
RESISTANCE MEDIA AND RESISTANCE ARTS: A STUDY OF "SURVIVAL GUIDE UNTUK KAMPONG RADIOAKTIF"

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ABSTRACT

This paper is tailored to look into utilisation of films with resistance elements in mobilising people to participate in social movements which aim to bring about social changes, influencing public opinion and government policies. The authors are particularly fascinated by the anti-Lynas movement which managed to mobilise the people to demand the Australian rare-earth processing corporation, Lynas to stop its operation in Gebeng, Kuantan. To be precise, this article will delve into the films made via a film project entitled "Survival Guide untuk Kampung Radioaktif" initiated by a group of independent filmmakers in order to create spaces for discussion and therefore an informed decision. Two conceptions on resistance arts and resistance media developed by two different scholars, namely Jacques Rancière and Joshua D. Atkinson will be discussed in this paper in order to point out the possibility in combining these concepts to look at films with resistance elements. From there, the authors will employ framing analysis in their efforts to explicate the overarching theme and arguments woven in the chosen films in order to study their compatibility with the conception of resistance arts and media. Lastly, the authors observe and argue that there is a gap of scholarly understanding on both the resistance media and arts which needed to be addressed in future research.

Keywords: *Alternative media, resistance arts, anti-Lynas movement, Tan ChuiMui, Liew SengTat*

INTRODUCTION

Anti-Lynas movement is originated to mobilise the people across Malaysia to demand the Australian rare-earth processing corporation, Lynas to cease its operation in Gebeng, Kuantan.

(Tashny Sukumaran, 2011, July 4) The movement observed participants from multiethnic, cultural background and different age groups as well as relatively balanced gender groups with female participants. Meanwhile, this movement was also joined by an unprecedented group of independent filmmakers in contributing their creativity aiming to stop the rare-earth processing corporation from continuing its operation.

Since early 2000s, a diverse group of independent filmmakers has been identified for their vocal and socially conscious subject matters depicted in their films. Mainly due to the scissor-happy Censorship Board, and unfriendly authority towards their uncompromising contents, their films were commonly made unknown to the public in Malaysia (Khoo, 2004; Lim, 2008; Mahyuddin, 2009; Yow, 2012). As a result, this group of filmmakers were particularly active in the international film festival circuits as this was the only arena for them to showcase their films apart from private screenings organised by the very same group of filmmakers.

In addition, the Web 2.0 has also offered greater refuge for this group of filmmakers in exploring subjects which are deemed sensitive to the authority. This trend is particularly salient near to the end of the 2010s with films projects such as “15 Malaysia” and “HerStory” that featured short films made in the light of providing voices to marginalised people and rarely explored subject matters.

Amir Muhammad, James Lee, Tan Chui Mui, and Liew Seng Tat, just to name a few, are among the renown independent filmmakers working closely with each other for that they have limited budget and common interest in realising their films projects. For instance, in 2011, the latter two have worked together for a film project entitled “Survival Guide untuk Kampung Radioaktif” and made a short presentation mainly in parody, on one hand; and a poignant documentary on a family of victims suffering from the radioactive waste produced by the Bukit Merah rare earth refinery, on the other.

This article will delve into these films by first investigating the proximity of the films for being elevated as resistance arts form by asking, “what are the elements (or characteristics) constituted in resistance arts?”, “how close these films can be pronounced as resistance arts?” In order to answer the first question, the following section (theoretical framework) will pick up two emerging conceptions on resistance arts and media. Meanwhile for the latter question, content analysis (framing of the film contents) will be employed in order to uncover the messages as well as arguments woven in the films.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

According to Atkinson, J. D. (2010), “resistance performance” should be observable in resistance media especially when images and narratives produced and circulated through them “aid in the construction and reinforcement of worldview concerning power and social justice” (p. 34). Power, in Atkinson’s conception, is built upon two differing portrayal of it, namely “traditional” or “hegemonic” power (ibid.). The former dictates the control by the government, corporates, or religious institutions over resources in the society and thus leaving little hopes for democratic change. Meanwhile, the latter perceive power in Antonio Gramsci’s conception of hegemony and oppression. In other words, power is wielded through ideological assumption which the subordinate groups are willingly participating in it. In sum, resistance media will strive to disseminate information in relation to the dominant power structures, and challenge it, in the society.

