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Burma and the Movies**

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# Populism, Politics and Propaganda: Burma and the Movies

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## Abstract

*For almost a century, movies set in or about Burma, particularly those made by the major American studios, have had a number of elements in common. While emphasizing its more colourful and exotic characteristics, they have either greatly romanticized the country or depicted it as a savage and untamed wilderness. Also, Burma has usually served as a backdrop for dramatic Occidental adventures, in which the local inhabitants played little role. More recent movies pay the Burmese people greater attention, but they are still secondary to the main plot, even when the movies consciously draw attention to the current military regime's human rights abuses. In recent films like *Beyond Rangoon* and *Rambo 4*, however, complex issues are over-simplified, or exaggerated to the point of unreality. While these movies have proven effective at planting vivid images in the popular mind and helping to mobilize support for the opposition movement, crude and misleading messages such as those sent by *Rambo 4* can actually hinder the resolution of Burma's many problems.*

One of the most memorable scenes in John Boorman's 1995 feature film *Beyond Rangoon* was that in which Burmese opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi, played by Japanese-German actress Adelle Lutz, quietly walked up to a line of armed soldiers in a Rangoon street and, through the sheer force of her personality, reduced them to quivering wrecks.<sup>1</sup> However improbable this scene might first appear, it was based on a real incident at Danubyu in the Irrawaddy Delta in 1989, when Aung San Suu Kyi confronted a squad of soldiers which had been ordered to shoot her. Fortunately, the order was countermanded, literally at the last minute (Wintle 2007, 308-316). In the movie, the scene was specifically included to illustrate not only the Nobel Peace laureate's undoubted courage, but also her deep commitment to non-violent resistance against Burma's repressive military government, which in 1988 killed more than 3,000 unarmed pro-democracy demonstrators.

A completely different take on the competition between the forces of darkness and light in Burma can be found in the fourth *Rambo* movie, released in early 2008. The

ageing but still invincible John Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone, shoots, stabs, strangles and in sundry other ways battles his way through the jungle to rescue a group of Christian missionaries held captive by the Burmese army. According to the Internet Movie Database (IMDB), the film 'averages 2.59 killings per minute' (*Rambo* IMDB; McCartan 2008). The final body count of 236 dead in just 91 minutes helped make it 'possibly the most violent movie ever to get an R rating and a wide release in America' (Gonsalves 2008). Rambo's sizeable contribution to this non-stop slaughter is justified on the grounds that Burma's military government has absolutely no redeeming features and its evil servants therefore deserve everything they get from the eponymous hero.

Both of these movies focus on Burma's contemporary political problems, but they approach them from quite different perspectives. One emphasizes the peaceful resolution of conflict, while the other advocates a violent solution. In one, the message is of patience and hope, while the other is a cry of anger and despair. This duality, however, is in keeping with a long tradition of feature films about, or set in, Burma. Whether they dramatize historical events, peddle romantic fantasies or simply use the country as background for more familiar themes, they all tend to emphasize Burma's more colourful and exotic characteristics. Yet some of these movies have a soft focus, and paint a picture of a beautiful country of golden pagodas, swaying palms and gentle people. Others are much harder edged, portraying it as a savage and untamed hellhole notable for its corruption and violence. A few movies try to combine both themes, seeking to achieve a greater dramatic impact from the contrast between the two.

The real Burma, of course, is infinitely more varied and complex. For another characteristic of all these movies is that they exaggerate certain aspects of the Burmese landscape or over-simplify difficult political issues to the extent of distorting them, sometimes to the point of unreality. This is all done in the name of art and entertainment, but such works can have a much wider impact. To a greater or lesser extent, depending on the subject matter and the lens through which the director views Burma, they are important in shaping popular perceptions of the country and in constructing a wider understanding of its history, society and culture. In many subtle ways, movies build on images already provided by literature, other art forms and the news media to create enduring myths, which can in turn influence attitudes to current political issues. In this regard it can be argued that, whether or not they are intended to convey a specific political message, all movies about Burma are propaganda and need to be viewed as such.

### **Early Hollywood Depictions of Burma**

Hollywood's interest in Burma began almost with the birth of motion pictures. In 1913, the Vitagraph Company of America made a short romance called *A Maid of Mandalay*. Based on Rudyard Kipling's famous 1890 ballad 'Mandalay', it was filmed on location, which was quite unusual for the time. The movie starred American matinee idol Maurice Costello as the British soldier and Clara Kimball-Young as Ma May, the 'neater, sweeter maiden in a cleaner, greener land' (Kipling 1940, 418-420). Rather improbably, Ma May's father had the Indian-sounding name Gunga Din, the title of another Kipling poem (and a later film by RKO Radio Pictures).<sup>2</sup> *A Maid of Mandalay* was followed in 1926 by *Road to Mandalay*, described by one critic as 'a lurid silent

thriller about prostitution and murder' (Mirante 2004). Directed by Tod Browning, it starred Lon Chaney as Singapore Joe, the disfigured leader of a criminal syndicate whose saintly daughter wants to marry one of his henchmen, in the middle of a gang war. In its theme of virginal purity set among tropical sleaze and corruption, this movie is reminiscent of *West of Zanzibar* (1928), a later and better known Browning-Chaney collaboration.

The old Burmese capital features again in *Mandalay* (1934) and *The Girl From Mandalay* (1936). The first is a torrid melodrama in which a Russian refugee abandoned by her gun-running lover becomes a notorious prostitute in a Rangoon nightclub, before being forced to flee to Mandalay to escape deportation. On an Irrawaddy River steamer she falls in love with an alcoholic doctor travelling upcountry to help the victims of a 'black fever' outbreak, in order to assuage his guilt over a botched operation. When her former lover turns up, she poisons him and bundles his body out a porthole. *The Girl From Mandalay* was based on Reginald Campbell's 1936 action-romance novel *Tiger Valley*, and was typical of many low budget movies made by Republic Studios during this period (Campbell 1931; Campbell 1986).<sup>3</sup> It starred the long-forgotten Kay Linaker as a Mandalay resort chanteuse who marries a broken-hearted Briton who has just been jilted by his aristocratic girlfriend. It is only after a fever epidemic and a marauding tiger are sorted out that a series of misunderstandings about Linaker's new, more respectable, social status are clarified. In their depiction of European women corrupted by the East these two movies probably owed something to Josef von Sternberg's justly famous *Shanghai Express* (1932), which starred Marlene Dietrich.

A lighter approach is taken in *Moon Over Burma*, produced by Paramount in 1940. The two managers of a lumber camp compete for the affections of a beautiful American showgirl, played by Dorothy Lamour, who is stranded in Rangoon — clearly a city where people get left behind. According to the memorable tag line, they 'make jungle love ... beneath that burning Burma moon. It's hot. It's dangerous. It's thrilling' (*Moon Over Burma* IMDB). While enlivened by a forest fire, and a fight with villains trying to prevent the export of the camp's teak logs, this rather pedestrian B-movie was essentially a vehicle for the former Miss New Orleans to 'wrap a variety of alluring costumes around her hourglass frame' (Crowther 1940). Burma, where men and women traditionally wear *longyis* (the local equivalent of the sarongs favoured by Lamour) simply served as a suitably distant and exotic setting for her thinly disguised mannequin parades.

*Moon Over Burma* was one of five feature films made by Dorothy Lamour that year. The first was Paramount's musical comedy *Road to Singapore* (1940) starring Bob Hope and Bing Crosby. This good-natured farce about a pair of wandering entertainers in the tropics started life as a forgotten script entitled *Road to Mandalay*. Presumably, the change of name was to avoid legal complications (and comparisons) with Tod Browning's 1926 shocker.

Thanks to its abundant natural resources, notably its rice, teak, oil and gemstones, Burma once had the potential to be the richest country in Southeast Asia. During the 1920s and 1930s, its capital was considered the pearl of the orient, 'a study in urban development' known for its prosperity and cosmopolitanism (Cangi 1997, 88; Singer 1995, 161-211). According to one historian, 'With few exceptions, Western visitors left

Rangoon singing the city's praises' (Cangi 1997, 92). It had the same status in the region that Singapore enjoys today, attracting wealthy tourists and artists like Aldous Huxley and Somerset Maugham (Huxley 1926; Maugham 1930). When the Prince of Wales visited Burma in 1922 his aide, a young Louis Mountbatten, felt that it was 'a most confusing country' but 'many times more loyal than India' (Ziegler 1987, 233 and 235). Yet the impression of Burma gained from the cinema during this period was of an exotic colonial sinkhole in the 'Far East', where fallen women or innocent maidens were left to the tender mercies of corrupt villains and the unpredictable natural environment. This image only began to change in the late 1930s, when politicians and journalists began giving serious attention to the new Burma Road to China.

