DARI LAYAR KE KANVAS
FROM SILVER SCREEN TO CANVAS

Faizal Sidik


The region of Southeast Asia is rich in art and cultural heritage on account of the assimilation of various cultures arriving here since time immemorial. The diversity of cultures reflects the variety of peoples inhabiting this area, a vast geography stretching from the Yunnan region all the way to the Austronesian islands whose societies are generally steeped in animism and spiritualism. Mythologies, spiritual beliefs, fairylands and supernatural powers recorded in some classical Malay texts, for instance, indicate the import of such traditions and practices in the past, and even until today. One of the means adopted by these traditional peoples to interact with unseen spirits is through shadowplay puppeteers. By welding flat puppets, narrating stories from behind the screen and manipulating the effects of light and shadow, puppeteers act as intermediaries between this world and the higher dimensions. Frequently performed throughout Southeast Asian villages of yore, shadow play can be considered the earliest form of moving screen before the advent of urban popular cultures that brought in modern theater among others, and prior to the introduction of photographic technology that has since significantly altered the urban public’s screen culture.

**Kelantanese Shadow Play**

This article aims firstly to investigate how the mediums of film and art can set off their own unique aesthetics by way of the notions of freedom of expression inherent in each one of them. Secondly, to explore changes in the field of scientific psychology that stem from the digression of artists’ representation of reality to their creative treatment of actuality. This sort of analysis is often seen done when fine art works, like paintings, are adapted to dramatic works, such as theater drama and film. However it is rarely conducted in the case of artists reproducing filmic images in their works based on film experience and film narrative.

Susan Langer in her essay 'A Note on the Film' (Feeling and Form, 953), points out that "the film draws upon some of the characteristics of literature, drama, poetry, painting, music and dance". In a film we can be exposed to literary works and fine languages, we can watch drama performance and facial-emotional expressions, listen to beautiful poetry and spoken words, view paintings and artistic visual effects, hear music and background sound, as well as enjoy the art of dancing and meaningful body languages. A good film, according to Rudolf Arnheim in his book Film as Art, is the one that combines a few disparate creative mediums and artistic forms.

Walter Benjamin through his seminal essay Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction had already previously discussed the impact of technology on artmaking. As argued by him, the invention of machines, above all camera, had largely modified not only the traditional production processes of art but also its form and appearance. He further stresses that, "Their most powerful agent is the film. Its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage." Regarding the link between film and painting, he writes: "Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the spectator to contemplation; before it the spectator can abandon himself to his associations. 'The 'screen' as mentioned by Benjamin refers to moving images projected on silver screens; meanwhile 'canvas' does not deal only with painting but also with other kinds of art forms including sculpture, print and
drawing. In the context of this exhibition, we want to see what will happen when moving images on silver screens are transformed into still images on canvas via artists' creativity and freedom of expression. In her book Art in the Cinematic Imagination Susan Felshman incorporates psychoanalytic theory and feminist criticism to examine how films use fine arts as sources of inspiration. However on the contrary, not many studies have been carried out to explore how visual elements in films inspire the creation of art forms like painting, sculpture, drawing and print. Before discussing this subject at length, it is necessary to remind readers that fine arts, in particular painting, have influenced the film industry ever since the discovery of the medium of photography, and more notably since makers of art films started applying elements of fine arts to enhance the visuals and thus contents of their films.

In this respect, we need to look back at the history of art. The impact of technological changes on art can be traced back to the period before or around the Renaissance in Italy when the ruling elites, mostly acted as art patrons, commissioned artists to immortalise their portraits. All of their portraits were done in realist style. The church likewise employed the style of realism to translate Biblical texts into visual images to educate its largely illiterate adherents. Michelangelo's fresco painting on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel (508-52) is one of the most famous illustrations of Biblical narratives. The Last Supper (1495-1498) by Leonardo da Vinci, which inspired the movie The Da Vinci Code (2006), exemplifies the dependency on painters during that period to keep a firm grip on power and to spread words of God.

Along the lines of the discussion of this essay and its link with art history, would like to include some examples from Rembrandt's art. Many of his paintings bear elements of drama, prompting several art historians to review them as created by an artist who wholly understood the technique of theater production. The lighting aspect in his painting The Nightwatch (642), for example, generates a sensation as if we are watching a theater play. How the medium of painting can sometimes significantly surpass photography in capturing images and events is apparent in The Third of May (808) by Francisco de Goya. Such violent scene of an execution of a guerilla fighter could only be expressed by someone who was there physically. It could not be conveyed by anyone who did not have his camera with him at that moment. This masterpiece by Goya can be judged the earliest major time-based social-political work.