Apart from content in a resistance media as discussed above, Atkinson also points out that resistance media also relies on its ability to stimulate interaction and activists' strategies in using the media. He argues that activists' worldview will determine their strategies and tactics – which he called “communicative resistance” – in performing resistances “against problems that stem from dominant power structures” (ibid., p. 46). On the other hand, the interactivity between the activists and the producers of the media contents will also help to motivate and provide feedback to both the international or local media producers (p.61 – 77). Not to be ignored that, there are times when the activists also participate in the production of the media contents which, in contrary, will reflect their beliefs and attitudes about dominant power structure in society.

Although Atkinson's conception of resistance media central on the media content as well as activists' usage and interactivity with the media producers, the authors would like to make clear that the “Survival Guide” film project was indeed initiated by a group of socially conscious filmmakers. For instance, in an interview with The Nut Graph, Liew Seng Tat explains:

“I'm not an activist, I'm just a filmmaker. I'm not against the rare earth plant; I know we need rare earth, but I don't think the location is suitable. By doing a film with some parody and slapstick comedy, I hope it will make people laugh and think about the issue” (as cited from PL, Gan; 2011, December 12).

In addition, the interactivity of this film project lies on the way the producers promoted and distributed the films. The films made in this project were released on both YouTube and Facebook page of the project in one-week-one-film manner and thus keeping the audience browsing the website weekly. The audience was encouraged to share the video and provide feedback to the filmmakers. Moreover, the producers also screened the films in rural areas where information on Lynas rare earth refinery can hardly be reachable due to media blackout (Patrick Lee; 2011, December 13). Thus, this film project did not stop at the virtual world, but it was also brought to the people via screenings that encouraged interactivity of the people with the content producers.

Meanwhile, Rancière, J. (2011), writing from the perspective of arts, points out that content of the political arts itself does not sufficiently indicate the result that they aim for, namely changing of perception, attitudes and feeling towards the strangeness of the political arts presented before us, and turned that awareness into action. This cause-and-effect paradigm is, therefore, put into question as Rancière succinctly put it that, “there is no straight path from the viewing of a spectacle to an understanding of the state of the world, and none from intellectual awareness to political action” (ibid., p. 143).

Thus, he brought our attention to the intolerable images (or representations) that were commonly linked to resistance arts as they were deemed to be able to invoke awareness and mobilisation among the audiences (ibid., 2009). In fact, according to Rancière (2011), there is no such simplistic correlation between political arts with action to be taken by the audience later. Political art, as the name suggests, is a body of art that reconfigure the (common) senses that we live in given that common sense dictate the way we perceive (make meanings) and feel about the world which is expectedly shared by others living in the same community. Thus, common sense is deemed as the enemy of the political arts that aims to challenge the existing body of meanings derived from the common sense that we live in. Such reconfiguration (or redistribution) is coined by Rancière (2011) as “dissensus”, which he argues:

“is to construct different realities, different form of common sense – that is to say, different spatiotemporal system, different communities of words and things, forms and meaning [...] They help sketch new configuration of what can be seen, what can be thought and consequently, a new landscape of possibility” (p. 102 – 103).

By referring to these two different scholars on resistance arts and media, one should discern the different viewpoints given, namely the importance placed on the contents of the media, on one hand; and the question thrown toward the simplistic presupposition of seeing, awareness, and action, on the other. It was the ability of the spectacles (in our case, the film contents) in challenging our common sense and creating possibility to the impossible that provide the capacity to resist in arts. It is these two properties that resistance arts and media should possess. Thus, it calls our attention to the films’ contents as well as the ability of the films to construct “dissensus” among the audience.

METHODOLOGY

Developing from the theoretical framework discussed above, it is clear that content of a film will be the central concern of this paper. Once the content is read and interpreted, the researcher will be able to observe the proximity of the films to resistance arts and media, namely its ability to prompt “dissensus”. Therefore, the authors will employ content analysis in order to uncover the messages as well as arguments woven in the films. Film content refers to what is presented, both implicitly and explicitly to the audience in audio and visual form. Coleman (2010) persuasively calls for implementing visual contents analysis since there is an “overwhelming evidence of visual images’ effects” while not sidelining the importance to incorporate that with written texts, verbal as well as non-verbal analysis (*ibid.*, p. 235-6). However, one should not dismiss the superfluous of content that one can explicate from a short duration, say three seconds of a film, let alone a short film ranges from ten to twenty minutes. Thus, it is the overarching and prominent theme and message that the selected films attempt to build upon that attract the authors’ attention. Hence, framing analysis which is rooted from content analysis, will be incorporated as the tenet of this research provided that,

“Framing essentially involves selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating texts, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/ or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman, R. M , 1993: p. 52).

