

Investigating the Creative Process in the Making of Malaysia's First Animation Feature Film: Hassan Muthalib's Silat Legenda (1998)

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the creative process in the making of milestone motion-picture *Silat Legenda*, the first animation feature film in Malaysian cinema history. It was the outcome of circumstances shaped by the interaction between the film's director Hassan Muthalib, as the dominant creative agent, with the evolving domain and field of animation production specifically within the Malaysian context. *Silat Legenda* is considered to have been the outcome of a creative process shaped by both enabling and constraining factors inherent to film production in Malaysia during the 1990s.

KEYWORDS: *Silat Legenda*, Hassan Muthalib, Animation, Creativity, Malaysian Cinema.

1. INTRODUCTION

Malaysian filmmaker Hassan Muthalib made important contributions to the use of animation in the context of Malaysian television and cinema. While Muthalib's significant influence on animation practices in Malaysia has been periodically highlighted in the Malaysian press, there does not seem to have been much attempt however, to conceptualize through the lens of creativity his contribution to animation feature film production practices through the making of *Silat Legenda* in particular.

A milestone motion picture in Malaysian cinema, *Silat Legenda* was the result of Muthalib's creative problem-solving strategies, productive collaborations and adherence to as well as departure from filmmaking conventions in Malaysia.

This paper discusses Muthalib's making of the first Malaysian animation feature film *Silat Legenda* (Legendary Silat Warriors) in terms of a systemic creative process that involves the interaction between an individual, a domain and a field as well as diverse stages of creative problem-solving and collaborative relationships within the enabling and constraining factors inherent to making films in Malaysia during the 1990s – as a consequence of which something novel was created. Csikszentmihalyi (1988) developed a systems model according to which he deems creativity to be the outcome of the confluence of three components: domain (culture), field (society), and individual (personal background). Each component of that system is viewed as necessary but insufficient on its own. What is at play are dynamic relations of circular causality, where the three components are both influenced by and influence each other. Individualistic approaches that focus predominantly on personality traits are inadequate to thoroughly comprehend and explain creativity – which should be considered a multi-faceted complex phenomenon that is part of an ecological system and does not reside in any single cognitive or personality process nor occurs in any particular environment. Creativity might hence be best investigated and explained via a systems approach that recognizes the confluence of multiple factors which contribute to, influence and shape creative processes.

The specificities of the national setting must be given due consideration when analyzing filmmaking processes in order to understand the reasons behind the implementation of particular patterns

of production because of the considerable differences at play that inevitably exist between motion pictures being made for large, medium or small markets. In the Malaysian context, factors like available resources, government policy and audience size have an impact on how much risk film producers and directors are willing to take in trying new ideas and things not previously done, and ultimately on their subsequent creative choices and decisions. *Silat Legenda's* making during the 1990s reflects how its development, as something not previously done in Malaysia at the time, was a process marked by high sunk costs amidst complete uncertainty as to whether or not local audiences would subsequently have any interest in such a novel filmic variation in Malaysian cinema.

In film and media studies, the creativity inherent in the filmmaking process and in filmmakers' creative choices during problem-solving has tended to receive limited attention. As pointed out by Redvall (2016: 141),

while creativity studies have taken a great interest in the ways that new ideas emerge and meet the world, film and media studies have traditionally focused less on the processes of developing, writing and producing new works. [...]. One can argue that film and media studies have been more interested in the product and the person behind the product (with a focus on the director as the auteur) than in the process itself or the press, which is understood as the environment in which the creative work takes place.

The exploration by Ian Macdonald (2010) of the Screen Idea Work Group, in the European context, is one of few instances of "studies focusing particularly on the creative practice of making a specific film, relating current practice and the development of the text and discussing issues like creativity, collaboration and constraint in concrete production

settings” (Redvall 2012: 59). But there has been a paucity of research that concentrates on the analysis of film production in relation to filmmakers’ creative practices during the development and making of specific motion-pictures.

For a better analysis and understanding of how creative work occurs in movie production, applying concepts, models and theories derived from creativity research can prove to be very productive.