Between 1937 (when Japan invaded China proper) and 1939, thousands of Chinese labourers constructed a 'mighty mountain highway' over very difficult terrain from Kunming in Yunnan Province to the railhead at Lashio in northern Burma. It was soon labeled 'the back door to China' and 'beleaguered China's lifeline' (Outram and Fane 1940, 629-658). Due largely to the value attached to China's survival by the US government, the route remained important even after Lashio was overrun by the Japanese army (attacking from the south) in April 1942 (Tuchman 1971, 240).<sup>4</sup> A major operation was launched to fly munitions and other supplies from India to China over the Himalayas (known to the pilots of US Air Transport Command as 'The Hump'). Meanwhile, a new road was built from Ledo in northeast India to link up with the old road near the Burma-China border (Webster 2003).<sup>5</sup> Add to these events the publicity given to the American Volunteer Group in China — immortalized on the silver screen by *Flying Tigers* (1942) starring John Wayne — and the participation of US ground forces in the China-Burma-India (CBI) Theatre, and it was not surprising that for a decade or more Hollywood saw Burma through the prism of the Second World War (Ford 1991, 111).<sup>6</sup>

At first, there was a strong focus on the Burma Road, which was not only well known but could be portrayed in the dramatic and stirring terms appropriate to the times. After the devastating attack on Pearl Harbour on 7 December 1941 and the surrender of 62,000 Allied servicemen in Singapore the following February, no US or UK movie studio wanted to remind its audiences of the disastrous and drawn out British retreat from Burma during the first half of 1942. As US General 'Vinegar Joe' Stilwell famously announced, the Allies in the CBI Theatre had received 'a hell of a beating' (Tuchman 1971, 300). At the same time, the US Office of War Information encouraged Hollywood to produce movies that emphasized key political and strategic themes (such as the need to support Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek's Nationalist Chinese forces in their struggle against the Japanese) and boosted morale in the Allied countries. This led to the production of several 'quickie' movies like *Burma Convoy* (1941), *Bombs Over Burma* (1942) and *A Yank on the Burma Road* (1942).

*Burma Convoy* tells the story of a group of American truckers — 'hell drivers' in the words of the Universal Pictures publicist — taking supplies up the Road for 'the defenders of the ancient soil of China' (*Burma Convoy* IMDB). The convoy is threatened by assorted spies and smugglers, who are only defeated when the hero, played by Charles Bickford, rallies the truckers against them. *Bombs Over Burma* is about an international group travelling along the Road who become involved in a plot to alert Japanese bombers to the location of a supply convoy. The movie starred Anna May Wong, fresh from her role as a Chinese resistance fighter in *Lady of Chungking*



(1942). She is equally heroic in *Bombs*, which has the usual cast of spies, turncoats and patriotic truckers. Despite the movie's title, most of the action takes place in China. *A Yank on the Burma Road* (1942) follows the adventures of a New York City taxi cab driver who is hired to lead a convoy carrying medical supplies up the Road. Along the way he gets entangled in a romance with an American woman stranded in Burma, whose husband is a traitor. While otherwise unremarkable, *Yank* occupies a small niche in cinema history as the first feature film to mention the attack on Pearl Harbor.

None of these movies could claim any great artistic merit, but at the time they were seen by Washington as valuable contributions to the war effort. They portrayed the US's embattled (if less than perfect) Chinese allies in the best possible light and painted the Japanese in the darkest colours. This propaganda effort reached its peak with Frank Capra's stark portrayal of good versus evil in his officially sponsored documentary *The Battle of China* (1944). This movie, which among other things emphasized the importance of keeping open the Burma Road, was seen by almost 4,000,000 people before the war's end (Dower 1986; 17-18).<sup>7</sup>

*Rookies in Burma* (1943) broke this pattern. After Universal Studios' smash hit *Buck Privates* (1941), starring Abbott and Costello and featuring the singing Andrews sisters, other studios were keen to cash in on the same formula. RKO's chosen duo was Wally Brown and Alan Carney, whose slapstick comedy *The Adventures of a Rookie* (1943) received such a good reception that RKO immediately filmed a sequel, *Rookies in Burma*. As the studio's unofficial historians wrote, Brown and Carney:

continued their impersonation of a couple of scatter-brained army privates who double-talk their way out of a Japanese concentration camp, blunder through the Burmese jungle via jeep and elephant, and finally return to the American lines in a stolen enemy tank (Jewell and Harbin 1982, 189).

In keeping with tradition, *Rookies* even managed to work in a pair of stranded American showgirls. The movie's racism was not unusual for the times, but has doubtless limited its re-release on DVD. Thankfully, it remains the only Western comedy set in Burma.

Perhaps the best known and most controversial Hollywood production about wartime Burma was *Objective Burma* (1945), made by Warner Brothers and starring Errol Flynn. The movie portrayed the tribulations of a group of commandos who parachute into Burma to destroy a Japanese radar station, as the prelude to an invasion. All the weapons, uniforms and gear used were accurate but, despite being vetted by the US War Department, the film still contained some obvious gaffes. For example, the Japanese did not have radar, no Allied forces parachuted into Burma during the war (they went in by glider, in trucks or on foot), and there is no way that an unfit and untrained civilian journalist would be taken on such a demanding and secret mission. Also, the long range penetration units on which the film makers clearly drew for inspiration were not American. Indeed, the operations of the Chindits behind Japanese lines in 1944, while justly remembered as examples of extraordinary bravery and endurance, were of questionable military value (Slim 1956, 162-163).<sup>8</sup> Even so, the *New York Times* described the movie as 'one of the best war films yet made in Hollywood' and it is still considered one of Flynn's better performances (Jarvie 1981, 125).

*Objective Burma* was well received when released in the US, but it caused a storm of protest when screened in the UK and in the CBI Theatre. There was the usual contempt felt by genuine combat veterans for the cinematic heroics of Flynn and his men, but the loudest complaint heard was that the movie made it appear the Americans were winning the Burma campaign single-handedly. Apart from brief appearances by a British officer at the beginning of the film, and a few Gurkhas during the operation, the commandos were entirely American. To add insult to injury, some genuine newsreel footage was included, and actual figures like Admiral Louis Mountbatten, then Supreme Allied Commander South East Asia, and Chindit leader General Orde Wingate, were mentioned by name, helping to give the impression that the movie was meant to be a faithful portrayal of historical events. Such was the public outcry when the movie was released in the UK that, after it had played for only one week, Warner Brothers withdrew it from circulation. It was not shown in the UK again until 1952.<sup>9</sup>

In some respects, the outbreak of anti-American feeling in the UK over *Objective Burma* was not surprising. As Christopher Thorne has written, during the Second World War the UK and US were only 'allies of a kind', and they disagreed over many issues (Thorne 1978). Their differences extended to how the war in Burma should be represented on film. This was demonstrated by the bitter controversy that erupted over Mountbatten's proposal in 1944 to make a full length documentary about the war in the CBI Theatre, along the lines of the highly successful films *Desert Victory* (1943) and *Tunisian Victory* (1944). In the end, it became impossible to reconcile the political and practical differences which arose between the British and the Americans on this score, and two films were made. In 1945 the US released *The Stilwell Road*, narrated by Ronald Reagan. While it did not ignore the remarkable Allied campaign to retake Burma, it emphasized the relief of China and the role of US ground and air forces. At the same time, the British produced *Burma Victory* (1945), which gave much greater emphasis to General William Slim and the 14<sup>th</sup> Army's efforts against the Japanese (Jarvie 1988, 55-73). In their own ways, both documentaries remain valuable records of the campaign in the CBI Theatre.

