

Article
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The Road Not Taken by Bangladeshi Cinema



Statement After My Poet Husband's Death by Tasmiah Afrin Mou.jpg

Two roads diverged in a wood- one led to fortune and the other to glory. The analogy of Robert Frost's beloved poem fits especially well with the film industry in Bangladesh. A group of profit-seekers make "formula films" for the market and an educated class steers clear of them, making "art films" for an international audience. Both groups are supremely concerned about the future of this "industry." Here's my two cents on this issue.

I should put the disclaimer here that this is not an academic writing. It's an opinion piece based on my observations alone. It does not have to be a splitting image of the opinions held by the rest of the intellectual community. We can always agree to disagree.

Last month, I went to the Cannes Film Festival as a FIPRESCI jury. The newspapers and TV media in Bangladesh were overjoyed to see such representation from Bangladesh after 10 long years. Every media

house called me up for interviews and they all had one question in common- “What is the future of cinema in Bangladesh?”



Meenalap by Senjutee Tushee

There is no clear answer to that, unfortunately. We can only analyze the trend and predict plausible courses of outcome. Whenever I answered this dreaded question with an assortment of hopefulness and frustration, this follow up question made an appearance more often than not- “What do you think we should do to overcome the existing challenges?” If I thought the previous question had put me in a difficult position, this one had me completely out of my depth.

What really is the future of cinema in Bangladesh and what can we essentially do to overcome the challenges staring us in the face?

Let me try to address this here as best I can. The success of cinema can be judged in many ways. I, for one, would like to consider two conflicting variables- success in terms of critical acclaim and success in terms of ROI (return on investment). We have a handful of directors who have the talent, the track record and the artistic honesty to be successful in regards to the first variable. However, we are hopelessly bankrupt when it comes to the latter- earning the investment back making decent movies that will run in local theatres.

Working in the media in Dhaka and Los Angeles for the last seven years has perhaps given me a unique perspective on how we think about the movie business as opposed to how Hollywood thinks about it. Our art house directors and our commercial directors don't see eye to eye, unlike our American counterparts who are dominating the world's theatres. Even at Cannes during this prestigious film festival, it was Hollywood's "Aladdin" and "John Wick 3" that was playing at local theatres.

Here's the truth about money in this business. Among the top film festivals in the world, even the most all-art-no-entertainment purist ones make money. The streaming services make money. The studios make money.

A filmmaker's accountability lies, to a large extent, with the financing body. When the money is not coming from the paying audiences in the theatres, it's only natural that the makers won't keep those audiences in mind while crafting the film. They'll target sponsors, grants and festivals that will give them the needed validation while the audiences will be snatched away by Hollywood, Bollywood, Netflix and Zee Bangla. In the absence of a theatre-driven pop culture, the audiences will be divided and sub-divided to a point of obscurity. Then, one fine morning, if, God-forbid, someone finally decides to serve the local audience for a change, they won't know where to begin, because their tastes vary so unfathomably widely.

Bangladesh is no anomaly in this regard. One group is out to prove their worth as artists while the other looks to strain some residual cash out of a dried up market. Neither of these two groups is trained to think about our local audience in a systematic fashion.

But don't take my words at face value. Celebrated filmmaker Tareque Masud, who had won the FIPRESCI prize at the Cannes Film Festival for his film "Matir Moyna" (2002), addressed this same issue in his 2010 interview to filmmaker Proshoon Rahman.

“FDC (Film Development Corporation) should have been the heart of our cinema culture. But when filmmakers like us tried to make good films, for right or wrong reasons, we moved away (from the mainstream) and made a B-team,” he said. “In doing so, we left the field (FDC) at the hands of idiots. This was our big mistake... We narrowed our goalpost and starting scoring goals in the form of short films. Now we are creating another new goalpost in the name of digital films. Will this improve the quality of films? That is something to think about... Maybe we are fumbling to run too fast.”



I am Time by Mahde Hassan

So, two roads did diverge in a wood and we- we took the one less travelled by. And that has made all the difference.

Reconciliation between these two philosophies is not impossible. Directors like Quentin Tarantino, Martin Scorsese, Francis Ford Coppola, Christopher Nolan and so on walk this fine line all the time. Their movies are, more often than not, commercially successful works of art.

There is plenty to be hopeful about in Bangladesh. Film societies and film movements are mushrooming all across the country. Rainbow Film Society is bringing more and more world movies and international film personalities every year at the Dhaka International Film Festival. On the other hand, Bangladesh Film Council and

Federation of Film Societies, Bangladesh are regularly protesting the corruptions in the film censorship and distribution system. More and more young blood is joining the cause. With the momentum we have in film activism right now, it's only a matter of time for the talents to meet the opportunities these support systems are creating.

The gifted filmmakers may be few, but they are irrefutably coming forth to the limelight. At the rate our young and talented filmmakers like Tasmiah Afrin Mou, Subarna Senjutee Tushee, Mahde Hasan and so on are progressing, we may soon score a place at the Directors' Fortnight or Critics Week at the Cannes Film Festival.

Looking through a spyglass into the future, one can certainly hope that the two roads will merge at one point. The wood is still too dense for us to see that far ahead. Maybe that junction will belong to the multiplexes, 4D theatres, streaming services, virtual reality or some newer method of movie-watching. What remains to be seen is whether our voice will be curated by ourselves in those platforms or some cultural imperialists will "divide and rule" us all over again.

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