Knowledge of how practitioners’ intentions arise, develop and change, and what choices end up being influential in the development of a specific product are not only relevant for the sake of better understanding the process but also for theoretical discussions of artistic intentionality and authorship or for analysis of certain characteristics of certain works produced in certain film cultures at certain points in time. (Redvall 2012: 69).

Since concepts, models and theories generated by creativity research have not commonly been used in the scholarly study of film and media in Malaysia, this article first presents and explains some of them before proceeding with their application in discussing the creative process inherent to the development and production of Hassan Muthalib’s *Silat Legenda* as well as the constraints, opportunities, collaborations, and creative choices that occurred during its making.

2. THEORIZING CREATIVITY AND CREATIVE PROBLEM-SOLVING

Considering how the definition of ‘creativity’ has evolved during previous centuries in various contexts (visual arts, literature, and so on) and because of the multiple ways in which it has been studied and explained, it would be relevant to provide some guidance about the

application of the term 'creativity' herein. Hence, Sawyer (2012: 29-30) pertinently elaborates how the

individualist definition associates creativity with the human mind and associates the study of creativity with psychology. When we look for the creator of a created product, we instinctively look for a person. The sociocultural definition emphasises, in contrast, that creativity doesn't only emerge from human minds; many natural and social processes can generate appropriate novelty. These two definitions are complementary.

Investigating creative processes should indeed be carried out via a balance between individualistic and systemic approaches rather than at the expense of either one over the other.

Not favouring one particular definition and acknowledging instead both above-mentioned perspectives, according to his systems model, creativity is defined by Csikszentmihalyi (1988: 28) as

any act, idea, or product that changes an existing domain, or that transforms an existing domain into a new one. And the definition of a creative person is: an individual whose thoughts or actions change a domain or establish a new domain. It is important to remember, however, that a domain cannot be changed without the explicit or implicit consent of a field responsible for it.

Csikszentmihalyi's approach to creativity hence shifts the focus from the traits of the creative individual towards a broader understanding of creative work. The recognition of creative work is not only related to talent but also to "chance, perseverance, or being at the right place at the right time. Because creativity is jointly constituted by the interaction among domain, field, and person, the trait of personal creativity may help generate the novelty that will change a domain, but it is neither a sufficient nor a necessary condition for it" (Csikszentmihalyi 1988: 29).

A comprehensive understanding and explanation of the phenomenon is only gained through the adoption of a holistic approach and the undertaking of more inter-disciplinary research based on a systems view of creativity that acknowledges a confluence of inter-related forces operating at multiple levels. And this can be achieved by resorting to “all-encompassing systems theories of creativity designed to tie together and make sense of the diversity of perspectives found in the literature – from the innermost neurological level to the outermost cultural level” (Hennessey & Amabile 2010: 590). When all the behaviours in a system – in the wider context of its environment – are taken into account, the systems perspective permits trans-disciplinary thinking, a focus on the whole picture and not just a single element as well as an appreciation of how the different components interact.

A combination of perspectives that incorporates a balance between the social and individual aspects would be the most appropriate approach in the study of creativity, as illustrated below by the synthesized model proposed by Kuo (2011):

Mainly adapted from Csikszentmihalyi’s ‘Systems Model of Creativity’ (1988), the synthesized model by Kuo (2011) additionally amalgamates Amabile’s ‘Componential Theory of Creativity’ (1983) and Sternberg & Lubart’s ‘Investment Theory of Creativity’ (1991). It acknowledges the significance of the individual’s motivation and personality and of specific knowledge from an external source or domain to create a new idea or artifact – ‘creativity generation’ – that is accepted into the domain after its variation has been examined by the field’s gatekeepers.

The ‘domain’ is a formal system of symbols derived from information that can be understood as a set of instructions, procedures, rules and action: if one does not have access to the information within

a certain domain, one is unable to contribute with new knowledge. Within the domain of film and animation production, there are different understandings of best practice, like the right way to structure a screenplay, to make critical choices and resolve problems during production or to implement classical storytelling strategies, for instance.