Between 1945 and 1962, Burma was the setting for three other movies about the war. *The Purple Plain* (1954) was based on H.E. Bates' novel about an emotionally scarred RAF pilot who crash lands in Burma, but crawls and hacks his way back through Japanese lines to find true love in the arms of a young Burmese girl (Bates 1947).<sup>10</sup> Made in Sri Lanka by the UK's Two Cities Films, the movie starred Gregory Peck as the pilot Forrester and the doe-eyed Win Min Than as the 'pure and soft' Anna. It was the first time that a Burmese actor had been cast in a lead role. Despite winning the hearts of most male movie-goers, it was Win Min Than's only feature film. In 1959, Frank Sinatra, Peter Lawford, Steve McQueen, Gina Lollobrigida and Charles Bronson banded together to star in *Never So Few* (released in the US as *Campaign Burma*). This was a rather far-fetched action movie about a mixed group from the Office of Strategic Services (the forerunner of the CIA) sent into Burma to train Kachin hill tribesmen in modern warfare.<sup>11</sup> While the locals get some attention, the main focus is on the interplay between the European characters. The corruption of the Chiang Kai-shek government is finally acknowledged, but Burma is used simply as an exotic locale for what one critic has described as 'a typical "Rat Pack" (minus Deano, Joey and Sammy) theatrical romp' (*Never So Few* IMDB).



The third movie in this category is *Merrill's Marauders* (1962), starring Jeff Chandler and Ty Hardin. Directed by America's 'tabloid poet' Sam Fuller, this adventure drama is loosely based on the exploits of the 5307<sup>th</sup> Composite Unit (Provisional), named after its commander, Brigadier Frank Merrill. The screenplay was co-written by Charlton Ogburn, the author of a best-selling book about the unit (Ogburn 1960; Hopkins and Jones 1999). Most of the footage was shot in the Philippines, presumably to show what the studio called 'the cruelest jungle on earth'. As Edith Mirante has written, 'the movie shows the relentless slaughter of Japanese and American soldiers, with those who do not fall in battle succumbing to fatigue, madness and disease' (Mirante 2004). The film is unusual in that it shows the Burmese people in a sympathetic light, but it is marred by its jingoistic tone and the implication (once again) that the US won the war against the Japanese in the CBI Theatre virtually alone. In fact, the Marauders only fought — albeit with distinction — in Burma's far north.

As Louis Allen has written, the war in Burma between December 1941 and August 1945 was the longest campaign of the Second World War. Arguably, it was also the most ferocious and the most varied in terms of terrain and the combat tactics employed (Allen 1984). Yet, during this period, Burma was seen by many as something of a side-show, particularly when compared to the more familiar and better publicized wars in Europe and the Pacific. This led General Slim's forces to christen themselves the 'Forgotten Army' — a tag which Mountbatten cleverly turned into a badge of honour (Latimer 2004, 181). The films about the CBI Theatre produced during the war, however, increased popular awareness of Burma. Despite their different emphases, and notwithstanding various technical and artistic shortcomings, they helped fix the country in the minds of millions of movie-goers as a place of cruel contrasts, in which a long and difficult struggle was taking place against a determined and ruthless enemy.

Perhaps the most enduring images of Burma during the war, however, came from two movies made during the 1950s, albeit from quite different perspectives. David Lean's 1957 film adaptation of Pierre Boulle's novel, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, was enormously popular with both the public and the critics (Boule 1954). While set in Thailand (where the original bridge over the Kwae Yai was in fact built), and filmed in Sri Lanka, this moving and insightful story about Allied prisoners of war (POW) working on the infamous 'death railway' from Kanchanaburi to Thanbyuzayat left generations of movie goers with indelible impressions of the war in Southeast Asia (Bourke 2006, xiii). Equally effective in its own way was *Biruma no Tategoto*, or *Harp of Burma* (1956). Based on Michio Takeyama's novel and directed by Kon Ichikawa, this movie was a sensitive and hauntingly evocative story about a harp playing former Japanese soldier who travels around post-war Burma disguised as a Buddhist monk, helping to bury the dead (Takeyama 1966). In 1957 it was nominated for an Oscar in the Best Foreign Language Film category, which helped give it exposure well beyond Japanese audiences. An animated version was released in 1986.

### **Movies About Burma Since the War**

While *Bridge* and *Harp* were serious psychological dramas of considerable artistic merit, one post-war Hollywood depiction of Burma reverted to type. *Escape to Burma* (1955) recalls an earlier style — and is one of Barbara Stanwyck's most forgettable

movies. Set in the 'hot green hell of the Burma jungle' during the British colonial period, this Saturday matinee thriller revolves around an American prospector, played by Robert Ryan, who is able to hide from both the police and pursuing natives in a teak plantation, thanks to a mutual attraction with its wealthy female owner (*Escape to Burma* IMDB). The local Shan villagers are mostly played by Caucasians in Indian-style costumes dreamt up by the wardrobe department, and there are appearances by a range of circus animals — including a chimpanzee and an orangutan, neither of which species is found in Burma. This film is probably most often remembered, however, for the scene in which a bare-chested Ryan is whipped by the minions of a vengeful Shan prince. According to the IMDB database, this flogging rates 20<sup>th</sup> in the study *Lash! The Hundred Great Scenes of Men Being Whipped in the Movies*. (*Escape to Burma* IMDB; Easter 2004).

Perhaps because it was so dreadful, *Escape* was the last feature film made about Burma for 40 years. From the late 1950s until 1995, Burma dropped out of sight of the major studios. This period broadly coincided with General Ne Win's coup d'etat in 1962, the adoption of the autarkic Burmese Way to Socialism and the country's subsequent withdrawal from the international community. Tourists were initially only granted visas for 24 hours and, even when this was increased to seven days, visitors were actively discouraged. Very little was heard about Burma in the international news media, and even less was known about its reclusive government until 1988, when a massive pro-democracy uprising thrust the country into the world's headlines. The new military regime's brutal crackdown against the opposition movement, later led by Oxford-educated and charismatic Aung San Suu Kyi, saw Burma attract much greater attention. It was in that atmosphere of heightened public interest and widespread concern that John Boorman decided to make his movie about Burma.

*Beyond Rangoon* is the story of an American doctor, played by Patricia Arquette, who visits Burma to 'pick up the pieces of her life' after her husband and infant son are murdered (*Beyond Rangoon* IMDB). The heroine's personal problems, however, are quickly dwarfed by the political turmoil around her, as the pro-democracy uprising in 1988 is crushed and the armed forces tighten their grip on the country. Along the way, she is tutored in Burmese history and culture by a local tour guide, convincingly portrayed by Aung Ko, playing himself. The country's quietist Buddhist ethic is contrasted with the violence of the soldiers rounding up civilians. For slow learners, characters come out with lines like 'In Burma, everything is illegal', and 'Burma will be saved when every student, every professor, and every mother, faces the guns like Aung San Suu Kyi' (Mirante 2004). In fact, she did not face the guns until six months after the events depicted in the movie. The film was made in Malaysia and Boorman took great pains to make it as realistic as possible, while taking certain liberties, as in the scene described at the beginning of this essay. Arquette's acting is rather flat and parts of the film come across as corny, but considered overall it is a powerful depiction of events in the turbulent period immediately following the 1988 military crackdown.

As an aside, 1995 also saw the release of *Singapore Slingshot: The Road to Mandalay*, an Australian tele-movie that has understandably sunk without trace. It starred John Waters as a cynical private investigator uncovering intrigue in the boardrooms, bedrooms and back alleys of post-colonial Southeast Asia. Notwithstanding the film's sub-title, most of the action takes place in Singapore, where the majority of the scenes were shot.

Largely as a result of its long record of human rights abuses and complicity in the drug trade, Burma's military government — which for 10 years glorified in the Orwellian-sounding name of the State Law and Order Restoration Council, or SLORC — has joined the list of the world's most reviled regimes.<sup>12</sup> As such, it has become fair game for Hollywood screen writers in their constant search for fashionably unpopular nationalities to cast as villains. Thus, to the 'Nips' and Nazis of the 1940s and 1950s, the 'Reds' and 'Chicoms' of the 1960s, the Vietnamese commies of the 1970s and 1980s, the Bosnian Serbs of the 1990s, Islamic terrorists after 2001, and more recently the North Koreans — see *Die Another Day* (2002) — has been added Burma's ruling generals (MacDougall 1999, 59-75). Occasionally, a smorgasbord of villains is offered, as occurred in *Stealth* (2005). This escapist action fantasy from Columbia has three US Navy combat pilots (one of whom is female) in ultra-modern aircraft precision bomb a building in Rangoon to prevent a 'terrorist summit', attended by an Arab, a North Korean and an Afghani.<sup>13</sup> The clear implication of this scene is that Burma's leaders are not only aware of, but condone, such gatherings on their soil.

