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An amalgamation of images from Lav Diaz's films *From What Is Before* (2014), *Season of the Devil* (2018), and *Genus Pan* (2020) rendered as a painting.

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## EDITOR'S NOTE

*Pelikula* arrives at a vexed moment when our cinema and nation are perched on the edge of imminent change months before another national election that promises, or threatens, to be historic.

As we endure being caught in a limbo precipitated by COVID-19 and its botched handling by our government, changes in the way we make and watch films unfold. More local digital-access platforms and online programs are on offer, and more Filipino films have become available worldwide via global streaming services. Movie theaters and microcinemas have reopened as of this writing, though moviegoing is far from where it was before the pandemic. Nevertheless, online and hybrid film festivals flourish, and against the odds, new films are made.

Though Filipino films continue to reap international recognition, it is no time for celebration. Another Marcos is running for president, and the dynastic and authoritarian families are feuding and scrambling to stay in power while the Filipino people suffer through economic and political crises. A section of the film sector remains engaged, but nothing is certain. Our cover art by Tom Estrera III assembling images from Lav Diaz's films captures this apprehension, this state of confusion, located between foreboding and defiance.

Despite challenges, *Pelikula* remains true to its goal of publishing articles that shed light and offer new arguments on national and regional topics surrounding Philippine cinema, its myriad facets, and its history. However, in this volume, we ventured to expand the notion of "regional" by orienting Philippine cinema outwardly, with some essays comparing, juxtaposing, and interpreting Filipino films with works from Vietnam, Thailand, Indonesia, Singapore, Hawaii, and Japan. Moreover, in several pieces, we highlighted the parallel growth and synergistic interactions of regional film artists and scholars, hoping to foster an appreciation of our shared efforts and our neighbors' cultural production. As we deepen our understanding of how much our historical and current struggles as peoples are similar, there is more opportunity for self-understanding and promoting solidarity across national borders.

The work on the journal has been steady, although we have taken it one step at a time, putting our long-term plans on hold while securing funding for each new release. Still, we were able to proceed because of the editorial team members' optimism, dedication, and hard work, who have been laboring for the most part out of love, and the authors and contributors, who have willingly shared with us their time and work. We are also fortunate that this year, we have received kind and generous assistance from institutions that share the vision of *Pelikula*.

I am grateful to the Japan Foundation, Manila, and its director, Mr. Ben Suzuki, a kindly, constant, and erudite admirer of Philippine cinema, and everyone from JFM who contributed to making this volume and the upcoming Japanese-language edition. Their openness to support the journal and collaborate with us came at the right time. We also thank the UP Diliman - Office for Initiatives in Culture and the Arts for extending additional help. The cooperation of the JFM and UPD-OICA has allowed us to continue our work for another year.

Finally, I wish to dedicate this volume to the memory of film critic and scholar Bienvenido Lumbera, whose legacy has made a journal like *Pelikula* conceivable.

—Patrick F. Campos

## A MESSAGE FROM THE JAPAN FOUNDATION, MANILA

*Pelikula* is one of the most important publications that center on Philippine cinema and films in general. Publications such as this journal provide in-depth analyses of the issues and achievements of Philippine cinema over the years and encourage debate and discussion on Philippine cinema's history and development. I would like to personally commend the contributors for the efforts that they have exerted in writing their manuscript as I, myself, know the difficulties, pressures, and challenges of writing.

The Japan Foundation, Manila, is greatly honored to support the sixth volume of *Pelikula*, which has a visible spotlight on the Philippines' connection to Southeast Asian cinema as well as Japan. We believe that this literary gem plays a vital role in the development of Philippine cinema and the promotion of Filipino films, writers, and academicians worldwide. We are proud to have selected articles from the present and the past editions and have them translated to the Japanese language, making them more accessible to Japanese readers. We believe that this initiative is a step forward to introducing Philippine cinema to Japanese audiences.

Congratulations to *Pelikula* for continuing to write about cinema amidst the uncertainties and challenges brought by the pandemic. We are in this crucial time when more platforms for various voices need to be empowered to be heard. And The Japan Foundation, Manila, is committed to its goal of supporting outstanding initiatives that deeply strengthen the Philippines-Japan relations and the continuous development of Philippine culture and the arts.

—SUZUKI "Ben" Tsutomu, Director  
The Japan Foundation, Manila



Over the past decade, several films have emerged from the regional construct of Southeast Asia that have engaged with the tropes of science fiction (SF)—constructing future worlds, bending time, imagining technologies, or portraying alien visitations. Some have used more direct, narrative adaptations of the genre, while others have experimented with its iconographies and themes. For this essay, I am particularly interested in films that use formal experimentation to throw the medium's transparency into question, creating a sensory experience that implies the limits of scientific empiricism: visuality as evidence, history as fact, knowledge as taxonomy. Woven together, the works' critiques of scientific rationality suggest alternative ways of seeing, sensing, and feeling historical time, modeling a method for being in an unstable, disorienting world.

The three films I will discuss surfaced across Southeast Asian geographies with an intriguing simultaneity: Jet Leyco's *For My Alien Friend* (Philippines, 2019), Minh Quý Trương's *The Tree House* (Nhà Cây) (Vietnam, 2019), and Yosep Anggi Noen's *The Science of Fictions* (*Hiruk-Pikuk Si Al-Kisah*) (Indonesia, 2019). Like any project organized within the auspices of Southeast Asia, *Pelikula's* special section was an invitation to imagine cartographies and locate the binding threads among culturally disparate texts. I adapt this curatorial practice not to suggest equivalency or take Cold War-era territorial boundaries for granted but to signal emerging forms of relation among seemingly distant histories, geographies, and temporalities.<sup>1</sup> While located in vastly different parts of the region, these three films are bound by their synchronous appearance and thematic and formal resonances. Across the three films, media and scientific technologies are co-implicated in patterns of displacement and disorientation. The turn away from historical narratives and scientific progress towards the microtemporalities of the body becomes an effort at reorientation.

#### Science, technologies, and fictions in Southeast Asia

Cinematic SF is not new in Southeast Asia; indeed, the genre has a long history in the region. Works have ranged from popular features, such as Fernando Poe Jr.'s superhero classic *Darna* (Philippines, 1951) based on a popular komiks character and Sompot Saengduenchai's *tokusatsu* or monster films (Thailand, 1970s) inspired by their Japanese counterparts, to independent shorts such as Mike de Leon's *Aliwan Paradise* (Philippines, 1992) which critiques media and politics through its portrayal of a satiric future world. What seems novel is a growing attention to alternative forms of SF, beginning around 2014 and thriving especially over the past four years. Like many films that fall into the art house or independent film category, these works have received much international attention through exhibitions at film festivals and cultural institutions. In October 2019, the Tokyo International Film

Festival's Crosscut Asia section featured recent Southeast Asian horror and SF films. In November 2020, the United States Smithsonian Museum hosted a screening series titled, *Alternate Realities: Science Fiction from Across Asia*, which featured an extensive lineup of films from Southeast Asia, such as Laz Diaz's *The Halt* (Philippines, 2019) and Anocha Suwichakornpong's *Krabi, 2562* (Thailand, 2019). A February 2020 article in the art magazine *Hyperallergic* announced, "Southeast Asian Cinema Takes Hollywood Sci-Fi in New Directions." And in January 2021, the Singapore-based Asian Film Archive hosted a program titled *State of Motion: [Alternate/Opt] Realities Film*, screening "a range of Singapore and Southeast Asian SF titles from the last 25 years."<sup>2</sup> Seeing the films as a way to examine the present from a regional vantage point, the organizers describe, "the usual tropes of the genre are adapted for local entertainment or built off in unexpected ways. As we immerse ourselves in these filmic simulations, one is encouraged to contemplate the conditions of Southeast Asia in different timelines and reorient our bearings about the histories of the future."<sup>3</sup>

What critical frameworks might be most generative for these cinematic experimentations with SF? In some ways, the films could be seen as fitting with the turn to what scholars Jennifer Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells have termed "global science fiction cinema" in their influential 2016 anthology, *Simultaneous Worlds*. As Feeley and Wells write in their introduction, they were interested in both the expansion of SF beyond economic and cultural centers such as Japan and the US, as well as critical attention to cinema "as a medium and cultural practice" and "its interface with other media and paratexts."<sup>4</sup> Feeley and Wells use the provocative term "global" purposefully, arguing that locally situated understandings of it allow "new ways of reading the world emerge, demonstrating the simultaneity of contemporary world-making projects."<sup>5</sup> They also refuse a reading of SF that places its emergence within capitalist modernity, a developmentalist narrative that that assumes capitalist teleology, leaving little room for "the errant and strategic use that SF can provide to filmmakers working within nation-states in vastly different positions of power with respect to global capital."<sup>6</sup> This is not an encompassing, globalist idea of SF, but one that pays ample attention to the uneven flows of capital and technology while refusing narratives of diffusion from center to periphery.

This analytic approach is a useful intervention in film genre studies. But I am also interested in how frameworks outside of genre studies can help us consider the works emerging from Southeast Asia. The films I will discuss are unconventional examples of the genre and may be just as easily read as documentary, art cinema, or experimental

Opposite page:  
*For My Alien Friend* (Jet Leyco, 2019). All screengrabs by author



# TEMPORAL TECHNOLOGIES: TEMPORAL TECHNOLOGIES:

## Toward Southeast Asian Science Fiction Cinema

Jasmine Nadua Trice



film. Focusing on these films' SF elements is a deliberate choice to position the works as interventions within a long history of literary and cinematic engagements with scientific development and speculative technologies.

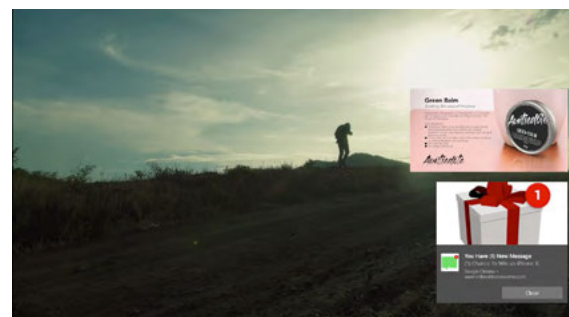
While genre studies approaches are useful, I would suggest two other areas of inquiry that seem especially relevant for the kinds of films that have emerged in Southeast Asia: the burgeoning field of Southeast Asian science and technology studies (STS) and postcolonial critiques of linear, homogeneous time. I find it particularly interesting that SF's regional, cinematic resurgence has occurred alongside recent calls for "Southeast Asian STS" that speak to transregional flows and histories, moving away from Euro-American theories applied to local data.<sup>7</sup> I am not an expert in this area, but I find the historical accounts of Southeast Asian engagements with technology and science useful for considering the sense of ambivalence, disorientation, and dislocation that seem prevalent across many of these films. Portraying longstanding knowledge systems' adaptations of colonial science while also describing the role of scientific modernities in nationalist movements, these STS narratives' concerns with conceptions of temporality, historicity, and modernity offer a way of thinking through the tropes of SF within long regional histories. At the same time, postcolonial critiques of homogeneous time offer parallel strategies for such critique.<sup>8</sup>

Across the three films, communications technologies offer connection while emphasizing distance: home becomes an unstable object of memory, and the microtemporalities of the body call into question history's singular, linear trajectory. More specifically, media technologies become the mode of critique for specific temporalities and historical forms. Each film engages with a specific media format: digital media (*For My Alien Friend*), celluloid film (*The Tree House*), and television (*The Science of Fictions*). I endeavor to locate the history of those technologies within the contexts of the films, as a means of using "Southeast Asia as method," building the contours of the genre from the region's parallel histories of media tech. The endeavor is more exploratory than definitive. Less a proving ground than a provocation, the discussion weaves the connections between *For My Alien Friend*, *The Tree House*, and *The Science of Fictions* as a starting point for thinking through what "Southeast Asian SF" might entail.

**Glitch histories**

Jet Leyco's *For My Alien Friend* unfolds as a digital collage of images and sounds strung together through a voiceover that is both contemplative and explanatory. The narrator, a version of the filmmaker himself, explains his life to his alien friend while at the same time reflecting on what this life might mean.

The film's collage format troubles ideas of historical linearity and progress, while its glitch aesthetics unsettle assumptions around technological mediation and communicative transparency. Some of its images are the sublime land-, sky-, and seascapes of visual arts and cinema history, evoking a scale of grandeur and eternity. Subsequent images undermine this grand scale, adopting the look of a computer screen recording. Pop-up windows advertising medicines and prizes like cars and iPhones festoon rural landscapes with internet detritus, constructing a distracted digital media spectator. Pixels melt into smears of color, a digital voice reminds the narrator of a low battery, images and sound repeat in a broken loop. Michael Betancourt describes glitch art as a "post digital aesthetic," drawing from curators Christiane Paul and Malcom Levy. The term "glitch" refers to "corruption artifacts" that "engage and reflect technical failures in digital systems."<sup>9</sup> Through this aesthetic of the glitch, the film emphasizes the materiality and ambivalence of the everyday engagement with digital media technologies: their possibilities for connection and documentation, as well as their unavoidable failures.



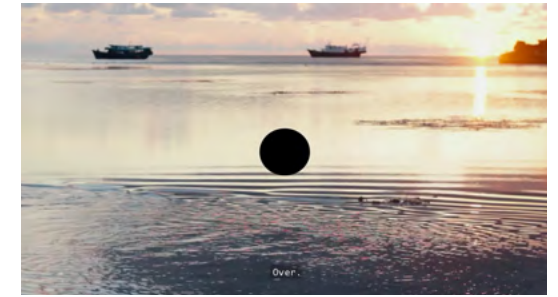
*For My Alien Friend*

**Through this aesthetic of the glitch, the film emphasizes the materiality and ambivalence of the everyday engagement with digital media technologies.**

The materiality of digital media is significant, given its complex history in the Philippines. As Hye Jean Chung has written in her analysis of digital images as media heterotopias: "A heterotopic analysis demonstrates a method to challenge the notion of cinematic space as a seamless unity. Instead, it considers cinematic space as a textured, multilayered assemblage of mediated materiality, or a composite of physical locations and digitally manipulated images that retain material residue of a geographically dispersed workflow."<sup>10</sup> Analyzing the traces of globalized labor pipelines in films such as Ang Lee's *Life of Pi* (2012) or James Cameron's *Avatar* (2009), Chung's analysis troubles the globalist rhetoric of mobility and frictionless connection that neglects the realities of territorial materiality.<sup>11</sup>

In part, what is interesting about Leyco's film is that it enacts a similar critique of digital culture, using glitch aesthetics and SF tropes to emphasize digital media's opacity and frictions, rather than its transparency and seamlessness. Given the history of digital technology in the Philippines, this becomes a critique of global, developmental histories. The history of the Philippines in global IT infrastructure is premised on its invisibility: call center workers train their voices to speak with American accents, and content moderators erase disturbing images from YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter.<sup>12</sup> Workers in the Philippines are made invisible, providing offshore labor that maintains illusory, global technoscapes. These enterprises are often the product of developmentalist state policy grounded in teleological temporal structures: dreams of participation in technologized futures and a turn away from embodied labor to knowledge economies.<sup>13</sup> Histories of empire are critical to this scenario, creating a perceived familiarity with US sociality that combines with economic precarity to create a desirable digital labor force.<sup>14</sup>

*For My Alien Friend* does not engage with these larger contexts directly, but its emphasis on the glitchy materiality of digital media troubles teleological histories. Science, technology, and empire become oblique reference points in the film, underpinning its autobiography. Leyco, the filmmaker, explains ordinary life to an alien friend via introductions to his friends and family through the voiceover. At the same

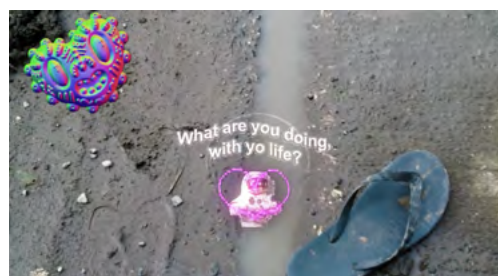
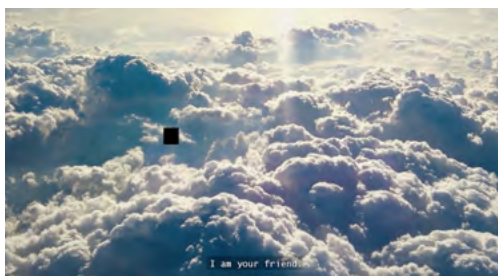
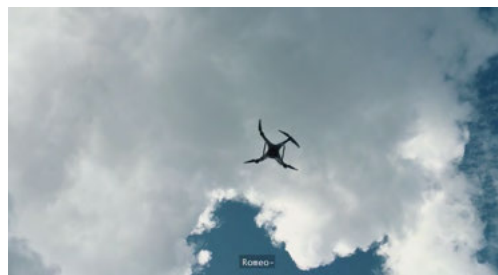


*For My Alien Friend*

time, his meditation on time swings between scales, from the mundane markers of human life—weddings, family members, friendships—to the cosmologies of religion and the teleologies of science. The film connects science and technology with militarism and empire; some of these relations are subtle. The film opens with a series of signs, some decipherable only with a digital device, others through linguistic translation. The film's first image is a QR code that reveals a series of numbers when activated. A web search suggests that these could be a tracking number for a package sent by Japan Post, but its meaning is unclear, positioning the act of decoding as a communicative dead-end rather than access to immediate information.

Leyco's voice, filtered through crackling static, communicates with a distant listener—the titular "alien friend" and the viewer—using the NATO phonetic alphabet. Evoking the low-fi audio textures of a walkie-talkie, the voiceover references technologies associated with distance and militarism. Animated shapes expand and contract over the screen; a dot becomes a cursor that selects letters from an alphabet, imprinted on images of moving clouds. The film also plays with translation, imprinting images of sky and sea with letters in the alphabet and Tagalog words, translated into English: buhay (life), tubig (water), tunog (sound), diyos (god). The film thus plays with the relationship between language and codes, cultural and institutional forms of communication, the voice and technologies of transmission. The film ends with a QR code, revealing the encoded English text, "What's on your mind?" when scanned. Rather than revealing information, these codes only yield more questions.





For My Alien Friend

The images of codes and clouds are beautiful and unsettling, tying nature and technology in disorienting ways. The cloud image is a literalization of metaphors for digital storage. Imprinted with digital text, it constructs digital seamlessness as fantasy, emphasizing the disembodiment of the voiceover narrator. Moreover, this floating, disembodied space conjures an escape from the infrastructural failures that may be waiting below. As Vicente Rafael has written in his classic article on cell phone technology and the EDSA revolution, cell phones enabled users to float above streets clogged with traffic and failing postal systems.<sup>15</sup> Like many liberalized economies, Rafael writes, the Philippines “shares in the paradox of being awash in the latest technologies of communication such as the cell phone while mired in deteriorating infrastructures such as roads, postal services, railroads, power generators and landlines. With the cell phone, one seems able to pass beyond these obstacles.”<sup>16</sup> Like cellular communication, it offers a fantasy of communication across distance, disembodied and instantaneous. But the cloud itself also has military underpinnings. Tung-hui Hu argues that the cloud offers a fantasy of political power as dispersed and immaterial; for Hu, the cloud allows digital technologies to deploy older conceptions of power over populations.<sup>17</sup> Usually, these conventions obscure its militarized inception.<sup>18</sup> In *For My Alien Friend*, the cloud image is a tranquil respite from the film’s glitch aesthetics’s erratic editing and visual density. But as Hu’s scholarship suggests, such tranquility belies the image’s connections to empire.

*For My Alien Friend* places images of the cloud alongside more direct references to technologized histories of empire. One of these is the film’s use of NASA’s moon landing audio, which blends into Leyco’s voiceover. American astronauts’ descriptions of the moon landing repeat throughout the film, played over images of rural Philippine landscapes and a first-person POV shot of a cameraperson walking in sand. The first time we hear the astronauts, the film turns to the indigenous minority, the Aeta, describing them as the first Filipinos. A figure sits against a vast, barren landscape, a visual parallel to the desolate moon the astronauts describe. The Aeta had historically lived in the area that became the largest US military installation in the Philippines, Clark Air Force Base and Subic Naval Base. According to Leyco’s voiceover transmission, the Aeta in this area were forced to flee their homes when Mount Pinatubo erupted in 1991. As the film cuts to images of mountains, his explanation continues, with the astronauts’ voices interspersed, describing F-stops, shutter speeds, and footprints. Leyco relates how the Aeta lost their homes. Rather than a seamless blending, time, space, and history are awkwardly entangled in an overt, performative way: 1969 and 2019, an astronaut and a filmmaker, a rocky, orbiting satellite and its home planet, rendered proximate, but not interchangeable, through an unreliable medium.

Ultimately, the film’s narrator achieves his search for meaning and connection not through god (both indigenous cosmologies and the bloodier Catholic practices of self-flagellation and crucifixion are referenced in the film), but through its inverse, “delta-oscar-golf,” the creatures that would ostensibly hold the lowest position in organized religion’s celestial hierarchy. As a digital voice alerts the narrator to a low battery in the film’s final moments, he connects with his alien friend, “Sheen,” described earlier as Leyco’s romantic partner. She observes that her dog, Kanyey, really loves her. This seems to be the film’s thesis on time



For My Alien Friend

and scale. The narrator has insistently played with the idea of g-o-d’s inverse being d-o-g, while also contemplating the idea of “moving forward, moving backward.” In the middle of the film, the narrator encounters Reneng Ilaya, an elderly, multi-awarded runner who runs long distances despite age and asthma. Ilaya relates his championships to the camera in kilometers; as he walks, he offhandedly comments that he is going in the wrong direction, saying, “I’ll go back.” The film puts this passing audio on a loop as it transitions to the next scene, which follows young boys in a cemetery likely serving as their home. They hold hands and walk among the mausoleums, their youth and vitality a stark contrast to the monuments to death and the afterlife. Ilaya’s voice lingers, repeating again and again that this is the wrong direction—“babalik ako,” “I will go back.” The human form becomes a measure of time, and the repeated audio becomes a frantic glitch urgently calling for the digital media spectator to turn back. If time is not a linear progression forward, the vehicles for marking and documenting it are not historical narratives, nor are they the technologized instruments of mediation that created the film itself. Ultimately, the only meaningful ways to mark time are through the microtemporalities of the body—the points of affective connection that chart its cycle from birth to death.

### Fractured, flickering times

Shot on S16mm film among Jarai, Ruc, Hmong and Cor indigenous communities, Minh Quý Truong’s *The Tree House* offers a telling counterpart to *For My Alien Friend*. Like the latter, *The Tree House* is concerned with the materiality

of mediation, trading the glitch aesthetics of the digital for an elegiac, celluloid meditation on home, memory, and loss. Questions of home and displacement are tied with histories of empire and violence. The violence of the camera parallels that of the gun. The film specifically incorporates archival footage of resettlement programs from the US Department of Defense, while reflexively wrestling with the ethics of filmic documentation. The film also critiques media technologies, questioning their capacities for documentation and communication while holding them in opposition to embodied forms of memory and recollection. Like *For My Alien Friend*, it borrows from SF tropes to upend more disciplinary forms of knowledge, implicating moving image media within these informational systems.

*The Tree House* was inspired by Minh’s memory of seeing a lone house on a mountain. As Minh relates, the film is about the many permutations of home—a home for living, a home for dying, and the ways communities have coped when such homes are lost.<sup>19</sup> These ideas of home and its relation to archival images hold weight in the context of Vietnam. As Thy Phu points out, drawing from Yen Le Espiritu and Christina Sharpe, in contexts where official archives are fragmented or broken, unofficial, familial archives, often associated with domestic spaces, gain particular significance.<sup>20</sup> *The Tree House* engages with the domestic sphere’s status as an alternative to dominant archival histories, foregrounding the indigenous lives and domestic spaces that exist outside the official archives of the nation-state.

Like *For My Alien Friend*, the film connects several vignettes through the framing device of the filmmaker’s



voiceover. The voiceover is a transmission from Mars in the year 2045. Over a black screen, the voiceover sets up the premise, the English subtitles reading:

He first landed on Mars in early 2045. He only carried a few things from home with him as people told him he wouldn't need much there. For here everything was new and completely different. A whole new life. Among his stuff there were one camera and one small recorder as he planned to make film during his free time here (actually, on Mars that meant most of the time). A documentary about life on Mars for example.

The film cuts to a shot that shows a toddler making his way through a silhouetted doorway. The voiceover continues:

One day he did a recording test of the sounds around where he lived. And this was the result. For a fleeting moment, it reminded him of the sound of wind rifting through a roof somewhere on Earth.

From its opening, the film's employment of SF calls into question the conventions of ethnographic representation, reflexively highlighting the filmmaker's outsider role and his distance from the lives the camera captures. The film is a collage of images and sounds that meld past, present, and an imagined, science-fictional future.

Media formats are crucial to these temporal fusions. The film oscillates among different media forms: drawings, photographs, radio reportage, archival US military film, South Vietnamese popular song, phone calls between the filmmaker and his father, the fictional transmission from Mars, and Minh's own film footage. Ultimately, each of these media formats is lacking in comparison to the embodied memory of the indigenous storytellers who narrate their own histories. This is not exactly a romanticization of indigenous lifeworlds but a reckoning with media's inevitable inability to capture and preserve the past. As Minh suggests in the voiceover, his own

reliance on photographs has led to a gap in his memory, while the Ruc people use their stories to bring life to the past: "Our memories depend too much on images: photography. But their memories are stories filled with imagination."

The film couples this question of personal documentation and memory with the larger media infrastructures underlining these individual media practices. Some parts of the story are told through fragments of institutional news media. We hear a radio news program telling of one of the film's participants, Hồ Văn Lang, a Cor man whose family home in Quang Ngai province was bombed in 1973. Though other family members perished in the blaze, he and his father, Hồ Văn Thanh, were able to escape into the forest where they lived for four decades. He and his father, according to Hồ Văn Lang, built a house in a tree, 20 feet above the ground. The film cuts to an image shown intermittently throughout the film's duration: a hand sketching a simple house on white paper, perhaps a reminder of the filmmaker's own image-based, documentary impulse. Through its emphasis on orality as a different form of memory freed from images, the film questions the validity of this pictorial impulse to capture a memory and preserve time. The matter of the father and son's survival pervades the news coverage, which the film references as it cuts to the news photograph of Hồ Văn Lang, used as globally circulated evidence of a "found" forest-dweller. The film manipulates this black-and-white image, bending it so that it blurs in and out of legibility, evoking the unstable malleability of ostensibly unwavering, evidentiary documents.

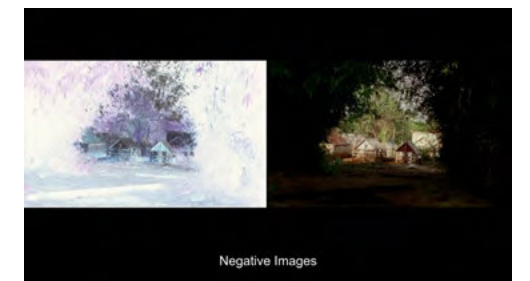
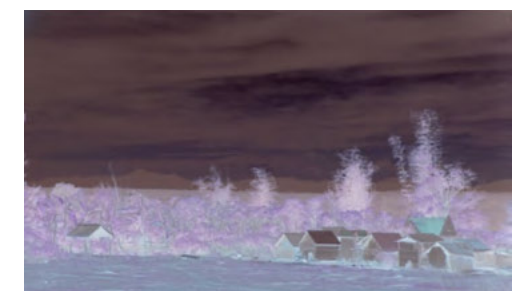
Like *For My Alien Friend*, *The Tree House* is concerned with the disjunctures between different temporal scales: the state and news media versus the personal, oral narratives that construct stories of life and death. For instance, in contrast to media narratives of forest survival, the filmmaker converses with people who have made the forest their home—as a matter of tradition, necessity, and later, as nostalgic visitation. Hardly a space of scarcity, the accounts describe the forest as a space of abundance. A Ruc woman narrates how she and others in her community moved to caves to escape the American military. She describes her family's cave as similar to a "normal home,"

covered all around "like a beautiful roof," with a place for a fire and rocks to lounge. Plants, animals, and insects were plentiful sources of nourishment, and later in life, she would occasionally leave her house to sleep a few nights in the cave. As Minh's voiceover describes, the state has transitioned the Ruc people to an agrarian lifestyle; the film shows their work in the rice paddies beside the barracks of the Border Defense Force. Later, we see footage of the identical yellow structures that serve as their state-mandated dwellings. Minh's voiceover tells of the developmentalist, evolutionary logics behind this transition: "A soldier told him, 'Teaching the Ruc people how to grow rice is helping them to evolve 1000 years faster.' So, displacing them from their caves and then relocating them into the identical yellow-brick houses was also helping them to evolve 1000 years faster?" *The Tree House* rejects such linear, evolutionary accounts of historical time.

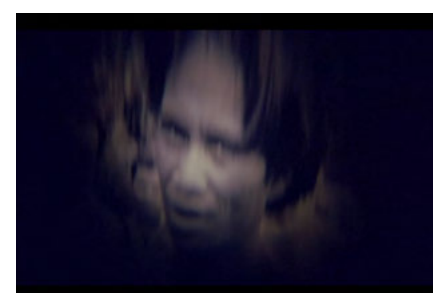
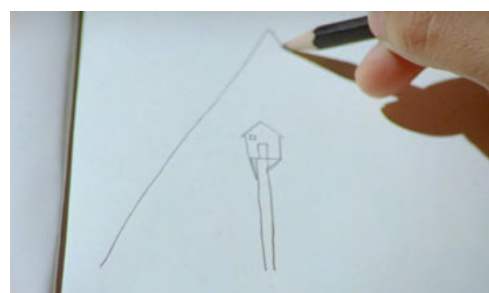
Technologies of filmmaking are key to this repudiation. If *For My Alien Friend* worked with the specificity of digital media to construct its meditation on time, *The Tree House* works with the specificity of celluloid. In his discussion of Jrai tomb houses, the small dwellings where family members would inter and mourn their loved ones, Minh finds a poignant connection to ideas of memory, preservation, and the visible. In cultures less dependent on the image for memory, life itself becomes a series of images. The distinction is not meaningful, as what is visible is a part of the body, the living. What is invisible is a part of the spirit, the dead:

For the Montagnards, life was a continuous train of images like in a film roll. It was said an aggrieved mother at the death of her son when she saw his images projected on the screen, she broke into tears, as she thought he was still alive. She asked her son back to her. Everything visible for the Montagnards was called "Rup," the body. The invisible was "Soan," the spirit. Rup and Soan, Life and Death, Day and Night, Positive and Negative. A tomb house was like the negative house for the living. A spirit had no size. A tiny space in a tomb house was where the dead continue living through different images. In Vietnamese, his mother tongue, "Negative," also meant "the realm of death." "Positive" was "the world of the living." A person who came from the world of the negative was a resurrected soul. Negative Images, Images of Death, Positive Images, Images of Life.

The film's take on cinema's capacities is ambivalent; it is *both* living and dead, simultaneously preserving and depleting the life it seeks to capture. The film intersperses negative images throughout: images of Jrai mourning loved ones inside their tomb houses; archival footage of exiled South Vietnamese singer Thái Thanh weeping during her performance of "Nostalgia," sung with the improvised words, "far away from home"; images of a cave constructed as a tourist site, scored with the indistinct, underwater soundscape the film has associated with Mars. Rather than maintaining a strict division between realms, these images posit a simultaneity between life and death, body and spirit, past and present.



*The Tree House*



*The Tree House* (Minh Quý Trương, Inselfilm Produktion, Kafard Film, Levo Films, 2020)





*The Tree House*

Nonetheless, cinema's dual capacities are not neutral, which becomes the crux of the film's critique. In a series of diptychs, a split-screen offers two images. On the left of the screen is the US Department of Defense footage mostly documenting indigenous houses: unseen cinematographers interact with children and capture the ordinariness of a domestic interior. In other images, houses burn, a military strategy to erase any shelters to house enemy combatants. On the right of the screen, Minh's own footage offers a comparison, and his voiceover points to the parallels between camera and gun, questioning whether it is possible to escape this confluence. The film lingers over these provocations, never quite arriving at answers to its questions: what makes a home, how do we remember it, and whether media technologies bend time towards the past or render that past inaccessible.

**Liveness and temporal lag**

Yosep Anggi Noen's *The Science of Fictions* offers another SF examination of historical chronology, rendered through a reflexive engagement with media, references to national history, and a critique of imperial science and technology. The film differs from the first two in significant ways. It is a narrative fiction film rather than an experimental documentary. It veers away from the meditative, first-person voiceover as its main character, Siman, is mute. Rather than spoken language, bodily gestures, dance, and diegetic and non-diegetic music cohere the film's aesthetics and nonlinear narrative structure. Nonetheless, there are thematic parallels among the three films. Like *For My Alien Friend*, the 1969 moon landing becomes a primary entry point into SF tropes; its rewritten history dissolves the myth of technological modernities. Like *The Tree House*, *The Science of Fictions* emphasizes the complicity between the camera and state violence, trading the supposed indexicality of cinema (the medium's ontological attachment to the real object) for the liveness of television (the medium's ability to capture events in real-time).

The film plays with truth and temporality, questioning the role of media as access to either. Temporal ambiguity and fluidity are key aspects of the film's thematics and its structure. The film is divided into two parts and takes place in a space peripheral to scientific development within dominant historical narratives: Gumuk, on the island of Java, Indonesia. Shot in black and white, the first part begins in 1962. Siman is a farmer, played by celebrated author and theater director Gunawan Maryanto, who worked with Noen on his 2016 feature, *Solo, Solitude (Istirahatlah Kata-Kata)*. He witnesses the creation of the moon landing, has his tongue cut out by American military, and becomes obsessed with the iconography of the space race. In the film, the moon landing is not a marker of scientific and technological achievement but a faked media event under the US military's direction. As Noen describes in his director's statement, the film is about history as a constructed narrative, a kind of fiction: "The most fictional era in Indonesia was the time when Soekarno, the first president, was replaced by Soeharto by a coup. Nobody knew about the real situation, or you could say the truth at the time. Everyone

has their version of the story. Myself, I also have my own. Soekarno was actually knocked down by America because he witnessed the shooting of man-on-the-moon project, which was taken place in the Southern part of Java."<sup>21</sup> State leadership is personified in a figure credited only as "The Actor," who wears a military uniform. The first half ends in 1966, the era of anti-Communist mass killings, the year marked with an exclamation from Siman's friend Ndapuk: "1966. Crazy time! This is an age of madness, Siman!" The film upends this historical marker, transitioning to color and the present a half-hour into its runtime. This transition implicates television, the main source of its media critique. The Actor wanders an empty exterior space, asking, "What's the date? What day?" A soldier shows him his expensive-looking watch, and The Actor replies, "It seems that your hand can answer my questions about time." The film then cuts to these images being played on Siman's television. The Actor asks, "What year is it" on the televisual screen, while Siman watches and the film transitions to the present and color. Siman has not aged. Actors in the first part of the film play different characters. The transition is disorienting, twisting linear chronology and progression.

Television becomes a key part of this temporal disorientation. Its importance in the film is unsurprising. Indonesia's first television station, established in 1962, was the state-owned Television of the Republic of Indonesia (Televisi Republik Indonesia—TVRI). Scholars of Indonesian media have demonstrated that between 1965 and 1998, the authoritarian New Order regime made TV a "national culture project," serving state interests.<sup>22</sup> Television was used as a means of modernization during the New Order to construct a unified mass public and a productive working class.<sup>23</sup> Throughout *The Science of Fictions*, events seen in the film appear again through the television screen: the temporally disoriented Actor appears on Siman's television twice, at the transition to the present and towards the film's ending, when Siman has constructed his spacesuit and his rocket ship home. As he exits his rocket-house, the television switches on, and we see the same scene of the Actor asking about the time. The film then cuts to The Actor on a modern movie set—perhaps, the set of *The Science of Fictions* itself. The film crew and soldiers sit around him as he eats and pontificates, "We are a great nation. Not a nation of slaves. Soekarno, as one of the founding Fathers, had thought about that a long time ago. We must fight together for our nation's sovereignty..." The film cuts to The Actor watching himself on an offscreen television, his televisual image continuing the lecture. He switches the TV off, walks down the hallway, and a cameraperson follows him. Televisions appear throughout the film, often repeating the images we have seen—The Actor driving his illuminated car, a space-suited Siman walking in slow-motion. It is the site of fakery, performance, and disorientation rather than a means of locating spatial and temporal coordinates through its status as a live event.

Television scholars have analyzed the importance of liveness for the medium of television. As Nick Couldry writes, liveness is a spatial and temporal form of governmentally: "Liveness can be understood as a category crucially involved in both naturalizing and reproducing a certain historically distinctive type of social coordination around media 'centers' from which images, information, and narratives are distributed and (effectively simultaneously) received across space."<sup>24</sup> It is premised on centralized transmission and social co-presence, its effect is produced through textual markers such as handheld cameras or scrolling on-screen



*The Science of Fictions* (Yosep Anggi Noen, Limac-nam Films, Angka Fortuna Sinema, KawanKawan Film, 2020)



*The Science of Fictions*

text for news.<sup>25</sup> The moon landing was a televisual event, its spectacle premised on liveness, immediacy, and the scale of the temporal and spatial distance overcome through twin forms of technology: aeronautics and television. *The Science of Fictions* rewrites this history and its imperial visions of global unity, reassembling it as canned fiction. Like *The Tree House*, the film rejects the medium's veracity and emphasizes its complicity with militarization and empire.

This rejection is a part of the film's larger re-scaling of technological forms. Through the character of Siman, the space race itself is reduced to symbols. Wearing a makeshift "space suit" that was created by a local tailor and topped off with a welding helmet, Siman moves in slow motion as though he were on the moon. Like Reneng Ilaya in *For My Alien Friend*, Siman's protracted, embodied movement becomes a way for the film to reject historical chronologies, trading such macro narratives for the microtemporalities of the body—in this instance, an embodied form of lag. The space this body occupies is also critical. Siman builds a home shaped like a rocket ship. As with *The Tree House*, privileging the domestic interior reworks official narratives of militarized scientific development. Siman constructs his rocket-home with the detritus of domestic technologies: deconstructed air-conditioners, refrigerator doors, fans, and washing machines form its windows and walls. Like the spacesuit, their "seams"

are visible, and this handmade reconstruction contrasts with more industrial forms of production, shown in Siman's brief job at a steel factory, where he stands dwarfed by the mechanized infrastructures of production.

As with each of these films, *The Science of Fiction* ends with a turn to affect. At the film's close, Siman sits outside his rocket-home, and an open-air "tourist train" arrives at the perimeter of his yard. A plaintive pop song begins to play as the passengers disembark and head towards the handmade rocket ship, smartphones raised to record the scene, faces full of delight. The film cuts to characters we have seen, visiting each one by one as they solemnly gaze at screens. In translation, the song's lyrics sing, "We won't surrender to distance/We still walk, always walking/Even though we don't know the end of this road." Each of the characters looks directly at the camera as flies buzz around them. As with *For My Alien Friend* and *The Tree House*, this is a turn to the body as a measure of time, and a nod to the impossibility of media technologies as a halt to this inexorable change. As a counterpoint to rhetoric of national histories, space travel, and vast, technologized futures, the song describes time as an ongoing, uncertain walk, while the buzzing flies signal the inevitability of corporeal decay.

*The Science of Fictions*

### Science, fictions, and feeling

What might these three films suggest about the potentials of "Southeast Asian science fiction?" One compelling aspect of *For My Alien Friend*, *The Tree House*, and *The Science of Fictions* is that their SF elements function as a mode rather than a genre per se. The films are not easily seen as part of a specific corpus of texts cohered around common semantic and syntactic features (e.g., semantic building blocks such as characters, traits, and locations, alongside structural relations such as "country versus city").<sup>26</sup> Rather than acting as a discrete category, a modality can be "a medium of interchange and overlap between genres."<sup>27</sup> A mode is less system than mood, a scattering of images, rather than a taxonomy of signs. This playful loosening of generic parameters enables a filmic critique that matches form and content. Perhaps it is appropriate that films assessing scientific rationality, technological fetishism, and linear, developmental chronologies would themselves be self-reflexive and nonlinear experiments in the cinematic sense. There is an important specificity to

this critique—the works are not interested in demonizing technology broadly in exchange for a romanticized past. Rather, they are specific in their approach, using communications across planets and times to draw connections between media technologies and imperial histories.

As I suggested at the beginning of this essay, the films offer alternative ways of seeing, sensing, and feeling historical time. Their turn to the body and affective states of loss, memory, and human connection cultivates a mode of affective spectatorship that settles the upended geographic coordinates of Southeast Asian modernities. As more films build from such experiments, and as states within the region evolve new forms of technoscience and power, the potentials for Southeast Asian futurisms might emerge.

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**Jasmine Nadua Trice** is Associate Professor of Cinema and Media Studies in the Department of Film, Television, and Digital Media at the University of California, Los Angeles. Drawing insights from diverse critical fields such as film and media studies, theories of space and place, and cultural studies, Her research and teaching engage with film aesthetics, industries, production cultures, and reception. Her first book, *City of Screens: Imagining Audiences in Manila's Alternative Film Culture* (Duke University Press, 2021), examines the politics of cinema circulation in early-2000s Manila.