The 'field' is the social organization of the domain and encompasses all the individuals who function as gatekeepers by deciding whether a new idea or an artifact should be included in the domain for individuals in the future to learn from (Csikszentmihalyi 1999: 315). In the Malaysian cinema context, government agencies' officials, movie producers and film critics are some of those in central positions who can choose which creative works deserve to be recognized, kept and remembered.

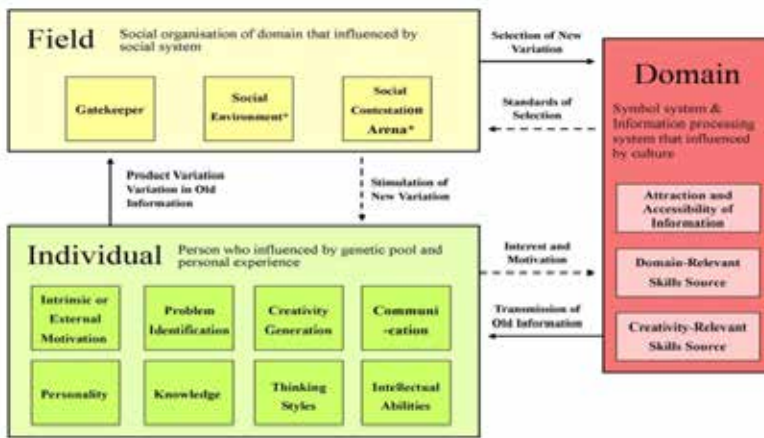
The 'individual' has a significant role in the creation of any cultural artifact and, according to Csikszentmihalyi (1988: 28), can be deemed to be creative when he/she uses the symbols in a specific domain, gets an idea, develops a new pattern or creates a novel artifact. It is also useful to think about how issues of novelty, quality and appropriateness relate to each other when looking into how the individual negotiates with the constraining and enabling factors in place with regards to what he/she intends to create in the context of filmmaking.

With regards to cognitive studies pertaining to creative processes, it should be highlighted that creativity has also frequently been viewed as a type of problem-solving. A problem can be considered as a situation wherein there is a desired outcome and an obstacle in the way. When faced with a well-defined problem, one can readily begin the process of solving it. But in many artistic endeavours however, the act of selecting which problem requires resolving is often a crucial aspect

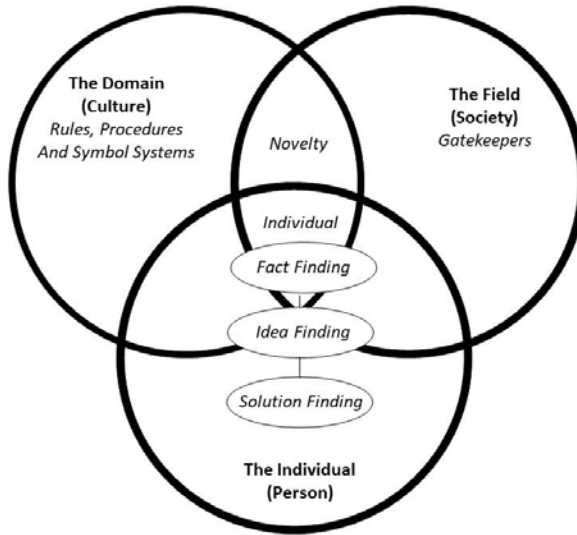
of the creative process itself. If artistic endeavours are understood as involving the pursuit of a conceptualization of creativity that is rooted in problem-solving through collaborations within a specific context, it would then be essential to acknowledge the frequently overlooked stage of first determining which problems truly need to be identified and resolved. Hence, if the production of a motion-picture is conceptualized as a series of different but inter-connected stages of problem-finding and problem-solving, some important questions that inevitably arise during those stages include: how do filmmakers go about creating a new film project? what are the challenges that emerge between initial concept to completed project? how are decisions reached about what ideas to pursue or to discard? what individuals will be involved and will need to do, and at what stages?