In a similar vein with Entman’s theory, Coleman (2010) notes that visual framing “is the overarching master narrative” which concerns “how the media transfer the attributes of issues and people in news (in our case, the films) to the public, focusing on how the issue is defined” (*ibid.*, p. 251). Taking this view, the authors presume that the filmmakers have the authority in defining the issue at stake, namely discontent over the operation of Lynas rare earth refinery plant in Gebeng, Kuantan. Thus, question such as “what is the major concern of the filmmaker?” as illustrated in the narrative or characters’ struggles.

Moreover, the authors presume that films can be read and interpreted in text form as information can be explicated through thorough analysis of both the audio and visual images

presented to the audience. It is in its unique presentation, and partly due to the time constrain that certain information is included in (and excluded from) films. Therefore, it gives rise to the concern of framing: “what is saliently presented to whom and from whom?” Departing from Entman’s widely referred theory on framing, this paper identifies the problem, causal, moral evaluation and treatment saliently suggested in the films.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Please refer to Table 1 for data in relation to content framing employed in both of the films.

Table 1: Framing analysis on the contents of ‘Welcome to Kampong Radioaktif’ and ‘Lai Kwan’s Love’

Framing	‘Welcome to Kampong Radioaktif’	‘Lai Kwan’s Love’
Problem definition	A series of health-related problems as a result of radioactive exposure: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Sudden death of a character who complains about the mysterious changes and death of his livestock 2. Mutation on the character’s body (an extra hand appears at the excretory organ) 3. Mutation of a man into a monster that consumes other villagers 	A mother (Lai Kwan) had to take good care of her son (Cheah Kok Leong also known as Ah Liang) who was born brain-damaged. She had no private time for herself as she had to spend nearly the entire day with her son, whom needed her attention and love. Ah Liang had passed away in 2012 a year after the completion of “Survival Guide” films project.
Causal interpretation	The problems encountered are due to the radioactive contamination engendered by village’s leaders and the entrepreneurs. However, neither characters in the films nor the audience are informed on what was done by the stakeholders mentioned above.	Although the film does not suggest the struggle of the family was due to radioactive exposure, a big portion of the film is spent in explaining Lai Kwan’s experience working in a rare earth refinery plant and her visit to Japan in order to demand for justice.
Moral evaluation	The stakeholders are portrayed as a group of insatiable and irresponsible leaders and businessmen. The villagers are stranded to suffer from the radioactive exposure which was promised will never happen.	No compensation was given to Lai Kwan and her son. The corporate which operated the refinery plant seems to ignore its responsibility and daringly attempted to bribe her for not suing it in the court.
Treatment recommendation	Not available	Not available

Set in a post-apocalyptic Malaysian village, ‘Welcome to Kampong Radioaktif’ is a fantasy of a village left with the innocent victims who survived the radioactive dust. They were unable to flee with their village’s leaders and the entrepreneurs who held responsibility for

the radioactive exposure. This short film is divided into three distinctive plots yet seemingly connected for that they are suggesting the absurd and irrational events occurred as a result of the radioactive exposure. The arguments used are oscillating between health concerns due to its hazardous potential of the allegedly toxic radioactive waste and the accountability of the related parties involved, particularly in the catastrophic event. Following are the three layers of plots explicated in chronological order:

1. A villager who complained about his mysterious disappearing livestock and his family members. He communicated directly to the audience in a talking-head manner, lamenting to the audience that his cow has transformed into a cat-like-creature. The plot comes to an abrupt stop when he died suddenly at his house's backyard.
2. Two surviving soldiers immersed from a river and sought for a temporary shelter to rest. One of them came to realise that his body (excretory organ) has undergone change and misinterpreted that as a symptom of contracting an unknown "virus". He attempted to keep that as secret from his counterpart. However, his secret was ephemeral as his mutating body started to reveal itself. He was afraid of being abandoned by his friend and later he killed himself with his rifle in order to avoid the "virus" from being widespread.
3. A family of four demonstrated the tedious process of putting up protective suits before they departed to visit their grandfather during Hari Raya celebration. Due to insufficient space in a tiny car owned by his father, a boy has to stay home as he was warned for the threat of a legendary "six-legs-monster". He refused to obey his mother's advice and loitered around his village and only to regret later when a mutant of female monster with a male physique appeared before him. The screen faded to black with alarming non-diegetic background music to suggest unpleasant denouement (the impending death of the boy) for the story.

