Turning Turtle

"This furore is entirely made up by the press. There may well be outrage in Malaysia—but it’s been forced on Mahathir by the press in Australia. Of course their job is to be mischievous. But I think it’ll have a bad outcome for Australia."

These censorious views come from the ex-journalist and ex-diplomat Blanche d’Alpuget, author of the 1981 novel Turtle Beach (now belatedly filmed). It was d’Alpuget who personally warned then PM Bob Hawke that the film—whose background is the treatment of refugees from Vietnam as they arrive in Malaysia—was going to cause many more problems with that country (and the ASEAN group of countries which Malaysia tends to lead) than her much more accurate novel ever did. As such, she herself may well be said to have initiated the subsequent furore.

For the damage control process that the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) then set in train has raised far more questions about Australia’s foreign relations and the government’s involvement in both cultural creation and the unfettered flow of ideas than the Malaysian leader, Mahathir, will ever do. DFAT has publicly dissociated Australia from 21 “errors of fact” in the film, and questioned Turtle Beach’s producer, Matt Carroll, about changing three aspects of the film. Despite this, Malaysia’s Foreign Minister Badawi has subsequently made it clear that it’s up to the Australian government “not to let the film”—which he hasn’t seen—"strain bilateral ties".

So why did d’Alpuget—who wasn’t involved in the script or the making of the film, apart from being kept informed—start the ball rolling? "There were three reasons", she explains. "One: practical diplomacy. I was in our embassy in Jakarta in 1966, with a bullet hole in my office window and flames down the road. If the film had gone out cold, the Malaysians would have been justified in reacting with great shock. They would have taken it out on the High Commission, expelled staff and caused our businessmen to lose out in trade. Two: any film has a greater effect than a book on its audiences. And three: the film was funded with government money through the Film Finance Corporation. Explaining the arms length principle of that funding to Australian artists is hard enough. It would be impossible to get it across to the Malaysians."

So, what is going to shock the Malaysians? Graphic scenes of the 1969 massacres of Chinese by Malays will certainly offend in a country that has done its best to expunge the event from the record. But that didn’t worry DFAT. Nor did the rather silly idea of showing a scene set in a Thai brothel, pretending it was in Kuala Lumpur. The sentence, “Malaysians are disgusting” did, however. It was spoken in frustration, and referred to the well-attested habit of villagers digging up turtle eggs after their mothers have swum thousands of kilometres and laboriously buried them. But DFAT didn’t think it should be said. It also disliked the portrayal of the Malaysian king as a lascivious playboy. There’s a small point here; in the book, the figure of Tunku Jamie is a minor princeling rather than the periodically elected big cheese. But it seems that Dr Mahathir’s own ruling UMNO Party is not in great disagreement with the filmmakers on this subject; it having recently set up a commission to investigate abuse of powers by the Sultans.

Which leaves the big one: a massacre of boat people, as they attempt to land, by Malay villagers wielding long and vicious parang knives. This doesn’t occur in the book and is unrecorded by history. Dramatically, it certainly helps to give extra power to the film’s ending—in which the central character of Minou, a Vietnamese refugee now married to the Australian High Commissioner, takes heroic action to save her children from possible massacre. But it could easily be seen as provocative. Producer Matt Carroll of course sees things differently. He argues the stoning of the refugees did occur: as many as 11,000 may have been towed back out to sea to an uncertain fate; and 200 refugees were drowned when their boat stuck on rocks as local villagers stood and watched.

And here we have the core of Turtle Beach’s problems. It is claimed as a work of fiction. The plot centres on two women—Judith, an excessively fictional journalist (played by Greta Scacchi) who becomes emotionally involved in actual events, and Minou (Joan Chen) the Chinese refugee mother from Vietnam with a kittenish exterior and a lioness heart that will go to any lengths for her offspring. But there’s no suggestion that this fiction is being played out anywhere other than in real Malaysia. There’s even a hint of apologia in the film’s line that “The Malaysians feel victimised and fear they’ll become a minority in their own country”. There was no consideration of re-setting the film in Ragaan—the imagined country that so upset Dr Mahathir in the ABC television series Embassy.

Producer Matt Carroll is a politically-charged filmmaker: an Australian Oliver Stone perhaps. Breaker Morant did a fair job on the Brits and Lord Kitchener without anyone dissociating from it. Waterfront took on the domestic politics of labour, scabs and their employers. The Last Bastion was no kinder to Churchill than Paul Keating has been of late. And the Barlow and Chambers mini-series certainly didn’t warm any Malaysian hearts in its portrayal of a quasi-political execution for two foolish Australian drug runners.
In *Turtle Beach* he would argue that he is more for refugees (of which there are still 8,000, isolated and almost forgotten on Bidong Island in Malaysia) than against the Malaysians. But he is not enamoured of the country’s justice system—a system that has become more and more enmeshed with the executive, and more Islamic. Indeed, it was on d’Alpuget’s advice that a conversation about the renaissance of Islamic fundamentalism was cut from the film’s script. Carroll believes that he’d be arrested if ever he went to Malaysia.

So we have a film that is emotionally absorbing and politically apt in reminding us of the continuing plight of refugees worldwide—whose numbers are enumerated in a caption at its end. But it’s also politically provocative in insisting on depicting a bloody massacre for which there is no known evidence.

But is this sufficient to give the Australian government the right to ask for changes—“trading human rights for economic reasons”, as Matt Carroll baldly describes it? And—however much we may want to understand and be understood by our Asian neighbours—does it justify the policy of dissociation? For surely other countries may catch on to the international and domestic advantages of kicking the craven Aussie. And how long, then, before some politician or bureaucrat decides to avoid such a fuss by pre-censoring the handing out of government monies through the FFC, and AFC or the Australia Council to artists wishing to create potentially ‘offensive’ products?

It’s drawing a long bow, admittedly. But with a mini-series about the Tiananmen killings finished, a play by a dissident Indonesian writer scheduled in Sydney, and another about Emperor Hirohito’s dying regrets due in Melbourne in October, it’s clear this subject will not be going away. And it’s an issue that unfortunately will stand between many viewers and the screen when they see *Turtle Beach*. (I personally preferred the subtlety of the book.) But as a metaphor for Australia’s need to learn from Asia, the central pairing of Greta Scacchi and Joan Chen is a powerful one.

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