In applying the systems perspective to discuss creativity in filmmaking, a creative problem-solving model is also useful for better understanding the interaction between the individual, domain, and field. In 1953, Alex Osborn developed the basic ideas behind creative problem-solving (CPS) while trying to explain how to increase levels of creativity in individuals and groups. There were originally seven steps in Osborn's CPS model that he later modified to include only three: fact finding, idea finding and solution finding [for more details, see: Osborn (1963: 86)]. Originally intended for the purpose of teaching creativity, the CPS model can also be a great tool for breaking down the filmmaking process into different stages involved in the complex production of new audio-visual artifacts, such as problems identified and solutions developed, constraining and enabling factors as well as challenges faced by those involved, critical choices made, and so on.

Viewing creative endeavours from a systems perspective and addressing them as a process involving the identification and resolution



of challenges – aiming to generate innovative and high-quality projects – places the spotlight on the creative agents, their collaborations and their decision-making. It is essential to remember that what is at the core of all that process is not just any product, but a highly specific text that must meet precise requirements from field experts, and that is shaped by existing works and the principles of best practice within a domain. The combination of Kuo's synthesized systems model of creativity with Osborn's CPS model – as illustrated below – enables a productive framework for understanding longitudinal complex processes in relation to not only individuals but also to their operational contexts. And that would indeed be most productive in investigating the creative process involved in Muthalib's making of animation feature film *Silat Legenda* in the context of Malaysian cinema.



Applying a systems perspective of creativity, in combination with the CPS model, requires considering Muthalib as the principal creative agent who operates within the enabling and constraining factors inherent to the structure of film and animation production in Malaysia, as well as his interaction with the field (which includes producers, animators, and critics) that influences decisions about what particular approaches to animation production deserve to be recognized as ‘best practice’ and maintained in the domain as well as subsequently reproduced in later screen texts.

3. ABOUT HASSAN MUTHALIB

While referring to E.H. Gombrich’s study of art history, Bordwell (1997: 150) argues how innovation is often the result of the artist’s “urge to be different, to compete with others, to savour the exercise of skill, or to seek new challenges.” In the context of Malaysian cinema, Muthalib’s

making of *Silat Legenda* can be understood as the outcome of systemic creative processes involving a combination of imagination, inspiration, expertise, perseverance and problem-solving as a result of which: the old is transformed into something that is original, something novel and fresh is produced, and something innovative occurs. Creative acts like filmmaking inevitably occur within a framework that includes enabling as well as constraining factors. Structures inherent to the codes, symbol systems and customary practices specific to animation production and to the kind of film world that Muthalib operated in – which includes producers, animators, critics – not only constrained but also enabled him to be creative in his pursuits. In order for innovation to take place in the creation of an animation feature film, a specific set of rules and practices needs to be conveyed from the realm of animation production to the practitioner. This practitioner is then tasked with generating a fresh interpretation within the animation domain. Subsequently, the innovative variation must be chosen by the industry for integration into the domain.

The creative individual needs to possess a certain level of prior knowledge before attempting to introduce modifications to established practices within the domain. Looking into Muthalib's career highlights how significant creative accomplishments typically represent natural progressions of existing concepts, requiring extensive effort and numerous incremental advancements. This is because creative ideas do not emerge from thin air but rather stem from a deep reservoir of experience and dedicated training in a particular artistic practice. As recounted by Muthalib (2016: 93):

I believe my journey into animation started way back when I was a lad. [...]. My first exposure to animation was through the book, *The Art of Disney*, which I borrowed from the United States Information Service library. What attracted me were the

magnificent background paintings done for the Disney feature films rather than the animation. I should emphasize here that I had not been born a talented artist nor did I have the opportunity to study art formally. That did not deter me. I diligently copied the works of great artists, not realizing that I was, in fact, ‘learning’ from the masters.

While working as a decorator for Robinsons department store in Kuala Lumpur, Muthalib developed an interest in photography and ended up purchasing a second-hand Voigtlander camera in 1966. “Subsequently, I became well-known for taking professional-looking wedding photographs and posed stills. This then led me to a stint as a still photographer for a women’s magazine. Undoubtedly, this interest and involvement in photography contributed to my understanding of storyboarding and live action filmmaking” (Muthalib 2016: 95).