Endnotes

- 1 See Gayatri Gopinath, *Unruly Visions: The Aesthetic Practices of the Queer Diaspora* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.
- 2 Asian Film Archive (AFA), *State of Motion: [Alternate/Opt] Realities Film*, stateofmotion.sgf/.
- 3 Asian Film Archive (AFA), *State of Motion: [Alternate/Opt] Realities Film*, www.asianfilmarchive.org/event-calendar/state-of-motion-alternate-opt-realities-film-programme/.
- 4 Jennifer Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells, "Introduction," in *Simultaneous Worlds: Global Science Fiction Cinema*, eds. Jennifer Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), x.
- 5 Ibid., xi.
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- 7 Work in this vein includes: Warwick Anderson, "Thickening Transregionalism: Historical Formations of Science, Technology, and Medicine in Southeast Asia," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society: An International Journal* 12, no. 4 (2018): 503-18; Itty Abraham, "The Contradictory Spaces of Postcolonial Technoscience," *Economic and Political Weekly* (January 2006): 210-17; Kerby Alvarez, "Instrumentation and Institutionalization: Colonial Science and the Observatorio Meteorológico de Manila, 1805-1899," *Philippine Studies* 64, nos. 3-4 (2016): 385-416; Sulfikar Amir, *The Technological State in Indonesia: The Co-constitution of High Technology and Authoritarian Politics* (New York: Routledge, 2012); Michitake Aso, "The Scientist, the Governor, and the Planter: The Political Economy of Agricultural Knowledge in Indochina during the Creation of a 'Science of Rubber,' 1900-1940," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 3, nos. 2-3 (2009): 231-56; Gregory Clancey, "From Intelligent Island to Biopolis: Smart Minds, Sick Bodies, and Millennial Turns in Singapore," *Science, Technology and Society* 17, no. 1 (2012): 13-35; John Law and Wen-yuan Lin, "Provincializing STS: Postcoloniality, Symmetry, and Method," *East Asian Science, Technology and Society* 11, no. 2 (2017): 211-27. Lilly U. Nguyen, "Infrastructural Action in Vietnam: Inverting the Technopolitics of Hacking in the Global South," *New Media and Society* 18, no. 4 (2016): 637-52.
- 8 Bliss Cua Lim's groundbreaking book on the fantastic in Asian cinemas argues that cinematic representations of the supernatural disclose "the limits of historical time," "unraveling a unified present." Her theoretically rich discussion of time, genre, and Asian cinema offers much for thinking through the ways that regional SF films braid together critiques of time with that of technology. See *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2009).
- 9 Michael Betancourt, *Glitch Art in Theory and Practice: Critical Failures and Post-Digital Aesthetics* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), 3.
- 10 Hye Jean Chung, *Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.
- 11 Ibid., 18.
- 12 Tarleton Gillespie has analyzed the problem of transparency in platform moderation. *Custodians of the Internet: Platforms, Content Moderation, and the Hidden Decisions That Shape Social Media* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).
- 13 As Jan M. Padios has written, "[W]ith their proximity to information technology (it) and evocation of knowledge work, call centers enable state and industry actors to craft a counterimage of the country as a source of higher-order white-collar labor, or mental labor rather than labor in a bodily mode." *A Nation on the Line: Call Centers as Postcolonial Predicaments in the Philippines* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2018), 4.
- 14 Elinor Carmi, "The Hidden Listeners: Regulating the Line from Telephone Operators to Content Moderators," *International Journal of Communication* 13 (2019): 449.
- 15 Vicente Rafael, "The Cell Phone and the Crowd: Messianic Politics in the Contemporary Philippines," *Public Culture* 15, no. 3 (2003): 399-425.
- 16 Ibid., 402-3.
- 17 Tung-hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015).
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- 21 Yosep Anggi Noen, "Director's Statement," *The Science of Fictions, Indonesia*, Festival of 3 Continents, www.3continents.com/wp-content/uploads/the-science-of-fictions-project-presentation.pdf
- 22 See Philip Kitley, *Television, Nation, and Culture in Indonesia* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2000); Krishna Sen and David Hill, *Media, Culture and Politics in Indonesia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
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- 24 Nick Couldry, "Liveness, 'Reality,' and the Mediated Habitus from Television to the Mobile Phone," *The Communication Review* 7, no. 4 (2004): 354.
- 25 Akshaya Kumar, "The Unbearable Liveness of News Television in India," *Television & New Media* 16, no. 6 (2015): 538-56.
- 26 See Rick Altman, "A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre," *Cinema Journal* 23, no. 3 (1984): 6-18.
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# State Monstrosity and the Political Resonance of Dissident Cinema

Noah Viernes





For many filmmakers, oppositional images run the risk of catching the watchful eye of the state in the form of censorship, imprisonment, and exile. Therefore, the following remarks pay tribute to the urgency of documentary filmmaking in Southeast Asia. In Alyx Ayn Arumpac's *Aswang*, the movement of the camera as witness to Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs heightens the war's unseen predatorial brutality whenever the shot is zoomed out to capture the landscape of the city or zoomed in to track more closely the uninhibited flow of the state as it polices the urban poor. In the networked city, the aswang is the "viscera sucker" of the body, segmented and feeding on the bloody executions in street corridors. In response, interviewees, filmmakers, and protestors alike move to protest the violence of a seemingly indomitable regime.

*Aswang* is not alone in its documentation of heightened political tensions in the region, where filmmaking stands against the re-concentration of executive power and the violent re-tuning of the collective political body. The monstrous force of the state, reminiscent of the biblical Leviathan that Thomas Hobbes thought would tame the anarchic disposition of nature, is also channeled in the aesthetic turn of the documentary. In Apichatpong Weerasethakul's "Ashes" (2012), the instrumentation of the film camera is exhausted by the political repression of Thailand's conservative turn since 2006. The documentary also looks to the borderland periphery to explore the making of political bodies as "stateness." In the same way, Nontawat Numbenchapol's *Soil Without Land* (2019) calls attention to the shapeshifting of regions. These three films are explored with the notion that the variability of the documentary aesthetic speaks, contemporaneously, to the mobilization of protest.

### 1. Monstrosity

For as long as this city has existed, a creature has roamed this land. They call it the aswang, a shapeshifter that preys on humans. It kills anyone that dares to look back. One must never look. These days, the myths and tales seem to have come to life.

Bliss Cua Lim articulates the aswang as "an assemblage of supernatural creatures...that is almost always woman," especially where queer reappropriations of otherness appear against earlier formations of misogyny.<sup>1</sup> At present, aswang tales transform genre in their various activations across amateur video clips, camp musical numbers, and print as a transmedial mode for negotiating popular manifestations of power. Lim's analysis is no less attentive to the pliability of "folklore," citing how the aswang's fabled monstrosity provided a dissident undertone against late 19th century colonial violence when indigenous shamanism was targeted because of its oppositional nature.<sup>2</sup> In this sense, aswang have shapeshifted with the

Previous page: Scene from *Aswang* (Alyx Ayn Arumpac, Cinematografica, 2019). All screengrabs by author

Figure 1. The Goliathan shadows of a crime scene



rhythm of time, gesturing toward the monstrous interplays of hegemony and opposition.

In the early days of Duterte's drug war, Alyx Ayn Arumpac joined photojournalists like Ciriaco Santiago III, or Brother June, on the night shift. She spent the next two and a half years documenting the crisis recorded in *Aswang*. Around the city, she encountered numerous accounts of the war, one of which was from a guest who came to pay his respects at the memorial for 17-year-old Kian delos Santos, a victim of extrajudicial killings.<sup>3</sup> "Of all the people, my buddy had to be the one killed," laments Jomari, who becomes, in the film, the audience's guide to the war's frontlines. The monster appears as a shadow presence over a growing number of corpses. It lives in the river, the demonic eyes of the state, and maybe the city itself; it exhumes and feeds on corpses and mourners alike. The city's monstrosity propels Jomari to dream of continuing school in the countryside when his mother gets out of prison. At the DaangDokyu national premiere of *Aswang*, Arumpac stated that the title was also designed to shield the project from the political currents of the Duterte regime.<sup>4</sup>

The exhausting brutality likewise plays out in the lens of Brother June, a photojournalist whose coverage of the war on drugs stems from the question, "how do these killings happen as we sleep?" As a Baclaran Church worker by day, where applications for "funeral assistance" have grown exponentially since 2016, the "documentary" impulse is harmonized with the larger mission of care. His images contrast with the black and white neorealism of the Goliathan state, even as his energies are exhausted in direct confrontation with daily violence. Near the film's conclusion, close-ups capture Brother June's meditative moments as an affective gesture of devotion and a documentarist's appeal to truth.

In the darkness of crime scenes, most things come to light through predetermined rationales for who belongs where in what Jacques Rancière refers to as a foreclosing of politics in the dominant order of sensibility. For Rancière, a documentary



Figure 2. Protesting Duterte

is political in its reordering of senses that go missing in what states, in place of direct violence, call policy. This official mode of representation is visible but deconcentrated of life in the numbers and counts that govern recognition. We might, therefore, read the politics of *Aswang* in this interplay of epistemological light and darkness where justifications of violence are reconsidered.

One scene that stands out is a dimly lit space where two aging men get high to prepare their bodies for another brutal day of work: "We work day after day. We need to get rid of the fatigue." This brief exchange opens an interrogation into how the capitalist impulse to accumulate and drug use are correlated and suggests that addiction itself conditions the survival of the city. In the darkness, the camera moves between tight corridors of the poor and incarcerated, betraying that the picturesque nightscapes are never what they seem. The film shines a distinct light, through flashing sirens and blazing fires, on the human targets of capitalism.

The bright lights of fires that are set ablaze to fight the aswang are also, Ramos observes, linked to the practices of funeral parlors that keep the lights bright until the sun rises again.<sup>5</sup> During the campaign spectacle of 2015, Duterte promised to fill these funeral parlors with fresh corpses, an image Rhea Gretchen Abuso suggests is possibly a collective memory of extrajudicial violence during the Marcos martial law era.<sup>6</sup> The distance of time means that the pretexts of killing are sutured into the authority of official texts (i.e., in biblical, constitutional, or universal formulations) for those who do not have a direct recollection of what happened. Between the vox populi of elections and the desire for order, the people wage

war against the unknown until they become casualties of the carnage. A devastated uncle fights back the tears after the loss of his brother. "I am for Duterte, but what they did to my brother is wrong."

In the shadow world of human rights documentation, where forced disappearances and blacklists haunt those who dive into the details, the deaths wrought by Duterte's war on drugs are made visible. The blueish nightscapes reveal a sky beneath where homeless subjects sleep, predators hunt, and young children like Jomari assume roles of action movie characters in the ambivalence. Unwittingly, they imagine tapping the "decisionist" power of the state: "My dream is to become a soldier," Jomari's younger friend remarks. Indeed, in the disorder, the state seeks to hold on to control, to the sovereign power "to decide the exception," as evinced in Walter Benjamin's "Critique of Violence," which is continually enacted by deciding who lives or dies in the manufactured consensus of the war on drugs.<sup>7</sup> In another scene, the children imagine wooden scraps as tools of execution while they play at dusk: "This is the police!" they mimic. "Get down to the ground!"

Between dusk and dawn, bonfires light unmarked graves of an inner-city columbarium, and a demonic protest image of Duterte's floating head is amid an angry crowd. The mortician we meet in the film links the official and unofficial recordings of mourning and killing. Whereas a head floating through a crowd of protestors segments executive power from the voice of the people, the mortician is one among other fearless witnesses that expand the city in its monstrous body counts.



Duterte set out to frame the Philippines as a narco-state, an administrative move rationalized as “securitization,” which pits the moral narrative against national security.<sup>8</sup> As governments mask the predatorial in the rational, the aswang is revelatory. In the documentary, omniscient voice-overs envelop subjects but also intensify a call to protest. One such voice-over ends the film with an emphasis on the city: “The city is its killing field, and it may kill you.”

From a distance, the city appears as one body. However, close-ups amplify gaps between zoomed-out skyscrapers and zoomed-in alleys of the poor. The camera closes in on the city’s under-exposed corridors to illuminate brutality obscured by the facade of order. In festival interviews, Arumpac indicated the importance of sincerity, especially at such close distance to her subjects, so that childlike characters like Jomari feel “honest” and “less transactional” as cinematic subjects. She follows him, even as he disappears into back alleys and then into the state’s social services system. Her geography becomes an attempt to connect, in the same way that Brother June expounds on the notion of service beyond the state in his everyday attempts to end the crisis as a servant of God. Jomari’s hope permeates the film in search of unlikely promise, but Brother June begins and ends the film in exhaustion. In the everyday captures of injustice, the film locates the right to grieve and sides with those who had been deemed enemies of the state.

As a form of cinematic dissidence, Arumpac’s and Brother June’s work transcends advocacy even as the film’s subjects fail to find sanctuary. Families are forced to let go of loved ones, and those who survive tell of living in fear of the police. Trapped day and night, we see a corpse cemented into the city itself. Arumpac’s camera, therein, conducts a recount of the innumerable dead, their bodies in the frame acting as witnesses to the regime’s brutality.

## 2. Resonance

*Aswang* resounds in rich undertones and an atmosphere that intermittently shifts into high-pitched glissandos. Here, the city screeches in the dominance of machines, traffic, abrasion, and the occasional ominous voice-overs. We hear and feel that glissando when Jomari tells the filmmakers and other children not to go near the river when it is rising because that means the monster is hungry. “You think it’s quiet, but something lives in there.” The film raises the necessity of listening when it is difficult to say who or what exists in the darkness.

The voices of the unheard are emphasized even in the use of sound as a restorative cinematic property, in the same way that Rancière found that global cinema belongs to “the history

of the restitution of world-images.”<sup>9</sup> Rancière meant that films resist the obviousness of “readily available information,” since the rational order of cause and effect removes disagreement from the dominant field of representation. As intervention, cinema reorganizes events to reclaim what has gone missing. In *Aswang*, the soundscapes expand political space by linking interviews, extraconstitutional forms of detainment, and scenes of protest. For instance, a faint echo of sirens (1:02:57) hovers in the background of a woman’s testimonial account of being kidnapped by the police for ransom. In the following scene (1:11:27), after the Human Rights Commission exposes one of these hostage sites, the sirens reverberate within an eerie soundtrack overlaying a God’s Eye view of the city. The complicity between policy and police brutality is linked to the assembly of sounds that bridge that lack of visibility with the dissident aurality of protests.<sup>10</sup>

The power of montage is, thereby, activated in the recovery of voice. Arumpac’s capture of protest works as the film’s climax, as images of popular uprising underscore that fear is not absolute. Thousands walk behind the banner “Labanan ang Diktadura” (fight the dictatorship) alongside bulldozers that represent development’s failure to hear protest. On the other hand, the stage is a microphone where justice can be vocalized. “Why does the war on drugs only target the poor?” asks a distraught mother. On the same stage, a priest repeats, “We accuse you, we accuse you.” Brother June observes the scene as day turns to night, and a giant portrait of Duterte, which splits to reveal a second layer exposing the monstrous devil inside, is set on fire in protest. As this sequence unfolds, we hear the intensifying chants as the people measure themselves against the demon. “You there, watching at the sides, come and join the nation’s protest.” With an army of torches, the exorcism shifts to a collective song celebrating the purge of the demonic state in flames. This protest pulses with the push-back of the people in a larger capitalist critique and channels voice and song-- even the heightened amplitude of the flames--against impunity.

The volume of protest is both collective and singular in the character’s attempts to overcome silence.<sup>11</sup> A turn to documentary filmmaking in Thailand, through Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s “Ashes,” demonstrates the variability of this relationship.

From the perspective of the Thai state, sovereignty is represented not only in the three pillars of nation, religion, and monarchy; and, the heavy-handed legislation that guards these pillars. Thongchai Winichakul describes this sovereign prerogative as built upon the incorporation of the margins in a lived “we-self,” or “geo-body.”<sup>12</sup> The power of text resides in the embodied and often violent orchestration of state functions. As one appendage of the geo-body, the voice is calibrated through disproportionate jail terms legislated in Article 112 of the Thai Criminal Code, which proscribes criticism of the

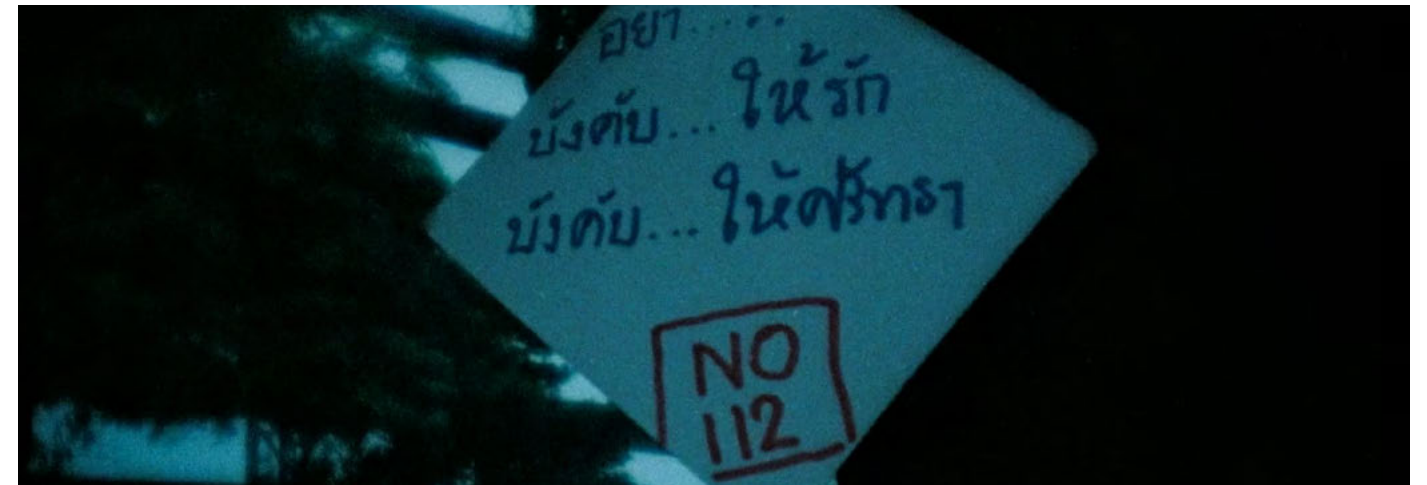


Figure 3. “Don’t force devotion or faith.” From “Ashes” (Apichatpong Weerasethakul, MUBI, 2021). Courtesy of Kick the Machine

monarchy. With dissidence attenuated, sovereignty appears eternal and indivisible, although Hobbes has construed sovereignty as an “artificial” reconstruction of the body. In this context, Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s “Ashes” the collision between the national image and personal experience in assembly of the body of film.

“Ashes” is shot at the four frames per second of a silent LomoKino film camera, where various sounds animate the visual images of marginalized spaces in Thailand. The camera is antiquated in the digital age because it aims at the mnemonic intimacy of a “remembered film.”<sup>13</sup> The nostalgic imperfections flicker about freely, with seemingly playful captures of rural Thailand where staggered POV shots find Apichatpong’s boyfriend, Teem, walking their dog at home in an amplified rural landscape. Abruptly, the camera cuts to Bangkok. Nothing is ever truly silent in the city, but here the soundtrack is removed for a full minute as images of protest play in black and white. Demonstrators are gathered in front of the Thai Criminal Court with images of prisoners sentenced for violating Article 112. Urban noise returns. Thai administrative buildings and a streetside image of Rama IX come into view, while “Ashes” cuts to a microscope slide, as if to suggest that surveying the body’s ability to fight a disease is not unlike regulating political disruptions of the nation-state.

“Ashes” contravenes journalistic realism in part because Thai law inhibits a comprehensive exposure of the image. In other words, we are not watching a “documentary as an indexical record,” but rethinking the value of truth, or what Carl Plantinga calls “veridical representation,” within the limits of expression.<sup>14</sup> Here, sound plays a central role in recovering political dissidence as the condition of possibility for documentary truth. Shutter noise accompanies the flickering of images in split-screen, which then fades into a melancholic guitar melody. The slowing *ritardando*, a shift in tempo that reappears in other projects, slows the succession



Figure 4. Closing sequence from “Ashes”

of images to digital captures beyond his control. Here, Apichatpong enters the film in a voice-over dream narrative that imagines life turned black-and-white as memories briefly flash across an empty black screen. We hear him talking of hope and then fear: essentially, that his dreams may not be his own. The strange climax is a symbolic gesture toward the three pillars that engulf these personal meditations in the spectacle of the national image. In high resolution, the Thai flag flutters in the middle of spectacular fireworks and a funeral pyre.

The burning funeral pyre, like the burning of the Duterte protest placard, connects cinema and protest around the presence and absence of voice. “Ashes” came to mind during recent 2020-2021 protests in Thailand, where replicas of Articles 112 were set on fire to protest state repression.<sup>15</sup> At the time of writing, protestors are calling for the resignation of Prime Minister Prayuth Chan-o-cha, the creation of a drafting committee to advance a new constitutional charter to replace the one pushed in the 2014 coup, and the reformation of the monarchy. The exponential rise of Article 112 cases instigates discord into a seemingly “inviolable” body strengthened in every military coup since 1947.<sup>16</sup> “Ashes” suggests that this body is legislated in the machinery of visibility.



### 3. Body

Against the monstrosity of the state, the political voice undertakes different modes of protest. The state moves visibly and freely, whereas resistance resonates from the fragmentation and disruption of voices and bodies. Nontawat Numbenchapol's *Boundary* (2013) marked a significant point in the politics of Thai documentary filmmaking amid the escalated frictions of Southeast Asia's border politics. The tension was masterfully assembled between interviews, b-roll, and intertitles that signified the divisions caused by Thaksin's province-led neoliberalism and re-militarized urban Royalist attempts to reclaim the Thai-Cambodian border. *Boundary* was banned. As cinematic dissidence, *Boundary* traversed the maps that spanned hundreds of pages of ICJ decisions between 2011 and 2013 and humanized the demarcations of the geo-body. In similar form, *Soil Without Land* (2019, 79 min.) begins with silent intertitles that explain why the subject has caught the interest of the filmmaker:

This film was made when my country of Thailand was ruled by a military regime. There was a lot that I was confused and curious about because I was never a soldier. Until I met a young man from the borderlands between northern Thailand and Burma, and we began a conversation.

The intertitle is important in empathizing with the protagonist's subjectivity, Jai Sang Lod, who in the film is soon to be a soldier. Nontawat emphasizes the personal resonance of military service as a consequence of Thailand's militarization since the 2014 coup. However, the silence of the intertitle also

opens space for unlikely conversations. In fact, the film was released to the Thai public in an exhibit installation with a 288-page companion volume packed with expert commentary on Thai-Shan relations. This kind of project always runs the risk of government censorship. When the Thai Ministry of Culture banned *Boundary* in 2013, they also claimed that silent text-over intertitles were an improper substitution for the voice-over, gesturing toward how the government anchors the body to an official voice.

In some ways, *Soil Without Land* takes on an official voice through a soldier serving the state, but the soldier is in an uncertain space between this state-making body and his turbulent personal history. From the intertitles, drone shots, and opening interviews, the viewer comprehends fragments of Jai Sang Lod's upbringing amid war. Cut off from all that he knows, Jai Sang Lod arrives in a Thai camp in the early 2000s as one among many internally displaced ethnic groups in the Burmese military's push to assimilate and develop the periphery. In Thailand, he earns money in a Chiang Mai karaoke bar, which, the soundscape suggests, caters to a growing number of Shan in Thailand. When his mother becomes ill, he crosses the border back into Shan state to care for his siblings. The Shan State Army (SSA) provides a fixed root for Jai Sang Lod to return to reconcile these ruptures. This is the "soil" without land: a stateless appendage, the film will conclude, to the Thai geo-body.

The film spans three acts that include Jai Sang Lod's upbringing, basic training, and deployment. We accompany Jai Sang Lod in basic training for the First Regional Army of the SSA alongside a motley band of cadets destined for unconventional combat. The opening exercises reconstruct the



Figure 5. Soldiers harmonize as an orchestration of stateness. From *Soil Without Land* (Nontawat Numbenchapol, Mobile Lab, 2019). Courtesy of Mobile Lab

harmonization of the sovereign body with the cadets': "From head to toe, a soldier is never soft. Always at attention. Ears and eyes open. Hands and feet coordinated. To be coordinated and in sync takes grit and discipline. All working together in harmony."

The symmetry of the scene layers the images of state power onto a former self. Across Nontawat's work, character development is layered like a dress code onto bodies passing through national spaces. In *Boundary*, shirtless men become soldiers in a rural draft ceremony, and young boys swim freely in a river donning the authority cloaked in their monastic robes half-worn. In *Soil Without Land*, the military trainees end their morning exercises by taking off their clothes for a leisurely swim in the river. Films capture the places where the nation is cloaked onto the body. The director is asserting the nuanced conditions of political subjectivity in the literal "warp and woof," to borrow Benedict Anderson's description, of the fabric of the community.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, tattooed skin and ludic gestures, despite the impositions of state discipline through the commander, who says that soldiers do not even smile, all speak to singular lives beyond the homogeneity of militarization.

### The viewer is called to reflect on what militarization really means.

The harmonizing of voice is also observed at mealtime when the soldiers reinforce state ideology in pre-meal chants like "we eat for strength and freedom." Meanwhile, one among them sits alone in chains—apparently because he had tried to escape the camp three times. Later, the prisoner is chained to his bed while his conversation with two other soldiers is left untranslated to suggest that he is not Shan. Amporn Jirattikorn describes the ascendancy of Shan nationalism during the Cold War era where cultural units were "[c]omposing songs in the Shan language...to entertain soldiers and feed those Shan guerillas a dose of nationalist sentiment with their songs."<sup>18</sup> The apparent uniformity of Shan ethnicity through a collective voice strengthens sovereign space even as the fugitive marks possible lines of flight.<sup>19</sup> In this chorus, the isolated soldier is a stray note.

Nontawat's soundscape follows the rhythm of bodies in harmony, especially in the stomping of boots that emphasizes their metronomic marches. These soldier harmonies are synchronized to whistles and commands "for nation, culture, and religion" and are on full display in the film's coverage of the annual National Day ceremony.<sup>20</sup> When the same soldiers graduate from their training, a camp commander holds up an image of the Thai monarch Rama X on stage, marking



Figure 6. The Three Pillars

the contradictions between historic alliances and the official recognition of boundaries.<sup>21</sup> In an interview, Nontawat wondered if including this particular shot would compromise the discourse of Shan sovereignty, but SSA leaders apparently encouraged it.<sup>22</sup> Nostalgic Shan pop songs cut to reverberated voices and high, dreamy piano notes. As the montage turns to slow-motion at the finale of the second act, the viewer is called to reflect on what militarization really means.

The history of militaries as executive arms of the authoritarian body links the "hot wars" of the Cold War era with the return of martial law in Southeast Asia. For Nontawat, the soldier represents the coming of age of "stateness," where the discourse of security culminated in seizing executive power by the military. As with Thongchai's theory of the geo-body, political subjectivity is extinguished in producing the "we-self." In the film's conclusion, Jai Sang Lod is manning a village outpost with a handful of other soldiers—two of whom seem to have abandoned their post due to the plight of borderland monotony. They head out on patrol in this third and final act as the leaves begin to rustle around them. Light flares fill the screen as the sounds of a Burmese helicopter on the horizon gain volume. The militarized harmony, therefore, does little to resolve the dissonance of continuous conflict. In fact, it is largely to blame.

### 4. Dissidence

All films, *Aswang*, "Ashes," and *Soil Without Land*, emphasize cinematic dissidence. An effigy set aflame, a funeral pyre, and a bright flare that fills the screen illuminate the state to a threshold where harmony becomes dissonance and security or protection becomes monstrosity, the source of the very pain it purports to overcome. There is a deep sense of personhood in these film projects, and each filmmaker's ethical position searches for the voices that resonate most in the narratives they cover. In the closing shot of *Aswang*, the camera POV flows uninhibited through the city's streets at night, recalling Ramos' description of how the aswang "discards [its] lower body from the waist down and flies."<sup>23</sup> The state's dream of freedom and sovereignty is another's worst fear. Something will always stand in its way.



**Noah Viernes** is an Associate Professor in the Global Studies program at Akita International University in Japan, where he teaches social movements, visual politics, and political thought. His current research focuses on Thai independent cinema, borderland poetry, and diasporic subjectivity.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Bliss Cua Lim, "Queer Aswang Transmedia: Folklore as Camp," *Kritika Kultura* 24, (2015), 186-187. dx.doi.org/10.13185/kk2015.02407
- 2 Lim, "Queer Aswang Transmedia," 185.
- 3 *The Drug Archive* links this particular incident to a two-day suspension of the drug war in August 2017 to dampen the "intensity of death instances." See Clarissa C. David, Ronald U. Mendoza, Jenna Mae L. Atun, Radx-eanel Cossid, and Cheryl Soriano, "Building a dataset of publicly available information on killings associated with the antidrug campaign," *The Drug Archive*, accessed on 20 February 2021, drugarchive.ph/post/14-anti-drug-dataset-public-info-killings.
- 4 "Director Alyx Ayn Arumpac talks about her Daang Dokyu entry 'Aswang'" *Orange Magazine TV*, accessed on February 04, 2021, Last Modified on February 19, 2020, www.youtube.com/watch?v=a6So0k6L\_xQ.
- 5 "During the mortuary vigil, the early Filipinos had a bonfire blazing beside the dead in order to keep the ghouls at a safe distance." Ramos, "The Aswang Sycrasy in Philippine Folklore," 245.
- 6 Abuso, Ma. Rhea Gretchen Arevalo, Narrating Human Rights in the Philippines, *Journal of Southeast Asian Human Rights*, 3(1), 7 (2019), 7. dx.doi.org/10.19184/jseahr.v3i1.8411
- 7 Michael W. Jennings, ed., *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 236-252.
- 8 Nathan Gilbert Quimpo, Duterte's "War on Drugs": The Securitization of the War on Drugs and the Return of National Boss rule. In *A Duterte Reader: Critical Essays on Rodrigo Duterte's Early Presidency*, ed., Nicole Curato, (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila Press, 2017), 147.
- 9 Jacques Rancière, *Film Fables* (London: Berg, 2006), 111.
- 10 Scenes of protest also stand apart from sensationalized coverage of the humanitarian emergency. Pooja Rangan writes of the moral dynamic in human rights coverage where the live media event becomes the pretext for resolving the humanitarian emergency, especially where eyewitnesses become reporters and where audiences sense a degree of closure. In one *Aswang* scene, journalists and camera crews follow a media spectacle that appears, if not staged, unresolved. Crowded into a local precinct, they join the Human Rights Commission to expose a police operation that holds alleged drug users for ransom. Here, press and policymakers converge to stream the discovery of rogue police officers, as if acting astray from the ordered bureaucracy of the state. These images of detainees in dark corridors to not resolve, but attend to earlier cases of disappearance where offscreen violence foils the atmospheric sense of the city as whole. See Pooja Rangan, *Immediations: The Humanitarian Impulse in the Documentary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017).
- 11 Robin James addresses a related take on the politics of resonance. "[R]esonance occurs when frequency patterns align and amplify one another rather than clash and dampen or mask one another." See Robin James, *The Sonic Episteme: Acoustic Resonance*, (Durham, Duke University Press, 2019), 7.
- 12 Thongchai Winichakul, *Siam Mapped: History of the Geo-body of a Nation* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1994).
- 13 Victor Burgin, *The Remembered Film* (London: Reaktion Books, 2004).
- 14 Carl Plantinga, "What a Documentary is, After All," in *Documentary*, ed., Julian Stallabrass, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2013), 53.
- 15 It's useful to note that between Western correspondents and local reporters, it is difficult to claim authorship when reporting on Article 112. See "กล่มต้านม.112บุกเผาตำรากรม.ค้านจำคุกสมยศ" [Article 112 opposition burn civil code to protest Somyot imprisonment]. *Post Today*, January 25, 2013, www.posttoday.com/politic/news/201059?fbclid=IwAR15cCIEBCIoSUV3MRSiB4RslGz96nloZJIBJBYWdKLvW\_huz-9vLtXfhua8; Reuters Staff, "Thai court jails six for setting fire to kings' portraits." *Reuters*, January 31, 2018. jp.reuters.com/article/us-thailand-king-insults/thai-court-jails-six-for-setting-fire-to-kings-portraits-idUSKBN1FK1K6.
- 16 Thongchai Winichakul, "Confessions to Lese Majesty: A Lens into the Rule of Law in Thailand," Institute of Developing Economics-Japan External Trade Organization (IDE Research Bulletin), (2019), 4. www.ide.go.jp/library/Japanese/Publish/Download/Report/2018/pdf/2018\_2\_40\_026\_ch01.pdf
- 17 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1986).
- 18 Amporn Jirattikorn, "Shan virtual insurgency and the spectatorship of the nation." *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies* 42(1) (2011), 26.
- 19 Here, Amporn Jirattikorn's mapping of Shan new media as a cross-border link between Burma and Thailand points toward James C. Scott's analysis of contemporary Shan chants that moves from culture to rational and bureaucratic modes of expression. See Amporn Jirattikorn, "Shan virtual insurgency," 25; James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 231.
- 20 As the language is similar to the Thai in this sequence, the subtitle might also be translated as "nation, society, language and religion."
- 21 In building stateness, James C. Scott argues that oral cultures of the highlands tended to rely on performances that emphasize the present. But detached from the permanence of the lowland host, they move like "jellyfish ... [to] permit a certain 'drift' in content and emphasis over time." James C. Scott, *The Art of Not Being Governed: An Anarchist History of Upland Southeast Asia* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 230.
- 22 This powerful interview describes every stage of the project. Nontawat notes that the continued royal relationship derives from a legendary alliance between King Naresuan and the Shan kingdom against the Burmese. In the contemporary transformation of this alliance, Amporn Jirattikorn describes the continued role of the Shan royal lineage which moves between Chiang Mai and Shan state to mobilize support for the insurgency. See Natcha Tantiwitayapitak, A Conversation with Nontawat Numbechapol and Natcha Tantiwitayapitak on Inspiration, Access, and People: Recording, Composing, and Disseminating. In *Process Of Time: Soil Without Land, A Project by Nontawat Numbechapol* (Bangkok: Princess Maha Chakri Sirindhorn Anthropology Centre, 2020), 190; Jirattikorn, "Shan virtual insurgency."
- 23 Lim, "Queer Aswang Transmedia," 187.

# Kahon-kahong Kinakahong Kwentu at Kwenta

James Leocadio



Fokus ng papel na ito ang pagtutulad sa representasyon ng espasyo bilang sityo ng alienasyon ng mga indibidwal sa lipunang tali sa lohika ng kapital sa mga pelikulang *Mee Pok Man* ni Eric Khoo at *Oros* ni Paul Sta. Ana. Tatalakayin ang atake ng dalawang pelikula sa ideya at imahe ng modernidad sa konteksto ng Singapore at Pilipinas. Ipuunto sa papel kung paano kinikitil ng kapitalismo sa kabuuan ang kwento at kwenta ng mga indibidwal sa lipunan.

Sa kanyang seminal na akdang *The Production of Space*, binigyang-diin ng pilosopo at teoristang si Henri Lefebvre na ang espasyo ay isang produkto. Sa ilalim ng kapitalismo, komoditi itong nakasandig sa nosyon ng kontrol at talaban ng kapangyarihan.<sup>2</sup> Ayon sa kanya, nanganganak ang lipunang tali sa lohika ng kapital ng mga abstraktong espasyong nagkukulong sa mga mamamayan nito. Ang mga abstraktong espasyong ito ang lumilikha ng demarkasyon upang paghati-hatiin ang mga uri sa lipunan ayon sa ekonomikong batayan. Selda ang mga itong nagtatago sa bihis ng disiplina, kaayusan at karangyaan na siyang gumigipit at gumugupo sa laya ng mga mamamayan. Nagtatakda ang mga nasabing espasyo ng mga pader na nagpipiit sa mga indibidwal sa sari-sarili nilang bula. Gayunpaman, sa mga naturang kontroladong espasyo ring ito sumisiklab ang pinakamalalaking apoy ng rebolusyon.

Sa ganitong mapanligkis na espasyo sumibol ang sine ng Singaporean filmmaker na si Eric Khoo. Pinakakilala siya sa mga pelikula niyang *Mee Pok Man* (1995), *12 Storeys* (1997), at *Be with Me* (2005). Ang mga ito ay ipinalabas at nagkamit ng parangal sa mga lokal at internasyunal na timpalak. Taliwas sa disiplina, kaayusan at karangyaang ibinabandera ng Singapore, ibinubuyangyang ng mga nabanggit na pelikula ni Khoo ang nanlilimahid, malupit at kasuklam-suklam na imahe ng naturang first world na bansa, “a side that the authorities, anxious to protect their political legitimacy and to attract foreign tourists, capital, and talent, would much prefer to hide,” ayon pa sa iskolar na si Kenneth Paul Tan.<sup>3</sup> Itinatanghal ni Khoo sa kanyang mga pelikula ang mga isinasantabi, inaabandona at hindi ibinibilang sa kamalayan, kasaysayan at diskurso ng pagkabansa ng Singapore.<sup>4</sup>

Gayong kilala sa aktibo nitong pagkakapon sa mga pelikula o anumang produktong pansining na may bitbit na kritikal at pulitikal na mensahe, nakalusot sa radar ng mga sensura sa Singapore (sa pamamahala ng Media Development Authority) ang *Mee Pok Man* ni Khoo.<sup>5</sup> Seminal ang naturang pelikula sapagkat ito ang muling bumuhay sa industriya ng pelikula ng Singapore noong 1995 matapos itong matengga ng halos dalawang dekada.

Maaaring sabihin na ang impluwensiya ni Khoo bilang bahagi ng isa sa pinakamayayamang pamilya sa Singapore<sup>6</sup> ang dahilan kung bakit hindi sinensor ang kanyang pelikula. Ngunit ayon sa kritikong si Jeremy Fernando, ang pagtuligsa ng *Mee Pok Man* ay nakapaloob pa rin sa diskurso at lohika ng “open society” ng estado kung kaya pinalusot ito ng mga sensura.<sup>7</sup> Dagdag pa, ang deklarasyon ni Khoo na ang kanyang pelikula ay tumutukoy sa “slices of life” (personal at hindi sistemiko ang atake) at hindi direktang kritika sa sistema ng lipunang kanyang kinalalagyan ang nagpalabnaw sa kargang diskurso ng pelikula sa mata ng estado. Hindi tatanggap ng anumang produktong tuluyang lalaslal sa kabuuan nito ang industriya ng pelikula bilang aparatong ideolohikal ng estado kung kaya may pangagailangang bansutin ang mga pelikulang gaya ng *Mee Pok Man* sa pamamagitan ng pagpapangalan na “personal o alternatibo” ito.<sup>8</sup> “Dissent is only allowed when approved by the state,” ayon pa kay Fernando.

[T]he source of the critique, and whether the critique is real or simulated, does not matter; its effects are the same. The simulated critique functions on a logic of paralogy—regardless of whether it functions to provide options (as opposed to real choices) for the subject, or is an auto-immunizing mechanism of the state fantasy, it allows the state to manage its subjects at maximum performativity, precisely by performing democracy itself.<sup>9</sup>

Kulong si Khoo sa kahong nilikha ng industriya ng pelikula sa Singapore, na siya namang kinondisyon ng rehimen ng People’s Action Party (PAP) sa naturang bansa. Magmula pa noong 1959, upang mapalawig ang tiranikong kontrol nito sa buong bansa, nagtalaga ang PAP ng mga batas at patakarang kikitil sa mga kaaway nito at kokontrol sa kamalayan ng mga mamamayan.

Magmula sa pagsasabatas ng Internal Security Act hanggang sa paglikha ng mga absurdong regulasyon na sumasala sa paglalabas ng mga produktong pansining/pang-midya, pinaikot ng PAP sa palad nito ang buong Singapore. Gayunpaman, hindi maitatwa na ang eksistensiya ng mga pelikulang gaya ng *Mee Pok Man* sa isang lipunang kagaya ng Singapore ang nagpapaubong sa mga naratibong kontrapuntal, kontra-agos, kontra-estado.

Ang *Mee Pok Man* ang pelikulang nagsilbing pangunang silab na muling nagpaddingas sa industriya ng pelikula sa Singapore. Tinatalakay ng *Mee Pok Man* ang rurok ng alienasyon at isolasyon ng indibidwal sa isang kapitalistikong lipunang tulad ng Singapore. Nakasentro ang pelikula sa isang mee pok man (Joe Ng) at kay Bunny (Michelle Goh). Ang una ay tinderero ng mee pok, isang uri ng Singaporean flat noodles, at ang huli naman ay isang puta. Pareho nilang kinamumuhian ang kanilang mga trabaho.

Gayong minana pa sa kanyang ama, hindi gusto ni Mee Pok Man ang pagbebenta ng mee pok maging ang mee pok mismo. Ngunit ayon sa kanya, ito lamang ang tanging gawaing alam niya at mahusay siya kung kaya siya nagpapatuloy. Sa parehong ayos, kinamumuhian din ni Bunny ang pagpuputa. Kung hindi nga lamang dahil sa alok ng malaking kita, ayon sa kanya, hindi niya pipiliing magbenta ng katawan.

Dahil tali sa lohika ng merkado ang lipunang kanilang kinabibilangan, atomisado sina Mee Pok Man at Bunny. Ang kawakas-wakasang hangarin nila ay mamuhay sa sarili nilang daigdig. Loner si Mee Pok Man. Hindi niya gustong nakikisalamuha sa iba dahil palagi siyang pinag-iinitan, inuuyam at kinakaya-kaya. Simula pagkabata ay binubully na siya ng mga kaklase (ayon nga sa kwento ni Bunny sa kanyang diary). Ang kasamahan nga niya sa trabaho ay binabraso lamang siya at laging kinikikilan ng salapi, at pinagbibigyan niya ito gayong hindi naman ito nagbabayad ng utang.

Tinutuya rin siya at binabansagang inutil ng mga customer niya sa kainan pero hindi siya pumapalag. Nakakahinga lamang siya nang maluwig tuwing nasa loob ng kanyang bahay at tuwing naglalakad-lakad sa mga lugar na walang katao-tao. Si Bunny naman, dahil sa kalikasan ng trabaho, ay may higit na koneksyon sa ibang tao kumpara kay Mee Pok Man. Ngunit tulad ni Mee Pok Man ay nasasakal din siya sa presensya ng mga kasamahan niya sa trabaho at mga kaulayaw.

Sa eksena nga kung saan kasama niya ang isang parokyano sa isang hotel, tila siya malamig na bangkay habang nakikipagtalik. Binubuhay lamang niya ang kanyang sarili sa paulit-ulit na banggit sa planong pagpunta sa ibang bansa at pagtigil sa pagbebenta ng katawan, mga larawan sa hinagap niyang nagbebendisyon sa tuyot na tuyot na niyang pagkatao. Ngunit batid niya at ng kanyang mga kasamahang wala siyang ibang mapupuntahan. Limitado at demarkado ang espasyong kanyang ginagalawan. Nakakalaya lamang siya kapag nasa loob ng kanyang kwarto.

Ang kalagayang ito nina Mee Pok Man at Bunny ay signos ng matagumpay na integrasyon ng lohika ng kapital sa lipunang kagaya ng Singapore. Takdain ng kapitalismo na pagkalas-kalasin at gawing atomisado ang mga tao upang maigi nilang magampanan ang kani-kanilang mga papel sa lipunan (sa pamilya, sa komunidad, sa relihiyon, sa negosyo, sa estado). Pinapatay ng ganitong sistema ang anumang ideya at aktwalisasyon ng komunidad o pakikipagkapwa sa pagitan ng mga mamamayan. Tinalakay ni Ulrich Beck sa kanyang akdang “Living Your Own Life in a Runaway World: Individualisation, Globalisation and Politics” ang papel ng indibidwal sa sistema ng globalisasyon. Ayon sa kanya, ang konsepto ng “living your life” sa isang lipunang nakakulong sa walang katapusang sirkulo ng modernidad at pag-unlad ay mapaminsala para sa indibidwal ngunit integral para sa iging pagpapanatili ng dominanteng kaayusan. “Modern society does not integrate them as whole persons into its functional systems; rather, it relies on the fact that individuals are not integrated but only partly and temporarily involved as they wander between different functional worlds,” ayon kay Beck.<sup>10</sup> Kung gayon, sa indibidwal ang tuon ng sisi sa anumang porma ng pagkaunsiyami ng biyahe ng tren ng modernisasyon at hindi sa mismong sistemang nagpapatkbo nito.

[Y]our own life – your own failure.

Consequently, social crisis phenomena such as structural unemployment can be shifted as a burden of risk onto the shoulders of individuals. Social problems can be directly turned into psychological dispositions: into guilt feelings, anxieties, conflicts and neuroses. Paradoxically enough, a new immediacy develops in the relationship between the individual and society, an immediacy of disorder such that social crises appear as individual and are no longer—or are

Previous page: Figure 1. Ibinubod ng opening montage ang komodifikasyon at alienasyon bilang paksa ng *Mee Pok Man* (Eric Khoo, 27 Productions, 1995). All screengrabs by author





Figure 2. Tila larong tetris ang sistema ng “paglulugar” sa mga indibidwal sa junkspace tulad ng HDB flats

only very indirectly—perceived in their social dimension.<sup>11</sup>

Aspirasyon ni Mee Pok Man na lumaya mula sa selda ng pag-iisa at magkaroon ng kasama o pamilya. Habang si Bunny naman ay gustong makahulagpos sa tanikala ng prostitusyon at makapangibang bansa. Gayong patungo sa magkaibang direksyon, iisa lamang ang pinatunguhan nilang dalawa—kamatayan. Naudlot ang pangarap ng una na magkaroon ng malapit na koneksyon sa pinapangarap niyang si Bunny nang tuluyan itong mamatay pagkatapos ng una at huli nilang pagtatalik. Nalagot din ang pangarap ni Bunny na makatawid sa inaasam na buhay tungong ibang bansa nang mawalan siya ng buhay. Tila “bocha” na dobleng kinatay sina Mee Pok Man at Bunny.

