

INSIGHTS > Why Cinema is Important to Singapore?

BY KERRINE GOH
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Why Cinema is Important to Singapore?



I will always remember this little vignette retold to

me, by my once filmmaker friend. She was studying film in a prestigious New York film school and her schoolmate asked in passing her why is she studying film. She eagerly replied she wanted to make films in her own

country, Singapore. This was met with some jeer from him, as he candidly mocked that Singapore has no film industry to speak of.

Singapore is climbing a mild gradient since then. A cinema industry, per se, we are not, but we have a growing presence of a tight community that is involved making films. We are forever crossing junctions and making decisions on how the cinematic road should be paved. A crossroad is met at every turn. A decision is made in anticipation that it would, in the long run, pay off.

In its heyday of the 60s, Singapore was regarded by many as the Asian Mecca for film production, and the glitz and glamour of Asian tinsel town. The very first Asian based film festival, The Asia-Pacific Film Festival was organized and initiated by the Shaw Organisation, movie distributors in Singapore. The industry waned to the influx of Hollywood movies and the concentration on building the economy. Like most post-war industrial drives, a great emphasis was placed on manufacturing, construction and practical education. After decades of science and technology, we realize that we also need to nurture not just the Intelligence Quotient (IQ), but also the Emotional Quotient (EQ) of Singaporeans. The growth of the arts and media are now set forth on a petri-dish awaiting bated fruition. There was an aim to attain, as what the government called, a 'swiss' standard of living whereby people were all knowledge able, motivated and cultured. Aesthetics, like traditional arts, music and film are now encouraged.

There have been large debates on whether film is an art form or a commercial venture. Here, I think the wisdom is to know the difference, but recognize its similarities. Art has its intrinsic value of the aesthetic, but it will only have market value if it is appreciated by many. A good film can straddle both, maximizing the visual and aural senses while multiplying coffers. Approximately 30 Singapore feature films have been made to date since 1996, and filmmakers are constantly trying to find this middle path. We can yet afford the extremes since the market is very small and the resources limited.

I think the importance of the film aesthetic is a key component to the appreciation of Singapore cinema, both in terms of the local and foreign audience. It was once said that true cinema is an investigation of how

people of the world share common characteristics. So I think we are talking about a shared value system that is experienced by the audience. Film aesthetics of storytelling, direction, lighting and art then contribute to this shared value system. Cinema is culture on the canvas.

Cinema is an escape pod, cinema is a laughing box, cinema is a grim reminder. One's culture, language, traditions, habits, and history survives through cinema. Cinema being one of the most modernist art forms, also embraces popular culture which defines the here and now. Social, personal, ethnical, political and sexual issues are brought to the screen to be addressed and shared. By making films, we are creating opportunities for culture to be retained. Perhaps, it is more than a retention of culture, but more of ensuring that the development and strengthening of a nation's identity is recorded, annotated and executed by our very own people, instead of relying heavily on foreign interpretation yet professionally objective voices from beyond our shores. In this case, if cinema consolidates identity, wouldn't cinema be ever more so important for a young nation trying to find our voice? We should look further than being recognized only for efficiency and productivity.

Cinema is as close to oral history as we can get. It is where recipes, old wives tales, legends and folklore have a chance to relive its glories. These can then be shared with a wider world. The export of culture and language through film can be seen in many examples of cinema. Identity is created via the films we produce. Take for example the distinctive differences between European, Asian and Hollywood movies. Short of saying that cinema is propaganda, the audience cannot deny that they, at least once, have been swayed by compelling storytelling and been influenced otherwise. Authority figures, intellectuals and practitioners often remind us that history is factual storytelling told from a perspective. And these perspectives are shared across continents. Generally, humans are curious towards each other.

This brings to mind the promotion of film as an aesthetic product that can be exported. In the global market, Singapore is but a small red dot on a map, people have once said that even on a charted map the red dot pinpointing our small island on the map, is still proportionately larger in scale than the island itself. Relying solely on the local market is dangerous,

the box office hinterland is small. Few hits and many misses in terms of return on investment translate to a lack a good track record of film as a business venture. Films have to move beyond its immediate line of sight. Major sources of funding still emanate from government support such as the Singapore Film Commission. Coupled with the Singapore International Film Festival, they are the two institutions that are constantly supporting the patronage and the production of Singapore films. A great irony here, is that Singapore films cannot tap into some film financing bodies overseas because we are deemed to be a 'developed country' and therefore should have its own resources to fund and provide its own culture a certain sense of continuum on celluloid.

Singapore films are caught in a chicken and egg situation whereby we need a successful track record and body of work to ensure consistency of funding, yet it is hard for funds to be found because of the very lack of track record and volume of work. The solution is only driven by a pioneering manifesto:-- to just continuously accrue a critical mass of films so that there is enough Singapore films to be embraced by international markets. Once that is fulfilled, cinema will naturally beget economic returns. Hollywood, is testimony to this statement, judging by the its variety, scale and output.

Singapore's film community is small, and tightly knit, it is on the way to expand and accommodate, but in doing so, we must not forget that an industry is built only when film production become regarded as a career that can be sustained. The craft of filmmaking must not be taken for granted. Every field of filmmaking, from the producers, directors, cinematographers and production designers, has to be nurtured.

The road is long we are laying the cobblestones as we take every step, periodically, keeping in check this balance of aesthetic and commerce, and continuously learning from more established market systems. Let's not try to imitate Hollywood, but hey, even Hollywood took 100 years to define what it has become today.

Don't stop making films.

Juan Foo, an independant producer

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