After starting work at Filem Negara Malaysia (FNM – National Film Studios) in 1968 as a titling artist in the Art Department, Muthalib only became seriously involved in animation “when the Art Department was asked by [then FNM director-general] John Nettleton to produce animated festival trailers” (Muthalib 2016: 43) each about one minute long, for television screening during the religious festivals of the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia. Muthalib believed that all his earlier initiatives gave him an advantage over the other designers when he made the 1972 Christmas trailer, which was his very first film: “With the years of experience in doing Christmas decorations at Robinsons, I bristled with ideas for my first film story. I was totally undeterred by the fact that I had never written a script, drawn a storyboard or animated before. It was an exciting challenge that I was raring to take on. The animation bug bit me then and animation was to become my next career” (Muthalib 2016: 96).

Muthalib's speciality became cel animation which requires characters and objects to be hand-drawn by artists on clear celluloid sheets – referred to as animation cels or animated cels – that are subsequently positioned over painted backgrounds. Cel animation came to prominence through Walt Disney's early works in particular during the 1930s and is, according to Muthalib (2016: 15), not only a technique but also “the understanding of all the elements that go into the making of a film. This is the only way to teach animation as the real purpose of making a film is to tell a story, not to try to impress the audience with beautiful pictures moving in space and time.”

While his early 1970s training was rudimentary at the start since he was just beginning to understand the subject matter, it was “the lectures by Disney veteran animator Clair Weeks in 1976 on the Disney philosophy of animation storytelling that were to have a profound impact on my belief than an understanding of storytelling was as important as understanding story-making” (Muthalib 2016: 253). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, FNM became known for its lively and humorous animated trailers, and his “literary background, knowledge of still photography, and frequent viewing of classic feature and animation films stood him in good stead in coming up with structured storylines that were almost always spiced with humour” (Muthalib 2013: 43). By the 1990s, Muthalib had contributed animation scenes to various feature films as well as directed a number of documentaries, PSAs and short animation films that had all been screened on Malaysian television.

4. THE DEVELOPMENT AND PRODUCTION OF *SILAT LEGENDA*

According to Muthalib (2016: 66),

animation *per se* was only to surface with the establishment of the Malayan Film Unit in Kuala Lumpur. If not for a series of

fortuitous events, animation may have taken an even longer time to appear in Malaysia. These events enabled animation to first take root in the late 1940s in Malaya, to blossom in the early 1980s, then to flourish into a thriving industry into the 1990s. The millennium witnessed Malaysian animation making its presence felt in the global arena.

Animation evolved from the establishment of the Malayan Film Unit (MFU), a documentary film studio that was founded in Kuala Lumpur, Malaya by the British in 1946. Creating a film studio was M.C. Sheppard's idea while interned in Changi prison during World War Two: he saw the potential benefit of a film unit to a nation in the process of recovering from the war's aftermath. A chance encounter between Sheppard and Ralph Elton, a film director associated with the Crown Film Unit in London, subsequently facilitated the acquisition of film equipment from a British unit in Singapore about to be closed down. With the equipment also came British filmmaker R.E.D. (Gillie) Potter who had been working with the unit and was tasked with assisting in the MFU's set up.

Training and production work eventually commenced at the MFU in 1947 [see: Muthalib (2016)]. Potter provided instruction to the local community on the operation of film cameras and the art of directing. Unbeknownst to him at the time, his efforts not only equipped the locals with valuable skills but also played a pivotal role in establishing the groundwork for what would become the Malaysian animation industry. With Potter's supervision and guidance, "the Art Department made numerous effective titles and animated sequences for the MFU's documentaries and training films. [...]. The first animation made in MFU was the stop-frame sequences for the film *The Kinta Story* directed by Harry W. Govan in 1949" (Muthalib 2016: 76): it is the earliest example in Malaysia of the production of 2-D animation that

was at the time the most effective way to get the message across visually to a mostly illiterate local audience. Although Gillie Potter conducted the first training in animation during the late 1940s at the Malayan Film Unit, the next training would only happen about 20 years later, beginning in 1972 with the production of public service advertisements and festival trailers and on-the-job training provided to newly joined art graduates in the Design Unit of FNM.