Piraso ng karne lamang silang ginigiling upang maging langis sa makina ng kapital. Nakapiit sina Mee Pok Man at Bunny sa kalagayang nagtatakda ng kanilang halaga bilang tao. Inilalako nila ang kanilang sarili (kakayahan, katawan at kaisipan) upang makasabay, kundi pa makaagapay, sa mistifikadong mundong kanilang kinalalagyan. Sa ganitong uri ng abstraktong mundo, hindi nila pagmamay-ari ang kanilang sarili.<sup>12</sup> Namamahay sina Mee Pok Man at Bunny sa sityong tinatawag ni Rem Koolhaas na “junkspace.” Ayon kay Koolhaas, “junkspace is what remains after modernization has run its course, or, more precisely, what coagulates while modernization is in progress, its fallout.”<sup>13</sup>

Ang junkspace ay basurahan. Wala itong kaluluwa. Inarkitekto ito upang pagsama-samahin at sa proseso’y paghiwa-hiwalayin (hinding-hindi pagbuklod-buklurin) ang mga tira-tira at ibinabasura sa lipunan. Dagdag pa, “junkspace pretends to unite, but it actually splinters. It creates communities not out of shared interest or free association, but out of identical statistics and unavoidable demographics, an opportunistic weave of vested interests.”<sup>14</sup> Tira-tira rin itong gaya ng mga indibidwal na namamahay dito. Kung kaya gayong ekseks, kailangang panatilihin ang eksistensya ng junkspace dahil ito ang kahon-ng-posporong pahingahan ng mga gulong na nagpapadaloy ng produksyon sa isang kapitalistikong lipunan.

Because it costs money, is no longer free, conditioned space inevitably becomes conditional space; sooner or later all conditional space turns into Junkspace...

Junkspace is the body double of space, a territory of impaired vision, limited expectation, reduced earnestness... It replaces hierarchy with accumulation, composition with addition. More and more, more is more. Junkspace is overripe and undernourishing at the same time, a colossal security blanket that covers the earth in a stranglehold of seduction.<sup>15</sup>

Junkspace ang “Heartland” na pangunahing lunan ng *Mee Pok Man*. Ang Heartland ay ang espasyong kinalalagakan ng mga proyektong pabahay ng estado ng Singapore na inumpisahang itayo noong 1960 sa pangunguna ng Housing Development Board (HDB). Ang Heartland, ayon sa makatang si Alfian Bin Sa’at, ay ang rehiyon sa labas ng siyudad na nagsilbing imbakan ng pwersa ng paggawa ng mga industriya sa sentro. Sinasabi kasing mahigit 80 porsyento ng populasyon ng Singapore ay nakatira sa mga HDB flats. Mismong ang estado nga ay may malinaw na diskintingsyon sa mga “cosmopolitans” (o yaong mga may sariling bahay at lupa) at “heartlanders” (o yaong mga nakatira sa mga pampublikong pabahay).<sup>16</sup>



Figure 3. Ang dimensyon ng buhay ng indibidwal ay inaarkitekto ng lipunang kanyang kinalalagyan

Taliwas sa imaheng ibinibida ng estado, ang Heartland sa mga pelikula ni Khoo (hindi lamang sa *Mee Pok Man* kundi maging sa *12 Storeys at Be with Me*) ay mga abstraktong espasyong nagpapaigting sa alienasyon ng mga residente nito. “The architecture and urban design of the public housing estates structure the limits and possibilities of interaction and self-consciousness among the majority of Singaporean in the course of their daily lives as they negotiate the discourse of hard work, material acquisition, and personal progress.”<sup>17</sup> Bombang ipinasabog ni Khoo sa kanyang mga pelikula ang imahe ng Heartland batay sa danas ng mga nakatira rito. Ito, ayon pa kay Tan, ang komentaryo ni Khoo sa pagiging “one-dimensional” ng Singapore bilang isang lipunan.

In a one-dimensional society, genuine community is fundamentally fractured by the demands of the economy, and nearly all alternative visions, resistant urges, and oppositional tendencies are either criminalized by the state, or repressed by self-indulging individuals, or commodified by the market and integrated into an affirmative system whose single-minded pursuit of profit, productivity, and consumer satisfaction—presented as a prerequisite for collective survival itself—promises and appears to deliver material benefit and psychical comfort to its risk-averse worker-citizens.<sup>18</sup>

Ang mga imahe ng maunlad na siyudad ay ipinakikita—matataas na gusali, episyenteng biyahe sa tren, mga taong mabilis na naglalakad sa mga kalsada ng siyudad—sa pagitan ng mas dominanteng imahe ng nanlilimahid, mabaho at kasuklam-suklam na lipunan. Ang ideya ng pag-unlad bilang pabalat ay mekanismo ng isang lipunan upang makontrol ang mga mamamayan nito. Binubulaga at binubulag ang tao ng mga imahe ng modernisasyon, konsumerismo at eskapismo nang tuluyan



silang maihiwalay sa tunay na kalagayan nila sa lipunan, upang sa tuwina sila mismo ay maging one-dimensional.

One-dimensional people, therefore, are alienated from their true needs and, blinded by the opulence of consumer society, forgo their human potential for self-fulfillment, freedom, happiness, and the achievement of a genuine community.<sup>19</sup>

Produkto ng pagiging one-dimensional ng lipunan ang mga abandonadong espasyong pinaglalagian ni Mee Pok Man. Sa pelikula, lahat ng mga lugar na pinupuntahan niya ay walang katao-tao (maliban sa mangilan-ngilan niyang bisita sa palengke at mga kainan). Maging sa inuuwian niyang HDB flat ay walang makikitang taong maaari niyang makasalamuha. Bumibisita siya sa isang tindahan ng damit-pangkasal ngunit maging ang posibleng interaksyon sa mga walang-buhay na manikin ay nahaharangan ng makapal na salamin. Naglalagi rin siya sa isang abandonadong eskwelahan kung saan may maririnig na hagikhikan ng mga bata ngunit walang aktwal na mga bata. Sa lunang ito nasasariwa ni Mee Pok Man ang kasaysayan nila ni Bunny, na magmula pa noong bata ay inaasam-asam na niya. Sa mga naturang pagkakataon sa pelikula masasalamang ang paghahanap ni Mee Pok Man sa wala. Sa mga abandonadong espasyo, walang buhay na obheto at patay na alaala sumasandig si Mee Pok Man upang makaagapay sa buhay.

Kung kaya sa huling bahagi ng pelikula, hindi pinakawalan ni Mee Pok Man ang bangkay ni Bunny. Wala siyang lupang mapaglilibingan sa huli kung kaya pinili niya na pabulokin na lamang ang bangkay nito sa kanyang kwarto.<sup>20</sup> Ang Heartland ang nagsilbing libingan ng dalawa. Ang mga basura sa lipunan na gaya nina Mee Pok Man at Bunny ay maitatambak lamang sa basurang espasyong pinaglalagakan sa kanila.

Sa konteksto ng *Mee Pok Man*, “necrophilia... thus becomes a powerful, deadly metaphor for critiquing a society



that cannot foster healthy human relations.”<sup>21</sup> Sa kabilang banda, namumuhay naman sa patay ang pelikulang *Oros* ni Paul Sta. Ana. Hindi tulad sa metaporikal na representasyon sa *Mee Pok Man*, nanlalapa ang estilo ng *Oros* sa pagtalakay sa mga ideya ng isolasyon, alienasyon at kamatayan.<sup>22</sup> Patay ang puhunan ng mga karakter sa naturang pelikula upang mabuhay. Hindi kamatayan ang epilogo ng kanilang kasaysayan sa libro ng kapitalismo, bagkus, ito ang kanilang esensya, ang pising nagtatalaga ng kanilang saysay sa lipunan.

Pinamamahalaan ni Makoy (Kristoffer King) ang sistema ng pasakla sa kanilang lugar. Bilang kasero o middleman, naisasagawa niya ito sa pamamagitan ng pag-i-spot o pagrerenta ng mga bangkay na pinabayaan o iniwan na sa punerarya. Si Makoy ang taga-kasa ng mga sesyon ng sakla sa buong sityo kung kaya siya ang nilalapatan ng mga katulad nina Linda (Tanya Gomez) at Annabel (Angelita Raymundo) na isang-kahig-isang-tuka at kapit-sa-patalim ang buhay. Katuwang ni Makoy sa gawain ang nakabatang kapatid na si Abet (Kristofer Martin). Hindi katulad ni Makoy na nakatanim ang kaluluwa sa napiling hanapbuhay, pilit kumakalas si Abet sa pagiging “boy” sa saklaan. Gayong nagtatangkang kumawala, hindi naman malinaw ang trajektori ng aksyong ito ni Abet. Ang mga alternatibo niya ay nakapaloob din sa sistemang kinalalagakan ng gawaing kinamumuhian niya. Hindi siya tumatakas upang tuluyang humulagpos. Katulad nina Mee Pok Man at Bunny, wala naman talagang alternatibo si Abet kung kaya hindi siya tuluyang makakalalas.

Tulad sa *Mee Pok Man*, siklikal ang buhay ng mga karakter sa *Oros*. Nakapiit sila sa estado ng pamumuhay na itinalaga ng sistemang panlipunang nagtatakda ng kanilang silbi at halaga. Ngunit hindi katulad sa romantisadong atake ng *Mee*

## Silang mga nasa laylayan ng lipunan ay palagiang isinasangkalan at ipinapain sa isa't isa.

*Pok Man*, nakangingilong parang malaking tipak ng yelong nginangatngat ang istilo ng pagtalakay sa buhay ng mga karakter sa *Oros*. Hindi nakaangkla sa lungkot o isolasyon ang pagnanais nila na makaahon sa burak sapagkat wala namang espasyo para tuluyan silang makaalpas. Hindi mabulaklak ang pagpapakita sa kanilang kasaysayan sapagkat wala naman silang (ka)saysay(an) bilang mga indibidwal.

Hindi kamatayan ang kanilang solusyon sa problema ng buhay sapagkat walang punto ang pagpapatiwakal dahil araw-araw naman silang kinikitil ng sistema. Patay ang puhunan at sugal ang kanilang mekanismo upang mabuhay; dalawang salik na halinhinang naglalagay sa kanila sa bunganga ng bangin. Siklikal ang kanilang buhay ngunit hindi umiikot ang roleta para maiangat sila sa pedestal dahil ito ang dikta ng may-hawak ng kanilang kapalaran. Silang mga nasa laylayan ng lipunan ay palagiang isinasangkalan at ipinapain sa isa't isa.

Mas malamig ang pagtalakay ng *Oros* sa paksa nito kumpara sa *Mee Pok Man* dahil tinatangka ng pelikulang ipakita ang kwento sa kung paano ito masasaksihan sa tunay na buhay. Hindi lamang tanggap ng mga karakter sa *Oros* ang kanilang kalagayan kundi



Figure 4. Isa, dalawa, tatlo, turok! Ginagawang tulay ng mga tulad ni Makoy ang patay upang patuloy na mabuhay



Figure 5. Literal at metaporikal ang pagkakakahon nilang mga nasa laylayan ng lipunan

nananalaytay ito sa kanilang pagkatao. Ito ang tagumpay ng akto ng pagkontrol ng namamayaning kaayusan sa mga subheto nito—ang kumpletong asimilasyon at integrasyon ng pilosopiya at mga polisiya ng sistema sa kanilang kamalayan.

Nakakabit ang nosyon ng pagsakop sa buhay ng indibidwal sa lipunan sa tinatawag ng pilosopo at teoristang si Michel Foucault na “biopolitics” o ang kakayahang/kapangyarihan ng dominante (uri/kapangyarihan/kaayusan) na panghawakan ang buhay ng sinumang napasasailalim ng kontrol nito. “Power would no longer be dealing simply with legal subjects over whom the ultimate dominion was death, but with living beings, and the mastery it would be able to exercise over them would have to be applied at the level of life itself; it was the taking charge of life, more than the threat of death, that gave power its access even to the body,” ayon pa kay Foucault.<sup>23</sup> Ang rurok ng “power” bilang pwersang panlipunan ay hindi ang pagkitil ng buhay kundi ang pagkontrol sa buhay; ang tukuyin kung sino ang mabubuhay o mamamatay.

Hindi tulad sa dikotomiya sa dalawang mukha ng pag-unlad sa Singapore na ipinakita ng *Mee Pok Man*, sa iisang sityo lamang nakatuon ang naratibo ng *Oros*. Nakatutok at hindi lumabas ang kwento sa Baseco (Bataan Shipping and Engineering Company) Compound. Gayunpaman, iisang sistema lamang ang gulugod ng mga lipunang tampok sa dalawang pelikula. Ang mga latak tulad nina Mee Pok Man, Bunny, Makoy at Abet, na isinasantabi at inilalagak sa mga junkspace tulad ng Heartland at Baseco, ay sinasagad ang silbi hanggang sila’y matuyot at mawalan ng buhay.<sup>24</sup>

This bio-power was without question an indispensable element in the development of capitalism; the latter would not have been possible without the controlled insertion of bodies into the machinery of production and the adjustment of the phenomena of population to economic processes. But this was not all it required; it also needed the growth of both these factors, their reinforcement as well as their availability and docility; it had to have methods of power capable of optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern.<sup>25</sup>

Literal na junkspace ang Baseco na lunan ng *Oros*. Ang naturang lugar ay isang squatter colony na nagsimulang okupahin ng mga residente noong 1991. Lumaki ang lugar dahil sa tambalang tambak ng lupa dulot ng mga relokasyon ng gobyerno para sa mga maralitang tagalunsod at tambak ng basura sa Manila Bay.<sup>26</sup> Dahil sa kasaysayan ng korupsiyon at kawalan ng tunay na malasakit, “basura” ang mga proyektong pabahay ng gobyerno ng Pilipinas para sa mayorya ng populasyon nito. Ayon sa pag-aaral ni John Francis Lagman ng Urban Poor Associates (UPA), isang NGO na sumusubaybay sa kalagayan ng mga maralitang tagalunsod, sa kanyang akdang “Anatomy of the Nation’s Housing Problems”:

[F]rom 1996 to June 2008, a total of 287 demolition cases have rendered more than 85,000 families or more than 400,000 persons homeless. More disturbing is the finding that roughly 7 out of 10 demolitions undertaken involved government-owned land cleared of informal settlers to make way for infrastructure projects (road expansions, river rehabilitation and flood control) and commercial establishments such as shopping malls. There are also increasing concerns over demolitions conducted by the Metro Manila Development Authority (MMDA) for its urban renewal or “beautification” and flood control programs. In most cases the MMDA demolition drives involve violence and lack prior consultation with the affected families, which is mandated by law. Furthermore, because most informal settlers also have their sources of livelihood in or near the community, an eviction not only destroys their houses but also their livelihood.<sup>27</sup>

Ang Heartland sa *Mee Pok Man* ay sinasalamang ng mga abandonado at bakanteng espasyo. Ang mga desoladong espasyong ito ang nagpapakita ng matagumpay na segregasyon ng mga mamamayan dulot ng neoliberal na aktwalisasyon ng modernidad sa lipunang tulad ng Singapore. Sa kaso ng mga katulad nina Mee Pok Man at Bunny, ang Heartland bilang lunan ng kani-kanilang HDB flats ay ang kanilang santwaryo; ang espasyo kung saan sila nagiging buhay at buo.



## Ang durasyon, silbi at esensya ng kanilang buhay ay naitakda nang parang bomba. Anumang oras ay maaari silang sumabog.

Ngunit ang mga espasyo ring ito ang piitang humihila pababa sa kanilang pagkatao; ang kahong pahingahan nila bilang mga esensyal na gulong sa makina ng namamayaning kaayusan sa kanilang lipunan. Sa *Oros* naman, ang Baseco ay tila bunton ng anay na nabulabog sa dami ng tao. Nagkataon lamang na nakatutok ang kamera sa mga bidang karakter ngunit hindi naiiba ang kanilang danas sa mga taong nasa paligid nila na nahahagip lamang ng kamera. Walang puwang sa mga ganitong espasyo ang melankolyang dulot ng isolasyon o segregasyon dahil ang buong komunidad na kinabibilangan ay miserable ang kondisyon.

Gayundin, simboliko ng pagkakahon sa mga karakter ang mga lunang kinalalagyan nila sa pelikula—kahon ng posporo ang mga barong-barong nilang bahay; pache-pacheng kahoy ang dingding ng kanilang mga tirahan; parisukat ang mesang pinaglalaruan ng sugal; parisukat din ang hugis ng umpukan ng mga nagsusugal; parihaba ang ataol na kinalagyan ni Abet at ng iba pang nabubulok nang bangkay; parihaba ang baraha o bingo card na gamit sa sugal; masikip ang mga bitukang-manok na eskinitang kanilang binabagtas; madumi, mausok, nanggigitata, parang purgatoryo ang kanilang lugar. Sinasalamin ng espasyo ng Baseco ang hungkag na pagtatangka ng neoliberal na polisiya ng estado na ilugar ang mga ibinabasura sa lipunan.<sup>28</sup>

Dahil basura ang turing kung kaya naglulunoy sa burak ang mga katulad ni Makoy. Para sa kanilang mga nasa laylayan ng lipunan, walang pagkakaiba, buhay man o patay, sapagkat batid nilang hindi magbabago ang sityo at sitwasyong kanilang kinalalagyan sapagkat hawak sila sa leeg ng mga kamay na kumokontrol sa pwersang nagpapainog sa mundo. Dahil dito kaya sila umaagapay; kaya sila nagtatangkang umagapay. Dahil

dito kaya pinaglalaruan nila ang buhay at patay. Sapagkat bungsi-bungsi ang tulay tungo sa mas magandang buhay kung kaya mismong tulay ng buhay ang tinatawid nilang mga buhay-na-patay.

Though a *product* to be used, to be consumed, it is also a *means of production*; networks of exchange and flows of raw materials and energy fashion space and are determined by it. Thus, this means of production, produced as such, cannot be separated either from the productive forces, including technology and knowledge, or from the social division of labour which shapes it, or from the state and the superstructures of society.<sup>29</sup>

Ang espasyo, ayon kay Lefebvre, ay hindi maihihiwalay sa talaban ng mga pwersa sa lipunan. Ang pulitika ng paglikha, pagtatalaga at paggamit ng espasyo ay laging kakabit ng banggaan ng mga pwersang lumikha nito. Ang mga nasa laylayang tulad nina Mee Pok Man, Bunny, Makoy at Abet ay hindi namamahay sa kani-kanilang mga bula. Ang kalagayan nila ay hindi inanak lamang ng kanilang personal na danas sa lipunan, bagkus, ito ay inarkitekto ng namamayaning kaayusang nagtatalaga sa/ng kanilang gamit at halaga sa sistemang panlipunang nakaligkis sa kapital. Ang durasyon, silbi at esensya ng kanilang buhay ay naitakda nang parang bomba. Anumang oras ay maaari silang sumabog.

Ngunit ang akto ng kanilang pagsabog ay hindi ang yugto ng kanilang pagkagapi. Sa halip, sa kanilang pagsabog ay isang bagong indibidwal ang sisibol; isang indibidwal na handang wasakin ang maskarang bumabalot sa kamalayan ng mga tulad nilang isinasantabi, ibinabasura at dinuduhagi sa lipunan.

### Endnotes

- Ang laro sa mga salitang “kwento (at) kwenta” ay mula sa awiting “Espasyo” ng musikero at makatang si Dong Abay. “*Kwento, kwenta, kwento, kwenta / Kwento, kwenta, tila kanta / Kwento, kwenta, binebenta*”
- Henri Lefebvre, “Social Space,” *The Production of Space* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 68-168.
- Kenneth Paul Tan, “The Tragedy of the Heartlands in the Films of Eric Khoo,” *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2008), 187.
- Jeremy Fernando, “The Spectre of the National that Haunts Singapore (Cinema), Or, You Can Only See Ghosts if You are Blind,” *Border lands e-journal* 5.3: 2006, www.borderlandsejournal.adelaide.edu.au/vol5no3\_2006/fernando\_spectre.htm.
- Hindi katulad sa kaso ni Khoo, ang mga filmmaker na sina Martyn See at Tan Pin Pin ay nasaling ng mga sensura. Ang pelikulang *Singapore Rebel* (2005) ni See ay na-ban dahil ito raw ay lumabag sa Films Act na tumutukoy sa pagpapalabas ng mga paksa ukol sa mga partidong pulitikal sa Singapore. Ayon sa mga awtoridad, partisano raw ang pelikula ni See tungkol kay Chee Soon Juan, isang dating lider ng partidong kumakalaban sa People’s Action Party (PAP). Na-ban din ang *To Singapore, with Love* (2013) ni Tan sa parehong batayan. Ayon sa mga sensura, kasinungalingan at mapanira sa imahe ng Singapore ang mga pahayag at kwento ng mga exile na ininterbyu sa pelikula.
- Si Eric Khoo ay anak ni Khoo Teik Puat, isang negosyante at kilalang may-ari ng mga pinaka-grandiyosong hotel sa Singapore. Naitala siya bilang isa sa mga pinakamayayamang indibidwal sa bansa.
- Tumatanggap ang anumang uri ng sistemang panlipunan (lantarang fasistiko man o pekeng demokratiko) ng “necessary evil” na pupuna sa mga bagay-bagay. Ang puna ay palalampasin basta’t pasok sa parametrong itinakda ng sistema. Kung lalampas sa parametro, agaran itong lalalasin.
- “We shall, therefore, say, considering only a single subject (such and such an individual), that the existence of the ideas in which he believes is material in that his ideas are his material acts inserted into material practices regulated by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatus from which (hardly by accident!) his ideas derive.” Louis Althusser, “On Ideology,” *On the Reproduction of Capitalism: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses* (London: Verso, 2014), 186.
- Fernando, *The Spectre of the National that Haunts Singapore*, n.p.
- Ulrich Beck, “Living Your Own Life in a Runaway World: Individualisation, Globalisation and Politics,” *On the Edge: Living with Global Capitalism*, pinamatnugutan nina Will Hutton at Anthony Giddens (London: Vintage, 2001), 165.
- Ibid., 167.
- Henri Lefebvre, “Marxism as Critical Knowledge of Everyday Life,” *Critique of Everyday Life, The One-Volume Edition* (London: Verso, 2014), 158-195.
- Rem Koolhaas, “Junkspace,” *The People, Place and Space Reader*, pinamatnugutan nina Jen Jack Gieseking at William Mangold (New York: Routledge, 2014), 22.
- Ibid., 25.
- Ibid., 22-23.
- Ayon sa dating punong ministro ng Singapore na si Goh Chok Tong: “The cosmopolitan is the one who has the skills and the global outlook that enable him to do well almost anywhere in the world. The heartlander,

on the other hand, has a more domestic outlook.” Alfian Bin Sa’at, “Hinterland, Heartland, Home: Affective Topography in Singapore Films,” *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, pinamatnugutan ni Tilman Baumgärtel. Aberdeen: Hong Kong University Press, 2012, 43.

17. Tan, *The Tragedy*, 189.

18. Ibid., 187-188.

19. Kenneth Paul Tan, “One-dimensional Singapore,” *Cinema and Television in Singapore: Resistance in One Dimension* (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2008), 7.

20. Ayon kay Sa’at, dalawang klase ng pagkamatay ang karaniwan sa mga HDB flat: “suicides from high-rise flats and the discovery of bodies in flats by neighbors when they begin to putrefy.” Sa’at, *Hinterland, Heartland, Home*, 45.

21. See Kam Tan at Michael Lee at Annette Aw, “Contemporary Singapore Filmmaking: History, Policies and Eric Khoo,” *Jump Cut* 46, 2003. www.ejumpcut.org/archive/jc46.2003/12storeys/index.html.

22. Gayong sa kabuuan, maliwanag ang pananagana at paglublob ng pelikula sa predictable na daloy ng kwento at ginasgas nang teknik sa pagkuha ng imaheng agad ikinakabit sa mga pelikulang may kagyat na kabit sa ideya ng poverty porn.

23. Michel Foucault, “Right of Death and Power over Life,” *Biopolitics: A Reader*, pinamatnugutan nina Timothy Campbell at Adam Sitze (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 47.

24. Ayon kay Foucault, ang kamatayan ang hangganan ng “power” at mga aktwalisasyon nito. “Power no longer recognizes death. Power literally ignores death,” ayon pa sa kanya. Ngunit ayon sa permutasyon ni Achille Mbembe sa kanyang akdang “Necropolitics”, ang dominanteng kapangyarihan sa lipunan ay lumilikha ng mga sityo ng kamatayan o “zones of death” upang isagad ang kapit nito sa buhay ng tao. Kung iispin, ang mga espasyong tulad ng Heartland at Baseco ay mga sityo ng kamatayan, kabaong at nitso, na pinaglalagakan ng mga buhay-na-patay sa lipunan. Michel Foucault, “Society Must Be Defended,” Lecture at The College de France, March 17, 1976,” *Biopolitics: A Reader*, pinamatnugutan nina Timothy Campbell at Adam Sitze (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 68.

25. Foucault, *Right of Death and Power over Life*, 45.

26. Mayroong 40 blocks ang Baseco. Ang orihinal na lupa ng Baseco ay ang “Block 40” habang ang iba pang tatlumpu’t siyam ay ang lugar na nabuo sa tambak ng lupa at basura sa mismong Manila Bay. Jose Aravilla, “Barangay Baseco: The Lost City of Stilts and Half,” *Philippine Star*, 2001, www.philstar.com/metro/134167/barangay-baseco-lost-city-stilts-and-half.

27. John Francis Lagman, “Anatomy of the Nation’s Housing Problems.” *PhilRights*. philrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/07/Anatomy-of-the-nations-housing-problems.pdf.

28. O maaari ring sabihing “matagumpay na paglulugar” sapagkat karamihan sa mga proyektong pabahay ng gobyerno ay inilalagak sa mga lugar malayo sa pinagkukunan ng kabuhayan ng mga mamamayan. Nagiging punto ito ng batikos sapagkat malakas ang pagtutol ng mga benepisyaryo sa aksyong ito ng gobyernong gustong linisin ang sentro. Ang mga lugar na tulad ng Baseco ay produkto ng paggigiit ng mga maralitang tagalunsod na makapagtayo ng mga tirahan malapit sa mga siyudad-sentro. Naging malaking usapin ang pwersahang pag-okupa ng grupong Kalipunan ng Damayang Mahihirap (Kadamay) sa mga abandonadong pabahay ng gobyerno sa Pandi, Bulacan. Abandonado ang nabanggit na pabahay para sa mga empleyado ng gobyerno sapagkat ang mga benepisyaryo mismo ay hindi inookupa ang mga ito dahil sa isyu ng distansyang nabanggit sa itaas.

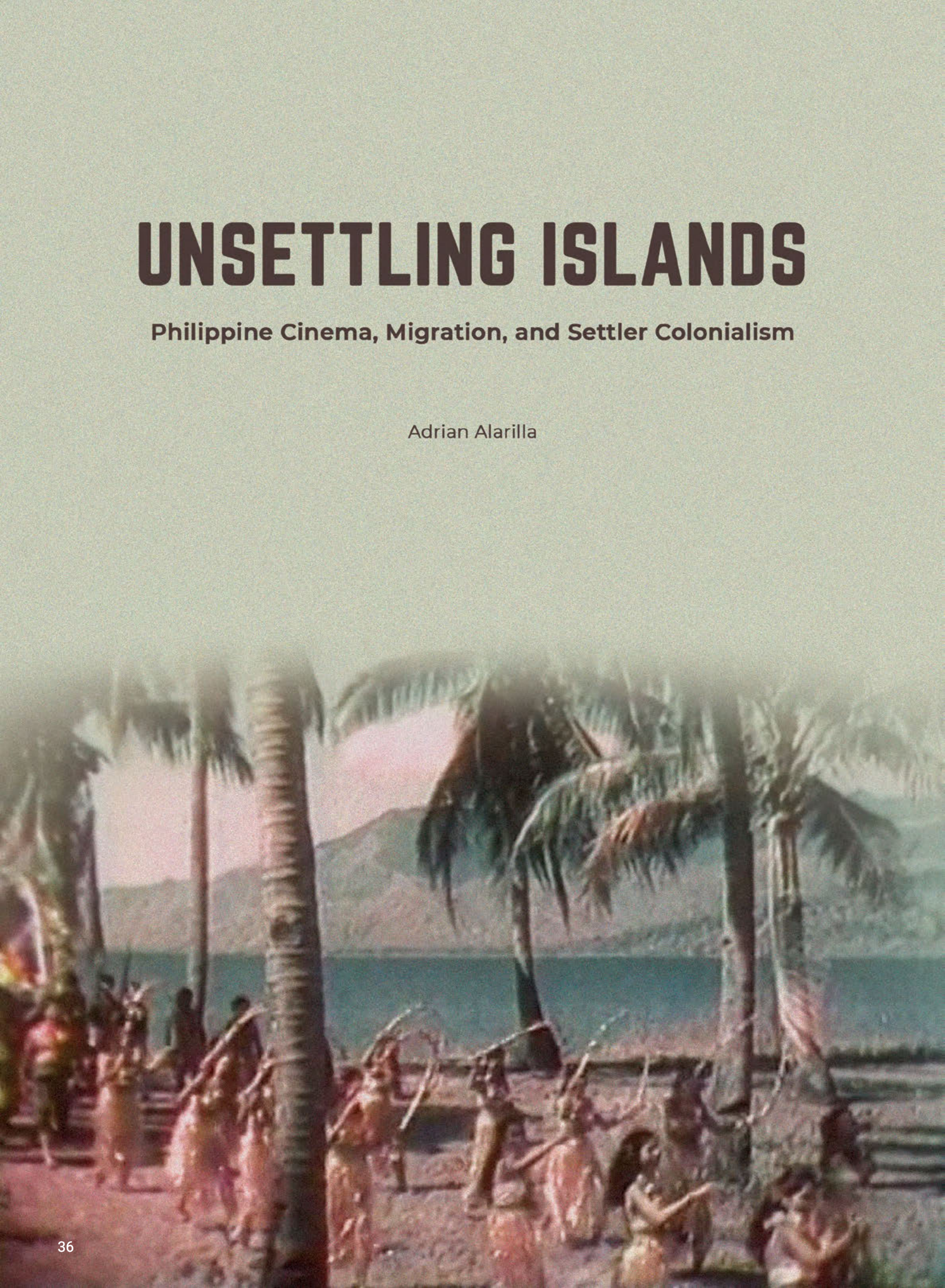
29. Henri Lefebvre, “Social Space,” 85.



# UNSETTLING ISLANDS

## Philippine Cinema, Migration, and Settler Colonialism

Adrian Alarilla



There were the émigrés, those that leave the islands forever... For them the gamble of a voyage into the spill of islands... was worth the risk when confronted by the catastrophe of a famine or a war.

—Greg Dening from *Beach Crossings: Voyaging Across Times, Cultures, and Self* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 211.

Going from one island to the next island, to the next island, on to the next island until they have circumnavigated the globe...

—*Balibayan Number One: Memories of Overdevelopment Redux VI*, directed by Kidlat Tahimik, 2017.

Dreaming of islands—whether with joy or in fear, it doesn't matter... is dreaming of starting from scratch, recreating, beginning anew.

—Gilles Deleuze from “Desert Islands,” in *Desert Islands and Other Texts, 1953–1974*, ed. David Lapoujade (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT Press, 2002), 10.

High tide or low tide?

—Charlene Gonzalez at the 43rd Miss Universe pageant held in Pasay, Philippines, when she was asked how many islands there were in the Philippines.

There are material archipelagos, occupying geopolitical spaces and bound by internationally recognized maritime borders; archipelagos whose islands can be quantified and censused, though always contingent upon forces natural (high tide or low tide?) and man-made (how many dashes?). There are islands that bind the nation-state together and those that are bound by it.

Then there are meta-archipelagos, not (entirely) in the Taal sense, but in the Benítez-Rojo sense, by “virtue of having neither a boundary nor a center.”<sup>1</sup> These meta-archipelagos are composed of “repeating islands,” islands that have been emptied and “deserted” of indigenous meaning and fit into a tropic mold by the droning tempo of the plantation machine, even as the polyrhythm of the colonial encounter constantly disrupts them: “a chaos within which there is an island that proliferates endlessly, each copy a different one, founding and refounding ethnological materials like a cloud will do with its vapor.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, the meta-archipelago churns out the material archipelago, even as the latter finds ways to transgress the former. Unsettled from their subterranean origins, these islands move, rise, and are submerged.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the US Empire decided to create its own Pacific meta-archipelago, executing both the annexation of Hawai‘i and the invasion of the Philippines in 1898. Establishing plantation economies across the islands, the empire redistributed labor populations from the Philippines to Hawai‘i, leading to the formation of

distinct cultural identities in both. The South Seas film genre became the cinematic representation of this meta-archipelago by creating a generic template to re-create the island tropics in America’s image. These films without a center brought the empire’s new island territories “under the scopic regime of Hollywood, allowing studios to concoct a narrative of cultural/civilization superiority and benevolent territorial administration,”<sup>3</sup> even as they spatially and temporally displaced the indigene and rationalized the exploitation of the labor migrant.<sup>4</sup>

Both material archipelagos continued to operate under the logic of the US Pacific meta-archipelago even after the end of formal colonialism in the Philippines and the incorporation of Hawai‘i into a US state. The incipient Philippine national cinema, borrowing from the US Empire’s technologies, in turn, constructed its own meta-archipelago, domesticating the image of the indigene in both Hawai‘i and Mindanao and recreating them in the image of the Philippine meta-archipelago to enable the continued migration to both island peripheries. This essay looks into how two films of the post-independence period, Manuel Silos’ *Hawayana* (1952) and Lamberto V. Avellana’s *Badjao* (1957), incorporated Hawai‘i and Mindanao into the Philippine meta-archipelago, and reflects on how narratives of migration must be critically revisited and unsettled in order not to reproduce the imperializing tendency of the meta-archipelago.

Opposite page: Scene from *Hawayana* (Manuel Silos, LVN Pictures, 1952). All screengrabs by author





From *Badjao* (Lamberto V. Avellana, LVN Pictures, 1957). On the right, Tony Santos and Rosa Rosal

### US Imperialism and the South Seas Genre

American cinema developed around the same time as the American empire, and many of the early moving picture “actualities” depicted the people and resources of America’s new Pacific holdings as ripe for the taking.<sup>5</sup> Hawai‘i became a particular favorite cinematic subject because of its growing economic and military significance in the empire and because of the convenience of appropriating indigenous Kanaka Maoli<sup>6</sup> culture into a touristic regime of Hula and hospitality. The South Seas genre developed in the 1920s and 1930s as a way to domesticate Hawaiian culture and make it America’s own, as well as “contribute to the projection of the US imperial status and the global expansion of its geopolitical boundaries.”<sup>7</sup> The plot of many of these early South Seas films usually revolves around the encounter of an American man and a “native” woman, two different people who fall in love with each other despite their contrasting cultural backgrounds. The native is feminized, usually embodied by the hula-dancing heroine, and thus easily domesticated. The commodification of Hula necessitated the erasure of Kanaka Maoli agency, turning them from violent male savages into subservient feminine colonial subjects, even as the trope of the vanishing native hides the actual violence of colonial genocide.

In the Philippines, early American filmmakers would employ the South Seas genre mainly to depict the archipelago’s more “savage” and “exotic” southern island group: Mindanao. In 1934, *Brides of Sulu* was released, although archivist Teddy Co argued that this could possibly be just two earlier silent films, *Princess Tarhata* and *Moro Pirates* (1931), spliced together with added narration and soundtrack.<sup>8</sup> The films’ leading man, Eduardo de Castro, would later be employed by American filmmakers George Harris and Stewart Tait to direct another film that would bear an eerie similarity to *Brides of Sulu*. In *Film: American Influences on Philippine Cinema* (2011), Nick Deocampo, shows how Philippine Cinema was rooted in America’s imperial project and how American interests dominated the country’s nascent film industry, even

as it developed nationalist aspirations, exemplified by the growing widespread use of Tagalog in films.<sup>9</sup> The technology itself and the production, marketing, and distribution of films were modeled after Hollywood. This is exemplified by Harris and Tait, who, aspiring to turn Manila into the “Hollywood of the East,” brought in American technology and Filipino film workers together in Philippine Film Productions, Inc., the studio they established in 1933.<sup>10</sup>

Their premier work, *Zamboanga* (1937), incorporated Mindanao into the US Pacific meta-archipelago by capitalizing on the South Seas genre, even as it assimilated Mindanao into the Philippine national imagination. Moro, Filipino, and Kanaka Maoli subjects were somehow conflated in the film as the Manila-based Mestizo Tagalog actors (Fernando Poe and Rosa del Rosario) wore floral prints and spoke in Tausug. The filmic narrative is interspersed with ethnographic glimpses of Moros to add to the film’s “authenticity,” even as their pearl-diving, traditional dancing, and savage war-making, are associated with the South Seas genre. All this time, the film is accompanied by a soundtrack of kulintang music interspersed with the twang of a Hawaiian steel guitar.

American-led productions such as *Zamboanga* became training grounds for Filipino filmmakers and film workers to familiarize themselves with modern, American filmmaking techniques, technology, and genre conventions. As José B. Capino argues, “some of the most impassioned, sensational, confounding American fantasies ever conjured on film are to be found in Philippine cinema.”<sup>11</sup> These dreams, in turn, were shaped by the repeating tropes of film genres such as the South Seas romance. But more than dreaming the American Dream, they also learned how to harness the imperial gaze. During the postcolonial, post-independence period, they became part of the incipient nation’s project to reproduce the Philippine meta-archipelago on its island peripheries through cinematic production and migration.

### *Harwayana* and the Submerging of Hawai‘i

In 1953, the huge Filipino-owned studio LVN Pictures celebrated its fifteenth anniversary with the release of a South Seas spectacle, *Harwayana*. Directed by Manuel Silos and based on a serialized komiks of the same name, the film was one of the few in the Philippines shot in color at the time. This hit film was headlined by heartthrobs Tessie Quintana and Armando Goyena, whose love team was catapulted to showbiz fame and led to celebrity endorsements.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the film shows how LVN Pictures’ success can be primarily attributed to their adoption of American film technology, from their star system to their technical sophistication and streamlined production methods.<sup>13</sup> Their films were lavish escapist spectacles and were a hit with a population struggling to rebuild after a devastating war, accounted for 65 percent of the films produced from 1946 to 1960, and today considered the First Golden Age of Philippine Cinema.<sup>14</sup> *Harwayana* is perhaps a high point of the South Seas genre in the Philippines, showing just how much the Filipinos have made this American genre their own. At the same time, it drew on Filipino fantasies of migrating to America and Hawai‘i, a dream that stemmed from a long history of Filipino labor migration and exploitation.

The annexation of the sovereign kingdom of Hawai‘i was orchestrated by American missionary families who had a vested interest in the development of the plantation economy on the islands.<sup>15</sup> The Americans brought in cheap migrant labor from Asia, including from their new Philippine territory, to work in the sugar plantations built on the stolen indigenous lands. Filipinos eventually became the preferred laborer since they were cheaper and were already US “nationals” at the time. Between 1909 and 1934, almost 120,000 Filipino migrant laborers arrived in Hawai‘i alone.<sup>16</sup>

Although the last plantation-ordered shipment of sakadas was in 1946, shortly before the Philippines became independent, there continues to be a steady stream of

“spontaneous” Filipino migration to Hawai‘i until today, mainly by Filipino settlers in Hawai‘i petitioning their family members.<sup>17</sup> Since the 1970s, roughly 3,500 Filipino immigrants arrive in Hawai‘i each year.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, Filipinos who settle in Hawai‘i are more likely to work in the most precarious and underpaid jobs, often in the service and tourism industries, to the continuing benefit of the American capitalists who continue to exploit Hawai‘i’s lands. “Spontaneous” Filipino migration, then, as Robyn Magalit Rodriguez argues in *Migrants for Export: How the Philippine State Brokers Labor to the World* (2010), can be rooted in colonial experiences under the US Empire and is abetted mainly by the Philippine labor brokerage state through the institutionalization of migration.<sup>19</sup> Thus, even though Filipinos have more options on where to migrate nowadays, in places such as Ilocos, a center of Filipino labor emigration to Hawai‘i during colonial times, Hawai‘i continues to be a preferred site of migration.<sup>20</sup>

This dream of “Blue Hawai‘i” was fed not only by narratives of family members migrating to Hawai‘i but also by American and later Philippine popular culture featuring Hawai‘i. Film scholar Andrew Leavold is currently undertaking a research project on the circulation of film and popular culture between Hawai‘i and the Philippines.<sup>21</sup> This Hawaiian fever reached its peak in the postwar boom of the 1950s and 1960s when the military significance of Hawai‘i became even more highlighted in the bubbling Cold War, as well as the promises of Hawai‘i’s impending statehood and integration into mainstream, mainland America. But long before *Hawaii Five-0* began to be broadcast in Philippine television, before Nora Aunor sang about her “Pearly Shells,” LVN Pictures had already capitalized on the South Seas genre.

Today, the only extant version of *Harwayana* is incomplete and has been uploaded by filmmaker and LVN scion Mike De Leon on his Vimeo and Youtube channels. The fairly generic romantic plot, however, is easy to glean. Leilani (Tessie Quintana), the princess of the island of Hawaii,<sup>22</sup> in a scene



Armando Goyena and Tessie Quintana in *Harwayana*





reminiscent of the 1937 *Zamboanga*, meets Kameha (Armando Goyena), prince of the neighboring island of Samoa while frolicking with her handmaidens in the river. As the two fall in love, they slowly realize each other's cultural differences, culminating in the cancellation of their marriage when Kameha's offering of a black pearl to Leilani is interpreted as a grave sign of offense. In Hawaiian island culture, the only way to prevent catastrophe is to sacrifice the virgin Leilani to the island's volcano. In the ensuing chaos, the two tribes of Samoa and Hawaii prepare for war even as the volcano erupts and Hawaii sinks to the sea. The two families, full of remorse at the loss of the island, agree to reconcile and live together peacefully in Samoa, as long as the Hawaiians agree to change their irrational ways and integrate with their new host culture. As the sun sets, Kameha and Leilani embrace each other by the shore.

