

Exploring Morality and Sexuality in Asian Cinema

Cinematic Boundaries



PETER C. PUGSLEY

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Dedicated to Bob and Beth Pugsley

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Introduction

The adage that ‘sex sells’ has been a long held belief for producers of all kinds of cultural texts: from Shakespeare spicing up the romance in his plays; to ancient Indian writings on the Kama Sutra; to exotic Orientalist paintings from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The arrival of the moving picture soon gave rise to erotic (or sordid) ‘peep shows’, but as cinema developed through the twentieth century, cultural attitudes toward sexuality on-screen saw many European cinemas (especially French, Italian and Scandinavian filmmakers) taking a relatively liberal view. Meanwhile the English language national cinemas of Britain, the USA, Canada, and Australia took a more puritan turn by establishing strict cinematic boundaries. The introduction of more clearly-defined classification systems led to some adventurous forms of filmmaking from the 1960s onwards, in which taboos on nudity in particular were lifted. But while this revolution took place, much of Asia was more circumspect, and traditional or conservative values toward overt sexuality (often closely linked to the attitudes of the colonising forces across Asia) were maintained through a balance of official and unofficial codes for what was acceptable as film content.

In all parts of Asia, strict codes can be found governing the types of images that can be screened on film. Past controversies over depictions of nudity, pre-marital relations and miscegenation in what are ostensibly general-release films have impacted heavily on local filmmakers in nations such as China, India, Singapore and Malaysia, subject to strict censorship and successive bans on the screening of their films. Japan, and to a lesser extent, South Korea, have different approaches to on-screen sexuality offering much more liberal environments for filmmakers. Yet the cultural mores of each nation’s cinema are seldom discussed in academic literature, nor are the more recent, somewhat startling transformations in attitudes and regulations in countries such as India; therefore this book offers the first major study to examine this important cultural shift in Asia’s film aesthetics. Furthermore, this shift is occurring concurrently with changes to Western representations of sexuality through films that blur the lines between general release films and pornography, such as Michael Winterbottom’s *9 Songs* (2004), Lars von Trier’s *Antichrist* (2009) and *Nymphomaniac Vol. 1* (2013), and Abdellatif Kechiche’s *Blue Is the Warmest Colour* [*La Vie d’Adèle – Chapitres 1 & 2*] (2013). Each of these films has enjoyed notoriety because of their graphic sexual content. What sets these films apart from the world of pornography appears to be their narrative aim. Rather

than existing simply as a platform for sexual acts (moving to the disrobing of key protagonists as soon as possible), these films propose more complex themes. This is not a book about pornography. What I wish to explore in these pages is the ways in which Asia's cinemas deal with sexuality in general release films – films that dwell within the boundaries of a nation's regulatory codes and are available to general audiences (albeit often within age-restricted categorisations). In reference to Susan Sontag and the complexities in deciding what constitutes a pornographic image, Gronstad sees her view as one where “as long as the erotic manifests itself within the context of Aesthetics, it should not only be tolerated but even commended” (2012: 121). Sontag privileges representations of sexuality within the canons of high art, where, it seems, anything is permissible and a concept that is commensurate with those that defend the often confrontational images of art house cinema. For many Asian filmmakers though, the plea for leniency in the name of aesthetics may well fail to resonate with the institutions that govern them.

This book explores the many differing attitudes and responses to on-screen sexuality across Asia and the moral boundaries imposed or implied upon filmmakers wishing to attract a broad audience for their films. The book focuses on the cinemas of several key Asian nations (respectively India, China – including Taiwan and Hong Kong – Malaysia and Singapore, Japan and South Korea) that have been the focus of my research for a number of years. I do not examine the vast cinematic outputs of other countries such as Thailand, the Philippines or Indonesia, as discussion of these national cinemas would be better left to those with a deeper familiarity of those nations and their cultures.