As European monarchies began to collapse in the 18th century as a result of the Reformation movement, art began to reach the masses. Genres or styles of painting flourished during the period were landscape and social realism. Naturalist landscapes by British painters like JW Turner and John Constable, as well as Romantic landscapes by German painter Caspar David Friedrich depict social issues faced by the societies there. Gustave Courbet's Stone Breaker (849) underscores the victory of human souls over machines (i.e. photography). The French Revolution influenced the notion that the creation of art is not merely to imitate Nature and to record history but is also related to the scientific theory of light and colours as can be discerned in paintings by Seurat, Cezanne and their Impressionist contemporaries.
With the coming of the 20th century and especially with the invention of photo-camera, the function of painting has been usurped by a medium that 'fixes the appearance of event' as described by John Berger in About Looking (980). However, do not totally agree with his outmoded position, particularly so in view of the advent of computers and computer softwares, like Photoshop and Illustrator that enable us to alter photographic images, for example by means of superimposition technique. To the majority of 20th-century artists, the emergence of photo-camera posed a great challenge far beyond the imagination of master painters like Michelangelo, Rembrandt and Turner and threatened their livelihood due to the more realistic and effective representations rendered by this photographic medium. To address such situation, they began to move away from painting everyday objects to exploring more cerebral subjects, an approach impossible to be achieved by machines. Avant-garde artist Salvador Dali and his friend Luis Bunuel ventured into the realm of surrealism.

In 929 Dali and Bunuel co-wrote and co-produced Un Chien Andalou (An Andalusian Dog), a 7-minute surrealist short in which the opening scene depicts an extremely disturbing, wholly unforgettable shot of an eyeball being sliced with a razor blade. Heavily influenced by Freudian psychoanalysis, Dali constructs a reality somewhat bordering on a dream world. Dali and Bunuel collaborated again in 930 to produce yet another surrealist film L’Age d’Or. It was deemed an anti-facist expression, and subsequently banned. Both films remarkably influenced the rise of the avant-garde and surrealist film movement.

In their analysis of how other art forms like painting are employed in films, most articles on film criticism and film studies make reference to the films whose directors' auteurism, or authorship, has been widely recognised. In a number of art films, the directors' auteurism informs the artistic elements of the films and expresses the personal styles of their directors. Jean-Luc Godard, for instance, adopted a collage-like structure for his Piérot le Fou (963). Words, images, graphics, colours, lines and volume in the film were collaged or montaged. In Red Desert (964), Michelangelo Antonioni used a red background to metaphorically signify movement. Andrei Tarkovsky in Andrey Rublev (966) took up the art of cinema to conserve iconographic paintings. It is nevertheless hard to find paintings (or other forms of fine arts) that include elements derived directly from films. Here would like to point out some explanations on how the process of transformation from screen to canvas can be observed.

In the 20th century contemporary art, medium or form is no longer an issue in artmaking. Artists manipulate technological changes to achieve their aspirations. Artists nowadays do not anymore merely utilise traditional materials like oil and canvas and stone. They now start to ‘paint films’ Andy Warhol, celebrated for his pop-art silkscreens of Campbell Soup cans, Coca Cola bottles and pop stars among others, tried his hand at cinema, producing conceptual films Empire (964) and Blow Job (963). Julian Schnabel, well-known in the 980s for his ‘plate painting’ directed The Diving Bell and the Butterfly in 2007 which was nominated for Academy Awards and won the Best Director Award at the Cannes Film Festival. Hunger a film directed by installation artist Steve McQueen, bagged the Camera d’Or Award at Cannes in 2008.
These artists paved the way for the rise of a vaster scope for artistic and creative expressions unrestricted by maternal dictates. Technology for them is simply a means to aesthetic ends. Their aesthetics does not rely only on individual auras of artists but also on how well they apply the existing mediums at hand. Hence, they go for film because it has more immense impact and influence, and easy to be grasped by the mind. Despite its great flexibility and efficiency in creating images, camera cannot easily deal with one particular element that could only be expressed via painting, sculpture, drawing and print, namely 'soul'. How do we define 'soul'? A soulful object possesses soul, and soul exists in an artist who creates things with his heart and the eyes of his mind that direct each and every steps in crafting good art.