The film, trite and escapist as it may seem, shows a Filipino refiguring of Hawai'i's history and relations with migrants based on a localized understanding of the South Seas genre. Indeed, *Harwayana* possesses many of the genre's conventions. It is set on a tropical island populated by primitive, superstitious, and scantily clad natives. The scenes are interspersed with musical interludes as the natives dance and showcase their otherness. Interestingly, Pearls are also a recurring motif, as both a symbol of love and harbinger of doom. At the same time, it exhibits elements of a new meta-archipelago that is distinctly Philippine. As the Philippine meta-archipelago is transposed onto the South Pacific, Hawai'i and Sāmoa, in reality thousands of miles apart, become neighboring islands that are only a day's outrigger boat ride away from each other. Hawai'i's shield volcanoes, which erupt slowly and steadily, transform into the cinder cone volcanoes more familiar in the Philippine landscape. Lastly, not only is the Kanaka Maoli culture of Hula, with its dense and complex vocabularies of movement, bastardized (just as many early American South Seas films did) but it was also blended with elements of Philippine traditional dances, such as the Bulaklakan (with the flower garlands).

However, the most striking deviation from the American South Seas genre is that, like in *Zamboanga*, the two lovers are both Malayo-Polynesians, portrayed by Filipino mestizos speaking in Tagalog. Most American South Seas films focus on the white man civilizing the native or mixed-race woman with his love. However, because the protagonists in *Harwayana* are racially and linguistically similar, the difference is performed through their cultures as constructed in the film. The Hawaiian culture, feminized by the heroine, Leilani, is highlighted by being particularly superstitious, warlike, and irrational compared to the Samoans. Through this difference, a civilizational hierarchy is reproduced, in the end justifying the reformation of the Hawaiians when they begin to live with the culturally superior Samoans.

The forced migration of the Hawaiians to live with the Samoans is also an unusual narrative intervention to the South Seas genre. In many early American South Seas romances, the racial boundaries initially transgressed by the lovers are usually restored by the end of the film, either through death or the man's return to civilization in the mainland. In the Philippines—and the Filipino encounter in Hawai'i—there may be no perceived racial boundaries to transgress like in American movies. Instead, difference is cultural and civilizational. Because of this, differences can be more easily bridged through acculturation and assimilation, though this often means the subsumption of the more primitive one into the more civilized one. Moreover, this acculturation is brought about by displacement and forced migration due to catastrophe. The Filipinos, coerced to migrate by imperial labor demands, can nevertheless regain their agency by subsuming the native and recognizing his part in the development and modernization of Hawai'i.

Filipinos and Kānaka Maoli are similar in many ways. They are both natives of their home islands who have been displaced and dispossessed by US imperialism. The demands of empire brought one over to the ancestral homelands of the other, though they encounter each other only through the ethnic-economic logic of the American industrial plantation. Ruminating on Filipino colonial mentality and collaboration with the settler state in an essay entitled "Colonial Amnesia: Rethinking Filipino 'American' Settler Empowerment in the US colony of Hawai'i," Dean Itsuji Saranillio argues that Filipino migrants, exposed only to American historical narratives that have drowned out native voices, can therefore only envision a collaboration with the settler state. Thus, even as they continue to be an exploited underclass, Filipinos can still be complicit in indigenous erasure:

The concept of settler colonialism disrupts notions that minorities who are racially oppressed are incapable of simultaneously participating in the colonial oppression of Native Hawaiians. Because Filipinos in Hawai'i live in a colony, our citizenship and desires for equality within a US political system are crucial components of a complex hegemonic colonial structure that must be carefully questioned.<sup>23</sup>

At the same time that the Hawaiians are spatially displaced in the film, they are also temporally displaced from the reality of the Filipino filmgoers. The characters are forever stuck in a primitive, precolonial past, furthering the Hawaiian islands' erasure and "deserting." *Harwayana* domesticates Hawai'i, making it legible to prospective Filipino migrants, and rationalizes Filipino migration as part of the American civilizing and modernizing mission.



Scenes from *Badjao* and *Harwayana*

### *Badjao* and the Domestication of Mindanao

Although a popular hit at the time, *Harwayana* fell into obscurity, perhaps deemed not important enough to be commemorated in the canons of Philippine national cinema. However, Lamberto V. Avellana's *Badjao* continues to be well-regarded today as a significant piece of Philippine film history. This is probably because Avellana, through *Badjao*, had succeeded in fully localizing the South Seas genre, turning it from escapist fantasy to ethnographic reality; a reality that is nevertheless constructed, situated in the fluid southern borders of the new nation, ultimately celebrating the diversity of the postcolony while at the same time tacitly constructing ethnic and civilizational hierarchies.

At the turn of the twentieth century, Mindanao was an important political center within the larger Malay world and had largely resisted European colonization. When the Americans finally conquered them, they recognized Mindanao's uniqueness compared to the rest of the archipelago, which had already been colonized and Christianized. Whereas by 1902, the rest of the Philippine territory was administered by a civil government based in Manila, the Americans ruled over Mindanao separately under a military government until 1914, imagining themselves as providing a paternalistic colonial tutelage to the Moros and Lumad.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, this allowed them to monopolize Mindanao, imagining it as a new plantation island. In its early years, most Mindanao plantations were American-owned, and they kept Filipino entrepreneurs away as much as they could. Setting foot on the fertile Bukidnon plateau in Northern Mindanao in 1911, Governor General William Cameron Forbes likened it to the western frontier of continental US in the nineteenth century, a "white man's land... an ideal spot to get to work and cultivate the virgin soil, and undertake other enterprises."<sup>25</sup>

The American pacification of the indigenous Moro and Lumad people of Mindanao paved the way for the incorporation of Mindanao into the Philippine nation. Although lowland Christianized Filipino migration to

Mindanao began in the 1930s, after independence, internal migration to Mindanao resulted in the most massive movement of Filipinos in the nation's history,<sup>26</sup> as postwar administrations struggled to redistribute what was seen as undeveloped, unoccupied land. "He explore [sic], my grandfather," Nora Gozon-Tagalog said in 2009, talking about how her grandfather first moved to Hawai'i in 1919, got married and had children there before going back home to the Visayas in 1932, then to Mindanao in 1941. "When he thinks the future is not good for him for tomorrow, he could go, he could move. And when he move [sic], he bring all the family... [and] in Mindanao, when you say, this is my territory, that's yours."<sup>27</sup>

The incipient national cinema of the Philippines became crucial in the consolidation of the Philippine meta-archipelago and the refiguring of Mindanao into a Philippine island. Once more, this was influenced by American genre conventions that studios and filmmakers have learned during the colonial period. In his essay, "Rural Landscapes and the Formation of a National Cinema," Patrick F. Campos discusses how the American obsession with visually capturing its frontiers and peripheries was "inseparable from the logic of national expansion,"<sup>28</sup> and was passed on to Filipino filmmakers, whose representations of the rural and peripheral "helped clear a space for the materialization of a distinctly Philippine cinematic landscape, circumscribing a place from which the nation and a national cinema could be imagined."<sup>29</sup>

Like previous American-era South Seas fantasies, *Badjao* captures the landscape (and seascape) of the Sulu archipelago in Southern Mindanao. It draws from South Seas conventions, such as the illicit romance of two people of different ethnic backgrounds, even as they are both portrayed once more by Tagalog mestizos. Hassan (Tony Santos, Sr.) is the son of the tribal chief of pagan Badjao, known as sea nomads, who live most of their lives adrift. Bala Amai (Rosa Rosal) is the niece of the chief of the Islamic Tausug who rules a land-based polity in Southern Mindanao. Again, pearls are a recurring motif, as Hassan gifts Bala Amai rare blue pearls as a token of his love.



The initially reluctant Tausug chief eventually agrees to their marriage after Hassan has proven his loyalty through feats of strength and by offering the chief even more blue pearls that only the Badjao know where to dive for.

Moreover, Hassan has to convert to Islam, give up his nomadic ways, and live on land with the Tausug. After their marriage, Hassan abandons his Badjao family but struggles to live on land, growing more alienated no matter how hard he tries to be a good Tausug husband to Bala Amai. Meanwhile, the Tausug chief, driven by greed at offers of great wealth by an American pearl trader, demands Hassan to dive for more pearls. When Hassan declines out of respect for Bala Amai, the chief orders their house to be burnt, even as Bala Amai gives birth to their child. Hassan confronts the chief, giving a dramatic speech on the honor of the Badjao compared to the Tausug chief's disgraceful behavior. Finally, he takes Bala Amai with him to rejoin his father and the rest of the Badjao, who sail away into the sunset.

As in *Harwayana*, it is not racial difference but ethnic and cultural difference that drives the story's main conflict. Again, there is a civilizational hierarchy, with the Badjao belittled by the Tausug, who regard themselves as culturally superior compared to the nomadic infidels. The film attempts to use the American pearl trader as the foil tearing the two peoples apart by his greed; indeed, he is the colonial specter that haunts the nationalized space of Southern Mindanao, and it is easy to blame the interethnic conflict on his intervention. However, this is unconvincing; he appears late into the film and plays only a minor role, serving instead as a reflection of the Tausug chieftain's innate greed. In the end, it is the perceived essential traits of the cultures that tear them apart.

A fascinating deviation from the South Seas genre is the gender reversal of the "civilizer," with the man, Hassan, this time belonging to the more primitive culture, and the woman, Bala Amai, tasked to civilize him. The changed gender dynamics marks a disruption of the civilizational narrative. As Hassan attempts to assimilate with the Tausug, he is also emasculated at the same time, left unable to oppose the Tausug chief or even Bala Amai. His emasculation justifies his reversion to the primitive Badjao lifestyle at the end of the film. With his masculine Badjao-ness restored, Bala Amai also reverts to being a subservient wife.

What does this ending point to, then? Although *Badjao* can be interpreted as the triumph of love amidst interethnic conflict, it also points to the immiscibility of ethnic identities in the new national peripheries, prefaced in the opening title sequence of the film: "Here are two peoples geographically the same and yet forever to be divided by custom and faith." The closing title sequence tries to offer a bit more hope: "Is it race or faith that divides us? What can unite us? The right to build a future, free, together. Whether Moslem, Christian, Brown or White." This curious text reaches beyond the diegetic narrative

## When the civilizing tide ebbs, what subsumed islands can be unearthed and unsettled?

to talk to the film's contemporary national audience in 1957, who have probably become aware of the interethnic tensions between the new Christian migrants to Mindanao and the indigenous communities they are displacing.<sup>30</sup> In the end, the film offers a sobering but necessary solution to this interethnic tension in terms of the national project. At the same time, as this text rolls onscreen, the Badjao also sail away from the camera, vanishing into the watery horizon. This sequence restores the traditional ending of the American South Seas romance, except now it is the more primitive native that is driven out of the Philippine meta-archipelago.

Because the *Badjaos* elude understandings of colonial and national boundaries, the film imagines not their assimilation, but alienation, as they sail away and disappear, their perceived modernity relegated to history, as the film suggests: "This is a moment... in the ever-changing present, an unchangeable moment that today joins the past."

### Legacies of the Philippine Meta-archipelago

Hawai'i, lying in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, and Mindanao, located on its fringes, have been—and continue to be—the final frontiers of the settler states that occupy these islands. Until the end of the nineteenth century, they have been home to sovereign indigenous polities who have largely escaped colonization. But since the formal occupation of the US of these islands in the 1890s, they have also been subjected to multiple waves of migration from the Christianized (and Hispanized) islands of the Philippines, mainly from the Ilocos and Visayas regions. The disappearance of the native—through assimilation in *Harwayana* and alienation in *Badjao*—"deserts" the islands to make way for the imperial, and later national, meta-archipelago, and sets the stage for the arrival of the Filipino migrant as part of the nation-building project, through the capitalization of cheap labor as well as the appropriation of land. Today, these island peripheries remain sites of encounter between the dispossessed indigene and the aspirational migrant, as both are used to legitimate the nation, even as they continue to be exploited by it.

There are material archipelagos bound by imperial and national boundaries. There are meta-archipelagos bound by ideology and hegemony. There are islands of conquerors and

subjects, islands of migrant settlers and indigenes. And there are islands where they are all spliced together into a garish spectacle of modern development. When the civilizing tide ebbs, what subsumed islands can be unearthed and unsettled?

**Adrian Alarilla** is currently a PhD Candidate in History at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa, working on his dissertation on Filipino migration to Hawai'i and Mindanao. He did his MA in Southeast Asian Studies at the University of Washington. He also makes films and helps organize the Southeast Asia x Seattle Film Festival and the Diwa Filipino Film Showcase.

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In the *Invisibility of the Visible: Emancipated Mindanaw and Sulu in Philippine Cinema*, Jay Jomar Quintos brings together distinguished Mindanaw and Sulu film scholars, writers, and filmmakers in discussing and problematizing Mindanaw and Sulu cinema vis-à-vis its place in Philippine cinema.

The title of the anthology itself reveals a few facts about Mindanaw and Sulu cinema: (1) that Mindanaw and Sulu filmmaking is flourishing; (2) that Mindanaw and Sulu cinema has been marginalized in the totalizing discourse of the nation; and (3) that Mindanaw and Sulu cinema remains a site for liberation and contestation. With a plurality of voices and perspectives, the anthology engages with issues of identity and Philippine nationhood, film history and representation, and styles and methods of filmmaking within the context of Mindanaw and Sulu. By no means is the anthology exhaustive in its exploration of Mindanaw and Sulu cinema; however, it offers excellent ways to be in conversation with Mindanaw and Sulu cinema and its possibilities.

In his introduction, Quintos contextualizes Mindanaw and Sulu cinema within the tumultuous history of disenfranchisement and dispossession in the region. From here he traces the beginnings of Philippine cinema and the beginnings of Mindanaw as a subject in the imaginary of the Philippine cinema. He critiques the orientalist lens of Manila-centric filmmaking that renders the culture and politics of Mindanaw as mere caricatures, and starkly contrasts the detached/outsider perspective of Manila-based filmmakers and the engaged/insider perspective of Mindanaw- and Sulu-based filmmakers.

This orientalism is, of course, an extension of the historical processes by which Mindanaw and Sulu and their people had been reduced to exoticized, often feared, savages by the colonizers and their colonial subjects. The wedge created between Christianized Filipinos and unrelenting Moros is most exemplified in the theatrical drama *Moro-Moro*, which began during the Spanish colonial period and plays out the conflict between the two supposedly warring groups, typically portraying the Moro as savages that must be civilized. They further perpetuated a divide between the “Christianized” population and the “natives” of Mindanaw, the Lumad (non-Muslim indigenous groups) and the Moro. This continued with the American colonizers and Filipino elites who came to dominate the Philippines as a nation long after the intercolonial transition from Spanish to US rule at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The first few essays in *Invisibility of the Visible* outline the history and tradition of Mindanaw and Sulu filmmaking. In the first essay, Mangansakan attempts to create a working definition of Mindanaw cinema. In his definition, Mangansakan highlights an important aspect of filmmaking about Mindanaw and Sulu: that many, especially Manila-

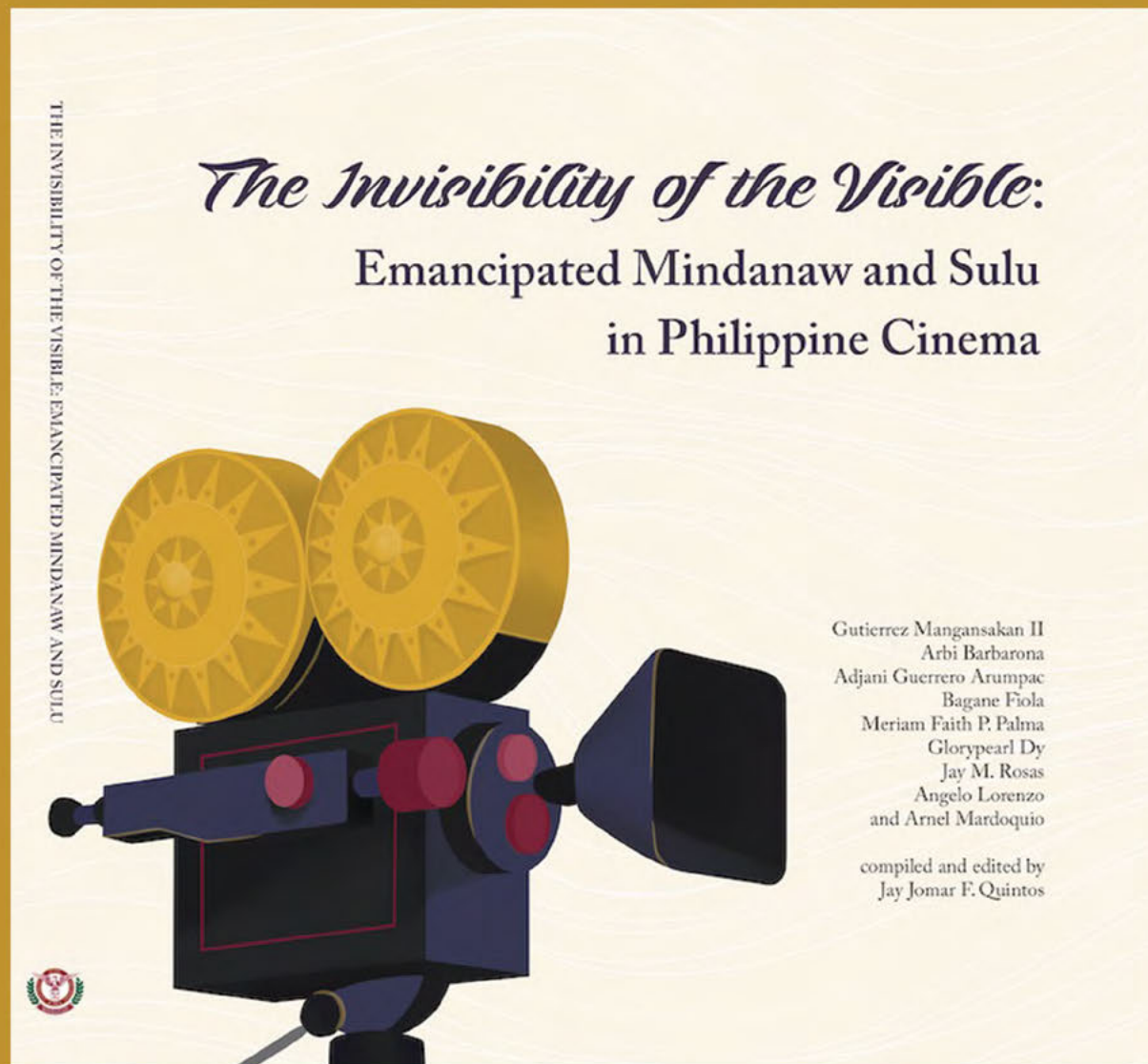
based filmmakers, misrepresent the region because they lack in-depth understanding and a sound sense of its people and places, thereby ending up exoticizing and sensationalizing the region and creating superficial narratives. Mangansakan’s delineation of “Mindanaw filmmaking” attempts to push forward the works of filmmakers with roots in Mindanaw and Sulu, who have a good grasp of the culture, politics, and social milieu of the region.

Rosas, meanwhile, traces the journey of Mindanaw cinema from its emergence to current movements. The essay notes how the narratives of Mindanaw and Sulu cinema highlight the experiences of common folk in the region. The third essay, written by Lorenzo, discusses the significance of the Cinemagis Film Festival in Northern Mindanaw and its contributions in bringing to light issues in Mindanaw cinema and, by consequence, Philippine cinema.

In my view, parallel to calls for decolonization should be a call for de-homogenization of cultures and perspectives in the Philippines. The omissions in Mindanaw and Sulu history run parallel to omissions of Mindanaw and Sulu narratives in the national cinematic discourse, often overshadowed by chimeric films on Mindanaw, which take on “Mindanaw themes” through a fetishistic outsider lens. Mindanaw and Sulu filmmakers should be allowed to take back their own narratives. As in ancestral domains and historical rehabilitation, there should also be reparations for and repatriations of Mindanaw and Sulu narratives in filmmaking.

The second section dives into reflections of Mindanaw and Sulu filmmakers on their aesthetics and politics. Arumpac begins the section with her essay on her journey as a filmmaker from General Santos City to Manila, from the regions to the nation. Boundaries are constructed socially to serve those in power: the “national” sets the stage that impacts the “regional”, defining expectations on language and aesthetics, and defining what “regional cinema” is as opposed to just “Philippine cinema.” In her essay, Arumpac describes the transcultural and translocal character of her artistic awakening and raises important questions about the place of Mindanaw and Sulu cinema within the idea of “nation”. We are thus able to reflect on how understanding the nation as representative of the entire Philippines and not just of a single locale or culture (as in Manila) leads us to challenge the categorization of Mindanaw and Sulu films as “regional” and to question the conflation of “national filmmaking” with filmmaking by Manila-based filmmakers.

Meanwhile, the essays of Fiola and Barbarona reveal their experiences of working with Lumad or indigenous communities in Mindanaw and highlighting Lumad issues in their filmmaking. Fiola uses the word verisimilitude – likeness to truth/reality – as the core value in his work among the Matigsalug of Marilog in his film *Baboy Halas: Wailings in the Forest*. Although Fiola seems to fall into the



## Ruminating Conversations and Contestations in Mindanaw and Sulu Cinema

A Book Review of *The Invisibility of the Visible: Emancipated Mindanaw and Sulu in Philippine Cinema* edited by Jay Jomar Quintos

Thea Kersti Condes Tandog



trap of essentializing indigenous peoples as naturalistic, this is countered by his attempts at verisimilitude which he achieves through immersion, a method akin to anthropology's ethnographic approach. Barbarona also sheds light on Lumad issues he exposes in *Tu Pug Imatuy*, particularly on Lumad spirituality and political struggles. The film is a depiction of what has been a perennial problem within the lands of Mindanao and Sulu: development aggression and intense militarization. Barbarona's work is instructive in showing the vantage point of the subaltern, who provides a counternarrative of how the world should be. All three essays signify the importance of grounding creative work in the social issues of places, as social spaces, from which they narrate their films.

The third part of the book engages in imagining the directions of Mindanao and Sulu cinema. Mangansakan emphasizes how cinema should mirror roots and identity, likening his own craft as a Moro filmmaker to his search for *copek batu* (mortar and pestle) in Indonesia—a metaphor for his own quest to understand his Pan-Malayan roots and identity. The *copek batu* represents the process of decolonization, of using the basic tools of our culture rather than those of the West. Mangansakan also asks important questions about representation of identities in filmmaking: who has license to create films on the narratives of life in Mindanao and Sulu? What of the power imbalance in filmmaking, which reflects a society that places a premium on the “center” (with agents who have power to write about the “other”) and marginalizes the “periphery”?

The issue of representation is not limited to the arts and humanities. It is a question also for all fields of sciences and social sciences. Who has license to write and/or discover? Here, I think, Fiola's call for verisimilitude and immersion establish importance. However, as in anthropology, it is crucial to highlight the subjectivities of the person whose eyes, or viewfinders, are used to frame someone else's reality. Reflexivity, especially in positionality, should always be seriously pondered upon by filmmakers in creating films about other people's narratives.

The third section also deals with how Mindanao and Sulu cinema keeps its vigor despite adversities and lack of institutional support. For instance, Palma writes that while Mindanao and Sulu cinema thrives through the creativity of Mindanao and Sulu filmmakers, there are still many challenges that intersect with the process of distribution because Mindanao and Sulu films are still, in many ways, marginalized.

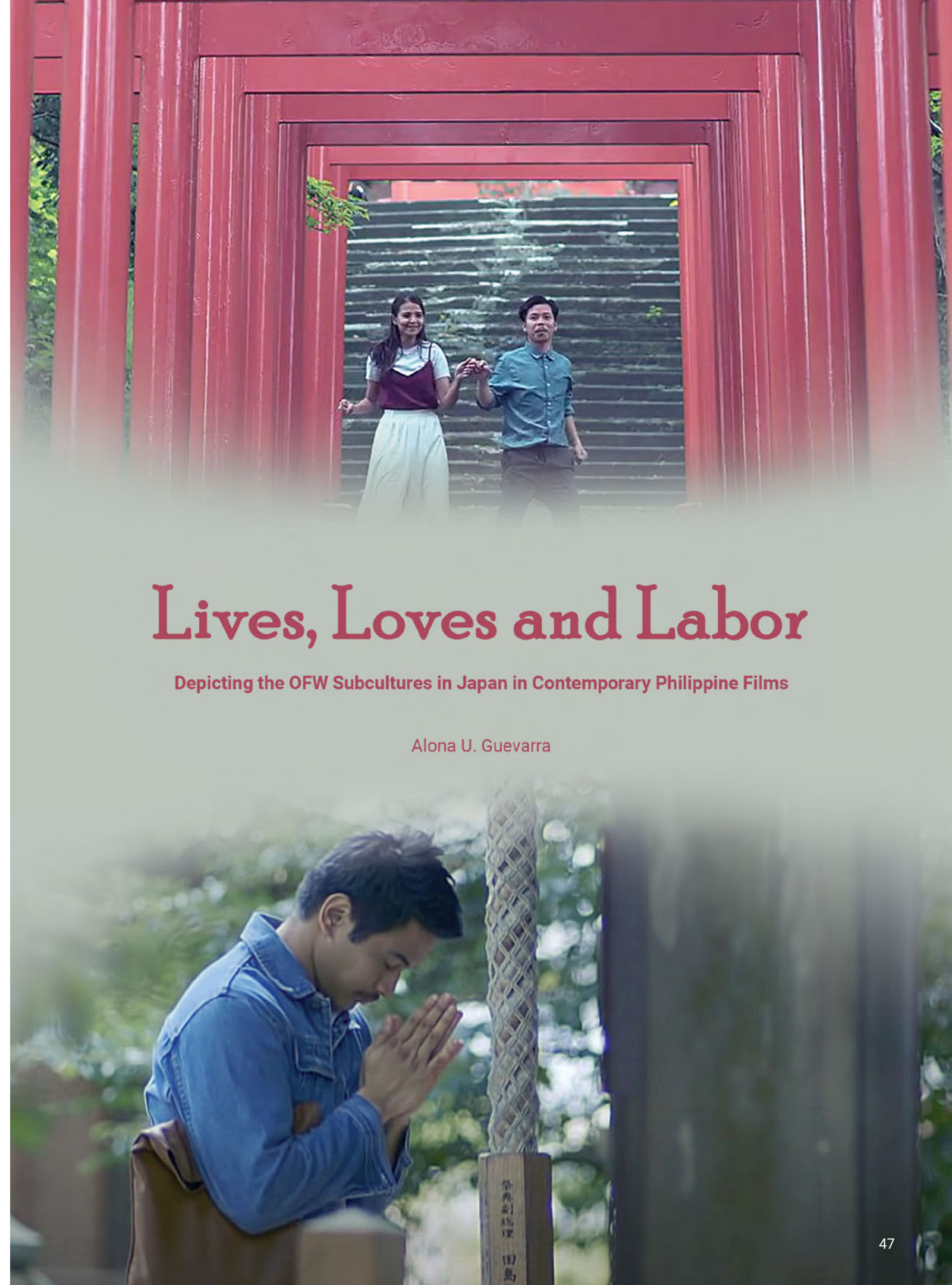
In the last essay, Mardoquio writes about the neoliberal character of Philippine cinema, which has resulted in the stunting of filmmaking in the country, including Mindanao, despite the dearth of multi-talented filmmakers and curious audiences. He argues that for Philippine cinema to flourish, neoliberalism in all forms should be dismantled. He outlines specific ways to do this toward further democratization of Philippine cinema, which embraces diversity rather than divides us via perceived differences.

The last part of the book contains the transcription of the roundtable discussion hosted in University of the Philippines Mindanao and facilitated by Quintos, entitled “(Re-) Locating Mindanao and Sulu Cinema in the Centennial Year Celebration of Philippine National Cinema”. The transcription reveals the lively discussions, intersections, and divergences in perspectives of Mangansakan, Dy, Barbarona, and Rosas. Their varying worldviews, contexts, aspirations and hesitations, even within the community of Mindanao and Sulu filmmakers, constitute a significant contribution in our consideration of positioning and situating Mindanao and Sulu cinema in relation to Philippine cinema.

*The Invisibility of the Visible* fills a large gap in our understanding of Philippine cinema as well as Mindanao and Sulu filmmaking. The book invites further scholarship on Mindanao and Sulu cinema as its own set of practices. It also opens interesting perspectives and debates on anthropological and sociological inquiries into what “nation” means in a diverse postcolonial society forced violently into assimilation through homogenizing techniques by colonizers and elite-dominated governments. It raises important questions on representation and situatedness, especially as it imagines trajectories for artistic production within a neoliberal economic and ideological system. For all the ideological nuances and contradictions presented in the selection of essays, the book emphasizes the need to recognize the social realities and cultural materials of actual people in Mindanao and Sulu from the eyes of the people themselves.

\* *The Invisibility of the Visible: Emancipated Mindanao and Sulu in Philippine Cinema* (edited by Jay Jomar Quintos, 2020) is published by the University of the Philippines Mindanao

**Thea Kersti Condes Tandog** is Assistant Professor in the Department of Social Sciences at the University of the Philippines Mindanao, home of the Anthropology and Mindanao Studies program.



# Lives, Loves and Labor

Depicting the OFW Subcultures in Japan in Contemporary Philippine Films

Alona U. Guevarra



## Japan and Cinema

It is well past 2020, the year of the COVID-19 pandemic, and Filipinos continue to utilize various media content to satisfy their wanderlust for lands far away as the world awaits more definite protocols for international travel. Fortunately, “[g]lobal communication networks, especially the internet,” Richard Butsch (2019) writes, “have made distribution of ideas and culture commonplace” (206) and travel vlogs, TikTok videos, and other social media content have managed to scratch the Pinoy’s travel itch vicariously. But into the year 2021, the pandemic persists in paralyzing travel and physical interaction for billions of people on lockdown, and as the government insists on its militarized response to eradicate a medical crisis, the spread of the COVID-19 virus and its mutations continues, and the mediated screen’s role as primary means of cultural exchange for many people is likewise prolonged indefinitely.

Before the global lockdown of 2020, Japan had topped the Philippines’ foreign leisure destinations for five straight years, according to Philippine Travel Agencies Association (PTAA) President Ritchie Tuaño (qtd. in Arnaldo). Filipinos apparently persisted in traveling to Japan despite being ranked as eighth most expensive country to live in 2021 (worldpopulationreview.com) because of its people, food, culture, shopping districts, and general safety of the city. Indeed, the dual identity of Japan as both a cosmopolitan city and historical space deeply rooted in tradition has piqued the curiosity of travelers for centuries. But with non-essential travel to Japan still barred by mid-2021, this period of forced physical distance permits us time to reflect on how Philippine cinema has artistically addressed the Filipino’s historical and evolving relationship with the Land of the Rising Sun.

While earlier Filipino cinema captured how Japanese soldiers came to the Philippines and heralded the atrocities of the Second World War—e.g., Mario O’ Hara’s *Tatlong Taong Walang Diyos* (1976), Chito S. Roño’s *Yamashita: The Tiger’s Treasure* (2001), and Cesar Montano’s *Panaghoy sa Suba* (2004)—twenty-first-century Philippine cinema sheds light on another dimension of international relations, borne out of Japan’s late capitalist economic prosperity during the post-World War II era. In fact, the outflow of Filipinos who leave their home country to settle in Japan since then has increased through the decades as a response to the allure of 20<sup>th</sup>-century Japan’s mighty Yen.

Having Japan as a filming location is no easy feat for Filipino film producers with limited resources. Fortunately,

some local producers of mostly independent films have found some local and/or international support to make Filipino films set in Japan, some of which are discussed in this article. These Filipino films set in Japan offer a courageous take on Japanese and Filipino representations, tending to focus not on Filipino tourists’ experiences but those of the Overseas Filipino Workers’ (OFW). Here, the honeymoon phase of travel is eradicated: when travelers’ stay goes beyond the tour and becomes part of the landscape, what happens? In such films, the country of migration is unmasked and becomes its own character in our material economic struggles.

As tourism researcher Sue Beeton writes,

Films not only present places as a backdrop to the action, but also at times, as characters of the narrative, which provides a level of emotional attachment for the viewer, especially when the setting is integral to the story, and, in effect, a star in its own very right. Furthermore, filmic landscapes can become ‘landscapes of the mind’ offering displaced representations of desires and values [being] both material and mediated. Consequently, they often engender strong emotional responses.

Japan is often portrayed across global cinemas as a character-place of refined historical nobility and modern cosmopolitanism: the clean lines of its traditional architecture, the celebration of negative spaces in its minimalist aesthetic, the idyllic countryside and sounds of nature, contrasting with its bustling commercial hubs, train stations, technological innovations, and the spiderweb of streets and alleys, cafés, and art spaces.

Japan’s own historically rich cinematic heritage can very well represent its own unified duality to the world. However, the outsider’s gaze in cinematic storytelling, exploring in the process of telling their own stories intricacies of what to them constitute Japanese-ness, has the special role of mediator that provides the viewer with varying layers of truths and myths about Japan. Indeed, the allure of Japan to outsiders has never abated since the invention of the camera; in fact, profit-driven Hollywood has constantly paid homage to Japan’s glorious dual character, portraying her as perplexing, as in Sofia Coppola’s *Lost in Translation* (2003); or exotic, as in Edward Zwick’s *The Last Samurai* (2003) or, much earlier, in the James Bond franchise’s *You Only Live Twice* (1967). While Filipino filmmakers draw from foreign cinematic representations of Japan, notably Hollywood’s more homogenizing gaze, the Filipino filmmakers’ cinematic gaze has created an assemblage to project a uniquely Filipino notion of Japaneseness for a new age of international relations.

Because the inbound movement of Japanese soldiers to the Philippines in the 1940s and the outbound flow of



*Kintsugi* (Lawrence Fajardo, Pelikulaw, Solar Pictures, 2020). Courtesy of Lawrence Fajardo



*Imbisibol* (Lawrence Fajardo, Sinag Maynila, Solar Entertainment, 2015). Courtesy of Lawrence Fajardo

Philippine workers to Japan in the 1980s to the present are both state-driven, obvious tensions have built up across the decades over differences in identity, culture, and society. Caroline Hau and Takashi Shiraishi, in their essay “Daydreaming about Rizal and Tetchō: On Asianism as Network Fantasy” (2018), revisit this encounter in recounting how, over a century ago, the Philippines’ Jose Rizal and Japan’s Suehiro Tetchō met aboard the ship SS Belgic when it left the port of Yokohama in 1888 bound for San Francisco. The men developed a friendship and brotherly connection throughout their journey, even as the encounter revealed their contrasting views of the nation. Rizal, during this sojourn, wrote to his family: “I have stayed here longer than I intended, for the country seems to me very interesting and because in the future we shall have much to do and deal with Japan.” These would be prophetic words as, a century later, a flood of overseas Filipino workers would enter Japan and profoundly change the situation for the two nations.

This paper provides a thematic discussion of four contemporary Filipino films set in Japan: Miko Liveló’s *Blue Bustamante* (2013), Sigrid Andrea Bernardo’s *Kita Kita* (2017), and Lawrence Fajardo’s *Imbisibol* (2017), and *Kintsugi* (2020). These films provide universally accepted features of Japan, such as the ephemeral features of its changing landscape across the country’s four seasons; the discipline, orderliness, honesty, and industry of its people; its islands that provide respite from the rest of the raucous world; the synergy between humans and nature pushing creativity to uncharted territories in new or traditional media; and so forth.

Lawrence Fajardo’s camera frames in *Kintsugi* capture the Japanese countryside and architectural structures where he privileges the use of negative space. The workplaces in *Blue Bustamante* and *Kintsugi* depict the strong teamwork and sense of collectivity that the Japanese are known to cultivate from an early age. Sapporo in *Kita Kita* features the cityscapes of Sapporo, where lush nature is integrated into the city proper. And, again, the quiet of Sapporo in wintertime milieus the

character Linda as she aids disheartened Filipino laborers in *Imbisibol*. These films reveal similarities in the experiences of different OFW in Japan, highlighting the workers’ triumphs and losses as they navigate the outer and inner landscapes. Remarkably, as the characters strive to understand their host country better, their growing familiarity with the foreign landscape and its foreign people also brings them to discover their own selves and identities.

## A Tale of Two OFWs: The Guest Worker and the *Bilog* in Four Filipino Films

In the 1980s, Japan experienced its “third wave” of foreign influx as it opened its domestic markets to foreigners. Japan’s economy then reached unprecedented heights, propelling the country to a potential superpower status during this decade. This period of economic growth from the 1980s to the early 1990s, now referred to as the Bubble Era, brought with it a phenomenon that prior to the period had been uncommon to Japan: a wave of immigration.

People from developing countries flocked to Japan, seeking to partake of its expanding economy. The influx caught the Japanese government unprepared. Much of Japan’s modern history has been in relative seclusion, whether because of its own national policy or the effects of the Second World War. It was in relative economic isolation from the forces of the world economy. With the arrival of foreign workers in Japan, Japanese legislation and agencies were hastily set up to help foreigners find jobs. The process, at times, was very uneven. Many tourists and legal workers overstayed their visas, while many legally entitled Latin American-Japanese found the transition process too complicated. Japan had to slowly come to terms with a country where non-ethnic Japanese became part of the landscape. Thus, the arrival of foreign workers forced the Japanese to reexamine the stereotypes and constructions they had developed of themselves and others over the post-war period.

Opposite page: Scenes from (above) *Kita Kita* (Sigrid Andrea Bernardo, Spring Films, Viva Films, 2017) and (below) *Blue Bustamante* (Miko Liveló, Cinema One Originals, 2013). All screengrabs by author



As a nearby Asian neighbor, the Philippines was naturally drawn to Japan for economic opportunities and employment. To date, many young Filipino talents, especially those in the arts and sciences, entered Japan initially as guest workers or university students. If they display aptitude in their areas of specialization and the Japanese language, the latter may progress to find work in a Japanese company or stay as a guest worker in Japan with all the legal benefits.

According to the 2019 data of Japan's Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, Filipinos followed the Chinese (418,327) and Vietnamese (401,326) to rank third with an estimated count of 179,685 Filipinos in the list of foreign workers in Japan. In the 2014 data of the Philippines' Department of Foreign Affairs, Japan ranked 6th out of 25 countries with the highest number of OFWs. This is without counting the number of undocumented Filipino workers who may be working illegally in Japan; one can only surmise that they too must be in the thousands.

Much like in other nations where OFW communes sprang up around the world, Filipino workers working illegally in Japan were distinguished from legal OFWs through the term colloquialized in Filipino communities in Japan as *bilog*. The word "bilog," meaning "round," evokes the number zero to define the status of the illegal workers in Japan. They are not simply second-class citizens; they are workers who are not seen by the state, Japan's, or their own, workers on whom states have turned a blind eye. They are, as Fajardo's film title fittingly describes them, *imbisibol* (invisible).

Among the four contemporary Filipino films for analysis, only Lawrence Fajardo's *Imbisibol* dives deeply into the underbelly of Japan's migrant economy. So much can be said about the *bilog* subculture as a reaction to the loopholes and shortcomings of proper, state-governed Japanese and Philippine societies. The *bilog* are the illegitimate children of the clandestine Japanese economy and the negligent Philippine government, the unfortunate offspring of the lack of clear state laws governing illegal laborers, and the immense profits both countries benefit from cheap labor. But like all illegitimate children, the *bilog*, too, need to be identified, protected, and given back their dignity.

*Imbisibol* (2015) was adapted from Herlyn Alegre's award-winning Virgin Lab Fest theatrical script. The script, in turn, was influenced by director-journalist Rey Ventura's autobiographical account of illegal foreign workers in Japan, titled *Underground in Japan* (1992). Ventura, in his memoir, recounts his experience of being a day laborer in the Kotokubicho District in Yokohama City. The work depicts how the presence of illegal workers or *bilog* in Japan is an open secret to the Filipino community and presents a case that that illegal workers, to a certain extent, keep the well-oiled wheels of Japan's late capitalism turning by providing the necessary workforce for so-called "3K" jobs. 3K is short for *kitanai, kiken,*

*kitsui*, which translates to "dirty, dangerous, difficult" blue-collar jobs that the locals often refuse due to their risk and undesirability.

*Imbisibol* peels back the curtains on Japan's migrant situation to find where the *bilog* subculture thrives in forgotten corners and shadows. Here, a network of illegal OFWs and their legal OFW connections and local conspirators walk a tightrope to protect the *bilog* from Japan's strict laws, which govern overstaying foreigners and illegal workers. Linda (Ces Quesada), the Filipina spouse of a Japanese national, represents the legally staying foreigner in Japan who conspires with a handful of illegal workers doing 3K jobs in the Hokkaido prefecture. She takes on the role of a benefactor to this little community, helping them to find jobs even as it puts her family at risk with Japanese law.

Through the association with Linda, the stories of the *bilog* are revealed to the film audience. There is the old-timer Benjie (Bernardo Bernardo) who, by choice or necessity, spent the prime years of his life working multiple jobs illegally to send money to his family, who have become emotionally estranged from him. Manuel (Allen Dizon) is a male entertainer, or *hosto*, who has already aged on the job and therefore has lost his attractiveness to customers. He is forced to compete desperately with younger Filipino *hosto* to earn money. Rodel (JM de Guzman) is a hard worker employed at a lumberyard whose dedication to his job becomes a cause of conflict with another Filipino worker in the factory. This conflict would eventually escalate and result in the tragic ending of the film. When her shady dealings are discovered, Linda is caught in an existential crisis. Her husband gives her the ultimatum to choose between her family or her OFW community of mostly illegal workers. The audience does not hear Linda choose in the film, but her actions betray that her OFW community means more to her.

While the film *Kita Kita*, to be discussed later in this paper, is set in Hokkaido's touristy Sapporo City, *Imbisibol's* Hokkaido resonates more with the inner struggles and realities of the *bilog*. As captured by Fajardo's camera, Hokkaido's primal white landscape is uninviting and desolate; the soundscape is deafeningly silent, with only small bursts of dialogue coming from the Filipino characters to break the quiet. While the natural landscape of Hokkaido is vast, the world of the *bilog* in it is suffocating. In the supreme effort to conceal their existence, the *bilog* move in cramped spaces such as tiny apartments shared by far too many people, hole-in-the-wall karaoke bars and pubs, rooms converted into gambling dens, and back alleys and crowded factories in remote areas.

The film makes a harrowing exposition of the various means (*para-paraan* in Filipino) that the *bilog* take to secure any job to stay in Japan. From marrying a local national to sex work to working 3K jobs, the *bilog* sees any work sacrifice in Japan as better than returning to the Philippines. The

Philippines may provide legal employment to qualified workers; however, compensation is often unfair and the same effort that can already provide rent, food, and some remittance to the family in Japan could not make a living wage in the Philippines. Alienated from their families and compatriots, the OFWs' life-value is reduced to how they contribute to the national income per capita, even without recognition or empathy for the *bilog* made invisible by a soulless world driven by capitalistic gains.

Meanwhile, *Blue Bustamante*, *Kintsugi*, and *Kita Kita* delve into the lives of legal OFWs or guest workers in Japan. These films show how highly skilled OFWs are, in contrast to the *bilog* of *Imbisibol*, given due support by their employers such as ample wages, access to decent housing, paid vacation leaves, social support, and the opportunity to travel around the country if they wish to do so. The latter 1990s to early 2000s, the period when these films were set, was a time when several policy responses from the Japanese bureaucracy, political parties, employers' groups and unions, and business and research institutes compelled the legal employment of foreign workers in Japan. Some of these policies focused on getting businesses to secure accreditation before being allowed to accept foreign workers. Others focused on regulating the level of unskilled illegal workers in Japan through work-and-learn programs. Elements of these proposals were eventually worked into the revision of Japan's Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Law (Cabinet Order 319 of 1951).

