

# The Potential of Malaysia's Horror Movies in Creating Critical Minds: A Never Ending Philosophical Anecdote

Mohd Amirul Akhbar Mohd Zulkifli<sup>1+</sup>, Amelia Yuliana Abd Wahab<sup>2+</sup> and Hani Zulaikha<sup>3+</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup> Communication and Media Studies, University Technology Mara, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia

**Abstract.** This paper attempts to identify and assess Malaysia's horror movies in creating critical minds in the context of Malaysia as a developing country, rather than just employing horror methods to guarantee a scare from its audience. The present literature has not focussed on this subject. Therefore, what this paper does is examine the context of Malay movies, its achievements in 2010 and 2011 and the inculcation of philosophical elements in film and feed backs got from the focus group based on pilot test done on a group in December 2011. It tries to answer why Malaysia's horror movies failed to educate the audiences in creating critical minds instead of being in the industry for the past 58 years. In so doing, two factors emerged as critical to the growth of Malaysia's horror movies that is, commercialization, and lack of consciousness for philosophical search for information and knowledge.

**Keywords:** Horror Movies, Critical Minds, Philosophy.

## 1. Introduction

As a multi-lingual and multi-racial society, Malaysia has proven as a country where Malays, Chinese and Indians live harmoniously for the past 55 years. Ever since the British grant freedom to Malaysia (Malaya) in 1957, the nation at large has made significant progress in every realm. Obviously as a developing country, Malaysia has attracted a great deal of scholarly attention. In Malaysia, the study of communication and mass media is relatively new (Syed Arabi Idid, 2008). Moreover the debate on the conceptual and practical dimensions of communication (mass communication) is a continuous one until today (Murad Merican, 2008, Zaharom, 2003, Zaharom and Mustafa, 1994). Hence films like the other mass media do not operate in vacuum. Film can be perceived as a potent medium in transforming meanings in mass society. It also maintained the existing social order whilst fulfilling the capitalist role (Juliana and Mahyuddin, 2009). Like other forms of art and media, film represents the manifestation of modernism which acts as a dream factory, pop icon, emerging values and philosophical ideas on civilization and consciousness (Murad Merican, 2007).

Undeniably the modernism which we are experiencing today begins with the inculcation of philosophy. The onslaught of globalization which affects various aspect of life, particularly the semantics and epistemology has led to the need for such study. The understanding of the philosophical aspects of film making requires a continuous effort which goes beyond the aspect of writing, research and educational films. This aspect will be the underlying philosophy and lead to the audience's development of a critical mind. In contrast to the views and opinions from scholars that have shaped the denotation of film as illusion rather than a reality, it can be observed that the placement of illusion that exist in any films is actually reflecting the reality that occurs in the society. A distinguishing aspect of reality and illusion is the real-time capability that does not exist in the film. If the local film makers are able to understand the philosophical aspect of this genre, then it will be the pushing factor toward the film industry in producing films that enable us to explore, and potentially recover from, the terrors of life in the real world. The ability to inculcate the philosophical elements in movies will help Malaysian film makers to explore the potential of the power of a horror film giving it a new perspective. It is not only dealt with the entertainment itself but it also involves other aspects of social development, economic and political. Although many well known film producers are now keen to produce the horror movies as a fulfilment of the entertainment industry, yet the fulfilment of such genre toward the social responsibility remain questioned.

---

<sup>1+</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +60355435933; fax: +60355444861. *E-mail address:* amirul@salam.uitm.edu.my.

<sup>2+</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +60355444860; fax: +60355444861. *E-mail address:* amelia4433@yahoo.com.

<sup>3+</sup> Corresponding author. Tel.: +60355435933; fax: +60355444861. *E-mail address:* hani\_ve@yahoo.com.