A film is a medium that contains a series of moving images recorded by the action of a camera. Transferring images from film to other mediums, like painting, means freezing the images of certain scenes in the film and transforming them into stills. An outstanding artist can determine that each film scene he picks to be frozen holds the most essential meaning, or can suitably re-present the language of moving images as the semiotics of moving images. Each selected scene must be significant enough to be transformed into a more meaningful, or in other words artistic, visual picture. By painting or reproducing a film scene in still form, the artist as though brings the world of photography into the locus of his individual creative aura. In consequence of the process of extracting an imagery in film and attaching more prestigious meanings to it, a film, an element of popular culture of spectacle, becomes a more exclusive art form.

A film director functions as a painter of the characters appearing in his films, or as a shadowplay puppeteer providing visual narratives to the movements of the puppets under the light and behind the screen. While transfiguring a film into a painting, an artist assumes the simultaneous roles of a writer an art director and a cinematographer. He sees every scene in the film as imbued with artistic merit. But he chooses only certain specific scenes with strong visuals and contents to be represented on his canvas. He raises images from popular culture (films produced by technology) to the level of high art by transforming it in his painting.

We can also observe the changes in the realm of scientific psychology resulting from the moving away from representation of reality in favour of creative treatment of actuality. When watching a film, we go through several stages that lead us to develop a reality outside of our life perceptions. On the surface or within the frame of the screen we undergo what is referred to as perceptual experience whereby light reflecting off the screen strikes our retinas (called retinal input) to form retinal and screen images. The formation of both images is a result of our perception of seeing an image emanating from the eyeball or a perceptual image popping up from within the frame. The structure of this process, normally experienced by spectators of moving images, is rather similar to the process of viewing still images.
Figure 1 The construction of reality as a sequence of cognitive procedures in the mind, indicated in bold. The surrounding text-blocks represent possible reality-options of the experienced. Fiction frequently manipulates this reality-status option, often in order to create effect by short circuiting the evolution process.

Source: Moving Picture A new theory of Film Genres, Feeling and Cognition

The diagram above shows several dimensions in the formation of reality and in the assessment of its status. It broadly underlines the notion of ‘feeling’ or ‘sensation’ encountered in experiencing reality. What exactly is nonetheless different in this case is that when we watch a film the surface we see in it is called visible surface and the moving images shape the visual narrative of its storyline. While observing these images, we do not exist in real time and space but visually imagine them on the screen. What we see are actually illusory visual experiences that enter our senses through the retinas of our eyes. In this regard an artist plays the role of a camera’s second lens. He captures both the foreground and background views episodically fragmented by virtue of the proficiency of visual language, or sensory data. Sensory data process the actions, postures, gestures and facial expressions that tend to ‘disturb’ the artist’s interaction with the film. But these ‘disturbances’ are in fact visual representations of his feelings, and are truly non-imagined by the moving images themselves. Once in the hands of an artist in the form of still images, the meaning of these ‘disturbances’ will be induced by a mental imagery that supposedly possesses a ‘soul’ for instance in the form, depth, and tone of a canvas’s surface.
Quoting Benjamin again, 'The painter maintains in his work a natural distance from reality, the cameraman penetrates deeply into its web. There is a tremendous difference between the pictures they obtain. That of the painter is a total one, that of the cameraman consists of multiple fragments which are assembled under a new law.' When an artist feels disturbed by stimuli, he experiences, besides a sense of beauty, an awe (sublime) towards something that permeates the objects he sees on the screen. Other than 'awe' or 'sublime' we may have heard the expression 'really great.' Yet in Kant's critical writing, he defines 'sublime' as an 'absolutely great feeling.' It is, in other proper words, an 'awe-inspiring feeling' that can instill into human five senses a kind of shocking and sensational effect that in turn can be translated into works of art.

What can conclude is that images derived from films undergo an unusual metamorphosis before ending up as still images on canvas. Visual signs on moving screen emerge from imagination, and film is a photographic imagination, a distinctive experimental medium in the field of visual art. Recreating or reproducing cinematic images in other art forms is a process of sparking ideas that could initiate a new science, new art, new interest, new emotion. It is indeed a process that could lead to a new way of seeing and thinking.