From the early days of animation at the MFU, it would take almost fifty years to get to the making of Malaysia's first animation feature film. Started around the mid-1990s and completed for theatrical release in 1998, *Silat Legenda* contains "traditional cel animation with some 3-D animation in the backgrounds. 2-D and 3-D digital visual effects were used to enhance some scenes" (Muthalib 2016: 61). The film was produced by Peninsula Pictures owned by Hisham Harun Hashim (who also owned The Image Generation Company, a 3-D animation, CGI and post-production service facility in Malaysia).

Silat Legenda is based on the internal turmoils that characterized the old Malaccan Sultanate before it was invaded by the Portuguese about five centuries ago. Its story and theme of unity are essentially inspired by legendary Malaccan warrior Hang Tuah and his four close friends. As explained by Muthalib, it was the film's producer Hisham Harun Hashim who had the original idea and he

explained to me his idea of how the five legendary heroes Hang Tuah, Hang Jebat, Hang Lekir, Hang Lekiu and Hang Kasturi were friends who were united and were able to overcome a lot of things together. But then an incident occurred between the two main characters Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat who came into conflict with each other – basically brother had to go against brother on the orders of the king. We took the cue from there for *Silat Legenda*. (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 99).

And Muthalib further elaborates that during its making in the 1990s, there was a political conflict occurring in Malaysia between the then prime minister Dr Mahathir Mohamad and his deputy prime minister Mr Anwar Ibrahim. “We thought: ‘Well, this is what we are talking about in our film’ (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 99), and that conflict essentially provided a guide for how to structure the film’s plot.

Originally meant to be a television series, producer Hisham decided to develop *Silat Legenda* as an animation feature film for theatrical release instead, after finding out that USD500 was all that local Malaysian television stations were prepared to pay per episode. To proceed with the production, professional staff

was now required but it soon became clear that there were not enough cel animators for the production. A decision was taken to plan the entire production up to key pose level and get it animated in Indonesia. A company called Citra Audivistama managed by Dwi Koendoro, a well-known editorial cartoonist and animator whom I had met on an earlier trip to Indonesia, was contracted to handle the animation in Jakarta. (Muthalib 2016: 210).

For his part, Muthalib had joined Peninsular Pictures in 1995 as a trainer and movie director, having recently left FNM: “working together with Hisham, I turned his story into a treatment. New characters and a more definite storyline emerged with a theme of unity” (Muthalib 2016: 209). From an artistic perspective, he discovered that the narrative needed to adhere to a specific creative process, involving the development of characters and stories through thorough research rooted in real-life experiences, pushing the boundaries of realism. During the phase of identifying challenges, he placed significant importance on

exploring a multitude of potential approaches to crafting stories. “From Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, I took his hero’s journey to formulate my structure, and the film never deviated from that. That’s probably the reason why the story of *Silat Legenda* has a certain flow, except for some parts wherein late changes had been made” after animation production had already started, explains Muthalib (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 85).

The making of *Silat Legenda* might have seemed to be a doomed enterprise from the start considering that none of the staff including the key people had ever worked on a cinema feature. Most of them did not have any experience at long form animation. Many could not even draw well. At Hisham’s request, background supervisor Cesar T. Coronado Jr. from Manila, Syed Hassan al-Mashoor and Hassan Muthalib conducted training sessions three times a week in the evenings for the staff in all aspects of animation production. (Muthalib 2016: 210).

These exchanges among diverse individuals, each playing distinct roles, were essential for the exchange of ideas, sharing of knowledge, and providing critical feedback on processes and outcomes. Consequently, *Silat Legenda* projects the collaborative efforts of creative teams comprising director, producer, animators, background painters, and so on. For example, as recounted by Muthalib:

One of the artists working on *Silat Legenda* came to me after four days with his drawings of ferns: I tore them up in front of him and told him to go to his house in Gombak (a district in the state of Selangor, Malaysia) to look at the ferns, at what is at their back, to touch them and feel what they are like. Only after that did I get good drawings of authentic ferns. [...]. I took the team to Belum National Park (located in the state of Perak, Malaysia) and we stayed there all night: I had everyone draw

trees, vines and so on. As a result, you can see that the flora in the film is very authentic. (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 85).