One of this book's central concerns is how cinema can create perceptions of a society's underlying moral and aesthetic values in relation to sexuality. This is not exclusive to Asian cinema, indeed there is a universalism in film aesthetics where the “cinematic drive to maximise beauty is born in part of the need for cinema to arrest the gaze and conjure erotic desire” (Krzywinska 2006: 35). However, much Asian cinema has developed during a period when the representation of erotic images upsets the nature of cinemas long designed to operate at a level where all (or most) members of the family can join in the cinema experience. The communal or even village watching of films as a universal experience now looks to be a thing of the past in a number of formerly chaste Asian nations. In an increasingly global environment, this communal viewing can also be interrupted by linguistic differences such as those found in the increased use of English in Bollywood films. This reflects India's colonised past as well as attempts to cater to diasporic and global audiences.

Linguistic differences also reflect cultural diversity and arise in issues of representation and regulation. In the introduction to their collection *East Asian Sexualities*, Jackson et al. (2008) discuss the difficulties found in trying to establish

a singular definition or meaning for the concept of ‘sexuality’ in those cultures where there is no linguistic equivalent. For Jackson et al. (2008: 3), this indicates:

something about the social ordering of sexuality in both Eastern and Western contexts – that to be ‘normally’ or normatively ‘sexed’ (gendered) is to display appropriate masculine or feminine sexual (erotic) conduct and, in particular, to form sexual (erotic) attachments to the ‘other’ ‘sex’ (gender).

Therefore sexuality becomes part of a generally recognised hetero-normative society, perhaps reliant on traditional views of human development and trajectories of modernity that may (or may not) match the actual lived modernisation of the East. And it is instructive to not lose sight of the fact that sexuality can be used as a site of power by the church, the state, local communities, parents, and society in general. These institutional or societal bodies either allow or restrict the production and circulation of film and other media. In doing so, they influence the flow of discourses on morality and sexuality. The release (or banning) of a film that explicitly engages with sexual themes can enable widespread debates about the control and suitability of such themes within the moral boundaries of a community.

The power of cinema in each individual nation or culture is not to be underestimated. After all, as Laura Mulvey (2010: 19) suggests:

While the cinema reflects the society that produces it, its mediating images, forms, and cinematic language contribute to the way a society understands and internalizes itself as image. Thus, how cinematic meaning is created still remains central to the analysis of film, but these images take film theorists and historians away from the screen and into the surrounding cultural context to which they refer and from which they emerge.

This work by Mulvey expands upon her seminal text, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema* (1975), a work concerned with both text and audience, in which she recalls, “I argued that the eroticized cinematic look was constructed textually, inscribed on the screen through its cinematic organization, point of view, privileged screen space, and so on, and that this way of looking is understood as gendered ‘male’” (20). Mulvey’s initial adherence to the work of Freud concentrated on his “naming of the pleasure of looking, voyeurism, as active and, therefore, metaphorically masculine” (20). Mulvey’s later considerations were to place a greater emphasis on the notion of context, as she admits:

It was this textual critical perspective that was challenged by a concern for the actual aspirations and anxieties that might accompany an audience into the

cinema from the real world and through which they would ‘negotiate’ with the pleasures offered by the movie on the screen (2010: 20).

Thus, when discussing the broad concept of ‘Asian’ cinema, one must also be highly cognisant of the cultural ‘baggage’ of the audience, both the assumed audience, and the ‘real’ audience who have paid for their ticket and taken their seat in the darkened cinema. Through what lens is their “gaze” (to use Mulvey’s term) focusing? The increasingly liberal environments across Asia, partly spurred on by a globality of cinematic images, means that audience expectations and understandings are considerably different from previous generations. The arrival of the type of overt sexuality on Asian screens that was previously only found in illicit pornographic materials is perhaps, as Thoret contends, reflective of the situation in Western societies where “pornography has ‘disappeared’ because now it’s everywhere [...] It is no longer a scandalous land one enters with lowered head and raised expectations, but the standardized backdrop that now conditions our relationship to sex” (2012: 89).

The possibility that once taboo images are now part of a “standardised background” raises a number of pertinent points. Like Michel Foucault, I too am interested in the ways that sexuality as a discourse of power emerges:

... the channels it takes, and the discourses it permeates in order to reach the most tenuous and individual modes of behaviour, the paths that give it access to the rare or scarcely perceivable forms of desire, how it penetrates and controls everyday pleasure – all this entailing effects that may be those of refusal, blockage, and invalidation, but also incitement and intensification (1978: 11).