The theme of the wicked military regime and its evil servants oppressing the innocent but brave Burmese people is taken to its utmost limits in *Rambo 4*. Stallone reportedly asked both the United Nations and *Soldier of Fortune* (SOF) magazine to name the world's hottest current war zones. SOF named the 60 year-old civil war between Burma's central government and the ethnic Karens, most of who live along the Thai-Burma border (McCartan 2008). The cinematic result is an almost cosmic battle between good and evil. The silent, disaffected anti-hero of *First Blood* (1982), *Rambo: First Blood Part 2* (1985) and *Rambo 3* (1988) is now in his 60s, and less inclined to take off his shirt, but he can still mow down the bad guys with the best of them (Schembri 2008). Along the way, the Burmese army is found guilty of genocide, homicide, infanticide, torture, rape, homosexual pedophilia, arson, theft, environmental degradation and cruelty to animals, among other crimes. This gives the avenging John Rambo a license for guilt-free mayhem on a grand scale (Gonsalves 2008). Nothing is left to the imagination in this digitally-enhanced gore-fest of blood, viscera and severed limbs.

Stallone's movie follows a large number of documentaries and 'true life' reports on the 'real' situation in Burma.<sup>14</sup> Some are better than others. Among the best are three made between 1966 and 1978 by British film-maker Adrian Cowell. They remain unsurpassed as accounts of the opium and heroin trade in Burma.<sup>15</sup> In 1990, Brian Beker made a movie called *Lines of Fire* which, according to one knowledgeable reviewer, unsuccessfully 'attempts to summarize the current general situation in Burma in the context of the Karen rebellion, the riots of 1988, and the politics and economies of the Golden Triangle' (Aung Thwin 1991, 220). In 1996, John Pilger released *Inside Burma: Land of Fear*, in which the Australian journalist takes his trademark approach to controversial issues. Other contributions in this broad genre include *Don't Fence Me In* (1995) by Ruth Gumnit, *Burma Diary* (1997) by Jeanne Hallacy, and *Burma: Anatomy of Terror* (2003) by Isabel Hegner. The latter was narrated by Susan Sarandon. All these films juxtapose Burma's physical beauty and the gentleness of its traditional culture with the shocking cruelty and ineptitude of the world's most durable military regime. Most have a clear, if not terribly subtle, political message.

## Burma and the Asian Movie Scene

Not all feature movies set in Burma, or about Burma, have been made by the big US or UK studios. A number have been made in the Asia-Pacific region itself. The most famous in this category is of course *Harp of Burma*, but Burma has its own motion picture industry and its neighbours have also used Burma as subject matter in their films.

Burma's movie industry has a long history. Its first documentary, about local cottage industries, was made for the British Empire Exhibition in 1919. The country's first silent feature film, entitled *Myitta Nit Thuyar* or *Love and Liquor* opened in Rangoon in 1920. The first talking picture, *Ngwe Pay Lo Maya (It Can't Be Paid With Money)* was released in 1932, and was followed by a flood of other productions. About 600 movies were made before the Second World War. Some, with strongly nationalist themes, were censored by the British colonial administration and at least one, *Dou Daung Lan (Our Peacock Flag)* (1936), was banned. During the war no feature films were made, but the industry quickly recovered after Burma regained its independence from the UK in 1948. Between 1950 and 1960, about 80 Burmese movies were released each year (Aung Zaw 2004; *Myanmar Online* 2008). Some were joint productions with foreign companies and a few included scenes filmed abroad. Most were frothy soap operas and escapist dramas but others were more serious. For example, *Pa Le Myat Te (Tear of Pearl)*, made after the Kuomintang invasion of Burma in the 1950s, had strong nationalist and anti-imperialist themes. *Ludu Aung Than* or *The People Win Through* (1953) was based on an anti-communist play written by U Nu, Burma's first Prime Minister (Nu 1957).

Following the 1962 coup, all studios and movie houses were nationalized, and 'Burmese theatre assumed a monochromatic socialist hue' (Seekins 2006, 307). Due to budgetary and other constraints, black and white film stock was used until well into the 1980s. Even after 1988, when the new military regime relaxed some regulations, the local movie industry continued to suffer from insufficient resources, weak technical skills, poor equipment and low artistic standards. These days there is a steady output of love stories, historical dramas, thrillers, inspirational Buddhist tales and stories based on the occult. There have even been a few attempts at home-grown martial arts adventures, featuring Burma's indigenous *bando* and *banshay* fighting techniques. More often, however, movies made in Burma are propaganda pieces designed to support the regime's political views and conservative cultural policies. Many productions cast the armed forces in a heroic light, battling vicious communists or traitorous ethnic rebels in the hills, as in the 1970s production *Ludu Aung Lan (The Victorious Flag of the People)* (Aung Naing Oo 2008). Some movies have been subsidized by the country's military intelligence apparatus which, until a major purge in 2004, exercised responsibilities that went well beyond its traditional functions.

In Burma, 'alien cultural influences' in the arts are frowned upon (Khin Nyunt 2003). In 1996, the regime promulgated a Motion Picture Law, stating that the industry's purpose was 'to consolidate the national unity, to give correct thoughts and to promote sound knowledge; to help towards purifying the moral character; and to contribute to perpetuation of sovereignty and national peace and development' (Seekins 2006, 307). Given such official guidance, it is no wonder that Burma's movie industry is in the doldrums, and that so many Burmese have turned to video tapes and DVDs (Yeni



2006). For those who can afford them, there is now a wide range available on the black market. Some are made locally, but most Burmese prefer to watch foreign productions. A limited number are legally imported each year, mostly from the US, India and South Korea, but all are subject to censorship. Popular tastes vary. *Gone With the Wind* (1939) was an early favourite, while the Hong Kong martial arts movie *Dubei dao* (*The One-Armed Swordsman*) (1967) was popular in the 1970s. Spy thrillers such as *For Your Eyes Only* (1981) and romantic comedies like *Sleepless in Seattle* (1993) were well received in the 1980s and 1990s.

Films banned by the regime, including pornographic movies (known in Burma as “adult love” movies), can be seen in dozens of underground theatres — most often a smuggled television set and DVD player in a back room. This year *Rambo 4* is in great demand.

Burma’s isolation from the rest of the world, particularly during the socialist era from 1962 to 1988, means that its movies are virtually unknown outside the country. Also, ‘fearing ridicule, Burmese officials generally shied away from showing their features abroad’ (Lent 1990, 223). The only exceptions were documentaries specifically made for foreign audiences and a few features dubbed into Russian or Chinese. Two works by septuagenarian director U Tu Kha, *Spinning Gold and Silver Threads in a Loom* (1976) and *Equal Love* (1979), were shown at the 1983 Asian Pacific Film Festival in Los Angeles, but this was a rare foray into the international movie scene. A rather quixotic attempt by the Myanmar Motion Pictures Organisation to stage a film festival in Bangkok in 2006, as a prelude to wider release of the local product, was a complete flop. Even with Thai and English subtitles added, there were clearly language problems. Also, their long exposure to modern Western movies has led Thai audiences to expect much higher standards of acting, screenwriting, cinematography and special effects (*The Irrawaddy* 2006). The Burmese movie industry is almost never mentioned in published surveys of modern Asian cinema and information on the world-wide web is almost non-existent (Vick 2007).

Ironically, Burma has been a recent focus for the Thai movie industry. About 10 years ago, Thai movie makers turned away from cheap gangster flicks and saccharine teenage romances and started making more realistic dramas, many with historical themes (*Far Eastern Economic Review* 2001, 68). Among them have been four movies which draw on the Thais’ deep-seated antipathy towards their western neighbour. The first movie in this genre was the very successful *Bang Rajan* (2000), which depicted the heroic efforts of Thai villagers in resisting a Burmese army on its way to sack the Thai capital of Ayuthaya in 1767. The second was *The Legend of Suriyothai* (2001), about a fabled Thai queen who died fighting the Burmese in 1528. Made with the help of Francis Ford Coppola, it is the highest grossing film in the history of Thailand (Wilmington 2003). Another historical drama, *Khun Suek* (2003), was set in the same period of confrontation with Burma. The first in a planned trilogy, *Naresuan* (2006) was about the acclaimed liberator of Thailand from Burmese domination in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. *Bang Rajan* and *Suriyothai* have been released internationally. None of these films make the Burmese or their armed forces look very good — which seems to have been the main intention (Wollweber 2007).