The involvement of numerous individuals was indispensable for the film's production, highlighting the essential nature of collaboration in the creative process. Within the realm of art, the realization of creative works often hinges on the collective efforts of multiple support personnel.

Many of the world's significant inventions and innovations have resulted not from the work of one lone genius but from that of groups of individuals with complementary skills collaborating with each other in resolving problems. This can be illustrated by the creative solution that was implemented for the scene in *Silat Legenda* wherein after the five heroes had come down from the mountain, they were going through various physical movements to practise their *Silat* (traditional Malay martial arts). The scene was meant to show that there was something different in the way they were doing their *Silat* moves after coming down from the mountain. But the animation of that important scene had somehow been overlooked during production. As explained by Muthalib:

for that scene, we already had the key animation finished and parts of other animation had also been done but were not all completed. And then an idea came to me, and I said: 'We'll do dissolves for that particular scene, so that it will look very unusual, and it will be very different from all the other scenes'. And this solution worked. In the finished film where you now see dissolves in the scene in which the five heroes are moving in tandem doing their *Silat* moves, that's because of animation not having been completed. (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 94).

Within the first year of production, various issues emerged with the Indonesian studio contracted to do the animation: its work was not up to par and there were repeated delays in delivering line tests. "It was decided that the animation work would be finished in Malaysia, as by this time many of the assistant animators had acquired skills through doing layouts and the training provide by Syed Hassan" (Muthalib 2016: 211). As commented by Muthalib (2016: 212), during the making of *Silat Legenda*

innumerable problems had kept cropping up, but through weekly meetings and professional updates by the production manager cum assistant director, Steven Lim, we thrashed it out and many times were forced to change direction. Executive producer Hisham was in the thick of things and involved in every aspect of the production as he began to master the intricacies of making an animated feature. Many of his ideas were also incorporated into the screenplay and production design.

This illustrates how creative individuals like directors, producers and various film personnel are usually embedded in social and professional networks that are made up of people working within the same domain of activity, and it is the 'genius' of the group as a whole that generates creative solutions and innovation in solving problems.

In explaining creativity, the equilibrium between imitation and innovation must be considered and the pivotal role convention and tradition play in the process must be recognized because "all creativity includes elements of imitation and tradition: there's no such thing as a completely novel work" (Sawyer 2012: 28). Muthalib confirms precisely that when he explicates, for example, how *Silat Legenda* includes strong Japanese animé influences:

I was very keen on Hayao Miyazaki's style of background because I saw a resemblance to the Malaysian landscape. So, I gave the background supervisor, Cesar Coronado, a book that I had received from Miyazaki's studio (Studio Ghibli) which I visited in Japan in 1997. I wanted the sky in *Silat Legenda* to have lots of clouds because they represented God or spirituality which is an important element of the film's narrative. When *Silat Legenda*'s five heroes go to mountain Gunung Ledang and when they return, I wanted the sky to be full of Miyazaki's style of clouds to show that the heroes had now achieved something very different. (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 84).

Additionally, characters in *Silat Legenda* are very anim  -oriented because some of the artists involved in their design were predominantly experienced in the design of Japanese anim   characters while previously working on diverse projects commissioned by Japanese animation outfits such as Toei Animation Co and others.

5. FILM AND ANIMATION PRODUCTION IN MALAYSIA: ENABLING AND CONSTRAINING FACTORS

It is important to take into account that Muthalib's entry into animation was shaped largely by informal self-directed learning – from copying illustrations in borrowed books to developing visual storytelling skills through photography and on-the-job experimentation – rather than through structured academic training. In his time, formal education in animation was virtually non-existent in Malaysia. Sporadic workshops and rudimentary in-house instruction served as the only avenues for the development of animation skills of sorts. This highlights the systemic constraints of the industry in Malaysia during the last quarter of the 20th century, where foundational expertise depended far more on individual initiative and improvisation than on an established educational infrastructure.