But the institutional control of sexuality and its various discourses evolved in a myriad of ways. For instance, Gronstad argues that the “artists of the late nineteenth century were attracted to the erotic as a means both to produce social critique and to interrogate aesthetic conventions” (2012: 128). And Hollywood’s sexualisation of women in the 1920s (taking its cues from Broadway), arrived at a time when the USA had “mastered a discourse of sexuality and new freedoms associated with ‘our modern maidens’ while also promoting an identification of modernity with femininity and consumerism” (Mulvey 2010: 25). This move toward individualisation in late modernity is viewed as resulting in “greater sexual freedom, the breaking of the link between sex, marriage and reproduction, and the exploration of new lifestyles”, to the extent that “women in East Asia are [now] also seeking greater autonomy [but ...] face considerable constraints in doing so” (Jackson et al. 2008: 17). This change does not come easily though, as various regions, such as some parts of East Asia are marked by their “continued strong double standards of morality ... sexual harassment ... and the difficulties of forging a viable feminist sexual politics” (Jackson et al. 2008: 17). Indeed,

these double standards are also apparent in India where Banaji notes that “in Bombay, the onus for remaining chaste is almost uniformly placed upon girls and women, while young men are known to engage, covertly, in a multitude of exploratory sexual practices and, sometimes, sexual violence without attracting much or any public censure” (2006: 105). While these views can perhaps also be extended across Asia, especially to South and South East Asia, geo-spatial renderings of ‘East Asia’ must also include Japan where different codes of morality and sexual politics appear to reside, and film has long been accepted as a site for explorations of sexual behaviour. Foucault once famously noted that the pre-modern societies of China, Japan, India, Rome and the Arabo-Moslem world perpetuated an *ars erotica* in contrast to the dour *scientia sexualis* of the Christian-led West. For Foucault, “in the erotic art, truth is drawn from pleasure itself, understood as a practice and accumulated as experience; pleasure is not considered in relation to an absolute law of the permitted and the forbidden” (1978: 57). While this may be the case for the earlier civilisations found in these societies, changes to moral outlooks in China and India have determined the course of cultural development often resulting in strict censorship of the ‘erotic arts’, such as the highly visual world of cinema. In its attempts to regulate film content, for example, India’s Central Board of Film Classification (CBFC) has shifted its approach on a number of occasions in its attempts to find a balance between conservative forces, on the one hand, pushing for the traditional codes of chaste morality that echo Foucault’s claim of the West where “the image of the imperial prude is emblazoned on our restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality” (1978: 3), and filmmakers on the other hand, keen to explore the perimeters of their craft. Japan, as an exception, appears to have instead incorporated such imagery into its daily life.

In this book I wish to show how the many cinemas of Asia appear to be moving closer to each other in their ability to express openness toward on-screen sexuality, partly as a by-product of globalisation and as a result of the expansion of the global film trade. For instance, the changing representation of women and their sexuality in film as possible sexual aggressors, or at the very least, as active and willing participants in non-marital sexual relations, is also viewed as a part of the unwelcome moral deviancy of the West. Jackson et al. reiterate this, noting that “[f]eminist and sexual liberation movements strike at the heart of Asian values – which is why they are often seen as unwelcome Western imports” (2008: 23). In India’s Bollywood cinema, for example, there is a visible shift in the way that film handles its representations of human relationships; no longer is it as simple as Takhar et al. (2012: 273) suggest where:

Bollywood love stories are always embedded within a wider context that maintains Indian social values, particularly the role of the extended family, its hierarchy, and the collective responsibility for family members. This system

ensures that individual wants are subordinated to the greater interests of the family collectivity.

Certainly this may be the case with family blockbusters like *Khabhi Kushi Khabie Gham* (2000, dir. Karan Johar) – itself a commentary on the value of family and reunification in the global age – but a general shift in Bollywood films challenges such traditional values. This becomes a more significant issue when one considers the pedagogical nature of film where “mothers use Bollywood films as a means of reinforcing long-standing cultural traditions, moral values, and life lessons” (Takhar 2012: 274). This shift has been noted by Chowdhury (2012: 54) where she observes an “emergent dichotomy” in which “a transforming attitude towards female sexuality, that increasingly, since the nineties, attempt[s] to redefine the limits of feminine desire and question the traditional assumptions about its allure”. Such an approach suggests that this is indeed a gendered phenomenon built upon hegemonic notions of an almost universal nature where, as Richard Dyer once wrote:

The visual representation of male sexuality puts women in their place, as objects of a ‘natural’ male sexual drive that may at times be ridiculous but is also insistent, inescapable and inevitable. Such representations help to preserve the existing power relations of men over women by translating them into sexual relations, rendered both as biologically given and as a source of masculine pleasure (2002: 98–9).

