

Book Reviews

Indonesian Cinema: Framing the New Order. By Krishna Sen. London: Zed Books, 1994. Pp. 188.

Interest in non-European/American cinema continues to grow. In recent years there has been a spate of books about the Indian and Chinese cinemas but only three on the Indonesian cinema, which is the largest and most significant film industry in Southeast Asia. Consequently, Krishna Sen's *Indonesian Cinema* is a most welcome addition to this corpus.

This is a revisionist account of an industry that has consciously aligned itself with Indonesian New Order ideologies of state security and stability and articulates development strategies frequently under the guise of art. There are reasons for this, as Sen shows. Film in Indonesia has been institutionalized within the Ministry of Information rather than the Ministry of Education and Culture. Consequently, history — both the industry's own and the way in which it represents national history — has always been a problematic issue for the industry. What Sen does is reveal the conditions whereby a cultural form can be shaped ideologically in a post-colonial situation by a political regime that is determined to control its image.

Writing about Asian cinemas by Western academics (Sen teaches at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia) is equally as problematic as the subject itself. Sen is very aware of this issue, which she addresses in an excellent introductory chapter where the major theories of Third Cinema are evaluated. Sen shows, in an economical fashion, the shortcomings of Third Cinema theory, Asianist and Comparative theories of non-Western film industries, arguing that film is neither transparent nor composed of essential, irreducible cultural traits. By contrast, she opts for an approach firmly grounded in statist theory, derived in part from

the work of Benedict Anderson and Richard Robison. The attractions of the approach when considering Indonesia are fairly obvious. However, the virtue of Sen's work, within what is an otherwise reductive stance, is her awareness of the complexity of Indonesian culture and society. The feminist edge she gives to many of her observations in many ways enhances her political economy of Indonesian cinema.

Like most of the Asian film industries, the Indonesian has its roots in the colonial era and the post-colonial regimes inherited a number of structures to be applied to film. Censorship is, of course, the obvious example. Like India, censorship has remained a central state issue in Indonesia and although the subjects dealt with vary over time the practices remain consistent. Censorship is always presented in moralistic terms irrespective of the culture. The censor is allegedly there to maintain cultural values and protect the innocent. In reality, censorship is about hegemony, how one group imposes itself upon others and maintains its dominance. The political advantage of censorship for the state is that it legitimizes the state's presence in the cinema, which then leaks over into the home in subtle ways. Indonesia is no exception. However, the edifice of censorship rigorously applied to film and the press in Indonesia breaks down in respect to trans-border television flows, which in turn raises questions about the very practice of censorship in Indonesia. The effect upon the industry has been profound. Sen sees it as

caught between the censorship on one hand and realist aesthetics of the intelligentsia on the other, the industry developed a formula for dealing with poverty which might engage the socially conscientious without enraging the censors. (pp. 105–6)

In other words, the industry has been compromised by the ideological dictates of the New Order. Not only is its representational system shaped by concerns for possible interference by the censor, but also its organization and its history. Sen argues persuasively that Indonesian film historiography was re-written in the 1970s and 1980s where the role of leftist film-makers, organizations, and studios in opposing American cultural imperialism have been discounted heavily in favour of individuals and groups more amenable to the New Order and international capitalism. Further, the industry itself has been organized around institu-

tions compatible with New Order ideology. The over-arching Film Council have been “the play things” of incumbent ministers; the film festival organization has legitimized a particularistic version of film aesthetics; and the professional organizations have been appropriated by ideologues who have translated power into economic advantage.

Two other issues require comment. Like all national cinemas, the Indonesian has existed in tension with the imported product. The relationship of the Hollywood staple to the local product is a recurring theme, demonized under Soekarno but eventually rehabilitated by a government “more malleable to international capitalism” (p. 64). Of greater interest, however, is the role of the Indian cinema. The 1970s were a period of considerable anti-Indian sentiment where the industry divided into production and import camps where issues of both economic nationalism and cultural specificity were fought out. In many respects, after the fall of Soekarno, one feels the Indian cinema was disliked more than Hollywood product, which in turn requires us to think about cultural imperialism with a different optic.

The other major issue of the New Order Indonesian cinema is the role of Soeharto. It is clear Soeharto exercises power in a particularly Javanese way, which translates into a complex network of expectations and behaviours impenetrable to the non-Javanese observer. Sen argues through the close textual analysis of a number of films that not only does Indonesian film re-write Indonesian history under the New Order, it also mythologizes Soeharto by structuring narratives along *wayang* lines, clearly identifying Soeharto with Arjuna becoming the ideal ruler. “He simultaneously inherits the nation and also makes it” (p. 101).

Given this trenchant critique, it would seem that film has been thoroughly neutralized as a potential tool for opposition. Although Sen’s emphasis is on the political economy of the industry, she does address the question of the audience. She sees the Indonesian film audience as composed of three elements defined by socio-economic status and location — the urban middle classes, the urban poor, and the rural peasantry. As I understand it, Sen sees film as directed almost exclusively at the young urban middle classes and ignoring the urban poor and peasantry with predictable results. Films aimed at the perceived illiterate and

vulnerable audience attract the ire of the censors, thereby encouraging the industry to continue producing films that articulate ideologies of stability and success and repress the inherent contradictions of Indonesian culture.

Sen brings to the book scholarly rigour inflected by a feminist perspective which has caused some flutterings among the Jakarta intelligentsia. As she argues “cultural generalizations about gender construction in Indonesia are ... at best matters of controversy” (p. 136). Nevertheless, through analysis of a number of key films she shows how Indonesian films construct women through a male gaze, reproducing a patriarchal society in which gender bias is accepted unquestioningly. Her analysis, therefore, can offend the patriarchs — no bad thing we might add!

If the book has a weakness it is in its coverage of the early history of Indonesian film. Film in the colonial polity is still little studied but there is evidence to show that different colonial administrations communicated over the alleged impact of film in their respective colonies. For example, discussions between the British in India and the Dutch over the imagined influence of film with respect to representations of women in the Hollywood staple. Further, both the governments saw American film in political terms, arguing that its portrayals of European culture were travesties that undermined European prestige in Asia, thus making the locals less easy to govern! There are other links between India and Indonesia in this early and crucial period of film history. For example, Abadooly Esofooly, one of the co-founders of Imperial Studios, a major Bombay studio of the 1920s and 1930s, began his film career as a showman in Southeast Asia, touring films in Java and Sumatra. These quibbles to one side, *Indonesian Cinema* is a fine book: as a study of an hitherto important but neglected national cinema and as teaching text, and as such is highly recommended.

Brian SHOESMITH

Brian Shoemsmith is Director, Centre for Asian Communication, Media and Cultural Studies, Edith Cowan University, Australia.