## 2. Horror Film, Its Origins and Production

### 2.1. Early Development of Malay Films

In an effort to understand the film industry in the region, it must be traced back to the history of its development in Singapore and Malaya (now Malaysia). The emergence of motion pictures can be traced as early as 1898 whereby films being screened in Kuala Lumpur. Because of its special features (movements and repetition) movies grew quickly. As asserts by Timothy R. White (1997), by the 1910s most of the larger cities got their own theaters. On top of the development also sees the acceleration of “*wayang pacak*” or “travelling film shows” that went on to other states and rural areas. The Malay film activities that took place since 1930s in Singapore witnessed the birth of *Laila Majnun* in 1933. It marked as the first Malay Film directed by Indian director B.S.Rajhan. The contours of the early development in the film in Malaya & Singapore in the nineteenth century were contributed by several factors such as the contributions made by Loke Wan Tho (Cathay Productions) the Shaw Brothers (before and after World War 2), The Eiga Haikyu Sha (Film Distribution Co. during the Japanese Occupation of Malaya 1942 – 1945), Indian film directors and Malay movie superstar Tan Sri P. Ramlee had contributed a lot to the Malay film industry.

### 2.2. Malay Horror Film Circa 1950s & 1960s

An analysis of the Malay Horror films can be drawn back in 1950s and 1960s. At the early stage the Malay film directors mostly were hired from India. Remarkably even the directors were from India, still most of the horror movies during those years were dominantly characterized and influenced with Malay mythology, legends, and the supernatural or mystic elements. As shown in Table 1, most of the horror films dealt with *Pontianak* or Vampire. Between the year 1955 to 1974 there were at least seven horror films titled with Vampire.

Table 1: List of Horror Film 1950s – 1970s

Item	Horror Film	Director	Year
1	Roh Membela (The Revenge Spirit)	B.N. Rao (India)	1955
2	Pontianak (Vampire)	B.N. Rao (India)	1956
3	Dendam Pontianak (Vampire Revenge)	B.N. Rao (India)	1957
4	Sumpah Pontianak (Vampire's Curse)	B. N. Rao (India)	1957
5	Sumpah Orang Minyak (The Oily Man's Curse)	P. Ramlee (Malaya)	1957
6	Hantu Jerangkung (Malay Ghost With Long Nails)	K.M. Basker (India)	1957
7	Hantu Kubor (Cemetery Ghost)	Chew Chong Kok	1957
8	Anak Pontianak (Vampire Child)	Ramon A. Estella	1958
9	Orang Lichin (Slippery Man)	B.N. Rao (India)	1958
10	Orang Minyak (The Oily Man)	L. Krishnan (India)	1958
11	Serangan Orang Minyak (The attack of the oily man)	B. N. Rao	1958
12	Pontianak Kembali (The Return of Vampire)	Ramon A. Estella	1964
13	Pusaka Pontianak (The Vampire's Wealth)	Ramon A. Estella	1964
14	Pontianak Gua Musang (The Vampire From Fox Cave)	B. N. Rao (India)	1964
15	Si Tora Harimau Jadian	P. Ramlee (Malaysia)	1964
16	Puaka (Ghost)	M. Amin (Malaysia)	1970
17	Harimau Jadian	M. Amin (Malaysia)	1972
18	Puaka (Ghost)	Omar Rojik (Malaysia)	1974

### 2.3. Malay Horror Films In Millennium Age

After nearly eight (8) decades, the Malaysian horror movies largely still maintain its Malay-centric which evidence in the present of Malay language, characters and narratives despite being a multi-racial and multi-cultural society. Throughout the years 2010 - 2011, the Malaysian film industry has shown a remarkable progress both in film productions as well as the revenues generated from it. It's experiencing the “galvanism period” that have shocked the local film industry as well as hack back to the glorious moment of Malaysian cinema circa 1940s, 1950s and 1960s. At this juncture, such phenomenon resembled the epitome of American culture, which sees the inculcation of business, art, entertainment and ideology in such genre. The horror films contributed at 13.8% from the overall total film production in 2010 which amounted of 29

movies altogether. Meanwhile in Table 2, horror films contribute 31% from the overall films production that were 42 altogether in 2011.

Table 2: List of Horror Films 2011

Item	Film Titles	Production Cost	Gross Revenue
1.	Khurafat	1.5 million	8.08 million
2.	Sini Ada Hantu	1.2 million	1.30 million
3.	Di Larang Masuk	1.1 million	0.75 million
4.	Senjakala	1.5 million	1.10 million
5.	Penunggu Istana	0.6 million	0.89 million
6.	Seru	1.42 million	0.87 million
7.	Momok Jangan Panggil Aku	2 million	0.55 million
8.	Karak	1.14 million	4.28 million
9.	Rasuk	1.5 million	1.03 million
10.	Flat 3A	1.82 million	1.44 million
11.	Al Hijab	1.62 million	2.24 million
12.	Klipx 3GP	1.02 million	1.14 million
13.	Sumpahan Puaka	0.46 million	0.31 million