In the case of Asian cultures, this creates narratives that replicate patriarchal societal structures, and further the increasingly global trend where “cultural transformations in the politics of sex are constantly being reflected and reworked in the cinemasphere” (Gronstad 2012: 130). What is new is the level of audience engagement in increasingly liberal screening environments, where there is an “amplified sense of spectatorial self-consciousness that has no doubt become part of the economy of watching moving images” (Gronstad 2012: 130). Changes are therefore apparent not just in the films, but in the Asian audience and their expectations of what the cinema can deliver.

But there are limits to what the audience will consider watching. Perhaps even more challenging to mainstream Asian sensibilities than heteronormative sexual imagery is the spectre of homosexuality, and as Jackson et al. contend, “Homosexuality and lesbianism are not merely objects of moral outrage – they challenge the foundations of the Asian patriarchal family” (2008: 23). The seriousness of such charges is not to be underestimated, not only does the gay man “renege on the paramount filial duty of continuing the family line and ensuring parent’s future as ancestors”, but the lesbian “refuses women’s part in this project, brings shame on the family, and flies in the face of all

tenets of feminine virtue” (2008: 24). Again, Japan appears to be the ‘odd man’ (or woman) out here, with more liberal views toward overt displays of homosexuality. While other Asian cinemas may feature gay characters, these are most often in the guise of overly-camp stereotypes acting as comic foil to the main, heterosexual protagonists (although Japanese cinema can be equally guilty of this). And while Dyer writes that the “effectiveness of stereotypes resides in the way they invoke a consensus” (2002: 14), Hong Kong director Stephen Chow’s films such as *Kung-fu Hustle* (2004) exemplify this with the use of the stereotyped character of ‘Fairy’ (played by actor and martial arts expert Chiu Chi-ling), the effeminate tailor so easily berated by the landlords of Pig Sty Alley where he lives and works. In the use of the stereotyped ‘queen’ or ‘dyke’, Dyer suggests that the message is that “gay men and lesbians are not ‘real men’ and ‘real women’, which expresses the assumption that true masculinity and femininity are in large measure defined in heterosexual sexuality” (2002: 30). Fortunately, Fairy’s eventual use of martial arts (the use of masculinised violence) to save the villagers goes some way toward redeeming the character as a worthy (that is, accepted) member of society, rather than simply a figure of ridicule.

Depictions of sex (heterosexual or otherwise) in films are, of course, subject to a plethora of differing rules, regulations and moral codes throughout the world. In Paul J. Wright’s meta-study of sexuality in the mass media, he expresses surprise at the dearth of safe-sex messages presented, “[g]iven that adolescents comprise a significant proportion of the popular film audience and that sex in popular films often occurs between the young and newly acquainted” (2009: 190). Although Wright’s focus is on Hollywood films and US audiences, the social changes and increased autonomy for young people in Asia, in line with the rise of individualism, suggests that such themes are also appropriate for contemporary Asia. However, while issues of gender preference and health communication messages are important, this book’s focus is on the changing aesthetics surrounding on-screen representations of sexuality in Asian cinema, and the resultant moral debates that arise from these changes.

Central to these debates is the role of censorship; the state-imposed control of images that often results in a crude intersection of art meets bureaucracy. When this censorship is carried out in an empathetic manner, the audience may be none the wiser. But the heavy-handed approach taken in many Asian nations where governments attempt to keep their citizens focused on nation-building (and economic growth), results in some severe interruptions to the artistic project. This approach often leads to the point where the:

... censor is frequently depicted as an omnipotent, albeit incompetent, agent of the state whose ineptitude in literary and filmic analysis is matched only by the crudity of his methods: fig leaves, black lines of bars, x’s and o’s, fuzzy dots,