Remarkably, as in real life, the OFWs portrayed in the three films come from middle-class Philippine families. This is worth noting to dispel stereotypes that OFWs come from the lowest income brackets only. In fact, OFWs have typically completed tertiary education and have a definite skill set, often leaving their home country to seek better opportunities abroad in the hope of accumulating financial capital for their families back home.

In the first film, *Blue Bustamante*, OFW George Bustamante (Joem Bascon) takes on the role of a stunt double of Blue Force, a superhero or *sentai* character from a fictional Japanese children's live-action show titled *Force Five*. George, an engineer by profession, resolves to work in Japan to provide a better future for his small family, composed of his stay-at-home wife and grade-school son. While early in the film, George's wife attempts to deter him from leaving his family by telling him that she will find employment to augment his income, George firmly refuses and asks her just to rest and care for their son. George sees his work in Japan as a short period away from his family that will provide him with ample savings so he could eventually return, having secured a better future for his family—the OFW's ultimate dream. However, upon his arrival in Japan, George's would-be employer does not push through with hiring him for unknown reasons. Refusing to return to the Philippines as a failure, he sends his resume to several companies while staying with his friend, a more veteran OFW named Roger (Jun Sabayton).

Roger acts as George's guide to Japanese culture and society. Roger's character is impressed upon the audience as highly skilled in TV production work. He is adept in the Japanese language, acting as a translator for George, who knows little to no Japanese. Through Roger's TV work, George lands the role of a stunt-double, a job he was initially hesitant to take for being so misaligned with and, he felt, rather below



The Filipino as a stunt double in *Blue Bustamante*





his professional training. However, out of necessity, George puts on the costume of Blue Force.

In this way, the film captures the bittersweet journey of the OFW in securing a bright future for his family. In a most recognizable portrait of the struggling OFW, Roger complains in a drunken stupor at some point in the film that he misses his family terribly and that he is lonely and feels cold in Japan. Roger, who has been in Japan for much longer and has overcome the same homesickness, consoles his friend by reminding him, “May silbi yang buhay mo. May rason kung bakit ka nandito” (“Your life has a purpose. There’s a reason you’re here”).

George’s shame in his stunt-double job is later dispensed when he learns from his wife that their son loved and followed *Force Five*, with Blue Force as his favorite character. At this point, George begins to take some pride in taking on Blue Force’s role, showing earnestness and dedication for his job as a *sentai* stunt double. It becomes his way of communicating his love for his son while working overseas.

The live-action superhero show *Force Five* takes inspiration from *sentai* shows that became part of Japan’s cultural exports from the late 1970s to the present. In the 1990s, when *Blue Bustamante* is set, Filipino youngsters had become exposed to shows of the *sentai* genre through series like Shaider, Bioman, and Power Rangers in local free TV channels dubbed Filipino or dubbed English versions. Japanese-costumed characters held high appeal for Filipino children, as they were more relatable than those churned out by Marvel or DC Comics. In terms of physique, *sentai* heroes were non-threatening, more leanly, and closely built, in contrast to the hulking Aryan representations of American comics that contrasted heavily with Filipinos’ darker skin and smaller build. The values of teamwork, humility, and loyalty emphasized in *sentai* shows are also qualities greatly valued by Filipinos, so children could safely enjoy the shows without censorship in the comfort of their family living rooms.

Certainly, the director-screenwriter Miko Lavelo was able to capitalize on the emotional nostalgia of *Blue Bustamante* to highlight the strong presence of Japan’s cultural imports in Philippine popular culture. Japan’s anime and manga exports capture the imagination of many generations of Filipinos, creating fond memories of a hybridized Philippine-Japan culture. While *Blue Bustamante* has its shortcomings in terms of plot and gender representations and does visually belie its budget limits (especially with obviously studio-shot scenes of what are intended to be scenes shot on location in Japan), the overall aesthetic and nostalgia of *Blue Bustamante* won it the best in Production Design award from ABS-CBN’s Cinema One Originals Digital Films Festival in 2013, as it was able to create and evoke a Japan that was familiar and recognizable to Filipinos, and stirred memories of a beloved and shared cultural past.

In Sigrid Andrea P. Bernardo’s 2017 romantic-comedy *Kita Kita*, the lead character Lea (Alessandra de Rossi) is a Filipino tourist guide based in Sapporo City who temporarily loses her eyesight because of stress caused by heartbreak. After she catches her fiancé of four years, a Japanese man named Nobu, cheating on her with a Filipino-Japanese colleague—a *kababayan* who presumably should have known and understood her own aspirations with Nobu—her vision becomes blurry and fades to black. The once outgoing and kind-hearted Lea becomes imprisoned in her joyless, sightless body.



Filipinos fall in love in Sapporo City in *Kita Kita*



*Kintsugi*

Lea finds hope in love and life through the aid of another *kababayan* Tonyo (Empoy Marquez). Also an OFW, Tonyo goes impulsively to Sapporo, located in Japan’s northernmost prefecture of Hokkaido, from Tokyo, where he is employed. He goes in haste to take a break after being jilted by his Filipino lover. Through a well-executed plot set-up, the blind Lea and the persistent, plain-faced yet endearing Tonyo develop a friendship that blossoms into a romance.

Both Lea and Tonyo are portrayed to be skilled workers staying in Japan legally. Lea lives in her own rented house in Sapporo, while Tonyo appears to be financially capable of vacationing in Sapporo after his failed romance, even renting a place close to Lea’s. Both have a good grasp of the Japanese language. Relenting to the touristic appeal of Japan’s more remote prefectures, the film gives the filmgoer a cinematic tour of popular tourist destinations in Sapporo City, such as Odori Park and Sapporo Clock Tower, the Bell of Happiness, and Hokkaido’s flower gardens.

But the tour showcases more than tourist destinations. The two characters, Lea and Tonyo, are portrayed as relaxed and at home in this landscape and are depicted to immensely enjoy it as legal guest workers. Except for Lea’s ex-fiancé, the Japanese people are portrayed as kind, polite and helpful, emanating a certain warmth despite being shot in chilly Sapporo. *Kita Kita*, at the time of its release, was the highest-grossing indie film in the Philippines. With its ability to sustain the *kilig* factor, that happy combination of romantic thrill and humor, from start to end, complemented by the film’s touristic gaze on picturesque Sapporo, the film is a solid homage of the Filipino love for Japan. The title *Kita Kita*, which translates in Filipino as “I see you,” translates incidentally to “North North” in Japanese, where Sapporo is on the map of Japan. The Filipino’s aspirational gaze views Japan as a place where they like all they see and hope that what they see can be seen in their own country. Tonyo articulates this aspiration literally while on a river cruise with Lea, asking what if the Philippines’ dirty Pasig River became as beautiful

as the Sapporo River they were in?

But while they immerse themselves in the beauty of Sapporo, their yearning for the Philippines is also sustained. The problems of our countrymen in a foreign land also surface as inevitable baggage in migrant work. In one scene, Lea mistakes Tonyo for a thief and the latter exclaims “*Alam mo grabe ka, kapag Pilipino, magnanakaw agad?*” (You know, you’re unbelievable! I am automatically branded as a thief just because I am a Filipino?). In another instance, Lea tells Tonyo that she misses the Philippines, where she is not treated as a second-class citizen. Lea, who appears to have lived a well-adjusted life in Japan prior to her blindness, does not elaborate on why she made this comment, leaving the viewers to interpret it as they will. This also leads us to imagine that perhaps hers is a story already too often told.

The most recent film for discussion in this paper is *Kintsugi* (2020). From the same team that created *Imbisibol*, director-screenwriter Lawrence Fajardo, Herlyn Alegre, and Brillante Mendoza work together again in *Kintsugi* to produce another cinematic drama that portrays the lives of OFWs in Japan. While *Kita Kita* centers on feel-good inspirational romance, *Kintsugi* tells of a more poignant and tragic love story.

Due to financial necessity, Dante Dizon (JC Santos) leaves his own family’s struggling pottery business in his hometown in Pampanga to work paradoxically for a family-owned pottery/ceramic business in the Saga prefecture in Japan. While working in the ceramics factory, Dante meets Harue Matsusaka (Hiro Nishiuchi), the daughter and heir of his boss. Harue has gone back to her hometown, leaving her job as an art professor in Tokyo, to heal herself from romantic heartbreak. While she stays with her parents, she begins helping around the factory as well. The attraction between Dante and Harue is palpable, and it quickly turns into a romance. But as the movie unfolds and they fall in love to the point that Harue is almost ready to leave the traditions of her conservative family behind for Dante, it is revealed that





*Imbisibol*

the financial need of Dante not only stems from the need to support his mother and sister in Pampanga but also to secure the medical needs of his wife who is on life support in a hospital in his hometown.

The symbolism of the dying wife/fledgling family business and the new lover/thriving family business is a painful contrast for the viewers. The protagonist Dante is painted as an antagonist, for being a cheater and for abusing the trust of Harue.

The title of the film *Kintsugi* is derived from Harue's handmade gift of a *kintsugi*-styled bowl to Dante as a token of her affection. *Kintsugi* is the Japanese art of repairing broken pottery with gold- or silver-infused lacquer, turning the cracks and breaks into veins of gold or silver to become an homage to, rather than erasure of, the scars accumulated through various pains and breakages. But as the movie draws to a close and Dante's deceit to Harue is revealed, the *kintsugi* bowl acquires another layer of significance, becoming symbolic of Dante and Harue's ill-fated love affair—a new breaking to overcome. In the context of Philippine-Japanese relations, viewers may also be invited to imagine this kind of “golden repair” in a shared history that has not been spared of violence and war; perhaps, these relations may yet be rebuilt for new generations.

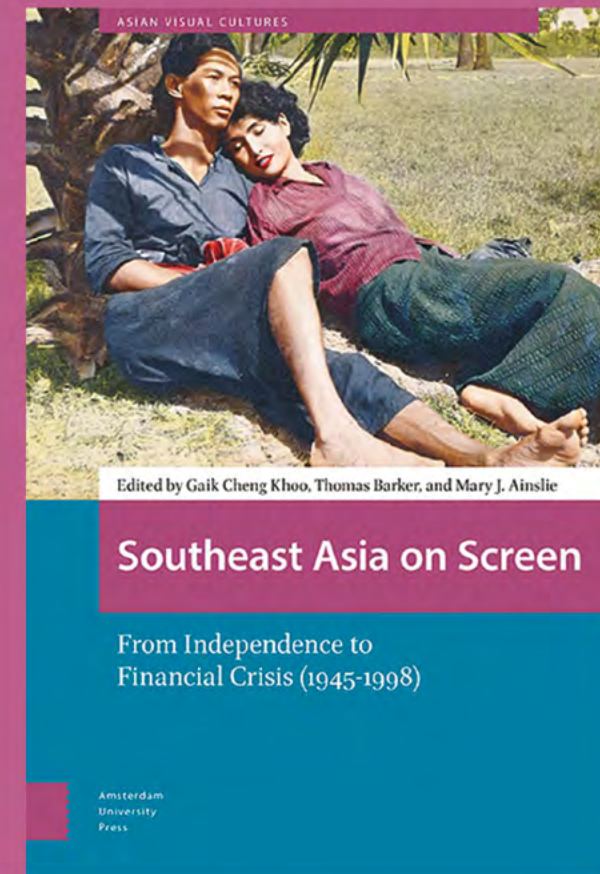
### Conclusion

In January 2017, then Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe made a two-day official visit to the Philippines where he met the newly-instated Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte. The latter toured Abe in his hometown of Davao, which incidentally is known as the country's Little Japan due to the

number of Japanese and Filipino-Japanese residing there. *Philippine Daily Inquirer* reports that the visit was mostly casual, with Duterte even showing Abe his room in his Davao home, where a *kulambo* or mosquito net hung over his bed—a sign of Duterte's modest lifestyle. The “folksy” diplomacy of the two leaders acted out what appeared to be the growing trust between the Philippine and Japanese governments. Bryman Media founder and scholar Mark Manantan would later state in a commentary for *Philippine Star* (Aug 31, 2020) that under the leadership of Shinzo Abe, the Philippines and Japan had entered the golden chapter of Philippine-Japan ties. In his 2017 visit, Abe was likewise hopeful that his trip would “pave the way for further expansion of the bilateral relationship not only in an economic context but also in the areas of cultural and people-to-people exchanges.”

While circumstances surrounding Duterte's administration would change significantly into the pandemic saga, these episodes and interludes of Philippine-Japan relations, from the intellectual and cultural encounters of Tetchō and Rizal to the folk diplomacy of Duterte and Abe, from the second World War in the 1940s to the Golden Age of Philippine-Japan ties in the 2000s, from the nostalgic memories of Japan in Filipino kids because of Filipino-dubbed *sentai* to the waves of OFWs migrating to Japan on the impulse of economic need, the Philippines' relationship with Japan continues to evolve and deepen. While still far from being ideal, the decades that have passed have shown that, at this point, each country needs the other and their histories have become inextricably linked. Many stories of this history continue to be told based on our past and current socio-political travails and triumphs. It is expected that cinema would continue to capture these narratives, the tales of these two countries, as their ties evolve and deepen with the times.

**Alona U. Guevara** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of English at the Ateneo de Manila University. Her research interests are popular culture and contemporary literature of Asia. She has taught an elective and published articles on the fiction of Haruki Murakami.



## Locating Philippine Cinema in Southeast Asian Film History

A Review of *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)* by G.C. Khoo, T. Barker, and M.J. Ainslie (Eds.)

Jason Paolo Telles

East Asian cinema has been given a great deal of attention in academia in the past decades, resulting in the publication of several books, chapters, and articles featuring critical interrogations and analyses of film products and industries in/of the region—mainly from China, South Korea, and Japan. Meanwhile, the cinemas of one of East Asia's immediate neighbors—Southeast Asia—are yet to be afforded the same attention, at least in the international sphere. However, it should be noted that there is already a growing number of locally produced literature (some of which are written in their national languages) on the topic in ASEAN member states.

Earlier works, such as the anthologies *Film in South East Asia: Views from the Region* (2001) edited by David Hanan,

*Southeast Asian Independent Cinema: Essays, Documents, Interviews* (2012) edited by Tilman Baumgärtel, *Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (2012) edited by May Adadol Ingawanij and Benjamin McKay, *Film in Contemporary Southeast Asia: Cultural Interpretation and Social Intervention* (2012) edited by David C. L. Lim and Hiroyuki Yamamoto, *The Films of ASEAN* (2000) edited by Jose F. Lacaba, and the French-language book *Le cinéma d'Asie du Sud-Est* (Southeast Asian Cinema; 2012) edited by Gaëtan Margirier and Jean-Pierre Gimenez, and the special issue titled “South East Asia on Screen” published in 2006 in the *South East Asia Research*, among others, have already opened the floodgates for the field but only to a certain point. If one is to conduct a review of such collections and more, it could still be observed that there is an uneven terrain in terms



of exploring film and cinema histories and texts in various countries in Southeast Asia. Most contributions feature Philippine, Malaysian, Indonesian, Vietnamese, Singaporean, and Thai contexts, while those of other countries in the ASEAN have a minimal amount of attention given to them.

In the anthology, *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)* (2020), edited by Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie, which is the focus of this review, Khoo posits that such varying frequencies of research attention per ASEAN state could be partly attributed not only to their geographical and economic characteristics, but also to their differences in their colonial experiences, cultural, ethnic, and linguistic contexts, borders, and political/geopolitical histories, among others.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, even in the anthology mentioned above, Brunei, Laos, Cambodia, and Timor Leste are not included. Yet, despite such lack, it still holds significant contributions to the field as it features aspects of Southeast Asian cinema that have not been comprehensively explored in the past.

With the premise that most of the existing literature on the field focus on the contemporary period, *Southeast Asia on Screen* seeks to add to the discourse by looking into specific case studies from the end of World War II, during which several ASEAN countries were arguably afforded their independence, up to the Asian Financial Crisis that occurred from 1997 to 1998. The book has three general sections titled “Independence and Post-World War II Filmmaking: Nation-Building, Modernity, and Golden Eras,” “Key Directors,” and “Popular Pleasures,” each containing critical interrogations of key personalities, films, and their political economies of cinemas in the region. This review, however, focuses on the contributions wholly or partially pertaining to the Philippines.

Media scholars in the country are not oblivious to the fact that film or cinema histories as a field has already blossomed in the Philippines, as evidenced by the growing number of (academic) literature on it, mostly from local academics such as Nicanor G. Tiongson, Nick Deocampo, Patrick Campos, Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., Rolando B. Tolentino, and Joyce Arriola, among many others. The same could also be observed in *Southeast Asia on Screen* as three of the 13 chapters fully focus on the Philippine cinema context, while two only partly do so (i.e., Chapter 11 is about Indonesia and the Philippines and Chapter 12 is about Singaporean, Hong Kong, and Philippine landscapes). Four chapters wholly or partly feature Indonesia, while Myanmar, Vietnam, Malaysia, and Singapore have one each. Meanwhile, only two contributions tackle the Thai context. The variety of contributions in the edited collection that tackle aspects of the industry in the Philippines from 1945 to 1998 display the complexity of the country’s cinema—arguably shaped by the industry’s political economy, colonial origin, and socio-cultural environment, among many other influences, motivations, and constraints.

In the first section, Joyce L. Arriola’s “The 1950s Filipino *Komiks*-to-Film Adaptation during the Studio Era” meticulously examines the practice of early major Philippine film studios of adapting stories from popular *komiks* through the lens of “vernacular modernism” by Miriam Hansen and further posits such a practice’s potential to influence the “national-popular imaginary.”<sup>2</sup> Adaptations of *komiks*, *korido*, and other traditional literary forms in local films have previously been examined by the author through her book *Postmodern Filming in Literature: Sources, Contexts and Adaptations* (2006) and through her articles published in various journals in and outside the country. Nevertheless, the author’s use of vernacular modernism as a framework in this latest work renders it a fresh perspective on the business of adaptations in Philippine films, which is often under-researched.

Meanwhile, in the book’s second section, the cases of cinema auteurs often overshadowed by larger, more popular ones are brought to the fore. In “Locating Mike De Leon in Philippine Cinema,” Patrick Campos discusses the uncertain position of the Filipino director in question in Philippine cinema. This chapter is unique because it is not a mere introduction and enumeration of the director’s activities, achievements, and aesthetic sense and capabilities; it offers an in-depth analysis and interrogation of the director’s position in the country’s Philippine cinema history and landscape. It does not put De Leon on a pedestal. Instead, it presents a close and comprehensive reading of how his works, though not that extensive in number, merit public recognition and attention in the discourse of the so-called national cinema of the Philippines.

The final contribution in *Southeast Asia on Screen* with a primary focus on the Philippines is Chishandra Sebastiampillai’s “Nora Aunor vs. Ferdinand Marcos: Popular Youth Films of 1970s Philippine Cinema.” It problematizes the image/s of superstar Nora Aunor in the 1970s. Similar studies on celebrities as cultural and political texts are not entirely new in the context of media studies in the Philippines since there have been related works such as *Richard Gomez: at ang Mito ng Pagkalalake*, *Sharon Cuneta at ang Perpetwal na Birben*, *at Iba Pang Sanaysay Ukol sa Bida sa Pelikula Bilang Kultural na Texto* (2000) and *Geopolitics of the Visible: Essays on Philippine Film Cultures* (2000) authored and edited, respectively, by Rolando B. Tolentino—a couple of chapters of the latter also discuss Nora Aunor. Sebastiampillai’s article is an important piece on the political economy of film production as it specifically and effectively illustrates how dominant political power/s shapes even the construction of images of celebrities in films and the popular public imaginary.

Meanwhile, the other two chapters in Section 3 partially explore and mention the Philippines since they critically historicize transnational “exploitation cinema” products.<sup>3</sup> The

first is a comparative reading of those from the Philippines and Indonesia, while the other one probes Bobby A. Suarez’s *They Call Her... Cleopatra Wong* (1978) introducing landscapes and scenes from the Philippines, Singapore, and Hong Kong.

In terms of novelty, most contributions from the Philippines in *Southeast Asia on Screen* can be seen as taking off from local works extant in the country’s literature in film studies. However, this does not diminish the fact that they successfully launch fresh perspectives that augment the depth and extent of the ongoing conversation about the field and our understanding of the cases they focused on and the Philippine “national cinema” as a whole. They also succeed in providing a much-needed comparative view that situates Philippine cinema in its broader regional context.

Overall, the book offers knowledge and insights on the various directions that each national cinema in the ASEAN, particularly that of Indonesia, Vietnam, Myanmar, and the Philippines, has traversed after World War II that brought what Ainslie considers a “general upsurge in indigenous production across the region as well as the emergence of major key studios and filmic figures.”<sup>4</sup> These explorations of such events, contexts, and narratives during the postwar period unveil new ways of understanding the origins and influences of existing genres and event trends prevalent in our current cinema industry and their socio-cultural implications. A case in point is Arriola’s conclusion that “*komiks*-to-film” adaptations serve as a manifestation of Philippine “vernacular modernism,” as well as remediation of “a narrative culture [...] that reflects a notion of nation integral to the worldviews current in the 1950s.”<sup>5</sup>

*Southeast Asia on Screen* also opens up conversations on the importance of interrogating the works, contributions, and personalities of lesser-known veteran auteurs in the ASEAN

who have their own place and involvement in the history and development of the cinema industries in their countries, if not in the whole of Southeast Asia. Such explorations can indeed augment one’s appreciation of the discourse of national cinemas in the region.

For example, just understanding the works and stories of giants such as Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, and independent filmmaker Kidlat Tahimik does not offer a complete comprehension of the Philippine context, as they only account for a small percentage of the actual number of auteurs in the country and the whole context of Philippine national cinema (or cinemas). There are those like Mike De Leon, the central figure examined in Campos’s chapter, and those from other provinces of the Philippines producing their films. Also of note is the book’s contribution to the interrogation of on-screen film personalities such as Nora Aunor and the politics of their image construction and performance, such as in Sebastiampillai’s chapter. More historical or veteran on-screen figures during the postwar and pre-Asian financial crisis periods can be of interest to scholars, even those who are not as popular and those who are not usually given roles as protagonists.

In sum, *Southeast Asia on Screen* is highly recommended as a reading for students and scholars interested in comprehending the complex and interconnected histories of cinema industries in the ASEAN region, especially in the period that the editors have chosen as a focal point. Moreover, it is exemplary in its attempt at the exposition of underexplored themes. Similar to earlier publications on Southeast Asian cinema, it can inspire the production of more related studies of cinemas of the region and its peoples.

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**Jason Paolo Telles** is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Communication and director of the Ugnayan ng Pahinungod at the University of the Philippines Baguio. He is also the executive director of the Southeast Asian Media Studies Association and an assistant editor of the Southeast Asian Media Studies Journal.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Gaik Cheng Khoo, “Introduction,” in *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)*, ed. Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary J. Ainslie (Amsterdam, Netherlands: Amsterdam University Press, 2020), 26.
- 2 Joyce L. Arriola, “The 1950s Filipino *Komiks*-to-Film Adaptation during the Studio Era,” in *Southeast Asia on Screen*, 59.
- 3 Khoo, 26.
- 4 Mary J. Ainslie, “Introduction: Independence and Post-World War II Filmmaking: Nation-building, Modernity and Golden Eras,” in *Southeast Asia on Screen*, 35.
- 5 Arriola, 72.





# Forging Networks Across Southeast Asian Film Cultures

Tito R. Quiling, Jr.

Witnessing the decline of the region's national film industries in the late 1990s and the emergence of digital media in the 2000s found a renewed interest among academics researching and writing on Southeast Asian cinemas. The succeeding years saw independent filmmakers from Thailand, Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and the Philippines screening their works and garnering awards in international film festivals.

In May 2004, amid the burgeoning regional cinema, Malaysian film scholar Gaik Cheng Khoo organized a conference during her postdoctoral fellowship under the Asia Research Institute at the National University of Singapore (NUS), participated in by authors, critics, and cinephiles from Southeast Asia, including Rolando Tolentino, Nick Deocampo, and Alexis Tioseco from the Philippines. The conference led to the formation of the Association of Southeast Asian Cinemas (ASEAC)—a non-hierarchical regional collective of scholars, critics, artists, archivists, and activists. From Singapore (2004), the conference rotated annually among cities in the region: Bangkok (2005), Kuala Lumpur (2006), Jakarta (2007), and Manila (2008). Now held biennially, the ASEAC conference has been held in Ho Chi Minh City (2010), Singapore (2012), Salaya (2014), Kuala Lumpur (2016), Yogyakarta (2018), and was slated to be hosted in Cebu (2020) before the COVID-19 pandemic. Over the years, Filipino film scholars and artists have remained active in their participation as organizers and presenters in ASEAC from its inception.

ASEAC focuses on cinema studies and film practice in the region as an academic endeavor, clearing a space where theory and practice converge. Besides the conference proper, the regular gathering brings scholars, literati, and cultural

Previous page: Philippa Lovatt speaking about the ASEAC-SEARN initiative at the Hanoi DocLab

activists in conversation with artists, archivists, curators, and programmers. Recent conference themes have centered on ethics and social justice, the archive, popular genres, gender and sexuality, time and space, censorship, regimes, faith and spirituality.

ASEAC has also launched other initiatives such as the Southeast Asian Cinemas Research Network (SEACRN) and collaborations among its members and participants have led to publications such as *Asian Cinema* 18.2 (ed. Gaik Cheng Khoo, 2007), *Inter-Asian Cultural Studies* 8.2 (eds. Khoo and Sophia Siddique Harvey, 2007), *Glimpses of Freedom* (eds. Benjamin McKay and May Adadol Ingawanij, 2011), *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema* (ed. Tilman Baumgartel, 2012), *Plaridel* 12.2 (eds. Katarzyna Ancuta and Patrick Campos, 2015) and 15.1 (ed. Adam Knee, 2018), *Situations* 12.2 (ed. Patrick Campos, 2019), *Southeast Asia on Screen* (eds. Khoo, Thomas Barker, and Mary Jane Ainslie, 2020), a dossier in *Journal of Cinema and Media Studies* 60.3 (eds. Philippa Lovatt and Jasmine Nadua Trice, 2021), among others.

While holding a face-to-face conference remains a challenge because of the pandemic, ASEAC, through a series of online events, continues to grow and forge connections among people bounded by an interest in moving images and film cultures in the region, extending a dialogue that echoes within Southeast Asia and beyond.

**Tito R. Quiling, Jr.** has an MA in Media Studies (Film) from the University of the Philippines Diliman. He is an instructor at the Department of Communication and Media Studies, University of Santo Tomas, and is a member of the Young Critics' Circle Film Desk. His research interests center on film, cultural heritage, urban and architectural studies.



Sherman Ong, Pepe Diokno, Victor Vu, Doan Minh Phuong, Charlie Nguyen, and Nguyen Trong Khoa in Ho Chi Minh City



Pattana Kitiarsa, Thanet Aphornsuvan, May Adadol Ingawanij, Nick Deocampo, Wenjie Zhang at the first ASEACC in Singapore





Sudarat Musikawong, Bliss Cua Lim, Arnika Fuhrmann, Chalida Uabumrungit in Los Angeles



Jasmine Nadua Trice, Gaik Cheng Khoo, Fatimah Tobing Rony, Thong Win



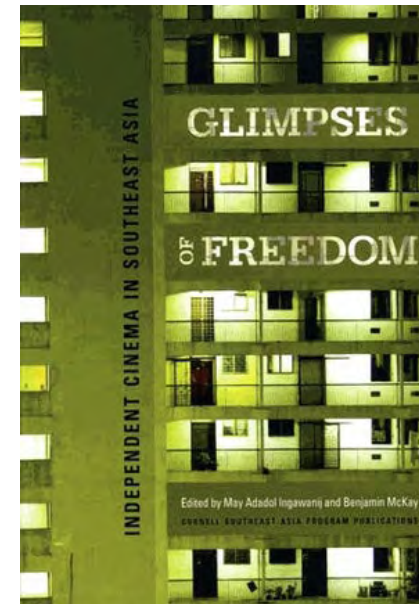
Nguyen Trinh Thi, Anocha Suwichakornpong, Marie Jamora, Shireen Seno, Nia Dinata

Images for this Archive section are courtesy of Philippa Lovatt, Jasmine Nadua Trice, Mariam Lam, Intan Paramaditha, Jackie Tran-Newton, Adam Knee, Brian Bernards, Rolando Tolentino, Antonio Sison, Adrian Mendizabal

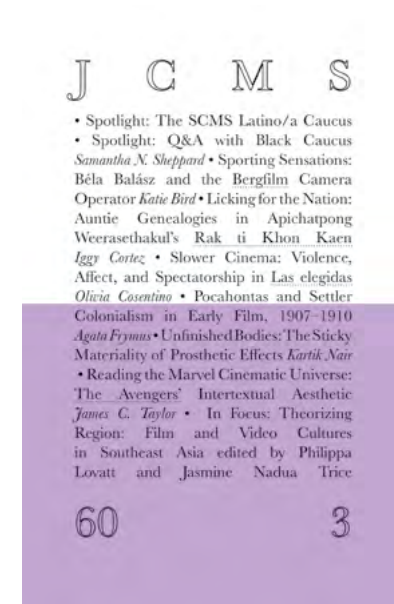




Davide Cazzaro video conferencing with John Torres in Hanoi



*Glimpses of Freedom: Independent Cinema in Southeast Asia* (2011)



"Theorizing Region: Film and Video Cultures in Southeast Asia," *JCMS* 60.3 (2021)



"Locating Southeast Asian Horror," *Plaridel* 12.2 (2015)



Lee Chatimetikool, Luka Kuncovic, Corinne de San Jose in Kuala Lumpur



Dain Said, Garin Nugroho, Boo Junfeng, Tan Chui Mui, Lav Diaz, Gaik Cheng Khoo



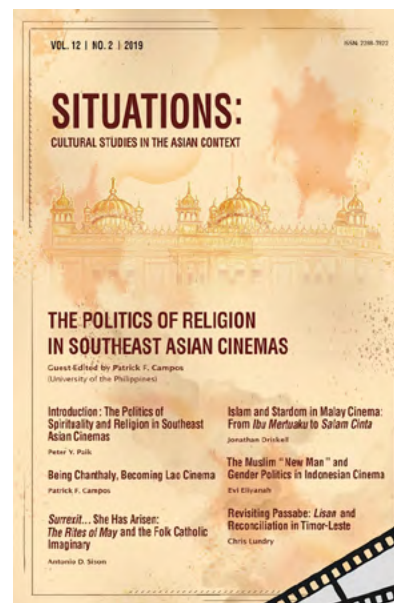
Chalida Uabumrungjit, Moira Lang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul in Salaya



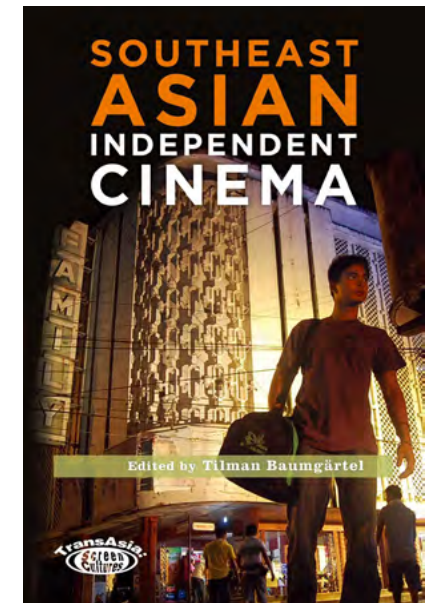
Graiwoot Chulphongsathorn, Ari Ernesto Purnama, Katinka van Heeren in Salaya



"Cinema and the Archives in Southeast Asia," *Plaridel* 15.1 (2018)



"The Politics of Religion in Southeast Asian Cinemas," *Situations* 12.2 (2019)



*Southeast Asian Independent Cinema* (2012)





Group shot in Ho Chi Minh City



Group shot in Los Angeles



Nadi Tofghian, Adam Knee, Katinka van Heeren, Gaik Cheng Khoo, Veronika Kusumaryati, Ekky Imanjaya, Thomas Barker, Yati Pastensen, Intan Paramaditha in Ho Chi Minh City



Philippa Lovatt, Thaid Dhi, Shweta Kishore, Sow Yee Au, Marc Gloede, Davide Cazzaro, Gaik Cheng Khoo, Thu Thu Shein, Nguyen Trinh Thi, Jasmine Trice in Hanoi



(Standing) Jasmine Nadua Trice, Gaik Cheng Khoo, Erika Suwarno, Phoebe Pua, Misha Boris Anissimov, (Seated) Tito Imanda, Intan Paramaditha, Riri Riza, Thomas Barker, Patrick Campos in Kuala Lumpur



Rolando Tolentino, Makbul Mubarak, Arnel Barbarona, Anucha Boonyawatana, Harry Dago Suharyadi, Dag Yngvesson in Yogyakarta



Noah Viernes, Sanchai Chotirosranee in Salaya



Tito Imanda, Antonio Sison, Dag Yngvesson in Yogyakarta



Group shot in Kuala Lumpur



Rolando Tolentino, Katrina Ross Tan, Miguel Penabella, Tito Quiling, Jr., and Adrian Mendizabal in Borobudur





## THE FIRST IMPULSE

This is Not a Book Review (with apologies to Khavn)

Gaik Cheng Khoo

Beautifully written, Laurel Fantauzzo's *The First Impulse* (2017) is a tribute to Alexis Tioseco and Nika Bohinc's love story, two young film critics, one from the Philippines and the other from Slovenia, murdered in a botched robbery at Alexis' family house in Quezon City on September 1, 2009. Rather than go through the history chronologically, the narrative zig zags through time, and bits and pieces about both Alexis and Nika trickle out as Fantauzzo weaves her personal story with theirs as she relates to each of them: with Alexis, it is their shared mixed Filipino heritage, and with Nika, it is seeing the Philippines through an outsider's perspective. The book works at multiple levels to introduce non-Filipinos and non-film folk to the Philippines' culture,

politics, history, and society, the issue of class being the most striking. It introduces and takes us deep into the psyche and feelings of the family and friends closest to Alexis and Nika. For those new to the story and the real-life characters, the book also works as a riveting crime thriller, sensitively written and researched by an academic. Yet, there is something much more than prose, thoughtful self-searching, and frank reflection about Filipino society: its people's warmth, its pauperized institutions corrupted by greed or indifference. More than anything else, the book gets us in the gut not just because it is about the potential of young lives cut short by random violence (one that elicits the word *sayang*, in another cross-cultural time and place where Filipino friends would say to me, a Malaysian,

knowing I would understand this common Malay word we share). It's that *The First Impulse* holds something more that we identify with.

This book is more than about Alexis and Nika. It's about the people whose lives he touched and who touched his life: Erwin Romulo, John Torres, Sherad Anthony Sanchez, and countless others not fully explored in the book. It's about people who connected and spoke through film and about film, who saw film as an essential expression of national art and culture, who understood its form as inherently modern and its possibility for postcolonial critique. It's also about a particular moment in the mid-2000s when independent digital filmmaking took off in Southeast Asia. Indonesian film scholar David Hanan noted his feelings about "witnessing an explosion" in Southeast Asian film scholarship and filmmaking at the third ASEAC Conference in 2006, in which Alexis took part.<sup>1</sup> Or, as Alexis himself used to say, before the label 'indie' got hijacked for more commercial purposes.

Alexis's community and friends spanned the region. The eulogies on the ASEACC website, Criticine.com, and elsewhere testify to what Alexis meant to us all: from Indonesia (short-film programmer Lulu Ratna, film academics Intan Paramaditha and Katinka van Heeren, community film activist Dimas Jayasrana); Singapore (writer Vinita Rahman working for the Singapore International Film Festival, Tan Bee Thiam, founder of the Asian Film Archive, film journalist Ben Slater); Malaysia (filmmakers Tan Chui Mui, Amir Muhammad, myself); Thailand, where he had introduced and helped program a retrospective of Lav Diaz's works (May Adadol Ingawanij, Chalida Uabumrungjit and Sanchai Chotirosserane of the Thai Film Archive and Thai Short Film Festival, Thai film editors of Bioscope, Filmsick, Film Virus, film critic Kong Rithdee), and stretching to NETPAC-India of which Alexis had also been part.<sup>2</sup>

In the book, Fantauzzo mentions an important "film festival in Singapore" that Alexis attended in 2004. To set the record straight, she meant the first ASEACC, dubbed "Where Big Budget Meets No Budget," that I organized as a postdoctoral fellow at the Asia Research Institute-National University of Singapore. The conference tapped into the rise of films from the region with the help of digital technology in the post-financial-crisis period, and it was meant to elevate the discourse of Southeast Asian cinema and connect theory (of film studies) to practice (of filmmaking, criticism, production). I had invited Lav Diaz, whose film *Batang West Side* (2001) was then receiving much attention. However, Lav could not make it due to his ill health, but he emailed to recommend his friend, Alexis. That was how we met. (Alexis had written very glowingly of the five-hour film for IndieFilipino.com.)

That initial conference was such a success that everyone wanted to continue, and it quickly became an annual event that rotated through the region. More importantly, ASEACC

2004 provided an initiatory space for conversations on setting up regional film magazines (such as Criticine.com, and later *Boemboe Meeting Point*), learning from each other's experiences on the need for film archives (notably, the Sinematek in Indonesia, the Thai Film Archive, the new Asian Film Archive in Singapore, and belatedly after Alexis' passing, the Philippine Film Archive), exchanging short-film programs (such as The S-Express), working in film communities as activists and film collectives, and networking scholars, critics, and programmers throughout the region with outposts in New Delhi, Busan, Rotterdam, Berlin, and beyond.

Alexis's passion was a beacon for us film academics. His travels through film festival invitations exposed him to a wide variety of films, and he also brought his knowledge and enthusiasm as a promoter of Filipino films wherever he went. Through Alexis, Khavn de la Cruz invited me to be on the jury of the .MOV Digital Film Festival in 2005, held in Cebu City and Manila, where I met Khavn, Lav, Cesar Hernandez, Teddy Co, and many more. It was an opportunity for a Malaysian film academic to be exposed to experimental films from around the region that Alexis and Merv Espina programmed. It was where I watched Lav Diaz's *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (2004), Faozan Rizal's *Yasujiro's Journey* (2004), and Sasithorn Ariyavicha's *Birth of Seanéma* (2004). Alexis also introduced me to the fantastic *Bontoc Eulogy* (Marlon Fuentes, 1995), screened in London in 2009 when May Adadol Ingawanij invited some of us from ASEACC for a Southeast Asian film conference.

He was the one we turned to for Filipino film recommendations for the conference. He expanded ASEACC to include more screenings (additional days just for screenings), feeling that attendees should watch some of the films discussed in the papers. The film aesthete in him expressed frustration and puzzlement as to why we film academics "waste" our time and energies writing and talking about "bad" films. But, in our defense, even "bad" films tell us something about their makers, consumers, and cultures.

Alexis's enthusiasm was infectious. Plans were made for a film library to be set up in the Philippines and in Indonesia—a space that would gather personal film collections and make them publicly accessible. He formed connections with the burgeoning and existing cinema institutions in the region: ASEACC, the Singapore International Film Festival, the Substation, the S-Express, Thai Film Archive, Rumah Film, Forum Lenteng, Kelab Seni Filem, and various short film festivals. It was truly a DIY time when screening spaces were expanding not only in the metropolitan areas but also beginning to spread to the islands and regional cities; when idealism and passion rather than profit and sustainable livelihoods carried the day; when Alexis slept on the floor of my bedroom at Gillman Heights for a few nights while in Singapore in 2005.

In reading *The First Impulse*, I was drawn back into the



warm fold of Southeast Asian cineastes and cinephiles. The source of the book title is Alexis's love letter to Nika, where he declares that "the first impulse of a good film critic must be of love."<sup>3</sup> Yet this love does not only explain Alexis's rationale for writing about the films he loved. Nor does it only reveal his romantic nature and feelings for Nika. While this sentence has been parlayed into a cliché, that equal sense of patriotic obligation, or cultural, filial, and even moral responsibility, that tension between the public and personal, home and abroad, and the path we must inevitably forge tortured many of us who knew Alexis. Intan's eulogy addressed Alexis's patriotic call to write about one's national cinema rather than rely on foreigners' accounts; Katinka talked about Alexis's putting into practice those dreams we shared.<sup>4</sup> His ideals held us accountable and wrought some shame that our older siblings had achieved so little compared to his short career.

With him, we had multiple ways of relationality. His death made me question whether his decision to stay in the Philippines ("If everyone who can help the Philippines leaves, what's going to happen?") was worth it when I considered moving back to Malaysia from Australia in 2012. *Am I doing the right thing, coming back to Malaysia?* Like him, I, too, had a choice to live abroad in a first-world country. I returned to live and vote for the first time in my life and to make a difference

in my equally corrupt country after more than twenty years of being away. Would Malaysia reward me the way the Philippines had rewarded him, fuelled not by class disparity but racial inequality and ethno-fascism?