Source: <http://www.finas.gov.my/index.php?mod=industry&sub=cereka&p=Filem2011>

#### **2.4. Philosophical, Genre Vs Horror Films**

Constructing and inculcating philosophical thought truly is a challenge. It was due to the overwhelming acceptance to the American epitome which accepted the horror films as some commoditization. Philosophy is an essential part in human being. It defines human behaviour beyond the normal imperatives. The society at large today is facing epistemological and semantic attacks. Inability to understand the situation will dilute the original meaning and ideas. Only through the inculcation of philosophical thought will protect the novelty of fundamental ideas of social system. At certain juncture it may reverse the silent acceptance on ideas (critical minds) among the society (Murad, 2007) as it did to Shakespeare masterpieces which highlighted human conflicts through dramas.

Looking from another perspective, scholars often decline to accept film or horror film as a genre or being perceived as unsystematic and unresolved (Gregory, 1987, Norman, 2005, William, 2003). According to Rohani (1996), between the years 1896 to 1985 there were about 1300 horror films being recorded in the Encyclopaedia of Horror Movies. With this large number of films recorded in the encyclopaedia, it clearly conform that horror film is a genre in its own class. The most significant classification made toward horror film as a genre was made by Barry Keith Grant in his "Planks of Reason: Essays on the Horror Film (1984), according to him commercial films which through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters and familiar situations. They also encourage expectations and experiences similar to those of similar films we have already seen.

#### **2.5. Preliminary Analysis On Understanding Film As Agent of Change**

Based on the two remarks made, the present of genre and philosophical elements in horror films clearly shows that through writing, research and counter research will enable us to see changes in film scripts that

can challenge the mind of the audiences. In so doing through this paper a preliminary study has been conducted in order to gain the audiences feedback in term of their understanding toward the horror film in Malaysia. The preliminary study involved eight males and eight females from the Faculty of Communication & Media Studies, Faculty of Sport Science & Recreation, and Faculty of Administrative Science and Policy Studies. Majority of the respondents (62.5%) were from the Faculty of Communication & Media Studies while 37.6% of total respondents were from the other two faculties. At the moment the study was conducted, most of the respondents (81.3%) were 20-27 year-old.

Each of the respondents was asked on his/her favourite Malaysia's horror movies screened in year 2010 and 2011. Among the 17 horror movies listed in the questionnaire, Khurafat was the most favoured (37.5%) followed by Mantra (31.3%), and Karak (12.5%) while Niyang Rapik, AlHijab and Seru were relatively represented by 6.3% of the respondents. Based on the responses, Khurafat was favoured because of its unique storyline, awesome visual effects as well as because of the actors. Mantra likewise was favoured because of the good and interesting storyline. In addition, Mantra showed interesting chronology, gave eerie feelings, portrayed moral values and it was a believable film. Conversely, Karak was favoured because of the messages it delivered and meanings brought throughout the film. Niyang Rapik on the other hand was favoured because of the cinematography and its editing technique while Seru was preferred for its 'real' effect. The respondents were also asked on what issue should be portrayed more in Malaysia's horror films to promote critical thinking among viewers. Majority of the respondents (35%) believed that religious education should be portrayed more as people nowadays are lack of knowledge on religion. Besides that, religious education is able to shape people's mind that subsequently could guide people to be good. In addition, issue of religion is closer to people and could promote discussion.

A total of 17.5% respondents on the other hand felt that family cohesion should be portrayed more while only 2.5% of the respondents equally thought that multiculturalism and friendship issues should be portrayed in Malaysia's horror movies. Generally, respondents believed that there must be an issue to be included in any horror movie as it can educate, promote positive values, and guide people to be inclusive in the society. Regarding the contribution of Malaysia's horror movies in Malaysia's film development, 50% of the respondents felt that Malaysia's horror movies are moderately contributes to Malaysia's film development. On the other hand, 37.5% of the respondents believed that horror movies in Malaysia could contribute a lot towards Malaysia's film development while 12.5% of the total respondents perceived that horror movies would not contribute much towards film development in Malaysia.

