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Futuristic electronic media art

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AS THE whole world, including Malaysia, prepares to enter the new millennium in less than three years from now, we are also increasingly being made aware of a future filled with mind-boggling experiences. This new world of the future will be very different in its complex, extraordinary technological and cultural ramifications.

Indeed, the manifestation of this brave new world of the next century, if not the entire, millennium itself, already signals even more scientific and technological discoveries and breakthroughs that will push Mankind towards newer, complex realms of psychological experience.

An intimation of the new realities and experiences that await us in the next century can already be envisaged and gauged by the new popular code-words that are being so readily bandied about in the 1990s, signalling the achievements already made by Man.

I am referring here to such words and phrases that have already entered into the lexicon of our everyday speech experiences, words such as satellite communication, information technology, borderless nations, cyberspace, virtual reality, genetic engineering, cloning experiments, inter-planetary travel, space stations and, on a more sinister level, chemical warfare, smart bombs and stealth bombers.

It is as if the once prescient predictions found in Alduous Huxley's 1930s novel "Brave New World" have not only been realised but have also been rendered somewhat obsolete by now. And, indeed, obsolescence is yet another fashionable concept that is intellectually discussed these days.

We Malaysians have, thanks to Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad's quite radical visionary inclinations, been motivated by the idea of "Vision 2020". If I am not mistaken, his grand vision entails a Malaysian quantum jump into the world of high-tech realities, circumscribed by the new Malaysian acceptance and manipulation of the new electronic culture and its inevitable consequences.

By making "Vision 2020" the cornerstone of Malaysia's developmental paradigm, Dr Mahathir hopes that we Malaysians will be transformed into a new, dynamic and futuristic society, geared towards the latest technological expertise and wizardry, thereby asserting our rightful place and stature in the new futuristic scheme of things, an Asian nation to be reckoned with hopefully.

Societies can and are often transformed radically as a consequence grandiloquent visions and dreams. There is no denying that Dr Mahathir, is a bold visionary leader in his own right, attempting to steer us into the highly complex new high-tech world of the future. It is not without some justification that the new rallying cry of the ambitious Malaysians has become "Malaysia Boleh!".

I must confess that I have deliberately drawn my reader's attention to the new realities of the new, complex high-tech contexts in order to raise some pertinent questions relating to the fine artist's place and role within the new scheme of things. More especially, the role of the modern Malaysian artists, as we continue to embark on our "Vision 2020" aspirations.

To put it another way, a pertinent question may be asked here: "Are our Malaysian artists already responding to the new modes of cultural perception and the new approaches delineated by the "Vision 2020" dream, underpinned by the new electronic media contexts and considerations?"

The answer to this valid question is an affirmative "Yes!". We seem to have already begun to produce a generation of younger artists who are seriously experimenting with new artistic approaches and techniques that highlight the use of the electronic media and its new possibilities. There is an increasing tendency among our younger artists to employ multi-media techniques, thereby challenging the more entrenched "Painting/Sculpture" approaches linked to the art traditions of the earlier Western-type art academies.

There is a quiet revolution taking place within the local art scene these days, prompted by the younger generation of artists and the interest in the possibilities of the electronic media approach can be described as a new phenomenon within the local art scene. It is a new artistic development that is very much a 1990s artistic development.

A number of recent art exhibitions held during the 1990s have featured art works that make use of the electronic culture as a frame of reference. Many of these artists do not employ the more traditional approaches of painting or sculpture but are more inclined to produce what are referred to as "Installation" or situational works that utilise the actual spaces occupied by the gallery-viewer.

Such works are, as a rule, inclined toward kinetic and mechanistic orientations, involving actual "events" occurring in real time and place. They are not composed of frozen images as experienced in more traditional art situations. This kind of work is also often referred to as "performance art" and utilises electronic devices for their visual and dramatic effects. Very often, computers are used to programme the sequence of events and the flow of imagery. In this country it is a relatively new kind of art form.

What is interesting about this kind of art connected to the media culture and the underpinnings of information theory, is its relevance to the electronic culture revolution that is taking place all over the world today. As such, the ideatic constructs underlying its production and manipulation are circumscribed by new artistic ideas more connected to post-modernist ideas and contexts.

These kinds of works challenge the more romanticised ideas surrounding such older hand-produced, painterly art movements such as Abstract Expressionism, which are dependent on the artist's personalised hand gestures and brushstroke markings made on the canvas, suggestive of his emotional state of mind as he struggles to create his "unique" masterpiece.

This new kind of electronically-inspired art is essentially mechanistic and even alienating. But their very "alienating" dependence on the machine and the computer are what makes them especially relevant to Malaysia's "Vision 2020" concept. The approaches of these electronic artists point to artistic sensibilities that are rooted in futuristic rather than past art contexts and practices.

I hope to discuss this new kind of electronic media art in this column in the next few weeks. I am reproducing a few examples here this week. So, until the next week, have a good weekend.

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