There is something about *The First Impulse* that makes one want to confess. When the news of Alexis's and Nika's murder reached me, I wept. I wept again when I found the last piece of Choc Nut from the Philippines. I regret not getting to know Nika. Nevertheless, thanks to Fantauzzo, I know Nika enough to realize that we would have gotten along well. I, too, love vegetables and make my own coffee. I would have happily shown her around Malaysia. *Here I am, still trying to please you though you're no longer around, Alexis.*

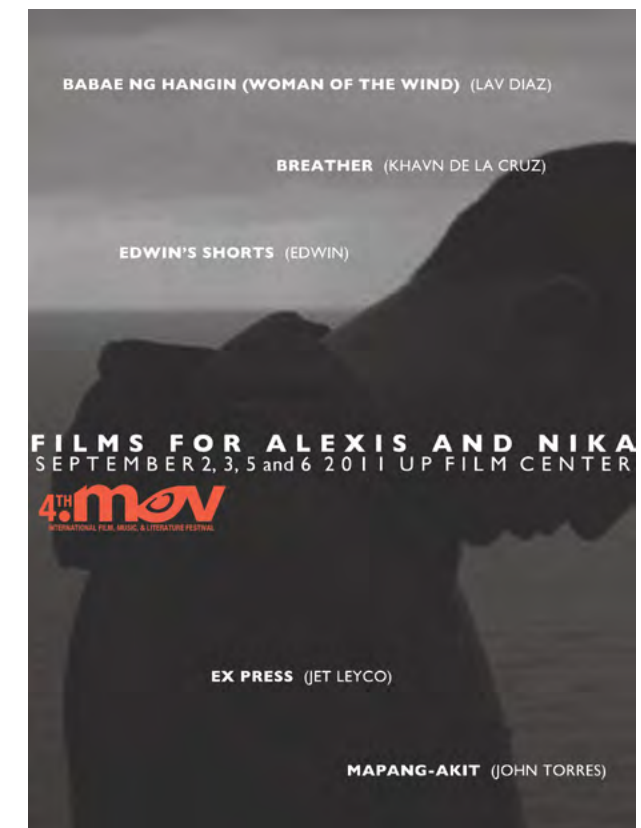
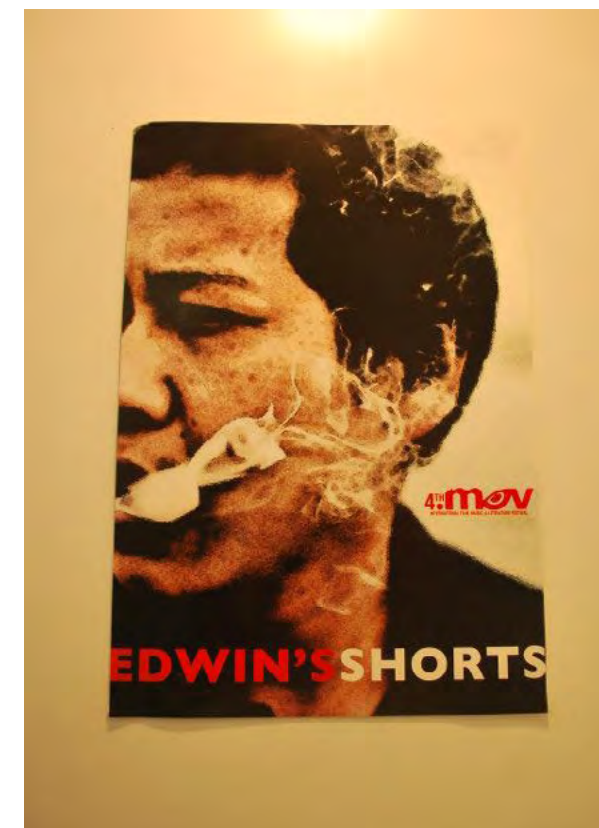
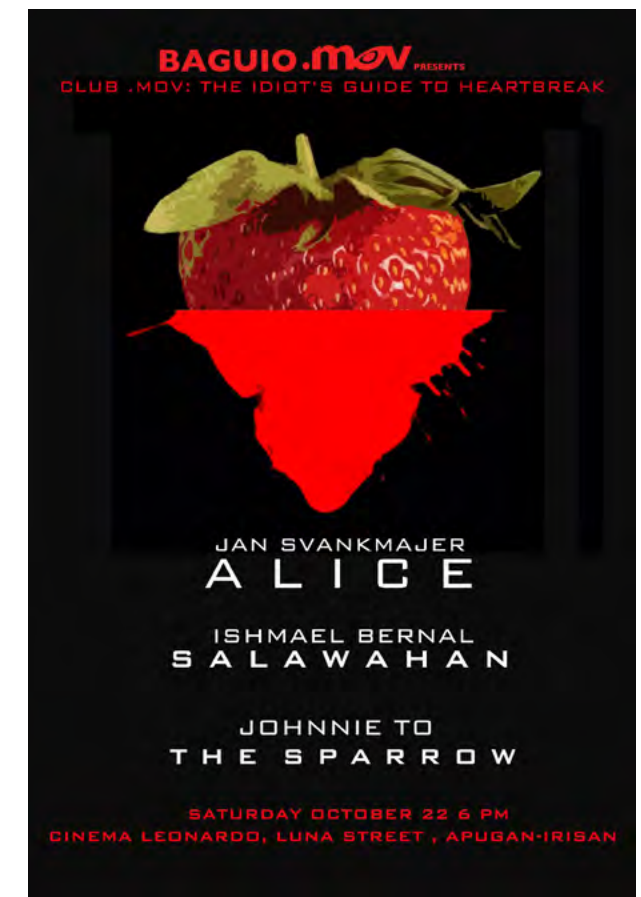
But I digress. Alexis's dream lives on in the continual effort to archive, restore, save old films and in the accolades those filmmakers he believed in continue to receive at film festivals. It lives on in his writings and the hopeful fulfillment of his wishes for Philippine cinema. Some day.

\* Laurel Fantauzzo's *The First Impulse* (2017) is published by Anvil Publishing, Inc.

**Gaik Cheng Khoo** is Associate Professor at the University of Nottingham Malaysia where she teaches Southeast Asian Cinema, Postcolonial Theory, and Posthumanism. Aside from film, she publishes on food and identity and is researching Korean migrants in Malaysia as well as exploring the possibilities of an environmentally sustainable durian supply chain. Her recent publication is the co-edited volume *Southeast Asia on Screen: From Independence to Financial Crisis (1945-1998)* with Thomas Barker and Mary J. Ainslie (Amsterdam University Press, 2019).

#### Endnotes

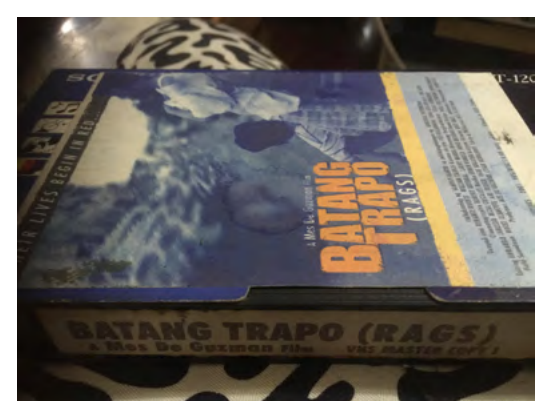
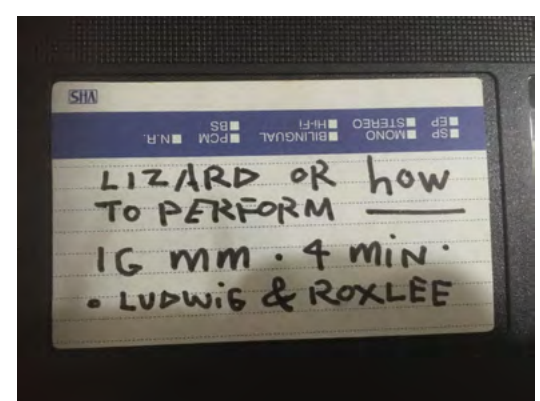
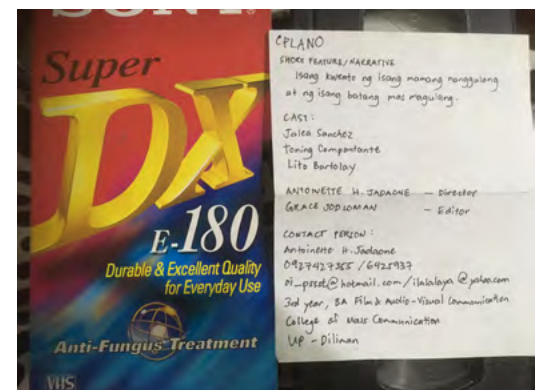
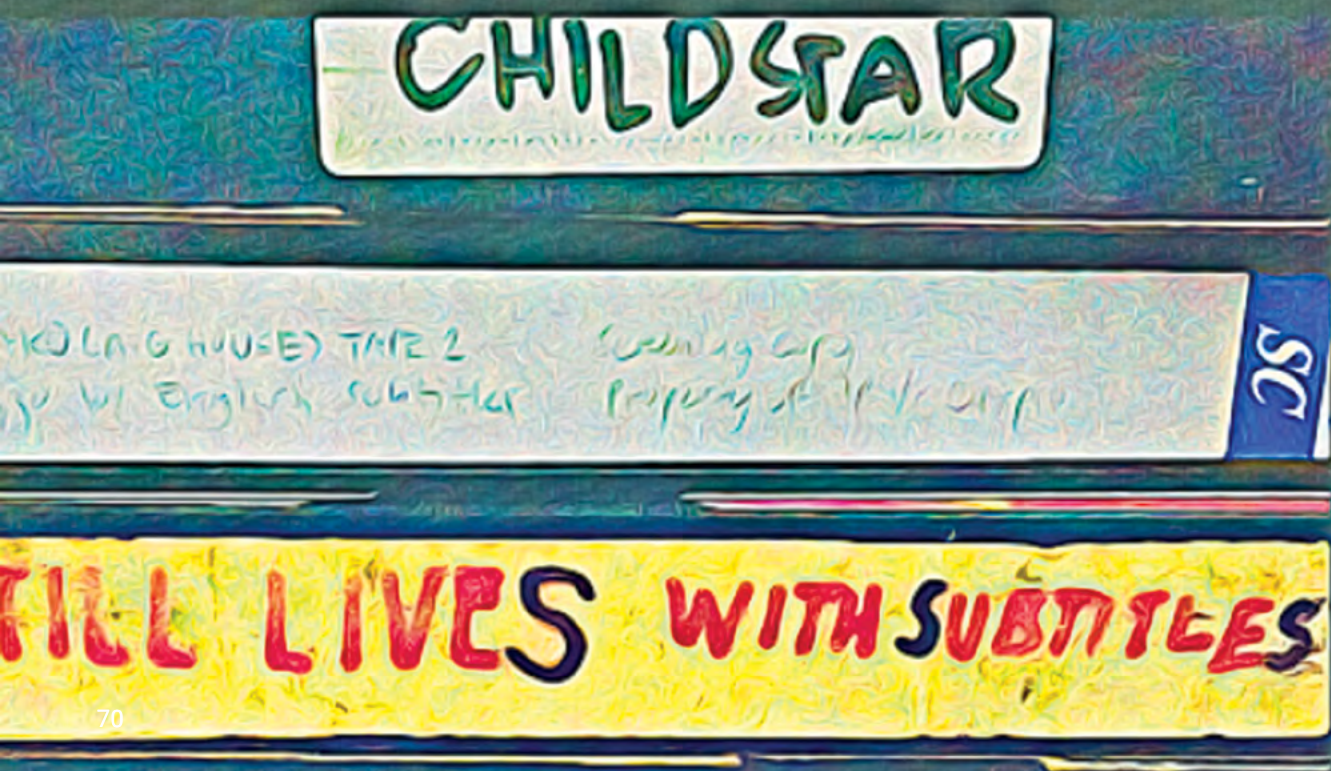
- 1 Back then, the conference was known as the Annual Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference, or ASEACC, until, in 2008, when the organising group decided it was too much work to hold the conference annually, and thenceforth we changed the name to the Association for Southeast Asian Cinemas, or ASEAC. See the association's related websites: [aseacofficial.wordpress.com](http://aseacofficial.wordpress.com), [seaconference.wordpress.com](http://seaconference.wordpress.com), and [aseac-interviews.org](http://aseac-interviews.org).
- 2 Some eulogies can be found here: "Alexis Tioseco," [seaconference.wordpress.com/2009/09/13/alexis-tioseco/#more-361](http://seaconference.wordpress.com/2009/09/13/alexis-tioseco/#more-361).
- 3 Alexis Tioseco's "The Letter I Would Love to Read to You in Person" is republished in *Nang*, [nangmagazine.com/ten-years-after/alexis-tioseco](http://nangmagazine.com/ten-years-after/alexis-tioseco).
- 4 "Alexis Tioseco."





# SMEELS LIKE INDIE SPIRIT

Dodo Dayao



VHS tapes and a handwritten list of films to be programmed for 2002 .MOV. All images courtesy of Khavn dela Cruz

## ARCHIVE

I first became part of .MOV during its third iteration, in 2008, where the trinity of alternative cinema was commemorated: Kidlat Tahimik, Roxlee, Lav Diaz. Like many filmmakers and cinephiles with their first hit of .MOV, the brunt of it opened my eyes, too. Here were new vocabularies, new postures, new tangents of cinema. The curating principle felt like a riposte to the prim arthouse you're used to from festivals. That year, there were films by Michael Pitz, Matias Bize, Kyle Canterbury, Woo Ming Jin, Albert Serra, names I was hearing for the first time. There were obscure local films, live performances, after-parties. It was avant-garde. It was punk. It was futuristic. It was intoxicating. I wasn't a filmmaker yet. My cinephilia was not taking as deep a dive as I thought either. But I wanted to be both more badly after that.

Zero Degrees of Separation came three years later. I became a part of it, too. It was the fourth .MOV. It was the .MOV that was not supposed to exist. Festival mastermind Khavn always meant for .MOV to end at three, make a neat little trilogy. What changed his mind was an unspeakable tragedy. Alexis Tioseco had been the programmer of the first three .MOV's. Nika Bohinc held a workshop for the third. After they died, a fourth iteration became all but inevitable. Zero Degrees of Separation was a film and music and literary festival but what held it together was the combined spirit of Alexis and Nika. Khavn always envisioned the fourth .MOV as a valentine to his friends, but it was also a celebration of the cinema they loved and championed, of their curiosity for new cinematic blood.

That curiosity has always been at the core of .MOV. It began on nothing but a surfeit of it. It began, really, in 2002, with Silvershorts, the short film competition that, like nearly everything Khavn did, had an antidotal thrust. Khavn wanted something more public, something more pop even, something that could attract traffic from outside the indie film community. Something like a mall. But when a mall eventually gave him the venue, they also gave him a week, too much for just ten shorts. In true Khavn fashion, he flipped the script and turned it into a film festival that was intended to run yearly but became a triennial event by a confluence of fate and logistics. MOV, you could say, started life as a contingency, and thrived, albeit briefly, as something of a contingency, too, for when all the old ways we were accustomed to perceiving cinema start failing us.

**Dodo Dayao** is by vocation a writer in various disciplines but for the most part writes films. He was co-screenwriter of John Torres's *Lukas The Strange* (2013) and *Kenneth Dagatan's Ma* (2018). He wrote and directed *Violator* (2014), *If You Leave* (2016), and *Midnight in A Perfect World* (2021). He is currently writing his next features and his first books of non-fiction and fiction.





# .mov<sup>3</sup>

INTERNATIONAL DIGITAL FILM FESTIVAL

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[www.movfest.com](http://www.movfest.com)

September 30 to October 7, 2008  
Robinsons Galleria Cinema

September 24 to October 7, 2008  
Bacolod, Davao City, Iloilo, Manila

ARCHIVE



Jose Basa, Whammy Alcazaren pose with their trophies from the 2008 .MOV



Jet Leyco, Jan Philippe Carpio, Timmy Harn carrying their trophies from 2011 .MOV



Alexis Tioseco, Lav Diaz, Gaik Cheng Khoo at the 2005 .MOV edition in Cebu



Ruel Antipuesto, Bee Thiam Tan, Victor Villanueva at the 2005 .MOV



Rox Lee, Khavn, Lav Diaz, U-Wei Bin Haji Saari



Khavn, Victor Villanueva, Keith Deligero



Ramon del Prado, Merv Espina, Kris Villarino, Cheryl Lyn Toting

## Tribute.MOV NO/SCREEN

INSTALLATION/KOMIKS/PHOTOGRAPHS

### KIDLAT TAHIMIK ROXLEE LAV DIAZ

OPENING OCTOBER 1 (WED), 6 PM  
EXHIBIT UNTIL OCTOBER 8 (WED), 2008



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# Tingin Southeast Asian Film Festival

Maya Quirino

## Inciting to Neighborliness

With a two-page document called the Bangkok Declaration, five men created the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) out of thin air in 1967. The Declaration proclaimed that ASEAN represented “the collective will of the nations of Southeast Asia to bind themselves together in friendship and cooperation and, through joint efforts and sacrifices, secure for their peoples and posterity the blessings of peace, freedom, and prosperity.”<sup>1</sup> However, the spiritual lineage of ASEAN could be traced back to, or at least find resonances in, the 1955 Asia-Africa Bandung Conference and a then incipient Third Worldism that not only confronted Western imperialism but stood against Soviet Communism.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, it was a political formation brokered to protect autonomy and promote “development.” Its most recent avowed goal is the birthing of an ASEAN Economic Community (AEC), which is “the realization of the region’s end goal of economic integration. It envisions ASEAN as a single market and production base, a highly competitive region, with equitable economic development, and fully integrated into the global economy.”<sup>3</sup> Economic integration melts the borders between nations, allowing the free flow of goods, labor, and capital. It, therefore, sings from the same hymn sheet of globalization.

The Tingin Southeast Asian Film Festival was hatched in 2017 to commemorate the fiftieth founding anniversary of the ASEAN. It aimed to showcase the region’s best films, enhance the cultural palate of Filipino moviegoers, and contribute to film students’ education. Tingin is a part of a suite of projects under the Culture and Diplomacy program of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) that aims to familiarize and enable Filipinos to form stronger ties with their ASEAN neighbors.

Previous page: Selected films from 2021 Tingin (clockwise, from top left): *Ethereal Creature*; *Hilang*; *Binb*; *Lost Wonders*; *New Land*, *Broken Road*; *Adam*; *Peon*; *Passing Moments*. Images by author used with permission from respective producers and NCCA

Conceptually, Tingin affirms the prescription that while the ASEAN originated along economic and geopolitical lines, it can now seize communalities and an *oikumene*, or “a moral and aesthetic community that embraces diverse cultures and races.”<sup>4</sup> It can be rationalized as a single unit of solidarity, akin to, or expanding on, Benedict Anderson’s notion of *imagined community*, which is always “conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship.”<sup>5</sup>

Since 2017, Tingin has typically chosen at least one up to two films to represent an ASEAN member country; a handful of films, including co-productions, are added to enrich the roster each year. Seen together, the films form a composite picture of modern Southeast Asia. (Tingin is a Tagalog word that means both perspective and the act of looking.) The deeper motive of Tingin is to capture an amalgam of Southeast Asian significations as mediated or refracted by its cinemas. At the same time, it seeks to interrogate and critique the aspirations and founding assumptions of regionalization.

In its first year, the official selections were made by the ASEAN member states themselves, supplemented by choices made by our festival programmer, Patrick Campos. That state representatives handpicked films meant the selections went through a national nomination process under the auspices of the members’ cultural ministries, resulting in an instructive process that revealed not only what these official institutions considered “good,” but, by extension, what captured the countries’ present or most urgent preoccupations. To their credit, most of the ministries steered clear of hagiography; in



Scenes from the festival’s first edition





Maya Quirino, Baby Ruth Villarama, Som Khemra, Teddy Co, Aung Ko Latt, Syahrul Fithri Musa, Sasithorn Panichnok, Noor Alimin, Remton Siega Zuasola, Mattie Do, Vongchith Phommachack, Annie Luis, Patrick Campos



Kulikar Sotho

fact, their chosen films tackled pressing social issues, one of the selection criteria, which might have them placed in a harsh light.

For instance, Singapore's official selection, *Ilo Ilo*, by director Anthony Chen, drops in on the country in the midst of an economic contraction. *Solo, Solitude*, from Indonesia, is a biographical drama about Wiji Thukul, a poet who flees to Borneo after being accused of being a dissident. Meanwhile, political fragmentation is the theme of Thailand's *The Island Funeral*, by independent filmmaker Pimpaka Towira.

Rounding out the selections were Hatta Azad Khan's *Wayang* (Malaysia), Cheang Chhordapheak's *Victim* (Cambodia), Somphong Phondy's *Khuan Nang* (Lao PDR), Aung Ko Latt's *Kayan Beauties*, Victor Vu's *Yellow Flowers on the Green Grass* (Viet Nam), HJ Sapami Abdullah's *Waris* (Brunei) and Remton Siega Zuasola's *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (Philippines) — all taking on various social themes. Complementing that year's selections by the ministries was the Tastemakers' Section, which comprised films chosen by key Filipino film personalities. This included Shanjey Kumar Perumal's *Jagat* (Malaysia), Davy Chou's *Golden Slumbers* (Cambodia), Mattie Do's *Dearest Sister* (Lao PDR), and K Rajagopal's *A Yellow Bird* (Singapore).

From the second through the fourth iterations of Tingin, the festival programmer came up with a shortlist of selections, which the festival director confirmed. In 2018, film selections included arthouse favorites Joko Anwar's *A Copy of My Mind* (Indonesia), Kan Lumé and Djenar Maesa Ayu's *bUsh* (Singapore/Indonesia), Dain Said's *Dukun* (Malaysia), Thunska Pansittivorakul and Harit Srikhao's *Homogenous Empty Time* (Thailand), Victor Tagaro's *Yield* (Philippines), Midi Z's *The Road to Mandalay* (Taiwan/Myanmar), and Kulikar Sotho's *The Last Reel* (Cambodia).

## In transporting Filipino moviegoers to various lived experiences in Southeast Asia, the festival exposes shared wounds and desires, histories and dreams.

In 2019, Tingin started to organize the festival around a specific theme. In observance by the NCCA of the United Nations Year of Indigenous Languages, the theme that year was "Indigenous Stories." Indigenous peoples, who inhabit but the fringes of popular imagination, were given a platform. The festival hoped to "shine a light on their struggles but also their fascinating cultures. Many of the films...celebrated indigenous peoples' languages, ...the carrier of culture, [that] must be safeguarded,"<sup>6</sup> according to Annie Luis, head of the International Affairs Section of the NCCA. This edition included Edmund Yeo's *Aquerat* (Malaysia), Rithy Panh's *Graves with No Names* (Cambodia), Riri Riza's *Sokola Rimba* (Indonesia), and Thi Trinh Nguyen's *Love Man, Love Woman* (Vietnam).

Because the intent of Tingin has always been pedagogical rather than commercial (Tingin is free to the public), film appreciation and school partnerships are built into its DNA. It offers master classes and lectures, primarily geared toward film students, during the festival proper. In 2017, Armi Santiago gave the lecture, "Representations of Women in Filipino Melodramas," filmmaker Baby Ruth Villarama expounded on "The Future of Film Distribution in Southeast Asia," and Campos provided an overview of contemporary Southeast Asian cinemas.

In 2018, Tingin hosted masterclasses by Sotho Kulikar (Cambodia) and by Victor Tagaro (Philippines); and in 2019, by Bagane Fiola (Philippines), Edmund Yeo (Malaysia), and Nontawat Numbenchampol (Thailand). In addition, in recognition of Kidlat Tahimik's proclamation as National Artist for Film, the 2018 festival featured a lecture by Campos on the director's cinema. In 2019, lectures by Teddy Co ("Indigenous Representations in Philippine Cinema") and Miks Padilla ("Indigenous Peoples: An Overview") were also held. In 2021, instead of masterclasses, Tingin held online conversations with filmmakers.

Since 2017, university students, film professors, cineastes, film workers, young professionals, senior citizens, mall rats, and homeless or ambulant people (called "regulars" by mall employees) have attended the screenings housed in the Shangri-La Plaza Mall Red Carpet (except in 2018), which generously waived rental fees. In 2021, amid and because of the pandemic, the festival migrated online.

What runs through the minds of these moviegoers as they watch films from Southeast Asia?

Tingin, ultimately, aspires to summon from its tapestry of Southeast Asian significations the outlines of a social imaginary, at least within the limited firmament of its reach. In transporting Filipino moviegoers to various lived experiences in Southeast Asia, the festival exposes shared wounds and desires, histories and dreams. The pathways for system change are as manifold as their ideological maps. They invoke sustainable development, shared prosperity, equality, sovereignty, environmental justice, depatriarchalization, cooperative economy, degrowth, and so on. Because of the breadth of the challenge, solidarity, many believe, must be internationalist.

Tingin reterritorializes Southeast Asia as/through a social imaginary, a concept which assumes "an understanding of society as a political institution, which is formed—and forms itself—in historical constellations, on the one hand, and through encounters with other cultures and civilisational worlds, on the other."<sup>7</sup> For, as Cornelius Castoriadis contends, the public determines social trajectories born of this imaginary: "Thus, just as the current evolution of culture is not wholly unrelated to the inertia and the social and political passivity characteristic of the world today, so a renaissance of its vitality should it take place, will be indissociable from a great new social-historical movement which will reactivate democracy and will give it once the form and the contents the project of autonomy requires."<sup>8</sup> In the social imaginary can potentially arise solidarity.

One of solidarity's possible incarnations is neighborliness, a simple yet radical idea Wendell Berry characterizes as "preemptive sympathy."<sup>9</sup> Conceived in light of Berry's defense of local economies and, especially, of the small family farm, it offers a valuable public and pedagogical framing device for organizing and sustaining an imagined affinity that is especially important for an ethnoscape (of in- and out-migration and therefore of ever-shifting cultural encounters) that is Southeast Asia. Film as a democratic art can be a creative and moral—but not moralizing—catalyst for a neighborly sociality in the region.



Bagane Fiola



Edmund Yeo in conversation with Patrick Campos



K. Rajagopal, Annie Luis, Maya Quirino, Shelley Francisco

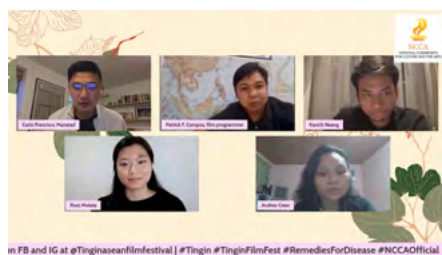


Victor Delotavo Tagaro in conversation with Patrick Campos. Courtesy of Terrence Julian Pestaño





2021 Tingin held online via Vimeo streaming and watch parties and conversations with filmmakers on Facebook Live



Carlo Francisco Manatad and Kavich Neang in conversation with Patrick Campos and the virtual audience via Zoom

## Remedies for Dis-ease

In 2020, the world entered a liminal realm.

An invisible virus, zoonotic in origin, has become a litmus test for social relationships, systems of production, the valorization of nature—everyday practices that create, reproduce, and maintain the world as we know it.

Under the so-called new normal, we must shed our prevailing *modus vivendi* so that we are not undone by pathogens. Yet, as we increase our ecological footprint, we too encroach on wild places, unleashing pathogens upon the world. This pandemic is just one of the symptoms, which include raging wealth inequality and climate change, of a deeper malaise that will keep in us a permanent state of *pagkabalisa*, or unease; or, collapsing disease and unease into one word, ‘dis-ease’ (borrowing from Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak).

Cultural work is, thus, critically positioned to help us weave a new ecological arc from the Anthropocene, or its more vicious sibling, Capitalocene, to what Donna Haraway proposes as the Chthulucene.<sup>10</sup>

For this new narrative, we need the brighter materials of care for the natural world and conviviality to survive, tame or cohabit with this dis-ease. These healing materials are in abundance across space and time. These may finally capture the public imagination in our liminal state, for “in this gap between ordered worlds, almost anything may happen.”<sup>11</sup>

In Southeast Asia, these folktales harking to a more egalitarian time or extant though marginalized agricultural practices keep forests in their original luminescence. We draw from ancestral memories and stories or propagate fictions (and non-fictions) about negotiations with and within political and economic arrangements today.

In 2021, under the theme “Remedies of Dis-ease,” Tingin ASEAN Film Festival tried, through its film selection, to draw up a cultural map for navigating through this changing landscape.

Set against the Asian Financial Crisis of 1997, Indonesia’s *Lost Wonders* captures the lengths ordinary people go to deal with and even repudiate an economic system that has unraveled and failed them. The same is echoed in Cambodia’s *New Land, Broken Road*, where a group of teenagers tries to find their place in a rapidly changing city. In Malaysia’s *Peon*, we catch a glimpse of how two marginalized groups (frontline workers and migrant workers) traverse and potentially disrupt the status quo.

Meanwhile, ecological dis-ease is hinted at in Thailand’s *Ethereal Creature*, where two friends make amends to a goddess in a forest. The film can be read as an allegory of the modern rejection of biocentric egalitarianism, which espouses that “humanity is no more, but also no less, important than all other things on earth.”<sup>12</sup> And in the Philippines’ *The Imminent Immanent*, the specter of climate change looms large over the lives of ordinary people in a small seaside town. The climate crisis, precisely, is pinned on the industrial intrusion on wild refugia.

But all is not lost: Lao PDR’s *Melody of Change* and Brunei’s *Hilang* tap into the power of cultural traditions and solidarity in battling crises. Finally, the film most pointedly about the pandemic, Myanmar’s *Passing Moments*, assures us that upheavals will eventually run their course. We need these values (and more) if we are to live harmoniously and sustainably on earth, our only home, as Vietnam’s beguiling *Binh* shows, or find ourselves perpetually lost, as in the lead character

in Singapore’s *Adam*.

Presently less an atelier of blueprints and more a wellspring of significations, film can be catalytic. As a progenitor of stories, film goes to the very heart of our functioning as the only species with a historical agency anchored on autobiographical consciousness.<sup>13</sup>

For stories have an evolutionary role. For example, a study has found that a hunting and gathering community uses storytelling to promote cooperation (and sex and social equality). The same study posits: “From simple storytelling to complex religion, and later formal institutions such as nation-states, the evolution of storytelling may have been pivotal in organizing and promoting human cooperation.”<sup>14</sup>

In the Cordillera region, Philippines, the butterfly tree (*Bauhinia purpurea*) has recently been discovered as an alternative antibiotic to a drug-resistant pathogen in lung diseases.<sup>15</sup> Like the butterfly tree used by Indigenous peoples

for hundreds of years to treat ailments, the remedies for our current dis-ease are hiding in plain sight.

But these remedies must not be decontextualized and denatured, as a pharmaceutical company would, digitally sequencing the enzymes found in *baubinia purpurea* and removing indigenous native science, culture, and consent out of the equation. By their very nature, remedies are homemade and homegrown; they are distilled from the complex interaction between people and ecology, subsistence and cosmology.

In transfiguring our world post-pandemic, we must abandon the logic of unbridled extraction and accumulation, which are at the root of diseases—and our dis-ease. Instead, we must pay homage to the natural world and to embedded practices and notions of solidarity and agency, which may yet be rich sources of relief and resilience.

Only then can we truly turn over a new leaf.

An NGO worker and film producer, **Maya Quirino** is the festival director of the Tingin Southeast Asian Film Festival. She graduated with a degree in English Literature from the Ateneo de Manila University and was a fellow of the Siliman National Writers Workshop. Maya traces her roots to the Higaonon indigenous people in Bukidnon, Mindanao.

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# FROM BEYOND TO SEATTLE, WASHINGTON

How Diwa Film Showcase Connects Audiences to Independent Films from the Motherland and the Filipino Diaspora

Joann Natalia Aquino

## SHORT TAKE

Under the iconic Space Needle, Diwa Film Showcase is held alongside Seattle’s Philippine Pagdiriwang Festival—a two-day celebration of Filipino arts and culture and one of the largest festivities of its kind in the Pacific Northwest usually scheduled in June around Philippine Independence day—to exhibit the work of Filipino independent filmmakers in the motherland and the diaspora. Initiated in 2014 under the leadership of film scholar Adrian Alarilla, Diwa (which means “spirit” in Tagalog) has grown steadily throughout the years, and like many festivals around the world, learned to pivot during the pandemic by screening films online, which turned out to be a favorable move to reach a wider audience.

“When we first conceptualized this festival, it was originally meant to make use of the underutilized loft areas of the Seattle Center Armory (a gathering venue in Seattle Center’s 74-acre campus, which includes the Space Needle), and become an alternate activity to encourage festivalgoers to explore beyond the Seattle Center Armory’s main floor and go up to the loft,” said Alarilla, the current Diwa Film Festival Director, who is a filmmaker himself, in my interview.

Now mainly focusing on short films, Diwa’s lineups have included subjects ranging from Philippine indigenous myths and folklore to issues that contemporary diasporic Filipinos face every day. For instance, the 2021 lineup featured short films of varying lengths by Filipinos from various parts of the world, in different Philippine languages and mixed genres—like *Aswang* (2021; English and Tagalog) by Keshi Sacdalan based in Australia; *Ang Laswa ni Lola Mame (Lola Mame’s Vegetable Soup, 2019; Hiligaynon)* by Vincent Joseph H. Entuna from the Philippines; *Basketball Coach—The Other Side* (2020; English) by Rajeev Thottippully from the United Arab Emirates; *Dagiti Tallo a Virgen (Three Virgins, 2020; Ilokano)* by Melver Ritz Gomez from the Philippines; *Dual Citizen Series* (2021; various languages) by Marie Alcober based in Canada; *Kalinguan Tane Ing Lutu nang Ima (Time to Forget Mother’s Cooking, 2019; Kapampangan)* by EJ Gagui from the Philippines; *The Modern Mambabatok: Lane Wilcken and*

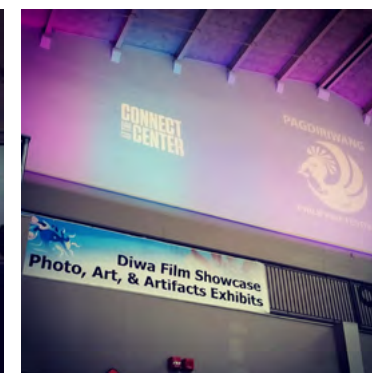
Previous page: Seattle Skyline. All images courtesy of author and DIWA Filipino Film Festival

*Filipino Tattooing in the Diaspora* (2019; English) by Kayla Sotomil based in the United States; *Puso Ng Pinoy Bboy (Heart of the Pinoy Bboy, 2019)* by Clifton Abuan based in Hawai’i; *Tomgirl* (2018; English) by Vonne Patiag from Australia, and more.

“We initially included feature films but found that the long runtimes were not popular with festivalgoers who merely wanted to walk around and take in a little bit of everything in the festival. So we decided to feature only short films that may have been perceived as more easily digestible. This became more popular, and it meant that we could feature more films and filmmakers in the limited amount of time we had at the venue,” said Alarilla.

Diwa was also deliberate in selecting films from all regions of the Philippines. “We realized that some audience members visited us specifically to watch films that featured their hometowns, something that may have been a rare opportunity for many Filipino expats in the area,” Alarilla noted. “But we also wanted to feature films from the Filipino diaspora, from the generations who were born and/or grew up outside the Philippines, but still maintained strong affective ties to their perceived heritage. We wanted to do this in order to bridge the so-called divide between Filipinos and Filipino-Americans. I think this is really important because the diasporic Filipino community is not a monolithic construct. There are so many diverse histories and experiences among us, and we want to represent all of these as much as possible.”

After postponing the film festival in 2020 due to the pandemic, Diwa came back in 2021 with a more robust outreach (thanks to people being glued to their screens) and offered over forty films available online for free through the Vimeo platform.



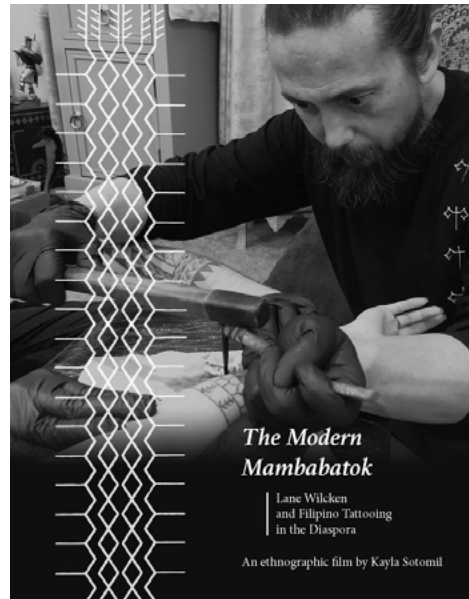
Scenes from the festival



The diasporic Filipino community is not a monolithic construct. There are so many diverse histories and experiences among us, and we want to represent all of these as much as possible.”



*Puso Ng Pinoy BBoy* (Clifton Abuan, New Image Productions, 2019)



*The Modern Mambabatok: Lane Wilken and Filipino Tattooing in the Diaspora* (Kayla Sotomil, 2019)



*Dagiti Tallo a Virgen* (Melver Ritz-Gomez, YlocosStar Films, 2020)

“When it felt like we were starting to make headway with the festival, things came to an abrupt halt when the pandemic began. We canceled the 2020 edition of the event. But learning from how other festivals adapted, we restarted it in June of 2021 as a virtual film festival that could be viewed from all over the world. This meant that not only were people from our local community from Seattle could enjoy these films from all over the Filipino diaspora, but the whole Filipino diaspora could potentially watch it as well,” explained Alarilla.

“Over the month of June, most of our viewers did come from the United States (and not just from Seattle), and there were also many viewers from the Philippines, Canada, Australia, and elsewhere around the world. This meant that Filipinos in the homeland could enjoy diasporic Filipino films and vice versa. So I think what started as a crisis became an opportunity to promote understanding between different Filipino communities and celebrate our different histories and experiences.”

Don't let its virtual presence fool you, though. Seattle's Diwa Film Showcase operates on almost zero budget.

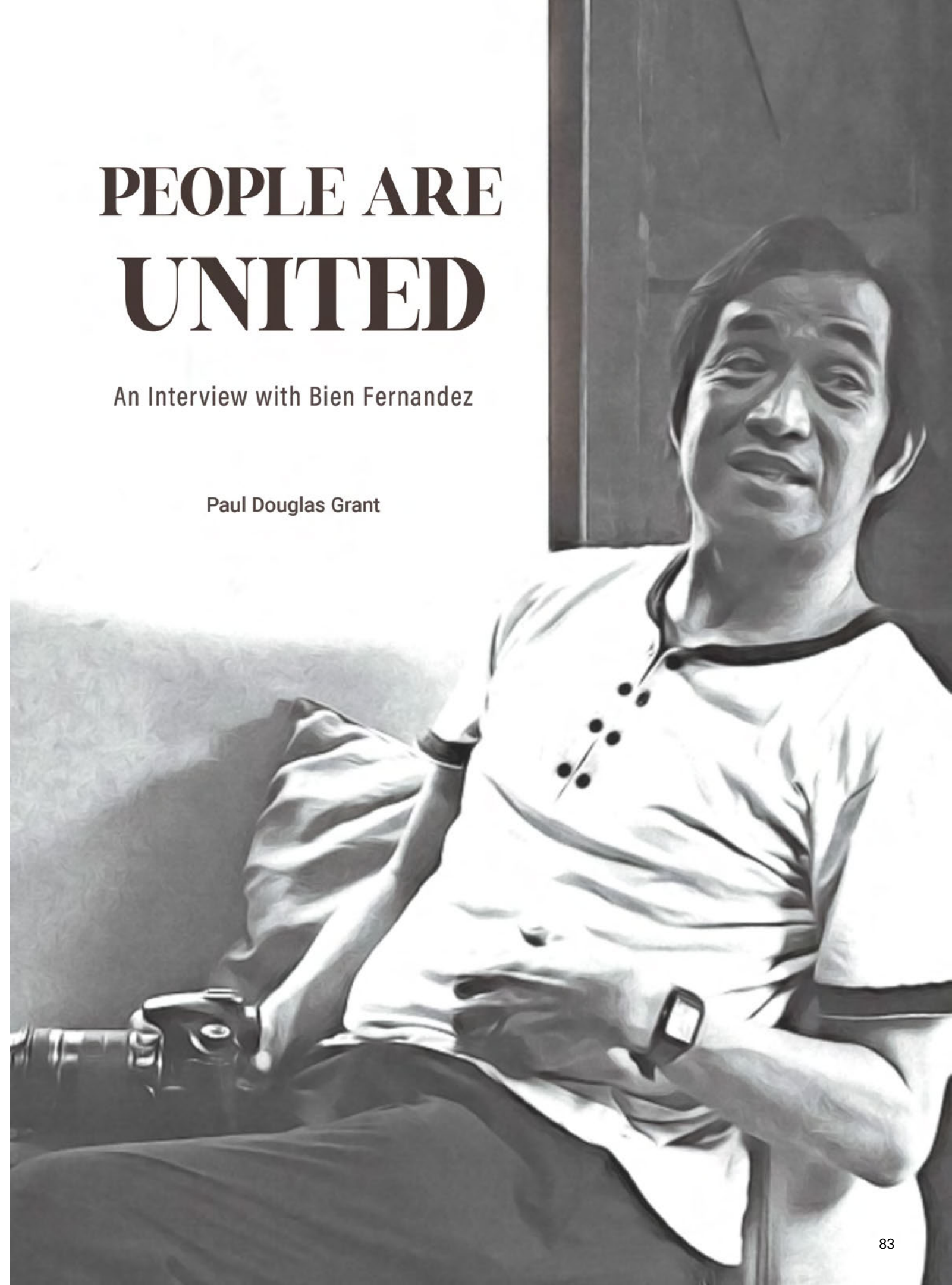
“To be real, we are still a very small, community-based film festival. We exhibit the films free of admission not only because it is the rule of our main venue, the Seattle Center, who provides us with the space for free, but also because we want to make the films as accessible as possible,” noted Alarilla. “We had no commercial motivations and I don't foresee us going commercial anytime in the near future. We want to feature films from the youth, student filmmakers, and perhaps underappreciated artists who nevertheless tell compelling and enriching stories. Eventually, we will need to talk about sustainability and who will take over for us in the future. But if the films being produced nowadays are any indicator, I have faith for the next generation, not only in making wonderful films but also in organizing venues and festivals to enable the celebration of these films, as well as the Filipino spirit wherever it resides.”

**Joann Natalia Aquino** is a writer, a publicist, arts marketer, and traveling freelance journalist covering lifestyle, including the arts, fashion, food, and wellness. A healing arts practitioner born in the Philippines, Joann is committed to being nomadic and currently spends her time between Coast Salish Territory (Washington State area) and the islands of Hawai'i.

# PEOPLE ARE UNITED

An Interview with Bien Fernandez

Paul Douglas Grant





There is a longstanding idea that cinemas from Cebu and regions in the Philippines other than Manila have been marginalized and largely kept out of the national histories. While this has held true for most of the medium's history, the last decade has increasingly seen the move of these cinemas from the peripheries of the archipelago into the national canon. But there are, of course, still gaps where hidden histories remain overlooked. While recent histories of Cebuano cinema have paid lip service to some of these practices and practitioners, Filipino filmmaker, photographer, and professor Bien Fernandez, along with his colleagues, represents a tradition in Cebuano filmmaking that has remained far off of the Filipino cultural radar for decades.

Since the appearance of Teddy Co's *Movement* article titled "In Search of Philippine Regional Cinema" (1987), an increasingly vehement focus on Philippine cinemas made outside of the capital and in languages other than Tagalog has emerged as one of the touchstones of contemporary scholarship and practice in Philippine cinema. One of the earliest articulations of this peripheral cinema in the Philippines materialized in the Queen City of the South, Cebu. Cebu's place in the history of cinema has taken on a progressively important role, with Nick Deocampo pointing to perhaps the earliest instantiation of film in the Philippines as being Jose Nepumoceno's newsreel footage of the funeral of then assemblyman Sergio Osmeña's first wife in 1918 being shown in Cebu. Whereas cinema from Cebu was once a marginal, little-known practice, the history following that early effort has become increasingly considered as an integral component of the history of Philippine cinema *tout court*. The primary focus of research has centered on the 1950s and the 1970s (popularly referred to as its "Golden Ages," due in large part to those periods witnessing an intensification in production), when cinema in Cebu began flirting with the possibility of actually becoming an industrial center for filmmaking (there were pre-war hints at what was to come, but cinema in Cebu is largely a post-war phenomenon).

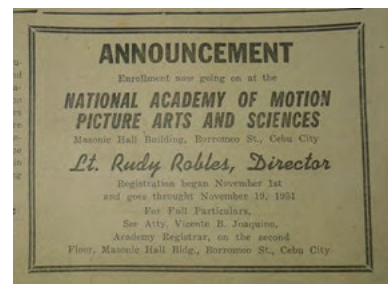
Apart from the industrial aspirations, the promotion of local cinema as an essential cultural practice in Cebu was mobilized in a number of ways. For example, newspaper and magazine columns dealing with local actors, directors, and films in the periodicals of Cebu became commonplace in the 1950s and again in the 1970s. Not only was film writing finding a home in the local dailies, but there was also the *Visayan Fotoplay Magazine*, a film magazine dedicated solely to Visayan cinema and headed by editor-in-chief Brian E. Baring.

In the 1950s, the balikbayan Rudy Robles, who had acted in American films in bit parts and as an extra, established a film school in Cebu, conceivably the first in the country. Stars from Cebuano films also began working in Tagalog productions, and LVN even got in on the action in 1952 when it released the Cebuano language film *Honi sa Gugma*, which was also released in Manila under the Tagalog title *Awit ng Pag-ibig*. Later on, in the 1970s, in an effort to become fully self-sufficient, film equipment rental services and a short-lived processing lab were established in Cebu. But nothing ever quite took hold that would allow for the struggling regional production to reach the industrialized heights it anticipated.