Apart from these three seemingly disjointed plots, they are in fact being connected with an omnipresent narration trying to put the puzzles together. For instance, soon before the first plot is ended, the narrator announces "strange things started happening to the villagers, just like this man here. And those who remained alive have become strange". The second plot ensues and the narrator's voice resurfaces again near to end of the plot to explain that "nobody realised that this is the result of years of heavy toxic and radioactive contamination. They: the capitalists, profiteers, and corrupt policy makers have all fled the village leaving the ordinary folk behind to suffer the consequences." "What they promised 'won't go wrong', have all gone wrong. What they said 'is safe', obviously it's not", the narrator presses.

It is this obvious finger pointing allegation that allows the film to pinpoint the dominant power structure exists in the fantasy world lived by the film characters. The power structure is described in "traditional" manner as the stakeholders (policy makers and corporate) are allegedly held responsibility for the catastrophic radioactive contamination. In addition, characters in the films were given no opportunity to change their faith as a result of no access to information pertinent to the stakeholders' decision and the effects of their decision. Meanwhile, exaggeration of the effects of radioactive

exposure on the characters, at time, triggers laughter and challenges audience's set of perception on radioactive exposure.

In contrast to 'Welcome', 'Lai Kwan's Love' takes place in a rather naturalistic and poignant setting as this documentary depicts the daily life of a mother and her brain-damaged son, Kok Leong. He was born a year after Lai Kwan worked as a construction worker at a rare earth refinery in Bukit Merah, Perak.

In general, there are two delineated plot points in this short documentary, vis-à-vis 1) daily life of the mother and son affected by radioactive exposure, 2) the cause of the event and the struggle of Lai Kwan in raising her children while refusing bribes offered to her. These two plot points are seamlessly linked with still photos accompanied by intertitles which explain the close relationship between the mother and her son.

At the beginning of the film, audience is informed on the self-destructive behaviour of Kok Leong where he will hit his head once he was irritated. In order to ensure safety, the mother and son had to stay in a confined space as the door will be kept locked for entire day. Meanwhile, Lai Kwan had very limited time (two hours) for herself to finish her household chores as her son will demand full attention by staying around her. This limited freedom of Lai Kwan is presented to the audience by having her sit – in front of a static shot – on her chair while explaining her struggles provide contrast to a previous shot showing her watering her flowers in her little garden. These shots were constructed in a way that suggests the transient freedom owned by Lai Kwan, which is only when her son is taking his two-hour-bath. The film ends with Lai Kwan sharing her little hope on her mobility: "Health is wealth. Although my right leg is weak, at least I can still move around. I can shop for food and cook. And we'll get by".

In other words, the filmmaker of "Lai Kwan's Love" has incorporated film language (i.e. camera movement and placement) into her documentary that concerns mainly with the after effects of radioactive contamination. The love of the mother to her son becomes the overarching theme that covers also the cause of their struggles. Undoubtedly, the film also highlights the irresponsibility of the corporate allegedly exploiting its workers' health for its profits. It is this questioning of the power structure existing in the society that fulfils Atkinson's conception of resistance media.

CONCLUSION

The framing analysis conducted on the films' contents reveals that both of the films central their concern on the effects of the radioactive contamination (i.e. scary mutation in 'Welcome to Kampong Radioaktif' and brain-damaged son in 'Lai Kwan's Love'). The stakeholders who wield powers via uninformed decision making has thus jeopardised the health quality of the characters depicted in the films. It is this oscillation between cause-and-effect that pushes the films' arguments forward.

Both of the films also fulfil the conception of Atkinson on resistance media as they highlight the imbalance power structure in the society that allows certain parties to manipulate the power that they hold. In addition, both films were also widely screened in public screenings which were organised by the producers or local communities thus created opportunities for the filmmakers to interact and receive feedbacks from the audience.

Lastly, 'Welcome to Kampong Radioaktif' has demonstrated characteristic of resistance arts proposed by Rancière by challenging the common sense of its audience on the effects of the radioactive contamination. It is via exaggeration that audience's perception and emotion on this commonly deemed as serious subject matter were challenged. On the other hand, no trace of resistance arts' characteristics (in Rancière's conception) can be observed in 'Lai Kwan's Love'. Thus, it gives raise to the authors' curiosity in filling in the gap of research that demand for a better understanding on resistance arts and media. "Is resistance in media different with the resistance displayed in arts?" This certainly provides a guiding question for any upcoming research.

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