There exists a distinct repertoire of abilities, knowledge, and methods linked to specific creative endeavours: the creative process in filmmaking is not solely the result of individual talent or inspiration but is also shaped by the constraints and opportunities in the milieu within which it occurs. Applying this perspective to Muthalib's work on *Silat Legenda*, it becomes evident how he had to operate according the simultaneously constraining and enabling circumstances – technological, financial, and otherwise – inherent to film and animation production in Malaysia. This can be illustrated by Muthalib's comments about how at Peninsular Pictures in Malaysia,

we did not have animators in the real sense of the word: they had been working on animé television productions for Japanese companies, but they had never worked on feature film projects. We had just two key animators who had only worked on television productions, and they had four assistants who also did not have much experience. (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 86).

Furthermore, Muthalib considers that he did not really have key personnel that he could depend on and to whom he could provide directives that they would subsequently pass to their respective teams: “In the end, other than being the film's director I also had to become the production designer and the art director too because the guy employed for that was not up to it. There were too many things that I was handling and that was not the right way to be involved in an animation film or in any production” (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 86).

Because of their pivotal impacting role on the creative process, external variables like environmental and social influences have to be accounted for alongside individualistic considerations to effectively explicate why, when, and where new ideas or artifacts are generated from to consequently become established in a culture. There are social,

cultural, economic and institutional factors influencing creativity with regards to film and animation production. Malaysia was affected by the Asian financial crisis that occurred during the production of *Silat Legenda*.

None of the staff received any salary for nine months when the Asian financial crisis happened: they were locked out of their houses because they could not pay rent and they were all sleeping inside the studio. The producer Hisham Harun Hashim was bringing in food for all of them, and we were like a family or people on a ship that was floundering. But we all stuck together and made the deadline: we finally got it all done in three years as originally planned. (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 92).

Muthalib's work was shaped by the demands of film and animation production, including budget and resource constraints, as well as the expectations of an evolving audience. However, he also had some autonomy within this context as his experience and expertise allowed him to negotiate with the producer for much creative control: "only the two of us had the final say, and the producer depended on me: if I said to go a certain way, he would go along with my advice" (Venkatasawmy & Randhawa, 2025: 95).

6. CONCLUSION

Silat Legenda did not break even at the box-office in Malaysia from its RM5 million budget and its critical reception was mostly not positive, confirming how the process of developing a new film or television product is "marked by high sunk costs without any certainty as to whether there will be audience demand for this specific new variation" (Redvall 2016: 139). But it is still productive to think of film and animation production as creative work that attempts to create novel

artifacts as well as to examine the processes implicated according to a systems perspective which involves problem-finding, problem-solving and collaborations. This kind of approach brings the practitioners involved and their creative choices into focus without losing sight of what is at stake and that what people are collaborating on is not just any product, but a very specific artifact that meets the demands of experts in the field and that is influenced by works and ideas of best practice already existing in a domain.

Taking into account that the entire professional practice of animation feature filmmaking during the 1990s in Malaysia constituted by itself a significant constraint – for various reasons mentioned earlier – in hindsight the commercial failure of *Silat Legenda* was inevitable. What matters though is that the film was nevertheless completed and theatrically exhibited. And such a milestone, although not remembered by many, was an important enabler for the subsequent production of animation feature films in Malaysia from the 2000s onward, leading to many highly lucrative locally made animation franchises by the 2020s.

2023 marked the 25th anniversary of its theatrical release and talking about *Silat Legenda* is still an apt exercise, because of its significance in the evolution of Malaysian cinema and because of how little younger generations of film students actually know about it. The following years after *Silat Legenda* saw predominantly animation television series being produced in Malaysia.

Once animation feature films of those popular television series started being made, they became pretty much the top grossing films across Malaysian and Indonesian cinema theatres, such as: *Upin & Ipin: Keris Siamang Tunggal* (2019), *Ejen Ali: The Movie* (2019), *Mechamato Movie* (2022) and *Dongeng Sang Kancil* (2024).

Although diverse contemporary digital technologies may have rendered traditional cel animation techniques somewhat obsolete, the legacy of Hassan Muthalib's *Silat Legenda* remains relevant in terms of comprehending the transformation of animation feature film production in Malaysia. Muthalib's contributions to the evolution of animation laid the foundation for the type of animation films and TV series that are now prevalent in Malaysia, not to mention the ongoing influence of his creative practices and teachings on contemporary Malaysian animation filmmakers.

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