India’s movie industry has also given some attention to Burma, starting with the Second World War. Before 1939, organisations like Modern Theatres, Gemini and the

United Artistes Association made several movies with strong nationalist themes. After the Congress Party government resigned, however, the local film industry fell into line with the wishes of the colonial administration, and started making movies that were overtly pro-British and supportive of the war effort (Baskaran 2006). The other common element was that they were all set in Burma. Perhaps the best known was *Burma Rani* (1945), in which a British spy ring in Rangoon, headed by a Tamil woman, helps three Indian agents escape back to India. Another contribution was *Manasamrakshaman (In Defence of Honour)* (1945), also about a spy ring. *En Magan* or *My Son* (1945), about an injured RAF pilot and a nurse, probably owed a debt to *A Farewell to Arms* (1932). These and other vernacular films attempted to counter the Japanese propaganda line, repeated by Subhas Chandra Bose, the leader of the pro-Japanese Indian National Army, of 'Asia for the Asians' (Fay 1995).

Since the war, India has made a small number of films about Burma. A. Kasilingam's Tamil language musical *Rangoon Radha* (1956) was based on a play of the same name, and touched on the subject of Indian refugees fleeing from Burma after the Japanese invasion in 1942. *Rangoon Rowdy* (1979) was another musical, filmed in the Telugu language. Vishal Bhardwaj's *Rangoon Express* (2008) is currently in production. Little is known about this movie, but it appears to be a mixed English-Hindi musical love story set in Burma during the Second World War. The plot revolves around an Indian soldier and an English movie stuntwoman who is acting in Indian films of that time (Kalsi 2008).<sup>16</sup> The producers have hinted that a well-known Western actress will play the female lead. While more or less in the Bollywood tradition, none of these movies stray very far from Burma-related movies made in the West. Like so many of their Hollywood counterparts, some even fall into the trap of strengthening cultural and racial stereotypes.

### **Trends and Themes**

Edward Said's landmark study *Orientalism* concentrated on colonial and post-colonial portrayals of Islam and the Middle East in academic writing, travel literature and novels (Said 2003). Yet many of his observations can be applied to representations of the 'Far East', including Burma, in Hollywood movies. For example, the treatment of women in *The Sheik* (1921) and the 'imaginative geography' of *Arabian Nights* (1942) have parallels in movies made before the war about Asian countries. They are 'structured around a basic dichotomy between East and West, and Other and Self' (Bernstein 1997, 1-18). This phenomenon is perhaps most noticeable in the depiction of foreign landscapes lacking the usual symbols of Western civilization, and the stark divisions drawn between the 'natives' and the European protagonists. Similar criticisms can be leveled at many Hollywood movies made since 1945, despite their claims to be culturally more sensitive. Both *Lawrence of Arabia* (1962) and *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981), for example, revolve around brave Europeans, alone in exotic and unfriendly places, engaging in feats of derring-do either to lead ignorant locals out of the darkness or to recover priceless treasures carelessly lost by them.

As Edith Mirante wrote in 2004, in the main Hollywood representations of Burma 'paint the country as an exotic, cruel land that serves as a backdrop for daring occidental adventures and patriots' (Mirante 2004). Women at various stages of social and moral decline act out dramatic scenes with Western men, who are either young and heroic, or ugly and venal. There is a persistent atmosphere of sleaze and corruption. Other



recurring themes include the tropical climate — the ‘steamy’ heat in particular — a veritable botanical garden of palms and leafy green shrubs, and a menagerie of strange animals — even including some native to Africa. Local colour is provided by picturesque villages of bamboo huts, fantastic pagodas, enigmatic Buddhas and even a traditional *chinthe* (leogryph) or two. To add authenticity to such props, movie makers have occasionally spliced in scenes of teak forests (with their inevitable working elephants) and wide brown rivers, or added gratuitous references to *pongyis* (Buddhist monks) *saophas* (Shan princes) *dacoits* (bandits) and *nats* (animist spirits). In movies made since 1988, the conflict between the military government and the Burmese people is portrayed as savage and unrelenting, and standing in stark contrast to the more benign and ritualized conflicts familiar to Western movie-goers.

However, there is another side to these ‘landscapes of fear’ (Winks 1985, 51). What is a harsh and forbidding place in one movie can be dramatic and ruggedly beautiful in the next. The wild animals and fetid jungle of one adventure can become a cinematic portrait of a rich natural environment, full of rare and attractive fauna and flora. The primitive and warlike ‘natives’ seen in earlier movies about Burma become peaceful and caring Buddhists in later productions. Even a film like *Merrill’s Marauders* includes a touching scene in which local villagers share their meagre food supplies with exhausted American GIs. The brutality and ineptitude of the post-1988 military government has its counterpoint in the generosity and stoicism of the Burmese people, and even their suffering at the hands of the armed forces is balanced by the charm of their customs and festivals. There are characters like the sadistic Major Pa Tee Tint (in *Rambo 4*), but there are also wise and gentle souls like Aung Ko (in *Beyond Rangoon*). The counterpoint to the rampaging and bloodthirsty John Rambo is the dignified pacifist Aung San Suu Kyi.

Yet the fact remains that in almost every major feature movie made about, or set in, Burma by American and British studios, the country and its people are viewed almost entirely through European eyes. The local inhabitants usually play little part in character or plot development, although in later productions they begin to feature more prominently.

In most early films the ‘natives’ only had walk-on parts, which were usually filled by non-Burmese actors. Movies made about the Second World War mentioned the locals from time to time but, as might be expected, they were merely supporting players in a global drama, acted out between the Allies and the Japanese Empire. In *Objective Burma*, for example, Flynn’s troops only encounter a few Urdu speaking villagers. The Kachin leader Nautaug in *Never So Few* was played by a Korean-American actor, but at least his followers were acknowledged as important characters in the movie. The locals were also portrayed sympathetically in *Merrill’s Marauders*. Win Min Than was given a lead role in *The Purple Plain* but, for all her luminous appeal, she was still the stereotypical ‘Burma girl’ waiting for her foreign soldier to return. *Beyond Rangoon* is unusual in that Aung Ko plays a major role, and commands a real screen presence. However, in this regard, as in so many others, *Rambo 4* represents a backward step. Two Burmese newcomers (ironically, both former anti-regime guerrillas) play Burma Army officers, but most of the extras were Thais (*The Irrawaddy* 2007). The movie is yet another example of the time-worn cliché of a Western hero arriving in a foreign land to save the poor, helpless natives.<sup>17</sup>

Because of their heavy dependence on action, high emotional drama and evocative sets, portrayals of Burma on film have tended to be more extreme than those conveyed by other art forms. Even so, the images of Burma created by mainstream movies over the years have been reinforced by the narrative traditions and cultural assumptions found in other forms of popular entertainment, such as poetry, songs, art and literature.<sup>18</sup>

From the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the Second World War, Kipling's ballad 'Mandalay' was responsible for the widespread perception that Burma was a land of whispering palm trees, paddle steamers, flying fish and demure women. This view was reinforced when 'Mandalay' was put to music in the early 1900s and recorded by famous singers like the Australian Peter Dawson. Sir Gerald Kelly's chocolate box paintings of lovely Burma girls 'a-settin' were very popular in the 1920s and, from its first performance in 1931, millions across the English-speaking world learned from Noel Coward's cabaret song that:

Mad Dogs and Englishmen  
Go out in the midday sun.  
The toughest Burmese bandit  
Can never understand it.  
In Rangoon the heat of noon  
Is just what the natives shun,  
They put their Scotch or Rye down  
And lie down.  
(Hadfield 1973, 100-103)

Novelists such as Tennyson Jesse, Maurice Collis and George Orwell also helped create strong images of Burma in the 1920s and 1930s, but they were preceded (and followed) by many lesser-known authors whose colourful and often racist accounts of life in Burma found a ready audience (Jesse 1929; Orwell 1934; Collis 1937). For example, in the ever-popular 'Biggles' books, children throughout the British Empire read of 'little brown men' with 'oriental minds' (which 'work on different lines from ours') in a land of 'leech-infested swamps' and 'stagnant jungles', in a part of the world that was 'rotten with drugs' (Johns 1934; Johns 1945; Johns 1946).<sup>19</sup>

Articles in illustrated journals like the US-based *National Geographic Magazine* were more accurate and balanced, but they too tended to dwell on titillating subjects like 'giraffe-necked' Padaung women, 'wild' Wa head-hunters and bare-breasted Naga beauties (Moore 1930, 247-254).