Independent samples t-test have been carried out to see whether there was any difference on opinion about Malaysia's horror movies' contribution towards film development in Malaysia according to gender and education level of the respondents. Result illustrated that there was a significant statistical difference between male ( $M=34.50$ ,  $SD=10.04$ ) and female ( $M=44.25$ ,  $SD=7.61$ ) respondents in their perceptions on the contribution of Malaysia's horror movies towards film development in Malaysia as  $p=0.046$ ,  $t(14)=2.188$ . Also, female respondents were more positive in perceiving that Malaysia's horror movies could contribute a lot towards film development in Malaysia. Nevertheless, there was no statistical difference between education levels of the respondents in their perceptions on the contribution of Malaysia's horror movies towards film development in Malaysia as  $p=0.242$ ,  $t(14)=1.223$ . Bachelor and Master Degrees' respondents alike perceived that Malaysia's horror movies were moderately contributes towards film development in Malaysia.

In order to identify how Malaysia's horror movies would contribute to film development in Malaysia, every statement was descriptively analyzed. Respondents (62.6%) mostly agreed that Malaysia's horror movies could expand local film demands. Malaysia's horror movies were also believed to create diversity in Malaysia's film industry and profitable to generate national income as agreed by 56.3% of the respondents. Conversely, 37.6% of the respondents did not agree that Malaysia's horror movies could be accepted by people from various range of age. Incredibly, respondents (43.8%) were positive that the quality of Malaysia's horror movies is increasing from time to time. In addition, 50% of the respondents agreed that Malaysia's horror movies are entertaining, argumentative, could educate the viewers as well as portraying the national cultural identity. Apart from that, most of the respondents (68.8%) agreed that Malaysia's horror movies implicitly delivered societal issues to the viewers. Malaysia's horror movies also had utilized the

technology to increase creativity in film production as indicated by 56.3% of the respondents. There were 37.5% of the respondents agreed that Malaysia's horror movies could enhance viewers' critical and analytical thinking. On the other hand, 37.5% of the respondents disagreed on the appearance of Malaysia's horror movies as knowledge development.

### 3. Acknowledgements

Special thanks to several people who have contributed toward the completion of the paper. They are Prof. Dr. Ahmad Murad Merican, Doreen Azlina Abdul Rahman, Amelia Yuliana Abdul Wahab and the most goes to Hani Zulaikha whom never fails to keep on searching materials for the paper.

### 4. References

- [1] Ahmad Murad Merican. Theorizing and Teaching Communication in Malaysia: Imperialism, Origins and Context. In: Ahmad Murad Merican (eds.) *Blinded by the light: Journalism and communication study in Malaysia since 1971*. Shah Alam: UPENA. 2008, pp. 1-31.
- [2] Is It True That Malaysian Film Need Philosophy? The Problems In Thinking, Research and Film Education. In *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia*, Volume 4. Shah Alam: UPENA. 2007.
- [3] Gregory Waller. *American Horrors*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press. 1987, pp7.
- [4] Norman Yusoff. Between Pontianak and "Psycho Slasher": Reading the Paradox of Horror in Contemporary Malaysian Cinema. In *Jurnal Skrin Malaysia* Volume 2 No. 2. Shah Alam: UPENA. 2005
- [5] Rohani Hashim. Filem seram sebagai satu genre. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Budaya. Julai 1996, pp. 61-63
- [6] Syed Arabi Idid. The Beginnings of Communication Study in Malaysia: A Preliminary Observation. In: Ahmad Murad Merican (eds.) *Blinded by the light: Journalism and communication study in Malaysia since 1971*. Shah Alam: UPENA. 2008, pp. 33-55.
- [7] William van der Heidi. *Malaysian Cinema, Asian Film: National Cultures and Border Crossings*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press. 2003
- [8] Zaharom Nain. Media Role In A K-Economy: Media Studies and Participation In The Transformation of Malaysian Society. Paper presented at the University of Malaya-Ohio University International Conference on Media Education and Training. Petaling Jaya. 2003, 21- 22 July.
- [9] Zaharom Nain and Mustafa K. Anuar. Communications, Curricula and Conformity: Of National Needs and Market Forces. In: AMIC (eds.) *Communication Education and The Needs of Them Media*. Singapore: AMIC/ Asia Foundation. 1994, pp. 23-44.