Apart from these two major moments of concentrated film activity, another period of interest for researchers in non-Tagalog-centric production was, of course, what followed the introduction of digital technology. In 2007, when Cinema One produced *Confessional*, a largely Cebuano language film,



Cover of *Visayan Fotoplay Magazine*, 1951. All images courtesy of author



Ad for Rudy Robles National Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, Nov 1951



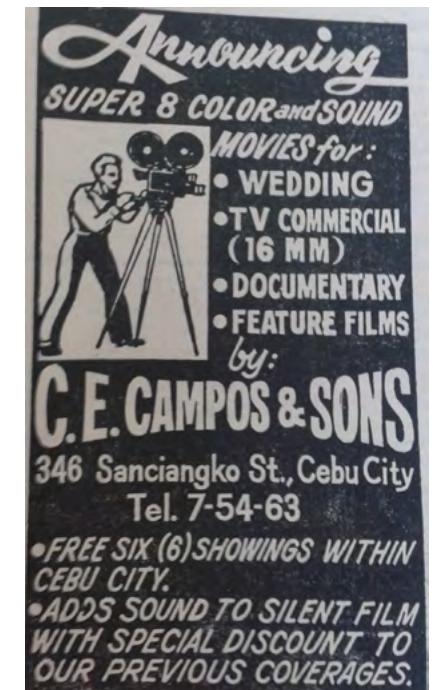
Ad for LVN's multilingual *Honi sa Gugma*, 1952

film production in Cebu began, once again, receiving attention, and out of that regional focus arose a new generation of young filmmakers. This new generation was largely detached from the history of filmmaking in their region, and with that detachment came a certain liberty to engage with cinema as a contemporary and fresh undertaking. This generation was eventually recognized at both national and international levels. This latter period corresponded with a more general appearance, both in the Philippines and globally, of smaller film productions gaining access to larger audiences and competing with larger-budget films.

These are the apparent cinematic ebbs and flows that we have seen in Cebu. Doing historical work on these periods can be frustrating; the near-total lack of remaining films or even significant ephemera, apart from the newspaper ads and often poorly written puff pieces, makes this a historical cinematic artifact begging for organization. To some degree, it is a cinema begging to be championed as an underdog against an apparent intra-national culturally and economically imperialist behemoth. As a result, the major periods are taken as models, given that they seem to be the elements that are robust enough to pose a real challenge. On the other hand, the interstices, those downtimes, become periods of mourning in which the cultural intelligentsia in Cebu reflects on what again caused the death of its cinema. It is also worth noting that this tone of concern over failure and sustainability coincides with the earliest film production in Cebu.

But there is also something else occurring in this betweenness. If Cebu's vernacular cinema was a marginalized cinema on the national scale, then the interstices, the periods of betweenness where it would seem the lights were shut off, offer us the margins of the margins. In the 1980s, 1990s, and even the very early years of the 2000s, industrious filmmakers and genuine cinephiles were creating a very local cinema that would not find its way into the theaters, but instead screened for farmers at community centers, fiestas, and among friends. It is worth noting that, while there was not a conscious association with this approach, the Binisaya film festival was developed predominantly upon these lines as well.

This was a period of filmmaking that relied principally on video technology. It was, at the time, a far cry from the almost uselessly high-definition technology of the 8K phone cameras that are offered to consumers today. The video technology of the period was visibly much different from film technology and no big-budget, mainstream projects of the time were employing the use of these often consumer-grade tools, such as hi-8, super-VHS, or eventually digital-8. Even if non-consumer grade formats like Betacam and U-Matic offered a higher quality and sturdier tape, less susceptible to the dropout so common with the smaller gauge formats, the projected image quality was much different from that of 16mm and 35mm film stock.



Ad for Campos and Sons rental and production house, undated

For all of its hardiness, the quality was not going to find favor with aesthetes and cinephiles. Mike De Leon made an early attempt in 1986 with his *Bilanggo sa Dilim* that was projected at the Sony Wave Cinema in the Araneta Complex in Cubao. Those who were using these technologies, barring the home consumers and television journalists, were almost by nature uncompromising and working in the margins. They were making films any way they could, often experimental work like the Hopi film *Iam Hakim, Hopiit* (1984), or political activist films such as Carole Roussopoulos in Switzerland and the early proponents of the portapak.

In Cebu, Bien Fernandez and his perennial filmmaking partner, Leonardo "Nards" Chiu were busy making movies with video technology towards the end of the 1970s and into the '80s and '90s. The earliest of their films were shot on 16mm, but they quickly turned to video technology and made their uncompromising projects. During this period, television also became an option for those working in video. Vernacular TV had its heyday, particularly in the '90s, and employed many of those active in Cebuano filmmaking in the 1970s. But, while important series, such as *Si Goot da Wonderpol*, written by Sacló and starring Teban and Goliat (a local radio talent duo who had much success throughout the VisMin region, up until the passing of Julina "Teban" Daan in 2019), were finding a dedicated audience, smaller omnibus productions were also being broadcast. Local Lenten films were produced (and continue to be so, particularly on CCTV), and these became





Al Evangelio at CCTN compound



Nards Chiu and Bien Fernandez at Chiu's home in Cebu

avenues to exploit for Fernandez and Chiu, who were looking for alternatives to the formal trappings of the movie theater.

While his contemporaries, such as Nards Chiu, Allan Jayme Rabaya, and Al Evangelio (IMAGE Al Evangelio CCTN compound) have all passed away over the course of the past decade, Fernandez remains active and interested in the collective and progressive aspect of filmmaking. His collective spirit found him often working in theater as much as it did in film, and always promoting the same values. The filmmaking practice of Fernandez and his colleagues occurred in the cracks, an insidious constant reminder of alternatives: it is political filmmaking explicitly in its content and implicitly in its practices. The following is a conversation with Bien Fernandez that tries to trace his background, his connection with Behn Cervantes, Nards Chiu, and agricultural workers from the 1970s up to the present. This conversation transpired over a Zoom call between Montreal and Cebu City on Friday, November 13, 2020.

**Paul Douglas Grant (PDG): Bien, do you remember that around 2013 or 2014, we filmed and interviewed both Al Evangelio and Allan Jayme Rabaya?**

**Bien Fernandez (BF):** Yes, Allan was in a wheelchair. That was really towards the end. Al was still wandering around at that time, but he was living in the CCTV compound, from where the broadcast was transmitted.

**PDG: *Male Boarders: Silas a Kwarto Kwatro* was Allan Jayme Rabaya's most well-known film, right?**

**BF:** Yes. Al Evangelio did *Bastonero*.

**PDG: So, Bien, did you grow up in Cebu?**

**BF:** No, I grew up in Manila. During my second year of high school, my whole family moved to Cebu. My father was actually Ilonggo, and my mother was Chavacano, from Zamboanga.

**PDG: So you didn't learn to speak Bisaya until you were in high school?**

**BF:** I learned a bit later. I learned to speak Bisaya at UP Diliman because my barkada was all from Cebu. So I would try to talk to them, but not in deep Bisaya. I never learned how to speak deep Bisaya. It was only when I began reading scripts and acting in plays that I understood the language well.

**PDG: When did you graduate from high school?**

**BF:** 1972.

**PDG: Do you remember seeing Cebuano movies in the 1970s?**

**BF:** Not many. I saw *Itlog Manoy Orange*, an 8mm film. The Teban film *Manok ni San Pedro*.

**PDG: Itlog was also shot on 8mm?**

**BF:** Yes, because they didn't have a budget, they shot on 8mm then blew it up to 16mm.

**PDG: So *Manok ni San Pedro* was blown up to 35? What about films like *Batul of Mactan*?**

**BF:** I remember *Batul*, I saw the billboards, and Jess Vestil, one of the actors in the film, was the father of one of my students. I met him because he was the head of USIS (United States Information Service) that had an office in Cebu. It was in the

Geographic Information Service building near downtown. I would actually go and interview him sometimes.

**PDG: What about *Mayor Andal*?**

**BF:** The one that Nards thought he had?

**PDG: So you never saw the film?**

**BF:** No, Jojo Labella talks about it sometimes.

**PDG: But the idea of Cebuano language films in the '70s wasn't so important for you? If you were from Manila, did you feel the drive to support local films?**

**BF:** Yes, when I was in high school, I didn't know about them. If I did, they were these kind of quickly made films that were in Bisaya. Later on, I got interested in them when I was teaching at St. Theresa's College (STC). At that time, I was with Nards, and he would talk about the films.

**PDG: How did you meet Nards?**

**BF:** I met Nards at his Ramon Aboitiz Foundation Office. My sister had been introduced to him, and they got to talking about making local films. She told him that I was also interested in making films and that we should meet each other. Anyway, that's how we met.

But back to the local films. Nards never really liked them, except for maybe those made by Gene Labella, I think in part because they were friends. But the others, he looked down on them. (There is) something about the films that came before the work we did with Nards, Al, Allan and another filmmaker who made many films whose last name was Francisco. The films done, for example, by Marcos Sacol (a prolific Cebuano writer for television, radio, and film), those films didn't have any real artistic element in them. They were just making film adaptations of radio scripts. In fact, that's something you can take away from those films if you haven't had a chance to see them: when they shot the films, they sounded more like radio programming than movies. I think this is partly why, when mass communication courses started being offered and film appreciation was part of that, the professors didn't use these films to analyze. Given the poor quality and the lack of any real aesthetic vision, they didn't feel like they were offering anything to analyze.

**PDG: But would you say that the aesthetics were that much different from the majority of the Tagalog films that were being produced?**

**BF:** Technically, the Tagalog films were better. There was a time when the Tagalog films were quite good. Worth watching and

discussing. That's why I think I once said to you that the scripts of Nards were symbolic and poetic. They were challenging to accomplish and to translate for the audience. There were a lot of films that we never really bothered to watch or to discuss.

**PDG: But, the discussion now is almost the very fact of their existence, the very fact that someone outside of Manila had the initiative to undertake the project of making Cebuano language films. And the real, for lack of a better term, "quality Tagalog films" of the '70s, for the most part, we've identified them, and some were luckily preserved, say the films of Brocka, Gallaga, Bernal, Castillo, etc. But there must have been many popular films, just as there are today, that ran for a week, that have no real technical finesse and with stories written by rote. Meaning, ultimately, a quality similar to what you describe as being produced in Cebu at the time.**

**BF:** Right, mostly love stories with no real social issues. Because the films of Lino Brocka were all about social issues, Bernal too. But these other films, Manila films, were watched because they were "bold" films. Bold films have pretty young actresses who show a bit of their bodies in bikinis. But then there were also *bomba* (sex) films. Or sometimes European films where someone in the audience would suddenly shout "Bomba!" and show clips of out and out pornography. That's when many moviegoers went to these box office successes. When *In the Realm of the Senses* (1976) was shown at Imelda's international film festival, it was a hit, and people lined up around the block.

**PDG: So, were you at university when you started getting interested in film?**

**BF:** It started when I graduated from Sacred Heart. I wanted to study Economics, and I received a government scholarship to do so. I wanted to study at Ateneo, but since I got the scholarship, my father asked me to go to UP instead because we were seven siblings in the family. But I also wasn't one hundred percent sure I wanted to do Economics. There was a very strong reason behind this idea of me taking up Economics. Mainly, it's that I grew up with children in the squatter areas. We were on Zorra street, San Francisco del Monte in Quezon City. My family built a bungalow, but all around us were squatters, and those were the children who became my playmates. So, when I studied at Sacred Heart, I was confronted with all these rich people and saw the incredible disparity. So really, I decided to pursue Economics with the idea that I would help my playmates. I wanted to bridge the gap.

Then, during the summer break between high school and university, I saw *The Black Pearl* (1977). This was, I believe, a Spanish-American film about a master diver in a small fishing



village in Mexico. A rich man asked the master diver to teach his son how to dive. He agreed but promised he would not dive for the black pearl, which is guarded by a manta ray. The boy learned to dive, but then the father ended up saying, “go dive for the black pearl.” He successfully found and took the black pearl and angered the ray in doing so. As a result, the fishermen couldn’t fish anymore, and the village began to starve. So to appease them, they had a procession with the virgin saint with the black pearl in her crown, but they kept getting hungrier anyway. So finally, the son, of his own volition, returned the pearl. It inspired me and somehow reminded me of the situation I saw with my playmates and the wealthy students I encountered. All of this was why I took Economics for three years and realized that what I’m doing now will not help the Philippine people.

But, remember this is the height of Martial Law, and all of my professors in Economics at UP were government officials under Marcos. That was too much. It tipped the scales the other way, and I transferred out of Economics. So, that’s when I transferred to Mass Communication, which was becoming a popular field. And there, I was able to do theater and film, and with my film projects, I saw that I would be able to maintain my advocacy by always including social issues in them.

When I got back to Cebu, I decided to make a film. I turned to Nards, who was in already Cebu, working at the Ramon Aboitiz Foundation (RAF). Every break I had from university, I would go to Cebu and talk with Nards at RAF about films. He would always say, “Bien, when you graduate, let’s make films together.” Nards had this slight snag with his work: because he was an officer in charge at RAF, he wasn’t allowed to direct the films. Aboitiz said they were interested in financing something, but someone else had to direct. We came up with this film project, and I was brought in as assistant director, but really, I acted as director. That film was *Ulan sa Udtong Tutok* (Rain at High Noon.)

**PDG: What year was that?**

BF: I believe the project was finished in 1979, but we may have begun shooting in ’78.

**PDG: What did you guys shoot on?**

BF: That project was shot on 16mm.

**PDG: Was that the first time you worked on a film?**

BF: Yes, because when I was at university, we were mostly in a studio using studio cameras (a three-camera set up). We made in-studio projects with those. We only studied film appreciation, not actual film production, because production was just too expensive. But I was able to be a part of the last

16mm productions happening in Cebu. With all the difficulty and mistakes that come with it.

**PDG: Do you remember which camera it was?**

BF: It was either an Arri or a Bolex owned by the Campos brothers (Campos Brothers has a rental house in Cebu). But they didn’t process the film, so that had to be done in Manila.

**PDG: Was it sync sound?**

BF: No, we dubbed the film. I told Nards that we should test the camera before we started shooting, but he refused and then, when the film came back, and we watched the dailies, we saw a scratch on all the processed film towards the bottom of the frame. To rectify this, Nards would go to all the screenings and put a piece of cardboard under the projector lens to frame out the scratch.

**PDG: How long was that film?**

BF: One hour and ten minutes. A feature film. And, of course, there are no copies left. There was only the original print. It was just too expensive to get copies made.

**PDG: So what was the idea with that film? How did you imagine it being distributed? Where was it to be shown? Who was the intended audience?**

BF: It was for the Bureau of Plant Industry (BPI). They were going to bring it to the farmers. So, while on the one hand, it was a love story, it was also a pedagogical film that was teaching A-frame farming in the hills of Cebu, towards the center of the island. The character in the film went to the city to study agriculture. So it was also pushing agricultural studies for the farmers.

**PDG: Did you guys travel with the film to show it to the farmers?**

BF: It was given to the head of BPI, and he traveled with it. He had children, two of the girls were, later on, my students at STC. I asked them if they knew about the film, and they said they had seen it, that it was in their house. And then the last person who saw it was the guy who acted in the film, Nick Ampatin. He saw it in the Visayan College of Agriculture in Leyte.

**PDG: How long ago?**

BF: About twenty years ago.

**PDG: Have you ever tried to find it since?**

BF: I tried to follow the route, but the person who received it at the Visayan College of Agriculture had already retired. One time, at the Philippine Information Agency (PIA) in Cebu, I saw a film reel laying there underneath a table, but it turned out to be an old film of Eugene Labella. I think Nards knew what film that was. Something about a character burned on their face with an iron, so they had to do the makeup.

**PDG: That was the first time you made a film. Was it considered Nards’s film or your film?**

BF: Nards’s name was on the film, but that was for RAF purposes. I was paid 1,500 pesos to be the AD and associate editor (roughly 35,000 today).

**PDG: How long did you work on it?**

BF: When we left Cebu, a new pope had been elected. When we went to Mantalongon and shot for ten days, we were cut off from the world. When we came back, there was a new pope (Pope John Paul I to Pope John Paul II in 1978).

**PDG: So after that, you started using video, is that right?**

BF: Yes, we started using U-matic. I shot *Kakangakanga ang Gugma mo Fredo* (Your Love Stutters, Fredo), which was about a guy with a stutter. It was a short film that was made as part of a series. Nards directed one, Allan Rabaya directed one, I directed one, and Dodong Rodriguez (who worked for ABS-CBN Cebu) directed one. We all shot on U-matic tape, and then we edited in Manila.

**PDG: What year roughly?**

BF: 1980, I think. And we have no copy of that either. Nards might still have *Gubat Gubat*, his entry in the series.

**PDG: What was it called, the omnibus film as a whole?**

BF: *Kabayag Kangitngit* (Light Dark)

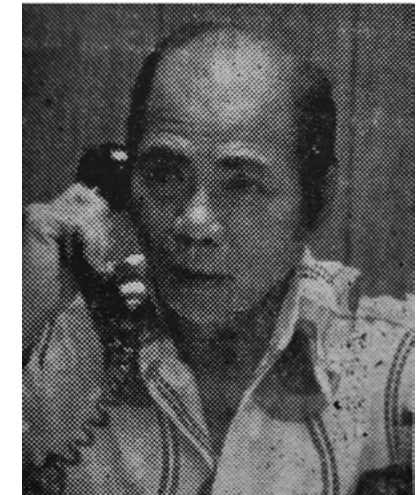
**PDG: That was a completely independent project?**

BF: No, they were all Nards’s scripts that Aboitiz was funding. Nards was a screenwriter.

**PDG: Was there also an educational component to those films?**

BF: Well, I’d say there were values in the films.

**PDG: Where did you want this film to be seen? Did you distribute it?**



Director Eugene Labella

BF: It was shown on Channel 3. For television, ABS-CBN showed them all at once, each film after the other.

**PDG: Was it Tagalog?**

BF: No, Bisaya.

**PDG: I ask because I noticed that with Nards’s later film, *Nagbreakfast ka na ba?* there was a lot of English. I would say that the film was predominantly English with some Bisaya sprinkled in. The dramatic moments are in Bisaya.**

BF: I wonder why there was so much English in that film. It might have been that Chris Ramos, the actor who played the protagonist, had been in the States for so long, so if he was forced to speak Bisaya...well, I remember when he spoke Bisaya to me, it had that twang.

**PDG: What year was that film?**

BF: Must be 2000 already. That film was just waiting to be produced, but then Neal Frazer (the Australian cinematographer, who worked with us on *Ulan*) told me that he knew the script existed, that it was a true story, and that Nards was the protagonist. (The narrative of *Nagbreakfast* follows Nards’s personal experience.) He had a relationship with a girl who was the sister of his wife. So that’s why it was very important to film it.

**PDG: After the omnibus film, what was the next project, or did you always work with Nards?**

BF: Mostly with Nards. I didn’t have the equipment, and I was subsisting on a teacher’s salary, and it was different if Ramon Aboitiz would fund it because they would have money.





Poster for *Kabiladman*

The idea was that the people would begin to rise up in arms and attack the mayor.

**PDG: What about your film *Kabiladman*? Was it also funded by Aboitiz?**

BF: Yes, because it was also an environmental film. *Kabiladman* is about a woman who lived in a town called Santa Barbara, and the mayor of Santa Barbara was obsessed with her and ended up raping her and then throwing her in a river, thinking that she was already dead. However, she wasn't dead, and she returned to town but became very secretive, and she never said who raped her. Meanwhile, she was preparing her revenge, but before exacting her revenge, she went to Cebu City to work, but unfortunately, the work she found there was as a stripper. The idea was that she took that job because she wanted to be a stronger woman. She wanted to forget that she was raped. Eventually, she returned to Santa Barbara. When the mayor saw her, he approached her and tried to hug her, but she shot him in the balls and then the his bodyguards shot her. That was the main story. However, it was also about the mayor selling the sand and the gravel from the river causing the banks to erode and creating an environmental problem. The idea was that the people would begin to rise up in arms and attack the mayor.

**PDG: Was it a feature?**

BF: It was about one hour long.

**PDG: No chance of finding a copy?**

BF: No, I lent it to some students, and it just disappeared. In any case, you can see that my films always had some advocacy. Even with the screenplays for Nards's films, I would add an advocacy if it was not there, and, of course, he would agree.

**PDG: What year is *Kabiladman*?**

BF: It was the '90s.

**PDG: So, for the whole decade of the '80s, were you making films? Like *May Kadaugan ang Pakigbisog sa Katarwhan* (Victory Can Be Attained When the People are United)?**

BF: Yes, that's the one I shot in Ozamis.

**PDG: Was that also the '80s?**

BF: Yes, I believe 1984. The woman who starred in *Kabiladman* died, but she wanted to be in the film. She bent over one day to tie her shoes and died of a heart attack. I think *May Kadaugan* came first. A radio actress played the lead role in *May Kadaugan*. Nards wrote the script, and he was there for some of the shoot.



Piux Kabahar, director of *Bertoldo ug Balodoy*

**PDG: I remember a discussion where you mentioned a link to the Durano family in that film?**

BF: Well, the warlord in the film looked like Durano.

**PDG: But that wasn't what the script was about?**

BF: Actually, it was very parallel, so we changed the script a bit, but at the same time, it was like Marcos. A dictator and his goons. And basically, that was what was happening in the Philippines, so each province had its version. The story of *May Kadaugan* is that during election time, Don Fernando, the political kingpin, is making sure his victory is sealed. He bought most of the land in the town except for that of the father of his laundrywoman. He kidnapped the man, and the family knew it. What was not known was that the daughter, who did the rich man's laundry, was also his sex slave. She agreed to be used by the old man for as long as he promised not to hurt her family.

**PDG: So that film is post-martial law?**

BF: No, that was during the elections. Marcos was still in power. There was an election wherein Marcelo Fernan (represented by the character Celeng in the film, who was played by Inday Daluz, a very popular radio personality at the time who was very anti-Marcos) was running for assembly. All of them lost except Ninoy Aquino. Martial Law was still on, and that's why we shot in Ozamis. We were advised not to shoot in Cebu because we would be arrested. In fact, when we shot in Ozamis, there was a lieutenant colonel who was contacted because he was anti-Marcos. We borrowed an ArmaLite from him. He also made sure that there was no military presence wherever we shot because we would have been arrested.

**PDG: So what were your intentions with *May Kadaugan* afterward? Where did you want it to go?**

BF: It was for an electoral campaign. It would be shown during rallies, but I never went. I don't know if Nards went, but I didn't go because I had already been identified. The military knew that I was a student of Behn Cervantes, and they were following me already.

**PDG: You were a student of Behn Cervantes? At UP?**

BF: Yes, when I was in college.

**PDG: So is he someone who had a significant impact or influence on you?**

BF: Oh, definitely. All his films and plays that I directed had a strong political edge.

**PDG: Were you part of the underground?**

BF: Oh yes.

**PDG: Was Nards also politically active?**

BF: Not so much, but he was sympathetic. A socialist. I was with the NDF



Screengrabs from *May Kadaugan ang Pakigbisog sa Katarwhan*



(National Democratic Front). When I transferred to Cebu, I was still with them, and I was teaching and did the play, *Hallelujah, Bayan Ko*, and *Pagtuaw sa katawhan* (Cry of the People), a powerful play. At that time, they were already watching out for me, which was done at the University of San Carlos (USC). I was an adviser at USC and STC. San Carlos had a theater group, one of the oldest, the USC Theater Guild. And those who took up theater were usually from the languages department, Political Science, or Anthropology, but there was no Masscomm yet.

**PDG: Are there any documents of those plays?**

BF: There's no video, but maybe a script or two somewhere.

**PDG: So you were going back and forth between theater and film?**

BF: Yes, because I would often get my characters from theater and my crowd scenes for the films. Behn Cervantes was the one who taught me how to direct crowd scenes. That's why, if you remember that attack in *May Kadaugan*, people were running, Cervantes was the one who taught me how to do that for film, for *Sakada*. He made some other films just to remain connected to producers because, after *Sakada*, no one wanted to work with him. He asked me to direct the crowd scenes on those films. There is a procession scene with pregnant women in Bulacan. I directed that.

**PDG: Didn't you tell me that you once replaced him as a guest during screenings?**

BF: Behn came here to Cebu, and we did a full press release announcing his visit, and they would hold lectures. He lectured at CIT, STC, but he was sick, so he asked me to do the lectures. He told me just to look at my own notes. He said they wouldn't know the difference between Behn Cervantes and Bien Fernandez, so I was introduced as him. They thought I was Behn Cervantes. I ended up giving the lectures, and since I had been lecturing at STC, I was confident. It's weird because Behn was very animated, more so than even Nick Deocampo. The guy put on a performance because he was an actor, a dancer, and a singer as well as being a director, so you got a show when he lectured.

**PDG: So, what was the issue with language at that time? Did you feel compelled to make work in Bisaya? Or was it rather a decision that came as the result of simply being in Cebu?**

BF: No, I really wanted to make the work in Bisaya. Because what's the use if a director from Manila comes and does a Tagalog play? He would miss some of the dialogue. So, I pushed for original work. I would ask them to think about what the point was of redoing the same old plays. If they made

original work in Bisaya, we would be able to see fresh work, fresh films, and fresh theater. And make films with values! Even with Binisaya. Whenever Keith Deligero and his group asked me what I thought, I would tell them that I appreciated the films in Bisaya and those with values because those films don't look like everything else being produced. The thing is, sometimes films with values can come off as corny, but if they can figure out how to make a strong film that incorporates Bisaya and values, then the schools will open entirely to you. And then you can develop an audience.

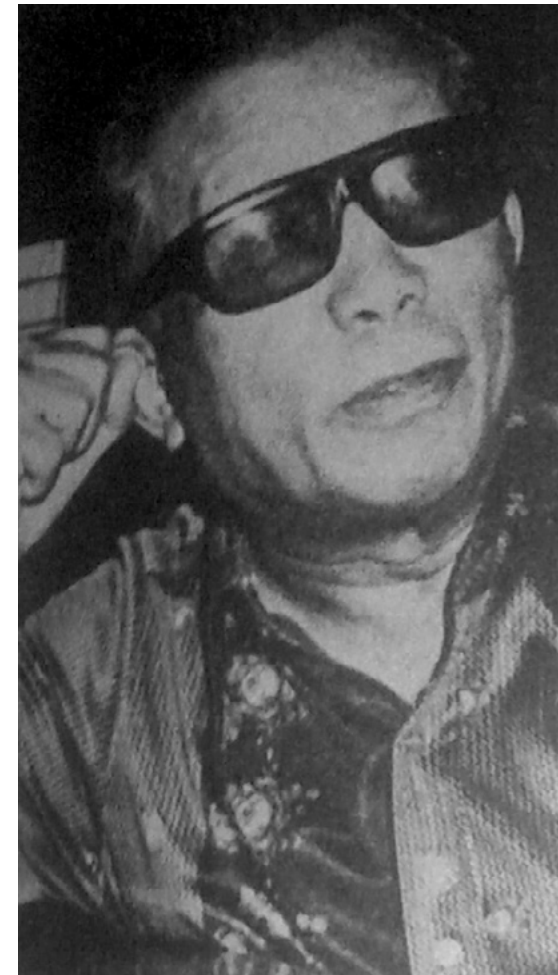
**PDG: Yes, that's the question. If you're doing this in the '70s, '80s, and '90s, you're thinking that your audience is Cebuano, or let's say Cebuano speaking, right? If you're making agriculture films for farmers in the mountains of central Cebu, obviously, it needs to be in the vernacular.**

Whenever Keith Deligero and his group asked me what I thought, I would tell them that I appreciated the films in Bisaya and those with values because those films don't look like everything else being produced.

BF: You know, before you left, I was telling Diem (Judilla, who teaches at USC) that I would be going around and doing agricultural films in the provinces of Cebu. But my health hasn't permitted it yet. But that would have been junior and senior high school students in their respective towns, and I would teach them, and then they would shoot in their localities, film farmers, and then essentially create a film festival similar to ToFarm Festival. Governor Davide had even approved it, but there's my illness and then the pandemic, and now, he's also no longer the governor.

PDG: So there were three others apart from yourself in that interim period between the 1970s and the beginning of the digital period. People point primarily to Allan Jayme Rabaya, Al Evangelio, Nards Chiu, and you as the only ones working in what we can call, for lack of a more precise term, filmmaking. Was there anyone else at that time who was working on film or television projects who was of interest?

BF: I think we were the only ones at that time. As I said, there was Gene Labella, who was teaching film appreciation at San Jose Recoletos. He was still healthy, perhaps a bit slow. But sometimes they would invite me to Recoletos.



Natalio Talyux Bacalso was a prolific Cebuano filmmaker in the 1950s and '70s

**PDG: What about Saturnino Villariño and Talyux Bacalso?**

BF: Look, at that time, I used to tell people, when I was teaching or at workshops, that there was this generation before us, but no one paid attention, people didn't take notice of them, principally because there were no Masscomm schools yet. It was only during my time that there was Masscomm, so they got to know all the films I did. Then Al and Alan did very few films, but Al did a series called *Bastonero*, a TV series on GMA7 that was actually a series of short films, but I think certain characters or actors overlapped in each of the films. I'm not entirely sure. I was told it was difficult to work with those two. They were hotheaded and blew up quickly. I was like that in the beginning, but people said, don't follow Behn Cervantes because he had a short temper. I guess because he was an actor as well. Many directors were like that. I was training Daisy Baad, a theater director who was teaching when they saw her acting up like me. A teacher told me, "Be careful because Daisy is following in your footsteps." So, then I cooled down, and so did she.

**PDG: Did you ever compile a list of each film that you have done?**

BF: I did before, but it was not complete. I also did a film called *Usik*. It was for TV, for ABS-CBN. They came to me and asked me if I could write and direct a series for them. *Usik* means waste. I made that into a fraternity or gang, Upsilon Sigma Kapa. These were young people wasting their time doing nothing. I also did *Ang Dili Kaniadto Mahimo na Karon*, a farming film. I did a lot of documentaries (roughly 80) and commercials.

**PDG: I know your health can be a limitation, but do you still have plans or projects in mind for the future? Perhaps, after the pandemic?**

BF: Absolutely, I want to go to the 44 towns of Cebu and make local films there and develop young filmmakers.

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**Paul Douglas Grant** is currently a visiting scholar at Concordia University and a lecturer at Kiuna College. He is the author of *Cinéma Militant: Political Filmmaking and May 1968* (Wallflower/CUP 2016), the forthcoming "Screening the Vernacular: The Emergence of Regional Philippine Cinemas" (Wallflower/CUP), and co-author of *Lilas: An Illustrated History of the Golden Ages of Cebuano Cinema* (University of San Carlos Press, 2016). He has translated the work of Serge Daney and Jean-Louis Schefer, and his work has appeared in, among others, *La Furia Umana*, *Situations: Project of the Radical Imagination*, *Film International*, *Hors Champ*, and *Philippine Quarterly of Culture and Society*.



The Emergence of Lav Diaz's Long Durational Style

# Early Periods

Adrian D. Mendizabal



## Introduction

This essay traces the concrete historical development of Lav Diaz's long durational film style as a result of the productive forces at work during the filmmaker's early life in Mindanao and the impersonal historical-material forces that supersede his personal experience. It attempts to show how the filmmaker's pedagogical and practical access to film technology and the historical transformation of Philippine society primarily shape the development of Diaz's film style. The essay's genealogical tracing shall cover two different but interrelated periods in Diaz's filmmaking career: (1) Diaz's pre-cinematic life in the regions and (2) Diaz's Mowelfund Film Institute (MFI) days experimenting with Super 8mm technology and the formation of his subjectivity as an alternative filmmaker, mainly focusing on his first short film *Banlaw* (1985). The task is to see these technological periods as temporally bounded regions and as highly interconnected periods resulting from the dynamism of the historical and material conditions of Philippine society.

## On Historical Materialism and the Development of Film Style

This essay builds on the materialist conception of history concerning the development of Diaz's film style. In *The German Ideology*, Marx presented the central tenets for such as a historiographic approach: "[T]he production of ideas, of conceptions, of consciousness, is at first directly interwoven with the material activity and material intercourse of men—the language of real life."<sup>1</sup> Marx insists that "men are producers of their conceptions... as they are conditioned by a definite development of their productive forces and the intercourse corresponding to these, up to its furthest forms."<sup>2</sup> Such interconnected development of productive forces can be attributed to the "industry and commerce, production and the exchange of the necessities of life [that] in their turn determine the distribution, the structure of the different social classes and are, in turn, determined by it as to the mode in which they are carried on..."<sup>3</sup>

A film style, being a mental conception with concreteness specific to cinematic practice, can be rooted in the "definite development of productive forces," which are related in the dialectical and historical interplay between personal and impersonal forces at work of a filmmaker or collective. David Bordwell's notion of style resonates with this. In his book *On the History of Film Style*, he defines style as "the texture of the film's images and sounds, the result of choices made by the filmmaker(s) in particular historical circumstances."<sup>4</sup>

While this essay does not dwell on the texture of images, the goal is to map the historical material development of a film style in relation to Diaz's development as a producer of cinema vis-à-vis the political-economic development of Philippine society within the period of interest. In this historical tracing of film style development, the genealogy of his relationship with the cinematic apparatus is read within the capillaries of power relations in a transforming Philippine society from 1950s to '80s.

This materialist positioning in biographical-historical inquiry refuses to merely acknowledge a presupposition that Diaz's style emerged only because of his personal aesthetic gesture toward embracing the aesthetic-formal potential of the *digital cinematic apparatus*. Instead, this essay argues that the long durational style he developed during the latter part of his career can be

Previous page: Photo of Lav Diaz during his high school graduation. All photos courtesy of Diaz, except where noted



Photo of Diaz's family: (standing) his brother Dan and Lav; (seated) brother Matthew, mother Maria, father Mario, sister Olivia



Lav and Olivia



Diaz with his sibling. The photo was cut out for an ID card



historically determined due to Diaz's economic struggles and the general transformation of Philippine society in the years of his development. What he repeatedly mentions, "the struggle [...] my struggle, my people's struggle and humanity's struggle," has historical bearing that this essay attempts to narrate.<sup>5</sup>

### Regional Beginnings: From "Paradise" to "Social Volcano"

During Lav Diaz's early life, he experienced difficulties accessing the pedagogical training necessary to elevate his film practice. Film style is necessarily a product of the filmmaker's level of practical development and his access to basic tenets of film practice. Given the struggles Diaz faced during his childhood and the complexities of regional conflicts in the Mindanao region in the late 1950s to the 1970s, it is not surprising that the concrete, actual development of his film style occurred when Diaz finally established his means of production, an autonomy of "independence" he now enjoys as an established cosmopolitan filmmaker with a "global auteur" status.

The interrupted development he experienced in his early life to establish a career in cinema proves that geopolitical forces are *always already* at work beyond his personal experience. Societal contradictions of an impersonal nature supersede his personal experience. This section shall focus on his regional beginnings in Maguindanao and the geopolitical displacements he encountered that led him to city centers like Davao, Cotabato, and eventually Manila.

Lavrente Indico Diaz was born in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao, Mindanao on December 30, 1958, to Mario Vigilia Diaz, an Ilocano, and Maria Linis Indico Diaz, an Ilonga, who were, according to Diaz, volunteer teachers and part of the pioneering batch of educators in the Mindanao region during the 1950s.<sup>6</sup> He is the third child in the family and a brother to one sister and three brothers.<sup>7</sup> Death had always lurked behind the shadow of Diaz's family. One of his brothers died as a baby, while his only sister, Olivia (for which the name of Diaz's production company is based), died in an accident.<sup>8</sup> His sister's death was a decisive moment in Diaz's career, and recalling the experience in 2004 to journalist Dino Manrique showed that this event would play an essential role in the development of his mode of practice in filmmaking: "I was sitting on a bench in New York, one snowy day, and had lived, until then, the bohemian life. I had just gotten the news that my sister died. They had buried her without telling me. There and then, I realized that life is short. Just do what you have to do. Just put everything into praxis."<sup>9</sup>

The death of his sister is symbolically significant in Diaz's mode of practice. It signifies a modality that his practice is much more personal than historical or political, as attested by his direct attribution of the local milieu of his films to the memory of this early period in his life. In one of his interviews, film scholar Nadin Mai asked if his film *From What Is Before* is about his life in Mindanao, which Diaz affirmatively confirmed:



Mario Diaz holding Lav. Photo taken at the gate of Katil Elementary School in Datu Paglas, Maguindanao



Olivia, Dan, Lav, and Matthew. Dan and Matthew would later become teachers and principals

Everything that you see there is from Mindanao. *From What Is Before*—you know, the shoot was hard. But the writing, the creation of the characters, the situations—it's all from memory. It's a composition of so many characters, from my parents, from my youth. I just put them together and created a narrative around them. It's easy to create a narrative for me because I really know the characters, the locale.<sup>10</sup>

His hometown, Datu Paglas, a fourth-class rural municipality of Maguindanao just south of the province of Cotabato, may have been one of the towns where Diaz's parents resided as volunteer teachers.<sup>11</sup> This portion in Diaz's life remains to be unearthed as it could provide the socio-political context that motivated his family's settlement in the Maguindanao area, which was then, according to Diaz, a "paradise."<sup>12</sup>

The young Diaz was raised in a petty-bourgeois household with a highly intellectual environment amid a rural backdrop, noting his father, then a public-school supervisor in Datu Paglas, as a significant influence in his interest in cinema and



Dan, Matthew, mother Maria, Lav, aunt Sophing, Olivia



Diaz at fourteen, taken in January 1973

literature.<sup>13</sup> Diaz recalled that his father was a "film maniac" and an ardent reader of "Russian Literature and all things Russian."<sup>14</sup> His father's interest in Russian culture is an interesting biographical note given the looming Cold War between the United States of America (USA) and the United Socialist Soviet Republic (USSR) in the international public arena during the 1950s and 1960s. The Philippines, being a strategically, was a crucial participant in the imperialist aggression of the US in Southeast Asia, especially in nation-states involved in so-called Southeast Asia's Cold War like Vietnam, Cambodia, Laos, and Indonesia. Moreover, Diaz's first name, Lavrente, was adopted from the first name of Lavrentiy Pavlovich Beria, chief of Joseph Stalin's secret police force Narodnyi Komissariat Vnutrennikh Del (People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs) during the Second World War.<sup>15</sup> Thus, the Soviet-Filipino connection in Diaz's films may have started during this early period in his life.

His father was his earliest cinephile companion. Diaz recounted in 2004 that he and his father "would watch all the movies on Saturday and Sunday [at the city center of Tacurong, then part of Cotabato, two hours away from Datu Paglas], and then [they] would sleep in the bus station [on their way back to Datu Panglas]."<sup>16</sup> Diaz's pedagogical development in cinema started in these regional conditions of limited cinematic access, often involving traveling back and forth from the city center to his rural hometown. The access to the cinema at an early age would eventually add to his subject position as a filmmaker. Diaz recounted in 2014 the type of liberal, transcultural conditioning he encountered during this stage:

We watched the whole gamut, all the genres—action, horror, Hong Kong movies, Hollywood movies, Filipino cinema. What I liked watching was action — Bruce Lee stuff, Fernando Poe, Jr. was a favorite then, James Bond, of course, and also the slapstick comedies of Dolphy and Chiquiito. All the fares in the theaters were double bills, so we were watching eight movies a week. It was virtually a film school.<sup>17</sup>

But the regional politics in Maguindanao was forbidding in providing Diaz the material means to practice filmmaking due to the lack of technological, pedagogical, cultural, and economic environment needed in establishing a basic film culture in the area.

Regional filmmaking in Maguindanao during the 1960s and 70's was, at that time, *unthinkable* and *absent*. The geopolitical forces that were present and the backward semi-feudal system in the region absented the possibility of a robust and well-consolidated regional film culture in the area that can approximate that of what can be found in city centers like Manila and Cebu, which were, at that time, at the seat of an emerging New Wave. The film culture that Diaz witnessed in the regions was not as sophisticated as what he would witness in Manila in the 1980s and New York in the 1990s. Genre films from Hollywood, Hong Kong, and the local film industry dominated the theaters in Tacurong City.

One can consider this period in Diaz's life as *geopolitically interruptive*. The impossibility of establishing the practical, productive tools as a regional filmmaker at a young age is not only an issue of access to the modes of film production in the region but also a factor of impersonal forces — the socio-political instability of the area, which a historical culmination of years of developmental aggression in the region orchestrated by imperialist forces and a crooked political system that coopted the dejected living conditions in the area. Diaz described the predominant geopolitical forces present during this time as a "social volcano."<sup>18</sup> The Christian-Muslim conflicts in Mindanao





Diaz at sixteen



Diaz (rightmost) with the Folk Singing Society, October 1980, Concert at Notre Dame Gymnasium in Cotabato City. Courtesy of Brod Erik

that started during the 1950s were a factor that hindered Diaz's practice as a regional filmmaker. Diaz's recounted this war as "bloody, very violent; it was also the advent of Marcos' brutal Martial Law, which made the situation really chaotic and destructive. [...] There were killings everywhere."<sup>19</sup>

During the rise of Christian-Muslim conflicts in the early 1970s, Diaz's family became refugees in the region.<sup>20</sup> In 1971, before the declaration of Martial Law, Diaz's family moved from Datu Paglas to Tacurong City, then still part of Cotabato, to escape the deadly conflict among Muslims, Christians, and the military forces occupying the region.<sup>21</sup> Before their move, Muslim rebels held their village Datu Paglas hostage, followed by the Philippine military bombing their areas to dissipate the rebels' hold.<sup>22</sup> As a result, there were many casualties, including some barangay officials.<sup>23</sup>

During the Martial Law years, Diaz witnessed many atrocities in the Maguindanao area. In one account, during his first year in high school, he and his brother witnessed a Muslim village burned down by rebels on their way home from General Santos City: "There were corpses on the street, from babies to old people. They were hacked at. It was horrible."<sup>24</sup>

The violence Diaz experienced during this period resulted from the long-standing class struggle in the Moro region. Diaz's family, coming from a Christian background, was part of the emerging settler communities in the Mindanao region, established during the American colonial period. During this period, Americans encouraged Christian families outside Mindanao to migrate and become administrators and partake in the evangelization efforts in the Moro region.<sup>25</sup> This trend continued after the Philippines' independence from the US. The dominance of the Christian landed class, and its control of the productive forces in the region has sparked rebellion from the Moro people, leading to violent upheavals, which Diaz had witnessed firsthand during his childhood.