During the Second World War, correspondents like Wilfred Burchett and George Johnston painted vivid word pictures of the CBI Theatre's harsh terrain, difficult monsoon climate and bitter fighting (Burchett 1944a; Burchett 1944b). Yet they also described a kinder, gentler Burma for their wide readership. Johnston, for example, wrote dozens of articles about the scenery and local inhabitants. He thought the Kachins were 'simple warlike little people', but he was quite taken with the 'slim, graceful, charming' Burmese women, who lived in a 'lovely, placid land' of 'captivating beauty'. These pieces later formed the basis of a book, *Journey Through Tomorrow*, in which he showed considerable sympathy for the plight of the Burmese and anger at the wanton destruction of their culture, by American soldiers in particular (Johnston

1947; Selth 1994). US journalists like Clare Boothe and Jack Belden (both writing for *Life* magazine) were influential in creating graphic images of wartime Burma for the American public. As far as the censors permitted, these and other correspondents did not ignore the harsh realities of war in the CBI Theatre but, for all their worldly cynicism, many of them helped perpetuate the romantic image of Burma that was commonly held before the war.

Since 1945, the picture of Burma conveyed in popular literature has been mixed (Silverstein 1985, 129-140). Several novels have maintained the theme of the mysterious and dangerous East, but there have been some more subtle interpretations of local conditions. Memoirs by 14<sup>th</sup> Army veterans like Patrick Davis and George MacDonald Fraser, and former members of the OSS like Roger Hilsman, have been more accurate but necessarily limited in scope (Davis 1970; Fraser 1992; Hilsman 1990). Most serious reportage since 1962 has concentrated on the country's troubled political history and economic decline under military rule (Lintner 1990; Smith 1991). There have also been a number of informative and entertaining travel books, such as those by Norman Lewis, Bertil Lintner and Andrew Marshall (Lewis 1952; Lintner 1996; Marshall 2002). During the 1990s there was a spate of airport thrillers by authors like Lawrence Sanders, Geoffrey Archer and Craig Thomas, who attempted to incorporate contemporary issues such as Burma's military regime and the drug trade into their often convoluted plots (Block 1998; Thomas 1999; Archer 2002). More recently, atmospheric novels by Amitav Ghosh and Amy Tan have been popular although, surprisingly, they have helped to reinforce cultural stereotypes (Ghosh 2000; Tan 2005).

Burma has never been a popular subject for serious intellectual analysis. After 1988, there was a rapid growth in the number of academic studies devoted to Burma, but their usually more balanced and nuanced arguments have not reached a wide audience (Selth 2007). Indeed, the most compelling popular images of Burma over the past 20 years have been derived from the news media. Unfortunately, many of these stories have been sensationalist and quite inaccurate. There have of course been notable exceptions, but even some of the better quality reports have tended to give a rather simplistic view of Burma's many complex challenges. Also, activist organisations and groups of Burmese exiles have become adept at using the internet to spread their views about conditions under the military government. While obviously written from a particular point of view, their graphic and often emotive writings have had a wide impact, and helped support the crude messages conveyed by films like *Beyond Rangoon* and *Rambo 4*.

### **Burma Movies and Propaganda**

No-one expects complete accuracy from movies, even fictionalized accounts of historical events. While claiming to be objective, documentaries too are made to convey specific messages and often reflect inbuilt political and personal biases. In any case, there has long been a dearth of information about many aspects of the country. As Anna says in *The Purple Plain*, 'No one knows it ... All of Burma. No one knows it all' (Bates 1947, 27). In these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that, for nearly 100 years, representations of Burma on film have been inaccurate or misleading. At least one has even been potentially harmful.

Inaccurate or exaggerated depictions of a country would not matter if films made for commercial release were simply escapist entertainments to distract and amuse, but they help create images in the popular consciousness that influence attitudes towards contemporary events. Indeed, some are deliberate attempts to influence public opinion. For example, movies like Costa-Gavras' *Z* (1969) and his later *Missing* (1982), reminded audiences around the world of the military overthrow of elected governments in Greece and Chile, and helped to inspire political movements against them. Zhuangzhuang Tian's *Lan Feng Zheng (Blue Kite)* (1993) was a searing indictment of communist China's disastrous 'Great Leap Forward' and the Cultural Revolution. Shekhar Kapur's *Bandit Queen* (1994) raised awareness of the systemic mistreatment of low caste Indians, and women in particular. At one level, George Clooney's *Good Night, and Good Luck* (2005) was about the McCarthy witch-hunts of the 1950s, but it was also a potent argument for greater tolerance and a more open political debate in the US about issues like the Iraq War. The two feature films about modern Burma which have tried hardest to sway international opinion are *Beyond Rangoon* and *Rambo 4*.

Artistic and financial considerations aside, both these movies were made to draw attention to the plight of the Burmese people under a military government which, in one guise or another, has held power since 1962. Boorman, whose father fought in Burma during the Second World War, has openly acknowledged his sympathy for the civilian opposition movement, and his personal admiration for Aung San Suu Kyi. After meeting some Burmese dissidents and reading Aung San Suu Kyi's 1991 book *Freedom From Fear*, he felt he 'could do something to help' (Smith and Murphy 1995, 46; Aung San Suu Kyi 1991). Stallone, who co-wrote and directed the latest Rambo epic, has made numerous public comments about Burma's terrible human rights record and the suffering of the ethnic minorities in particular. He has challenged the regime to let him into the country, so he can show them where they are going wrong. He has also said that he wanted his movie to reflect real world events, and to influence international perceptions of the situation in Burma. Accordingly, *Rambo 4* opens with documentary footage of the pro-democracy uprising in 1988, Karen refugees along the Thai border, and the so-called 'saffron revolution' in 2007 when the armed forces crushed another round of peaceful anti-government demonstrations.

To convey his political message, Boorman chose to portray Aung San Suu Kyi's 'active pacifism' and to contrast the regime's brutality with Burma's quietist Buddhist culture. The Arquette character's comfortable middle-class American background is progressively stripped away as she is confronted with the harsh reality of developments in Burma. A medical doctor, she ends up volunteering to work in a refugee camp on the Burma-Thai border, helping those who have managed to escape from the military regime. Stallone takes the opposite approach, suggesting by both words and actions — particularly actions — that violent resistance to such oppression is not only justified but necessary. In one sequence, the dialogue of *Rambo 4* reads:

Rambo: Are you bringing any weapons?  
Burnett: Of course not.  
Rambo: Then you're not changing anything.  
(McCartan 2008).

Efforts at humanitarian intervention are dismissed as well-intentioned, but essentially naive. The only way to improve the situation in Burma, this film is clearly saying, is to overthrow the regime by force.

In different ways, and at different levels, these two movies have achieved their political aims. Such was the emotional impact of *Beyond Rangoon* that it was adopted by many Burmese exiles and activist groups, and used to mobilize support for the pro-democracy movement. Shortly after it was released in Australia in September 1995, for example, the film was screened at Parliament House in Canberra for politicians and their personal staffs. In the US, activists attending pre-release screenings handed out special information packs about the regime's human rights abuses ('Info pack' 1995). *Rambo 4* is such a gross caricature of the violence being perpetrated against the civilian population that few will see it as a convincing picture of contemporary Burma. Even so, its political message has been welcomed by activists and members of Burma's scattered exile community as a vivid and timely reminder of the military government's brutal rule (*Asian Pacific Post* 2008, 18). It is already a hit with Karen insurgents based along the Thai-Burma border, many of whom idolised Rambo even before the release of Stallone's latest film. In addition to wearing Rambo tattoos and T-shirts, they have taken to repeating the hero's mumbled catch-phrase 'Live for nothing, die for something' (McCartan 2008).

