive thinking for those times was the provision for a Council of Races comprising two representatives of every race, including minorities, to ensure laws did not discriminate. Looking back at the proposed constitution for a secular, multi-racial nation, this was the beginning of progressive thinking that would change the country. The struggles of the Left in 1940s Malaya somewhat resonates in the sociocultural and political pulpits of today albeit in the oft-tumultuous context of post-colonialism. Yet Fahmi seems hopeful on his audience generating the next wave of epistephilia, particularly in re- and de-historicizing our insecurity towards new insights to help the nation apprehend the imbroglio of its fragmented past. His call is indeed relevant given the substantial spirit of enlightenment in Malaysian sociocultural and political contexts today. The most significant is the continuing contestation in the narrative of the racial riot of May 1969, which remains 'useful' for the kind of 'bogeyman' politics practised by right-winged Malaysian politicians.

CONCLUSION: INDIE FUTURE AND WEB 2.0 JUGGERNAUTS

The connotative term 'indie' exudes a refreshing sense of independence and freedom that is associated with the young. An indie community is generally seen as socioculturally diverse, intellectually middle-classed and technologically savvy movement of creative and critical force whose youthful roots may be found, almost literally, in urbanized enclaves around the world. Those who watch movies or videos on the Internet can access these works too (whose 'form' now is known as online documentary). It is made possible by Web 2.0, which is precisely for

sharing information via Youtube, Google and Vimeo platforms, which are seamless in its potential to affect the imagined communities of audiences out there. The creative arts is the most fertile domain of identity politics, the zeitgeist of today's globalizing societies. Here, the indie's instinctive nature is to move away from normal considerations that 'govern' the majority section of the society across a spectrum of sociocultural and political activities.

A general rule of thumb, perhaps, but because an indie movement does not seem to earn or be given a *locus standi* to participate in public policy affairs, such lack of recognition by the establishment apparently finds the indie to be exclusively on 'the other side' of many an official if popular 'narrative', in the broadest sense of the word. Our young documakers do not look at their craft as a reproduction of reality but instead, as a representation of the everyday lifeworlds which have pre-occupied them both in terms of its mystery and unfamiliarity. This is what makes this cohort tick, that casts the trio in particular as trailblazers in their own rights as they edge over their 'mainstream' counterparts as far as the worthiness, timeliness and relevance of a documentary over a feature film is concerned. We contend that from our discussion that the 'alternative' documentary film has established itself as an important spatial extension of this nation's historicity and should be understood and utilized as a potentially transformative public sphere. Besides these works being identifiers of identity politics, and as critique of social, cultural and political 'modernity', so to speak, experienced in the last 50 years, they are 'different' or 'strange' because they utilize the Internet as a medium of disseminating their narratives of the nation. This plays to the advantage of alternative filmmakers, who may find their audience rather specialized.

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Badrul Redzuan Abu Hassan
Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.
Bangi, Selangor
Malaysia
E-mail:badrulah@gmail.com

Roslina Abdul Latif
Taylor's University, Lakeside Campus.
E-mail:linalatif1@gmail.com