

Yow, C. L. (2015, July 9). Cens*rs on our doorsteps and yes, they knocked. *The Malay Mail Online*. Retrieved from <http://www.themalaymailonline.com/what-you-think/article/censrs-on-our-doorsteps-and-yes-they-knocked-yow-chong-lee>

Cens*rs on our doorsteps and yes, they knocked
Yow Chong Lee

This year marks the 120th anniversary of cinema – one of the precious treasures of arts and media in the contemporary society. This year alone, many film festivals has celebrated the anniversary by putting up greater hope for a better cinema which embraces diversity.

Cannes Film Festival, for instance, has appointed two well-known filmmakers, namely Coen Brothers as their presidents of jury in order to recognise the contribution of Lumière Brothers, known as the pioneers of filmmaking who invented Cinematograph, a device which can both capturing and projecting moving images.

The move of having two heads of jury is unprecedented in the history of film festival. Albeit the move can be seen as unnecessary, it in fact sends out a subtle message to the world that, cinema has never stop evolving and therefore any attempt to halt the progress can never bear fruit. This can be true for censorship too.

Since the early inception of cinema, its existence has never brought serenity to moral guardians. Albeit its magical mesmerisation which has continually amazed many since as early as at the turn of 20th century, the cinema has had encountered many harassments from baseless accusations to the need to comfort the moral guardians by having the films cut, if not banned altogether.

As early as 1910s, many studies were conducted with the aims to prove that films are harmful to the vulnerable mass, in particular the kids and the women as they are deemed irresistible to imitate what they have seen on screen.

By putting kids in groups and serving them with films containing violence and later observing their behaviour upon watching the films is one of the many scientific attempts to justify their concern.

The early context-less researches like such were mainly conducted (or stemmed) by teachers associations and religious institutions, thus it explains their seemingly innocent concern on the effects of films toward this specific group of people.

Spanning a period of more than a century, the cause-and-effects audience studies (or infamously known as hypodermic needle model) and its impacts are still vividly felt by many and to be fair, it is not solely confined to Malaysians.

Iranian cinema for instance, is well known for its scissor-happy authority particularly intensified at the aftermath of 1979's Iranian Revolution. Soon after the revolution, just to give one example, films showing women without veil are disallowed on screen.

While not compromising their creative expression, filmmakers such as Abbas Kiarostami, Jafar Panahi and Mohsen Makhmalbaf, just to name a few, have tried to please and, at the same time, irritate their censorship board.

Meanwhile, Chinese directors such as Chen Kaige, Zhang Yimou, Tian Zhuangzhuang as well as the younger generation of directors have chosen arduous path to show their films abroad at international film festivals while risking their films banned in China.

Looking back to our home country, the Censorship Board (LPF) has recently released a set of thorough guidelines on what to be excluded from Malaysian televisions if a "local film" was to be shown.

The guidelines go as far as to differentiate films produced for different languages or ethnic background. Take one tiny yet impactful example from the guidelines, local film which involves

a Malay actor cannot show any intimate scene if the film is to be broadcasted on Malaysian TVs. This however, is not applied to films which are categorised as non-Malay.

These discriminative guidelines can be problematic for many as the demarcation between local and non-local as well as Malay and non-Malay are both unclear.

Departing from postmodern perspective, it is in fact extremely difficult to differentiate a local film to non-local film. This is particularly true for a globalised world with countless social and cultural interactions which allow ideas (non-physical form) to “travel” from one country to another.

In addition, this endeavour can be a face-slapping to the government’s efforts in encouraging international collaboration which involves local productions. In such case, the “originality” of a film can be problematic.

A question which I frequently posed to my students, “how do you define a local film?” In most cases, I will receive answers which I compile here: “a film with local content which is made by local productions with local cast and crew”.

If that are the criteria, it seems like many films couldn’t fit into the category and thus (who know?) can be exempted from the stringent censorship.

How should the authority assess, say local-cum-Hollywood toned-down version of “Fifty Shades of Grey”? Can the film go on local TV as it barely brings the tag of “local film” and therefore should be assessed as international production?

In addition, the problem can be notoriously obvious for the categorisation of “Malays” and “Non-Malays” in this newly released guidelines too. For bureaucratic sake, the authority will probably evaluate and categorise an actor as Malay according to the Constitution which states a Malay has to habitually speak Malay, conforms to Malay custom and practices Islam as his/ her religion.

What if the Malay actor did not fit into the Constitution’s version of Malay? Can the film be evaluated according to the guidelines set for non-Malay films category?

These head-aching examples given here are only the tip of iceberg on the heated discussion. And ones can certainly go on and on to point out the problems which come with these guidelines.

Probably this is the type of diversity we are heading to. And yes, be cautious before you open your doors to welcome the cens*rs with their morally correct scissors.