Another measure of the effectiveness of these movies as propaganda is the military regime's responses to their release. Both films have been denied clearance to be publicly screened in Burma, and the sale of private copies has also been banned. When *Beyond Rangoon* was released, however, hundreds of video tapes of the movie were distributed throughout Burma by activist groups. Pirate copies could be bought on the black market. There were also reports of Burmese crossing over the Thai-Burma border to towns like Mae Sot and Mae Sai, just to watch the movie. Some insurgent bases in Burma and refugee camps in Thailand held public screenings. After *Rambo 4* was released in February 2008, Burma's Press Scrutiny and Registration Board ordered all journals and newspapers in the country to publish a government article criticizing the movie. Entitled 'Speaking seriously, it is hilarious', the article lampooned the movie unmercifully, describing the lead character as a fat lunatic with sagging breasts (*Huffington Post* 2008; Cho 2008). Despite the efforts of the authorities to prevent its unlicensed distribution, however, bootleg DVDs of *Rambo 4* can still be bought from street sellers, and people are prepared to risk jail to watch it, either at home or in underground theatres (Interviews and personal observations, Rangoon 2008).

The regime may soon have something else to worry about. In early 2008 the US trade magazine *Variety* reported that a movie about Aung San Suu Kyi was being made by Giuseppe Tornatore, director of the Oscar-winning *Nuovo Cinema Paradiso* (1988) (Dawtre 2008). Entitled *The Lady*, it will cover the period from Aung San Suu Kyi's return to Burma from the UK in 1988 until the present day. Given her iconic status among both Burmese and non-Burmese alike, there is little chance that this project will be a critical examination of her character and political philosophy. More than likely, the movie will be like the literary biographies of the Nobel Peace Prize winner published to date, and cast her as a 'living heroine' of Burma's pro-democracy movement deserving of the same recognition as Nelson Mandela, with whom she is often compared (Kyaw Yin Hlaing 2007, 359-376). One of the producers of the new



movie — Avi Arad of *X-Men* (2000) and *Spiderman* (2002) fame — was quoted in *Variety* as saying:

To me, Suu Kyi was like a character from 'X-Men', except that she's a real hero, not an imaginary one. She didn't need to do what she did, and she gave up a lot to do it. (Yeni 2008).

Arad has said that *The Lady* was both 'a love story and a political thriller', intended to reach the widest possible audience. It also had to be a commercial success. If it is as popular as, for example, Richard Attenborough's epic bio-pic *Gandhi* (1982), it will have achieved its aims.

At the same time, Burma has been adopted as a worthy cause by several prominent Hollywood personalities. Just before the military crackdown on Buddhist monks and other pro-democracy demonstrators in September 2007, comedian Jim Carrey urged the regime to release Aung San Suu Kyi and other political prisoners (*News and Reports* 2007). A week later, 28 Hollywood celebrities wrote to UN Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon urging him personally to intervene and secure Aung San Suu Kyi's release from house arrest. Organised by Anjelica Huston, the group included Dustin Hoffman, Robin Williams, Owen Wilson and Jennifer Aniston. Other television and movie stars, such as Eric Szmanda (from the series *Crime Scene Investigation*), Walter Koenig (a member of the original *Star Trek* cast) and Angelina Jolie (of *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* (2001) fame, among other movies) have all visited refugee camps on the Thai-Burma border. This interest has been shrewdly encouraged by anti-regime lobbyists in the US and elsewhere. On 1 March 2008, Hollywood hosted its first ever Burma event, to honour Aung San Suu Kyi. A key organizer of the event was Julie Benz, who claimed to have been made aware of Burma's myriad problems by her role in *Rambo 4* (Shwe Moe 2008).

In May 2008, just before Cyclone Nargis struck Burma, a web-based campaign consisting of daily 'public service spots', was released online by more than 30 Hollywood celebrities. They called for Aung San Suu Kyi's release and the restoration of democracy in Burma. Some of the spots are short sketches — including of all things comedy routines — designed to arouse public awareness of Burma's plight. In his spot, Sylvester Stallone talks about *Rambo 4*. He says that 'it is flattering to be part of a movie that is giving the Burmese people hope'. He also feels 'it is cool to say "I'm banned in Burma"' (Paddock 2008). Following Cyclone Nargis, a group of high profile Hollywood personalities, led by George Clooney and Brad Pitt, undertook to raise a large sum of money for the victims, on the grounds that the military regime gave a low priority to the welfare of Burma's citizens.

*The Lady* is due for release in 2010. Like *Beyond Rangoon*, it will doubtless be seized upon by opponents of the regime to promote their cause. People as high up the political food chain as US First Lady Laura Bush seem to have adopted Aung San Suu Kyi as a personal role model, and are likely to be happy to promote the movie's basic messages. Even without the help of such luminaries, it seems destined to confirm in the popular imagination a rather two dimensional picture of the pro-democracy struggle in Burma. Yet movies do not have to be entirely accurate or highly nuanced to make an impact. For example, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, and the novel on which it is based, are both completely fictitious. As Roger Bourke has pointed out:



There is a deep and a sad historical irony here: that the best known, most popular and notable account of the prisoner of war experience under the Japanese should happen to be the least authentic (Bourke 2007, 88).

Even so, the movie has had an enormous influence on public perceptions of POW life working on the Thai-Burma railway, and the war in Southeast Asia more generally. Neither *Beyond Rangoon* nor *Rambo 4* pretend to be documentaries, but they too leave vivid images of Burma's contemporary problems in the minds of movie-goers. In the hands of an accomplished director like Tornatore, *The Lady* seems destined to do the same.

Movie makers as far back as Joseph Goebbels have understood that, for a political message to get through to a mass audience, it only has to be simply stated, over and over again. Indeed, complex and subtle messages have less chance of achieving the desired result. Thus, the more effective movies are as propaganda, the more they risk hiding or distorting the real picture. One consistent criticism made about *Beyond Rangoon*, and more recently *Rambo 4*, is that they ignore the enormous complexity of the problems found in Burma since 1988. Boorman's film is based on a simplified chronicle of events and suffers from some rather half-baked analysis. As Brian McCartan has persuasively argued, the extreme level of violence shown in *Rambo 4* 'trivializes the actual conflict situation in war-torn Karen State' (McCartan 2008). The regime's long history of atrocities has been well documented, but some of the more horrific scenes in the film, such as pigs feasting on rotting bodies, are 'complete fiction' according to human rights groups. More children die from a lack of medicine to treat diseases than are shot by the army. Also, as McCartan points out, there is no mention in the film of the hundreds of Karen insurgents and dedicated civilians who risk their lives every day to assist their countrymen and women in Burma.

Indeed, it can be argued that, by over-simplifying extremely complex issues and painting the protagonists in such stark colours, movies like *Rambo 4* can actually hinder resolution of Burma's problems. For, if taken to heart, let alone seen as reflecting reality, they support equally simplistic views, and encourage the advocacy of short term, black-and-white solutions where more carefully calibrated, long term approaches are necessary. Since 1988, a number of different policies have been tried to persuade the military regime to implement much needed political, economic and social reforms. Some countries have chosen an uncompromising policy of public criticism and economic sanctions. Others have tried 'constructive engagement', in an attempt to persuade the regime to change. Yet, as is self-evident, no government or international organization has yet been successful in shifting the regime from its core positions. Even when it would appear to be in the regime's own interest to modify its hard line stance, it has resisted pressures to do so, as occurred in May 2008 when Cyclone Nargis struck Burma. It is gradually becoming more widely accepted that there are few truly effective policy options available against a dictatorship that is prepared to put its own survival before the welfare of its people and international norms of behavior.

There are other dangers. As David Steinberg has pointed out, to those opposed to the military regime, in particular the Burmese who have fled the country because of

military oppression or economic necessity, films like *Rambo 4* excite emotions that reinforce their plight and reaffirm the lack of legitimacy of the military government.

Even more problematic, however, and far more dangerous, is the implication that the regime may be overthrown by US public or private military action (Steinberg 2008).

Ever since the 1988 uprising, there have been calls by activists and others for an invasion of Burma, to restore democratic rule. This issue recently resurfaced in public debates about the international community's overriding 'responsibility to protect' the victims of Cyclone Nargis, after the military regime refused to allow foreign countries directly to deliver aid to devastated areas of the country. In the current circumstances, any attempt by opposition groups to overthrow the regime by force would be unsuccessful. Clandestine support provided for such a venture, either from foreign governments or non-government groups, would simply be encouraging a futile gesture that was likely to end in a bloodbath. Also, an invasion of Burma by the US or a UN-led coalition has never been on the cards. Even public discussion of forcible external intervention has the result of increasing the regime's paranoia and hardening its resolve to resist what it considers to be foreign interference in Burma's internal affairs and a violation of Burmese sovereignty. Thus, while it may give some temporary comfort to the activist community, movies like *Rambo 4* may in fact help delay the resolution of Burma's problems.

## Conclusion

Compared with many other countries, relatively few people have been to Burma or know much about its history, politics and culture. For those wishing to find out more, let alone conduct serious research, accurate sources are scarce and reliable assessments about its current political, economic and social problems are hard to find. Particularly since 1988, these information gaps have tended to be filled by rumour and gossip, fuelled along the way by regime propaganda, sensationalist journalism and activist lobbying. To this heady mix of potentially misleading data and opinion must now be added feature films.

Ever since 1913, movies about Burma have helped to create popular conceptions of the country — including contemporary developments — which often bear little relation to the facts. This should not be surprising. After all, movies are above all else escapist entertainment, offering brief excursions into imaginary worlds where the normal rules do not apply. This is a large part of their attraction. Yet, when movie-goers leave the theatre they take away with them more than a passing sense of enjoyment. In many subtle ways, even those movies that do not pretend to have a specific message can leave deep impressions about the places and events portrayed. These images combine with information and perceptions gleaned from the news media and other popular art forms to create what the Irish poet Seamus Heaney has called 'cultural depth-charges' (Heaney 1980, 150). These are networks of subliminal associations that range from the intellectual to the emotional, from the enlightened to the primitive. When triggered by specific circumstances, these inner connections can influence attitudes and decisions without those affected even knowing it. Clearly, this phenomenon should not be over-stated, but at least since Leni Riefenstahl's *Triumph*

*des Willens (Triumph of the Will)* (1935) it has been recognized that movies can have a powerful influence on public attitudes.

For many years, popular images of Burma were stereotypes drawn from ballads, paintings, novels and Saturday matinees. They tended to revolve around steamy jungles 'infested' with dangerous animals (or enemy soldiers), quaint villagers in picturesque paddy fields, and seedy bars inhabited by stranded singers and other lost souls. As the RAF pilot Forrester stated in *The Purple Plain*, before going there, 'Rice and rubies ... that was all the Burma I knew' (Bates 1949, 27). As a result of the Second World War, and the efforts made by war correspondents to bring the CBI Theatre to life for Allied audiences back home, a more realistic picture of Burma gradually began to emerge, but dark images of an untamed and dangerous country still competed for mental space with the romanticized ideal of golden pagodas and graceful women. Ironically, to large numbers of people, reference to wartime Burma now conjures up images derived from David Lean's brilliant but inaccurate masterpiece, *The Bridge on the River Kwai*, which was set in Thailand. No movie yet made about, or set in Burma has achieved such canonic status, but over the past 15 years there has been a deliberate effort by two directors to promote enduring images in the minds of movie-goers and the wider public, of Burma suffering under the military regime.

Arguably, movies like *Beyond Rangoon* and *Rambo 4* are successful as examples of escapist entertainment. Both are quite well made, in technical terms, and they have demonstrated that they can elicit strong emotional responses from their audiences. It can even be claimed that these two productions demonstrate how far movies about Burma have come since those first silent melodramas about demure maids in Mandalay, and later matinee fare about shapely teak wallahs in jodhpurs fending off savage tribesmen. In their representations of Aung San Suu Kyi and John Rambo, Boorman and Stallone offer two alternative views of how Burma's current political problems might be viewed, and how they might be managed. Yet, in their own ways, both *Beyond Rangoon* and *Rambo 4* suffer from the major flaw that, while setting themselves up as commentaries on contemporary 'real life' events, they grossly oversimplify complex issues that have long defied easy answers. This has the potential to further complicate the resolution of Burma's many problems. Indeed, by suggesting that violence is the answer, and by making the generals feel more threatened by external forces, films like *Rambo 4* could make a satisfactory outcome in that deeply troubled country even more difficult to attain.

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## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> In 1989 the new military government changed the country's name from Burma to Myanmar. In this essay the former name is used for ease of recognition.

<sup>2</sup> This was *Gunga Din* (1939), starring Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen and Douglas Fairbanks Jr.

<sup>3</sup> Ironically, Campbell spent the greater part of his working life in northern Thailand, and *Tiger Valley* is set in Thailand, not Burma.

<sup>4</sup> The importance of China in US strategic planning cannot be underestimated. Referring to the American political and military leadership around this time, Churchill told General Wavell that 'China bulks as large in the minds of many of them as Great Britain'. Tuchman, p.240.

<sup>5</sup> The Ledo Road was renamed the Stilwell Road in 1945, at the suggestion of Generalissimo Chiang Kai-shek.

<sup>6</sup> The American Volunteer Group was assembled in the months before Pearl Harbour was attacked on 7 December 1941 but, contrary to the impression left by the movie *Flying Tigers*, their first combat mission against the Japanese was not until 21 December. Ford, *Flying Tigers*, p.111.

<sup>7</sup> Capra's film has been described as 'an epic paean to the resistance of the Chinese people against Japan's aggression'. It was, however, temporarily withdrawn because it omitted any mention of problems among the Chinese themselves. Dower, *War Without Mercy*, pp.17-18.

<sup>8</sup> The actual military value of these expeditions remains the subject of debate. In his memoirs of the Burma campaign, for example, Field Marshall Slim described them as 'an expensive failure'. Slim, *Defeat Into Victory*, pp.162-163.

<sup>9</sup> Contrary to popular myth, the movie was not 'banned' by the British government. Nor does it appear to have been the cause of riots, either inside or outside the theatres in which it was playing. There is no doubt, however, that the movie made many people in the UK very angry, and that it received a drubbing from the UK press. Jarvie, 'Fanning the Flames', pp.117-137.

<sup>10</sup> Bates wrote a second novel about Burma, *The Jacaranda Tree* (Michael Joseph, London, 1949).

<sup>11</sup> The OSS operated in Burma during the war, usually under the cover name Detachment 101. One of their roles was to help train members of the local hill tribes, like the Kachin, in modern warfare.

<sup>12</sup> In 1997, on the advice of a US public relations firm, the SLORC changed its name to the State Peace and Development Council (SPDC).

<sup>13</sup> At least, this was the impression given by the names of the terrorists attending the summit — Shaq El Hoorie, Soon Kit Din and Mansur Khan Shamsuddin.

<sup>14</sup> Documentaries about Burma have a long history. See, for example, *Burmah, Rangoon, India* (1912), released as a split reel with the silent comedy *Bringing Home the Pup* (1912); and *Elephant as a Workman, Rangoon, India* (1913), released as a split reel with the silent western *The Cattle Thief's Escape* (1913).

<sup>15</sup> Cowell's filmography includes *The Opium Trail* (1966), *The Opium Warlords* (1974), *Opium* (1978) and *The Opium Kings* (1997).

<sup>16</sup> *Rangoon Express* may be the latest name for a project previously referred to as *Julia*, a possible reference to the suspected participation of US actress Julia Roberts.

<sup>17</sup> In fact, mercenaries have played a very small role in the Burma conflict.

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<sup>18</sup> Popular entertainments also built on official reports and accounts by explorers, traders and missionaries. While beyond the scope of this essay, these writings often gave inaccurate or highly distorted pictures of Burma and the Burmese. See, for example, Helen G. Trager, *Burma through alien eyes: Missionary views of the Burmese in the nineteenth century* (Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1966).

<sup>19</sup> Burma is mentioned in three books written by 'Captain' W.E. Johns, namely *Biggles Flies Again*, *Biggles in the Orient* and *Biggles Delivers the Goods* (Hodder and Stoughton, London, 1946). His young readers also learnt some questionable geography. In *Biggles Flies Again*, for example, Johns describes his hero taking off from Rangoon and flying east-northeast to India.