After finishing high school in Tacurong City, Diaz ventured to Manila from 1975 to 1976 to attend Ateneo de

Manila University (AdMU).<sup>26</sup> The city culture offered Diaz an intensified experience with cinema, prompting him to reconsider filmmaking as a potential career. In "Delta Theater," Diaz first saw Francis Ford Coppola's "stunning" *Godfather* (1972), which registered a "strong impact" on him, followed by a required academic viewing of Lino Brocka's *Maynila sa Mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975) in Coronet Theater, Cubao.<sup>27</sup> Then, out of curiosity, he read cinema books with "...reviews... [and]... biographies of directors" at the AdMU's Rizal Library during his free time.<sup>28</sup>

This experience was interrupted again by a call to transfer to Ateneo de Davao University to be closer to home as regional conflicts in Mindanao intensified.<sup>29</sup> In addition, his involvement in fraternity-related violence prompted him to transfer to the Notre Dame University of Cotabato City.<sup>30</sup> At Notre Dame University, Diaz took an undergraduate degree in Economics to fulfill his parents' wishes.<sup>31</sup>

While at Notre Dame University, Diaz immersed himself in the cultural scene of Cotabato City, which inspired him to become a musician. The regional youth culture and its material conditions would only allow for the music scene to thrive. Forming a band and performing songs were not as difficult as coming up with a film. This transition may have been a critical period in understanding Diaz's approach to cultural practice.

Diaz was active in the Cotabato music scene although he received poor income from this line of work. He formed a band named Cotabato, and for every performance, each member was paid P25 a night.<sup>32</sup> However, during his third year in college, he decided to marry and have a family.<sup>33</sup> His decision to focus on his family was a matter of financial circumstance. This decision led Diaz to abandon his dream of becoming a musician. His P25/night income was not sufficient to fulfill the immediate needs of his family. He planned to take up a Bachelor of Arts in Music at the University of the Philippines Diliman after finishing his degree in Economics, but the plan did not materialize as Diaz was already set to become a father and a breadwinner.<sup>34</sup>



Diaz with his eldest daughter Iara Celeste

Diaz's *incapability* to form a localized regionalist base as a filmmaker resulted from the dominant historical-material forces he confronted during his youth. The geopolitical factors that disenfranchised his access to practical means of film production were the following: (1) the lack of a state-funded decentralized program for culture and the arts in the Maguindanao area, (2) the lack of infrastructure for the dissemination of film education and practice, (3) the presence of the long-standing class struggle in the Moro region, and (4) the lack of sustainable and available technological base that would allow Maguindanao locals like Diaz to explore filmmaking.

### Super 8mm: Exploring Alternative Film Practices

In the early 1980s, unable to sustain a living in Mindanao, Diaz brought his family to Manila.<sup>35</sup> There, he worked as a journalist in *People's Journal* and *Taliba* and as a television scriptwriter for Cecile Guidote-Alvarez's television drama *Balintataw* and the children's program *Batibot*.<sup>36</sup> He also worked as a music journalist for *Jingle Magazine*, contributing articles and poetry, among others. His training in *Balintataw* provided Diaz a practical experience in film and television production. He also ventured into other film production projects. He became Gil Portes' assistant director in a film shot in the US (*Merika* [1984]), and, after winning an FPJ-Mowelfund Screenwriting Contest, he also became a scriptwriter in the FPJ production *Mabuting Kaibigan Masamang Kaaway* (1991).<sup>37</sup> This series of production work in the media and film industry enabled Diaz to immerse in its industrial complex in the 1980s. These complex and multifarious networks of laboring bodies, capital, and technology became Diaz's index to explore alternative film practices.

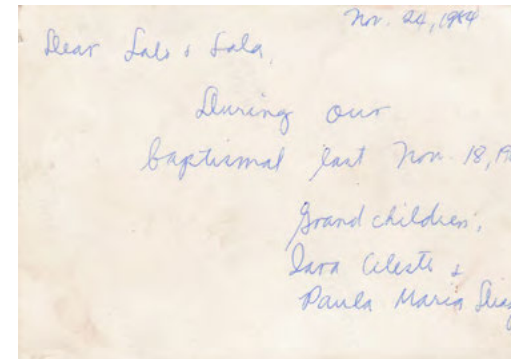
Aside from establishing a stable livelihood for his family during this period, Diaz was desperately searching for a break in the film industry. In 2006, Diaz looked back at his experience in the film industry with dismay: "During my early years of struggling to break into cinema, there was no digital yet... [...] [T]o thrive as a filmmaker meant to go mainstream, the so-called 'industry.' [...] [T]he industry is the status quo and the culture there is very feudal. They protect their turf, they are wary of newcomers, especially if you're 'schooled.' To break in was hardcore."<sup>38</sup> For Diaz, the only way to break into the commercial film industry at that time was to subject oneself to the impersonal commodification of labor: "a compromise."<sup>39</sup> Connections with film industry executives and staff and occasional scriptwriting competitions were also essential access points in the cutthroat industry.

During the Marcos regime in the 1980s, the local film industry was undergoing a contradictory transformation. To control market forces, the Martial Law government, in connivance with the landed class and the imperialist US, used military force to suppress insurrectionary movements and arrest the citizens' basic rights to freedom of assembly and self-expression. Marcos's excessive borrowing from local and foreign sources resulted in a backward semi-feudal, semi-colonial economy in which foreign-controlled businesses thrived alongside those of the landed class. Interestingly, Philippine cinema thrived under exploitative labor conditions, which Diaz witnessed firsthand during his short foray into commercial cinema.

The emergence of alternative film practices in the 1980s spearheaded by MFI, the political films of AsiaVisions Media Foundation, and other alternative political enclaves played a crucial role in the historical



Baptism of Iara Celeste and Paula Maria



A dedication at the back of the baptismal photo, dated November 24, 1984





With his father Mario (obscured) and his child



Diaz with wife Minda and one of his daughters

formation of Diaz's film style. It forms the concrete historical basis for Diaz's long durational style as a modality of alternative film practice. What generated Diaz's alternative, liberal, and counter-industrial subjectivity, which was "realized" as an actual film style and subject position in his encounter with the digital medium during the 2000s, was these early frustrations and attempts to break into the productive forces of the film industrial complex. Even though the film industrial complex's modes of production, its film technologies, and pedagogies provided him the necessary set of technological and practical skills to create his films, the profit orientation of the film industry, its exploitative, "feudal," and backward political economy, disallowed Diaz to achieve an autonomous status as an "independent filmmaker."

After his stint as a production staff in *Daddy Goon* (1992), one of the comedies of Regal Films [], Diaz withdrew from the commercial scene to pursue an alternative path to filmmaking. However, this attempt will be interrupted again in 1997 when Good Harvest Productions, a low-budget commercial film production company under Regal Films, offered Diaz a chance to re-enter the industry. Although the political economy of commercial outfits in the late 1990s had a vastly different political economy compared to the 1980s, this re-entry of Diaz to the commercial industry only reinforced the notion of exploitation he experienced at that time, albeit with a different intensity.

Diaz did not receive any formal institutionalized training in commercial and alternative filmmaking. The only institution that offered alternative film production workshops at that time was the MFI. Diaz became an active participant in such workshops, eventually leading him to embrace an alternative (counter-hegemonic) subjectivity. As early as 1983, and alongside his stints in commercial film productions and journalism, Diaz attended film production and scriptwriting workshops. He attended two key workshops: Ricky Lee's scriptwriting workshop and a film production workshop of MFI organized by alternative filmmakers and film practitioners, namely Serafin "Surf" Reyes, Nick Deocampo, Mac Alejandre, and Raymond Red, where guest speakers like Peque Gallaga and Lamberto Avellana were invited.<sup>40</sup>

These "hazy and crazy" workshops led him to create his first-ever short film *Banlaw* (Cleansed, 1985).<sup>41</sup> *Banlaw* is Diaz's first work as a director. Using a Super 8 camera, Diaz shot and edited a three-minute narrative film of what he recalled in 2006 as his first "idealist Socratic" character.<sup>42</sup> He described his protagonist as:

a young man who views the world with absolute goodness but also with a heavy pessimism [and] believes that the world is going terribly malevolent and retrogressive. He watches television, and he sees a Buddhist burning himself as an ultimate act of sacrifice to save mankind. He is well aware that every day his activist friends are going underground, and some have been tortured and killed by the Marcos regime. He walks the streets of Manila, and he sees hungry people, thousands of lost street kids, beggars. Inspired by the young Buddhist, he walks naked in protest and then kills himself.<sup>43</sup>

In *Banlaw*, we see traces of his succeeding films, particularly his thematic treatment of his characters. One can see from this description above Diaz's early attempts to build narratives of characters torn between religious beliefs and the chaos and retrogression of the world-at-large, which we would encounter again in *Heremias* (2006), *Siglo ng Palulurwal* (2012), *Norte*, *Hangganan ng Kasaysayan* (2014), *Hele sa Hirwagang Hapis* (2016), among others. In addition, *Banlaw* indicates Diaz's cinephilia as he admits stealing a shot from Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove or: How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964).<sup>44</sup> Before going to the US in 1992, Diaz stole the only copy of *Banlaw* in MFI's archives but eventually lost it "in one of the basements in Jersey City."<sup>45</sup>

*Banlaw* was shot using Super 8 film technology. Super 8mm was MFI's available medium at that time. It served as its technological base for screenings, training, and workshops on film production. MFI's Super 8 facilities included "super-8 cameras, editing facilities, projectors, and related equipment."<sup>46</sup> According to Diaz, in a typical Mowelfund workshop of forty

While Super 8 was the most politicized format of filmmaking in the 1980s, digital was comparably more "democratic."

participants, there were only seven Super 8 cameras and one 16mm camera available but no available celluloid film, for which a 16mm film, at that time, would cost around \$80 a roll.<sup>47</sup> For Diaz, this was a "dead end."<sup>48</sup>

In *Banlaw*, the long durational style was *unthinkable*. The Super 8mm technology introduced by the MFI can only accommodate, at most, a ten-minute worth of footage for a 200-ft. 8mm film roll.<sup>49</sup> The 8mm film roll was also expensive, making its fate in the Manila experimental scene momentarily brief, only comprising almost a decade of practical existence. From being the frontrunner medium for the Manila-based experimental scene in the early 1980s—a medium that enabled Nick Deocampo and Raymond Red to make their first set of alternative counter-cultural films—Super 8mm disappeared suddenly during the late 1980s when Kodak's Super 8 laboratory closed and when "light and cheap" analog video equipment entered the Philippine market.<sup>50</sup> Diaz used analog video in his second short film, *Step No, Step Yes*, in 1988.

In its brief and abrupt contact with Diaz in *Banlaw*, it is important to look at Super 8 as a technology that introduced Diaz to alternative film practices he would soon embrace in the 2000s. Therefore, it was not surprising that Diaz would call Super 8 "a dead end." The category of the "dead end" of Super 8 should be seen in the digital context. While Super 8 was the most politicized format of filmmaking in the 1980s—attested by its medium-specific negation of both the regimes of Hollywood and the local industry and its potential as an alternative mode of film practice exemplified by the films of Deocampo, Raymond Red, Regiben Romana, among others, for Diaz—digital was comparably more "democratic" than Super 8. Super 8 was "a dead end" in terms of its material limitations. In addition to the production cost incurred in every shoot, the pricey Super 8 celluloid film and camera, the high cost of Super 8 film processing, and the eventual disappearance of processing laboratories in Manila were prohibitive of a sustainable alternative cinema.

**Adrian D. Mendizabal** is currently completing his MA in Media Studies (Film) at the University of the Philippines Film Institute and serves as the head researcher of the PUP-NCCA Project on the Philippine Documentary Heritage Archival Collection on the COVID-19 pandemic. He has contributed essays on Philippine cinema to *VCinema*, *Asian Politics & Policy*, *Plaridel*, *Kino Punch*, *NANG*, *La Furia Umana*, *New Durian Cinema*, *Transit*, *Sinekultura Film Journal*, and *MUBI Notebook*.



Diaz in New York

## Conclusion

The formation of Diaz's long durational style cannot only be a consequence of a mere superficial and haphazard aesthetic choice, driven only by foreign film influences (such as Andrei Tarkovsky, Bela Tarr, etc.), nor can it be seen only as Diaz's anti-establishment political tirade. Instead, a style's development is often a result of the contradictory relation of individual choices and the impersonal historical-material transformation of the times.

Two notes can be drawn from this historical materialist inquiry: (1) that his long durational film style is a modality and interplay of both personal and impersonal (historical-political) influences in film practice as certain elements such as the milieu (usually rural landscape), character narratives, and motivations, are informed by Diaz's experiences;<sup>51</sup> furthermore, (2) that his long durational film style is a modality of alternative film practice he developed as early as the 1980s.

Indeed, his long durational style cannot be seen only as an *aesthetic choice* but rather a product of Philippine society's complex and dynamic historical-material transformation that culminates in his deployment of a technological determinist *politics of the image* in his embrace of the digital.



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# A THEOLOGY OF CINEMATIC SALVATION

Rethinking the History of Digital in Lav Diaz's Slow Cinema

Miguel Penabella





The films of Philippine director Lav Diaz are often couched in discourses of slow cinema, referring to a loose collection of contemplative films that privilege decelerated long takes with near stillness in composition and a reduced emphasis on narrative causality, often from various international filmmakers working outside the Hollywood industry. Academic study in this area frequently identifies the spread of digital technology throughout the past two decades as an affordance for increasingly long takes not possible on celluloid, especially considering Diaz's extremely long duration that runs from four to ten hours.<sup>1</sup>

For Diaz, digital technology is not simply an aesthetic choice but a political necessity bordering on semi-religious doctrine. When asked if his method of filmmaking has developed as a result of the digital format he uses, the director argues that digital represents a form of "liberation theology," likening it to a political instrument in which the tools of cinematic production have been reclaimed for impoverished, independent filmmakers seeking to circumvent an exploitative, capitalist studio system.<sup>2</sup> Diaz expands on this idea in his interview with Tilman Baumgärtel:

Digital changes everything. You own the brush now, you own the gun, unlike before, where it was all owned by the studio. Now it is all yours. It is so free now... We do not depend on film studios and capitalists anymore. This is liberation cinema now. We can destroy governments now because of digital... Digital is liberation theology.<sup>3</sup>

The main purpose of this article is to complicate such ideas by triangulating the more complex historical relations between Diaz's conception of liberation theology, slow cinema, and digital cinema. Unpacking the term liberation theology compels us to ask why this politicized rhetoric for the digital is needed altogether and what exactly is being liberated in the first place. What is slow cinema as a framework when paired with the liberation theology of digital? In what ways can we think of slow cinema's historicity beyond such formal elements and instead connect Diaz's formal attitudes with his own biographical and social contexts?

By examining the assumptions and historical omissions in common understandings of Diaz's career, I argue that slow cinema is not necessarily enabled by digital, as slow cinema's impetus—and even Diaz's filmography—predates the commercial emergence of digital technologies, and that a complete understanding of Diaz's rhetoric of resistance to commercial studios is much more complicated than supposed binaries of independent vs. Hollywood, digital vs. analogue, and new vs. old.

### Rethinking Slow Cinema

The evocative wording of liberation theology calls to mind the influence of leftist politics on the one hand and the Philippines' majority Catholic population on the other, both of which must be brought to bear on Diaz's own upbringing and biographical contexts. Born Lavrente Indico Diaz in 1958, Diaz was named after Soviet statesman Lavrentiy Beria, reflecting his parents' familiarity with socialist theorists that would later influence him.<sup>5</sup> If liberation theology suggests a collision of socialist and Catholic rhetoric, then Diaz's parentage reflects this tension, as he calls his father a "hardcore socialist" from the northern region of Ilocos and his mother a "hardcore Catholic" from the central region of Visayas.<sup>6</sup> However, these two ideologies are not mutually opposed, as Diaz remarks that his father later adopted his mother's hardcore Catholicism himself.<sup>7</sup> While growing up in the Southern region of Mindanao, his parents volunteered to build government-funded school systems, emphasizing community-driven activism and cultural education of indigenous people.<sup>8</sup>

The geographical realities of rural Mindanao had a direct impact on the filmmaker's perception of time. Diaz notes that "slow aesthetics" was always a part of his culture and upbringing, as life in the province meant he had to walk ten kilometers back and forth just to go to school.<sup>9</sup> Thus, while slow cinema may represent a style collapsed into the homogenizing categories of contemporary world cinema, Diaz's childhood reflections suggest that his decelerated filmmaking approach speaks to the rural Philippines' specific social and infrastructural realities more pressingly than a pushback against sped-up action spectacle.

Opposite page: *Century of Birthing* (Lav Diaz, Sine Olivia Pilipinas, 2011). All images courtesy of Lav Diaz

*Florentina Hubaldo, CTE* (Lav Diaz, Sine Olivia Pilipinas, 2012)



The extremely long running time of Lav Diaz's films also reflects a "declaration of artistic independence" that exists outside the hegemonic conventions of studio filmmaking, a motivation developed over the course of his long and varied career.<sup>11</sup> Responding to the question on why his films are so long, Diaz contends that his cinema "is not part of the industry conventions" and that Filipinos are not governed by time but by space, as the association of time with productivity is a fundamentally colonial mentality that must be questioned.<sup>12</sup> Put into practice, his cinematic running time upwards of four to ten hours thwart the film industry imposition of an average two-hour running time meant to maximize exhibition profits. If we are to take Lav Diaz at his word that the impetus behind his approach is to push back against standardized studio systems representative of capitalist hegemony and colonial pasts, then we must extend the scope of slow cinema and liberation theology to his earlier, oft-overlooked career as a studio filmmaker in the first place.

Because the historical positioning of slow cinema against Hollywood studio filmmaking runs the risk of centralizing Hollywood as the singular cinematic center to which these filmmakers are responding, this framework overlooks the specific, regional, and personal contexts that undergird theories of cinematic slowness. While filmmakers like Lav Diaz express opposition to Hollywood conventions with "binary models" of fast vs. slow and more vs. less as slow cinema theorists like Matthew Flanagan suggest, such distinctions potentially perpetuate an othered identity that mischaracterizes the histories of slow cinema.<sup>13</sup>

Diaz's emphasis on the ownership of the materials of cinematic production to achieve honest artistic expression partly speaks to his liberation out of the exploitative scheduling of Philippine studios. Prior to global fame in an art cinema festival circuit in the mid-2000s, Lav Diaz worked within the Philippine studio system throughout the 1990s to finance independent personal projects. In particular, he wrote action and comedy scripts for Regal Films and worked as an in-house director for the studio's subsidiary Good Harvest Productions, producing four films: *Serafin Geronimo: Ang Kriminal ng Baryo Concepcion* (*Serafin Geronimo: The Criminal of Barrio Concepcion*, 1998); *Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buwan* (*Naked Under the Moon*, 1999); *Burger Boys* (1999); and *Hesus, Rebolusyunaryo* (*Hesus the Revolutionary*, 2002).<sup>14</sup> Good Harvest employed Diaz within the *pito-pito* (seven-seven) production system, which involved a physically and mentally taxing seven-day shooting and seven-day postproduction schedule with extremely low budgets to maximize box office returns.<sup>15</sup>

The *pito-pito* cycle provided Diaz with first-hand experiences working under an exploitative system that commissioned the labor of independent filmmakers for low salaries, stripping them of creative agency and trapping them within a parasitical structure. Plentiful anecdotes about the grueling schedule serve as unspoken fodder for the liberation theology he espouses years after his emancipation from the studio system. For instance, Diaz notes that these years had detrimental effects on his health, as he and his crew suffered flu and fatigue, and he had to nourish himself with antibiotics and coffee before passing out on the final day of production.<sup>16</sup> Liberation theology's insistence on the emancipation of the individual artist from a predatory studio system cannot be divorced from such personal experiences given Diaz's resentful memories of this period.



Artwork for *Hubad sa Ilalim ng Buwan* (Lav Diaz, Good Harvest Production, 1999) and *Serafin Geronimo: Ang Kriminal ng Baryo Concepcion* (Lav Diaz, Good Harvest Unlimited, 1998)





*Florentina Hubaldo, CTE*

The director's upholding of the individual artist via liberation theology is striking because it runs counter to the liberation strategies of leftist filmmakers that sought to, as theorist Masha Salazkina more generally notes, "democratize cinema by abolishing individual film authorship and dismantling film's status as art, thereby opening cinematic production to the masses and in the process liberating mankind."<sup>18</sup> Diaz's polemical rhetoric that attempts to recuperate the role of the individual filmmaker serves as a response to the alienating effect of the pito-pito system that subsumed his role to the iron will of the studio, alienating his labor and leaving him voiceless. Under *Good Harvest*, the studio ultimately maintained the final cut, sometimes splicing in sex scenes shot by an outside director without the permission of Diaz in order to attract audiences seeking lurid spectacle.<sup>19</sup> As Michael Guarneri argues, what is at stake for Diaz is a resistance to the "feudal mentality" of a self-sustaining studio system that excludes any voices outside the narrow parameters of profit-generating entertainment.<sup>20</sup>

Both slow cinema and liberation theology offer antidotes to the supposedly unmarketable films that bypass the standardized running time of mainstream productions. According to Diaz, the emergence of cheap digital video undercuts the more expensive 16mm and Super 8 equipment largely safeguarded by studios, and this alternate format represented one way to emancipate his cinema from studios

like *Good Harvest*.<sup>21</sup> Cinematographer Richard de Guzman filmed Diaz's nearly ten-hour-long *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (dir. Lav Diaz, 2004) with digital equipment, thus permitting Diaz and his crew to oversee production and postproduction and distribution outside the watchful eye and studio control of Regal or *Good Harvest*.

This, in turn, affected the labor of the filmmaking process as Diaz eschewed the unforgiving, rapid deadlines of the pito-pito system and decelerated his approach by temporarily living in on-location shooting sites and allowing the contingencies of weather, landscape, and locals to guide the direction and pacing of the film.<sup>22</sup> One way to reframe slowness in the historical context of Diaz's career is as a therapeutic corrective to his experiences while working the intense schedules of the pito-pito years.

### Rethinking Liberation Theology

While digital filmmaking serves as a tangible, more accessible means to produce films independently from the pito-pito system characterized by Diaz's early career at *Good Harvest*, it represents but one way to understand the historical complexities of liberation theology. Historically, the association with cinema as a liberatory artform finds its most compelling arguments in writings concerning Third Cinema, which frame liberation in the context of emancipation from the ideological



*Evolution of a Filipino Family* (Lav Diaz, Sine Olivia Pilipinas, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)

shackles of commercially driven filmmaking structures hailing from the West. However, aligning Lav Diaz's work within the strictures of Third Cinema risks mischaracterizing both the filmmaker and the historical specificities of this movement originally coined by Argentine filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino.

Further theorized by Teshome Gabriel, Third Cinema can be understood as a concerted political effort to immerse audiences "in the lives and struggles of the people of the Third World" and is informed by "the militant manifestations of their struggles."<sup>23</sup> Rather than "re-aestheticize traditional cinematic codes," Third Cinema attempts to develop new, political cinematic codes entirely.<sup>24</sup> Antonio D. Sison has written extensively of the connections between liberation theology and Third Cinema, finding parallels in the theological interest in God's guidance of human liberation with Third Cinema's interest in privileging the liberation struggles and experiences of the global poor. Examining the theological work of Edward Schillebeeckx, Sison notes that the binary between salvation and sociopolitical liberation are not separate categories but "interrelate dialectically and are mutually implicated," in which religion "sees the divine manifested in humanity's search for justice and good in the world."<sup>25</sup> Sison locates a similar project in Third Cinema's sympathy for the sociopolitical realities and militant struggles for liberation in the Third World.

Certainly, a liberatory streak runs through Diaz's filmography, such as in the primacy of long takes that highlight the subjectivity of impoverished peoples, as in the still compositions in *Storm Children, Book One* (2014) that document wayward children salvaging valuables in the wake of Typhoon Yolanda. However, rather than characterize such works in the legacy of Third Cinema, I would instead turn to notions of "revolutionary humanism" theorized by Bert Cardullo and André Bazin. Liberation theology has an uncanny antecedence to earlier cinema histories, particularly

recalling Bazin's chapter on Italian neorealism, "An Aesthetic of Reality: Cinematic Realism and the Italian School of the Liberation," in his second volume of *What Is Cinema?*<sup>26</sup> Liberation discourse historically travels, as Italian schools of realist cinema were drawing from Soviet film theory, and the institutionalization of cinema in countries such as Cuba or the Philippines adopted these aesthetics and theories on behalf of a new politics.

If Diaz understands liberation in accordance with the circumvention of commercial filmmaking via low-cost affordances of digital technologies, comparisons emerge with Bazin's association of Italian neorealist practices that champion an aesthetic of reality. According to Bazin, the collapse of the professional industry and the development of 16mm film stock liberated cinema from commercial interests in favor of documenting the everyday stories of Italian people in durational time. This shared vernacular privileges the everyday and real, suggesting that these quotidian images run counter to the commercial interests of a profit-driven studio system seeking attractive spectacle.

By juxtaposing Diaz's liberation theology with Bazin's liberation aesthetic, what becomes apparent is a shared focus on this revolutionary humanism that privileges the overlooked plight of everyday people filmed on-location and in real-time, which is a basis for slow cinema and Diaz's conception of liberation theology.<sup>27</sup> Taking Augusto Genina's *Heaven Over the Marshes* (1949) as an example of a "good Catholic film," Bazin links aspects of neorealist filmmaking with spiritual sensitivity to God, noting the film's rejection of ornamentation and supernatural flourishes.<sup>28</sup>

Advocating for a sense of austereness rather than the ornamental when it comes to depicting religious themes onscreen, Bazin sees theological worth in the film's use of nonprofessional actors, naturalistic dialogue, location shooting, and so on. Diaz's work similarly lifts Neorealist strategies of documentary realism and the casting of nonprofessional actors,



*Storm Children, Book One* (Lav Diaz, Sine Olivia Pilipinas, DMZ Docs, 2014)



and these formal choices contribute to a broader opposition to studio artifice. Such naturalistic techniques dovetail with contemporaneous works by filmmaker Robert Bresson, whom Sison notes “sees more of the divine in human life portrayed as it is rather than literal pronouncements of God’s name,” in the everyday and the human.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, Bazin debunks the idea that Italian neorealism was “spontaneously generated,” instead recognizing the longer sociopolitical consequences of Italian Liberation as decisive in the development of neorealism.<sup>30</sup> The end of World War II did not return the country to a prewar status quo but produced economic, social, and political tensions, and Italian filmmaking responded with “reconstituted reportage” that could not escape the reality of the political and social situation “into which its roots are so deeply sunk,” as Bazin suggests.<sup>31</sup>

The inescapability of social realities and a focus on actuality through documentary reportage are of essence to the films of Diaz. After the destruction of Typhoon Reming (or Durian) in November 2006, Diaz brought out his camera without any set plans or script for what he would create with the reportage and interviews obtained. From these efforts, Diaz later wrote the story of *Death in the Land of Encantos* (2007), incorporating documentary footage of the typhoon’s aftermath as a kind of post-disaster reportage of the destruction wrought on common people living in the countryside.<sup>32</sup> Thus, Diaz’s liberationist language should be understood not simply as a response to Hollywood filmmaking or as a radical shift in film aesthetics, but as sharing a longer legacy of the visual and narrative strategies and sociopolitical urgency of Italian neorealism and even Soviet filmmaking, as these schools of thought travel through time and across national lines.

### Rethinking Digital Cinema

While liberation theology suggests that digital is a revolutionary tool that marks a historic break with studio control, the impulse for slowness in cinema should be more expansively historicized and theorized beyond the contexts of

## The inescapability of social realities and a focus on actuality through documentary reportage are of essence to the films of Diaz.

the digital. Diaz’s assertion assumes a rupture in a historical teleology of cinema, as though digital were a fundamental, revolutionary historical break in film’s aesthetic and political ethos.

Drawing partly from André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, I contend that the emergence of digital technologies should not be privileged as a wholesale “revolution” in cinema, especially within the contexts of slow cinema filmmaking.<sup>33</sup> Despite liberation theology’s praise of digital as a means to circumvent studio control, the means of production are still controlled by major studios, effectively shutting out the profitability of 35mm film and creating more fiscal pressures to shoot in digital, as the majority of distribution and exhibition industries exclusively support digital. Quoting theorist John Belton, Gaudreault and Marion note three major events throughout this decade as studios effectively monopolized digital technologies. At the same time, analog formats fell by the wayside: Panavision and Arriflex 35mm cameras ceased production in October 2011, Eastman Kodak filed for bankruptcy in January 2012, and major industry distributors announced the end of 35mm film distribution in 2013.<sup>34</sup> Thus, while liberation theology is framed as an escape from the confines of a celluloid format hijacked by the capitalist hegemony of the studio system, the digital alternative is not necessarily the domain of independent filmmakers when this technology has been thoroughly embraced and even hoarded by studio systems. Digital may thus be more a necessity than a radical, liberationist alternative.



*Storm Children, Book One*



*From What Is Before* (Lav Diaz, Sine Olivia Pilipinas, 2014)



*Melancholia* (Lav Diaz, Sine Olivia Pilipinas, 2008)

Likewise, even as digital may allow Diaz to shoot extremely long running times, the filmmaker is still bound in some sense to the two-hour segment, evoking Philip Rosen’s concept of digital mimicry, which identifies the theoretical overlaps between the assumed novelty of digital and established cinematic techniques of analog filmmaking.<sup>35</sup> Diaz typically structures his narratives to conform to the material limitations of the two-hour capacity of the DigiBeta L Tape, thus segmenting his films in even, two-hour chapters.<sup>36</sup> The supposed binary between the digital and indexical is misleading, as digital cinema achieves pictorial verisimilitude by replicating “preexisting compositional forms of imagery,” an observation identified by Gaudreault and Marion when they suggest that digital merely aims at “imitating the results achieved for ages by celluloid cinema.”<sup>37</sup> Thus, despite the supposed newness of the digital, it often perpetuates and appropriates strategies of celluloid filmmaking embodied by the studio system, which liberation theology seeks to oppose.

Digital technology also enables other kinds of cinema that may even counter a liberation theology. Digital filmmaking affords certain abilities for flashy special effects in postproduction, in which the image is awash in immaterial greenscreen effects wholly unmoored from reality, in service of hurried blockbuster spectacle. Slowness itself is also not necessarily a product of long takes and digital technologies, as fast-paced action cinema has repeatedly deployed the long take as a marker of intense action spectacle in films such as Alfonso Cuarón’s *Gravity* (2013) and Sam Mendes’s *1917* (2019). Moreover, digital may also enable the creation of fast cinema via more precise cuts in editing software, allowing for more rapidly cut action spectacle as demonstrated in films such as George Miller’s *Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015). If digital cinema is inescapable from “prior histories of mediated representation” and overlaps with such histories as Rosen argues, then liberation theology should similarly be called into question as

If digital technologies do not necessarily represent deliverance from studio systems—but may, in turn, enable more opportunities for control—then where does that leave liberation?

a radical break from studio filmmaking, since Diaz’s career is nevertheless inextricably linked to these contexts.<sup>38</sup>

If digital technologies do not necessarily represent deliverance from studio systems—but may, in turn, enable more opportunities for control—then where does that leave liberation? The question of *how* Diaz deploys the long take gestures towards possible routes for liberation, in its fostering of an oppositional consciousness that privileges mindfulness, deep contemplation, and even spiritual sustenance. His films’ immense lengths and long takes can be perceived as an attempt to capture that sense of infiniteness beyond the human scope, of time running away from us, gesturing towards the sublime. Diaz’s use of the long take finds similarities in the work of filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, whose self-penned volume *Sculpting in Time* notes his interest in the theological and the elusive aspects of existence, and theorists like Bhaskar Sarkar have noted Tarkovsky’s preoccupation with “the sublime dimensions of Being that tend to escape representation.”<sup>39</sup> More specifically, Tarkovsky notes that the appeal of cinema





*Norte, the End of History* (Lav Diaz, Wacky O Productions, Kayan Productions, Origin8 Media, 2013)

is in its ability for audiences to experience time, as it “widens, enhances and concentrates a person’s experience” and even “makes it longer.”<sup>40</sup>

The long takes of Diaz can perhaps be understood in similar ways, as concerted efforts to compel audiences to reframe and retrain their senses to the intangible by enduring the materiality of sustained time. Through long duration, film offers space for contemplation, whether on the lived experiences of underprivileged figures depicted onscreen or more elusive qualities of the divine. Sison quotes Craig Detweiler in suggesting, “Cinema is *locus theologicus*, a place for divine revelation,” and Diaz’s films likewise foreground that sense of sublime transcendence, a kind of awakening manifested in motifs lifted from Tarkovsky—like levitation—as in one evocative shot towards the end of Diaz’s *Norte, the End of History* (2013).<sup>41</sup> Thus, slowness serves not simply as a stylistic affectation but as a tool for retraining audience perception and awareness.

While liberation theology embodies a well-intentioned gesture in support of independent Philippine filmmakers preyed upon by an exploitative, predatory studio system, its supposed role as a revolutionary break from the past demands critical skepticism given the more complex interrelations between liberation theology, slow cinema, and digital cinema. By historicizing liberation theology beyond the immediate contexts of Diaz’s career in these past two decades, a more thorough and politically complex history thus emerges. Slow cinema can never only be understood in straightforward binaries against Hollywood, against analog, and against the old, but must always be conceived in dialogue with a longer scope and larger geographical space of film theory.

**Miguel Penabella** is a PhD candidate in Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Santa Barbara. His research examines conspiracy, spectrality, and melancholia as theoretical frameworks for examining historical revisionism and questions of national cinema in the Philippines. He is also interested in theorizations of cinematic temporality and slowness. He is a member of the Media Fields editorial collective, where he serves as coordinating editor.

Endnotes

- 1 William Brown, for instance, takes this technologically determinist view, arguing that Diaz is “technologically enabled [to adopt an aesthetic of slowness] by digital film-making equipment.” Likewise, Matthew Flanagan contends that digital technology both “altered montage relations by increasing the capacity for duration” and “grants independence” to filmmakers by way of this inexpensive equipment. See William Brown, “*Melancholia*: The Long, Slow Cinema of Lav Diaz,” in *Slow Cinema*, ed. Tiago de Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 114; Matthew Flanagan, “Slow Cinema: Temporality and Style in Contemporary Art and Experimental Film” (PhD thesis, University of Exeter, 2012), 185.
- 2 Tilman Baumgärtel, “Digital is liberation theology,” in *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*, ed. Tilman Baumgärtel (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012), 176–77.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 *Century of Birthing*, directed by Lav Diaz (Philippines: Sine Olivia, 2011), film.
- 5 Michael Guarneri, “Long Story Long: An Introduction to Lav Diaz’s ‘Free Cinema,’” *MUBI Notebook*, October 8, 2016, <https://mubi.com/notebook/posts/long-story-long-an-introduction-to-lav-diaz-s-free-cinema>
- 6 Nadin Mai, “Lav Diaz: Slow Burn,” *Guernica*, January 15, 2016, <https://www.guernicamag.com/slow-burn/>; Michael Guarneri, “The Burden of History. A Conversation with Lav Diaz,” *La Furia Umana*, August 8, 2014, <http://www.lafuriaumana.it/?id=243>
- 7 Guarneri, “Burden of History.”
- 8 Mai.
- 9 Baumgärtel, 175.
- 10 *Florentina Hubaldo, CTE*, directed by Lav Diaz (Philippines: Sine Olivia, 2012), film.
- 11 Guarneri “Long Story Long.”
- 12 Baumgärtel, 174. In terming a “Malay” conception of temporality, Diaz contrasts this with the arrival of Spanish colonizers in the Philippines, who introduced quantifiable, productive time in the form of calendric and clock time governed by capitalist productivity, in which missionaries dictated the start of oration at six o’clock and work at seven.
- 13 Flanagan, 17.
- 14 Guarneri, “Long Story Long.”
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Michael Guarneri, “Everyday Struggle, Struggle Every Day: Lav Diaz Rebolusyonaryo,” in *Laying Down In A World Of Tempest: Lav Diaz*, ed. Nicola Mazzanti, Paul Dujardin, and Pieter-Paul Mortier (Brussels: CINEMATEK, 2015), 73.
- 17 *Florentina Hubaldo, CTE*.
- 18 Masha Salazkina, “Moscow-Rome-Havana: A Film-Theory Road Map,” *October* 139 (2012): 98.
- 19 Guarneri, “Everyday Struggle,” 74.
- 20 Ibid.
- 21 Guarneri, “Long Story Long.”
- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Teshome Gabriel, *Third Cinema in the Third World: The Aesthetics of Liberation* (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1979), xi.
- 24 Ibid.
- 25 Antonio D. Sison, *Screening Schillebeeckx: Theology and Third Cinema in Dialogue* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 150.
- 26 André Bazin, *What Is Cinema? Vol. II*, trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 16.
- 27 Ibid., 21.
- 28 Bert Cardullo and André Bazin, “Cinema and Theology: The Case of Heaven Over the Marshes,” *Journal of Religion & Film* 6, no. 2 (2002): 6.
- 29 Antonio D. Sison, *World Cinema, Theology and the Human: Humanity in Deep Focus* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 6.
- 30 Bazin, 16.
- 31 Ibid., 20.
- 32 Lav Diaz, “Our Death, In Memoriam,” in *Laying Down In A World Of Tempest: Lav Diaz*, ed. Nicola Mazzanti, Paul Dujardin, and Pieter-Paul Mortier (Brussels: CINEMATEK, 2015), 42.
- 33 André Gaudreault and Philippe Marion, *The End of Cinema? A Medium in Crisis in the Digital Age*, trans. Timothy Barnard (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 4.
- 34 Ibid., 3.
- 35 Philip Rosen, *Change Mummified: Cinema, Historicity, Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), 309.
- 36 Flanagan, 209.
- 37 Rosen, 309–10; Gaudreault and Marion, 4.
- 38 Rosen, 304.
- 39 Bhaskar Sarkar, “Threnody for Modernity,” in *Tarkovsky*, ed. Nathan Dunne (London: Black Dog, 2008), 237.
- 40 Andrey Tarkovsky, *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*, trans. Kitty Hunter-Blair (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1987), 63.
- 41 Sison, *World Cinema*, 5.





# ANG PADANG BILANG PATMOS

Ilang Nilay Sa Apokaliptikong Bisyon ni Lav Diaz  
sa *Kagadanan sa Banwaan ning mga Engkanto*

Kristian Sendon Cordero

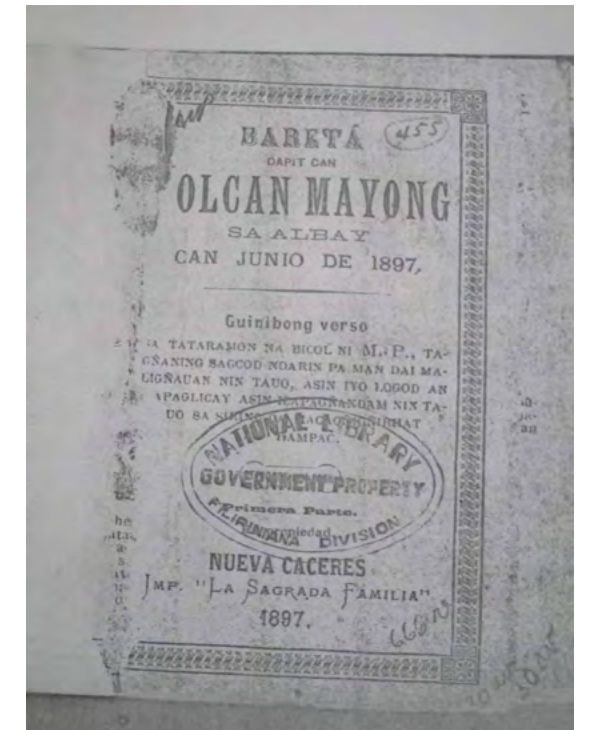
Katulad ng makatang si San Juan na ipinatapon ng isang Romanong emperador sa isang isla ng Patmos at mula roon maisusulat niya ang itinuturing na pinakahuling aklat ng Bagong Tipan, ang Aklat ng Apokalipsis o ang The Book of Revelations na palagiang ikinakawing sa isang pagbabagong mundo, isang apokaliptikong tunggalian ng lehiyon ng mga mabubuti at kampon ng mga halang, isang paglalagom, isang paghuhukom, na siyang aking pinanghahawakang imahen sa pagsubaybay ko sa naging buhay-pagbabalik ng makatang si Benjamin Agusan (ginampanan ni Roeder Camañag) sa Padang, isa sa mga pook na lubos na sinalanta ng bagyong Reming na sinabayan na pagragasa ng lahar mula sa tuktok ng Bulkang Mayon noong Nobyembre 30, 2006.

Isang taon pagkatapos ng trahedyang ipinalabas ang pelikulang *Kagadanan sa Banwaan ning mga Engkanto* (Death in the Land of Encantos, 2007) at bilang pelikula na malay sa paggamit ng karakter ng makata, kasama na ang karakter ng isang eskultor (si Catalina na ginampanan ni Angeli Bayani) at ng isang kababatang-tagahanga/kapwa-makata (si Teodoro na ginampanan ni Perry Dizon) umiinog ang *Kagadanan* sa anyo ng tula bilang aural na kasangkapang (voice over) gumagabay sa panood ng mala-epikong obra ni Diaz: ang tinig ng persona o ng bida na pumapailalim at nagtatahi sa masalimuot na naratibong ito ni Diaz. Ang sentimental na mga tula ni Agusan/Diaz ang naging gabay ko sa mala-Danteng paglalakbay sa purgatoryong itong binuksan ni Diaz na pinanahanan ng mga pamilyar na mga mukha, ng mga tinig na magbabakasakaling magsalita sa wikang Tagalog/Filipino sakaling iharap ang kamera, sa pagnanasa o sa pakiramdam na higit na mauunawaan ang sariling lungkot, ang bigat ng luksa, ang naliligaw na mga ligalig ng buong bayan kung papaloob sa isa pang wika madalas mapanood lamang sa mga pelikula at telenobelang mula Manila.

Sa nilay ko, kinakasangkapan ng pelikula ang ganitong pagpapakilala sa pangunahing panauhan ni Agusan bilang makatang tagaloob-at-labas, upang pagtambisin o kung hindi man tumbasan ang prosa ng salaysay ng mga mismong kalahok o tagaloob silang mga saksi sa mismong trahedyang kanilang inaalala o isinusumbong sa harapan ng kamera, silang mga kinapanayam at panaka-nakang lalabas bilang kausap mismo ng mamemelikulang si Diaz at ng kaniyang production team. Sa ganitong pagtatagpo ng tula at buhay ni Agusan at ng iba pang “fictional” na tauhan, kasama na ang kapre, at ang mga tagapagsalaysay ng mga kinapanayam at ilinahok sa pelikulang ito at binanggit ang mga pangalan bilang mga interviewee—sina Benjamin B. Arienda Jr., Angelita Kelley, Raul Banares, Rodolfo Miranda, Megs Ilaguyo, Rosemarie Dino na hindi ilalahok o nilahok bilang bahagi ng *cast*—maaari nating matukoy kung paano nahahati o napag-iiba ang matatagurian kung sino ang hindi nakikita, bagaman maaaring marinig, o ipinarinig sa atin ang kanilang mga salaysay, mga sumbong at hinaing sa gobyerno, ang kawalang ng ayuda, na hindi ko maiwasang maramdamang maaaring sila ang maituturing kong mga engkantong nagpaparamdam sa atin sa *Kagadanan*; kasama silang hindi natin mapapangalanan, silang mga natabunan, silang

Previous page: A photo of Mayon by JM Magdasoc.  
All images courtesy of author

(The 1897 eruption of Mayon Volcano almost wiped out the town of Sto. Domingo) by Mariano Perfecto (MP, BARETA DAPIT CAN VOLCAN MAYONG SA ALBAY CAN JUNIO DE 1897, IMP. “LA SAGRADA FAMILIA”). One of the first literatures on Mayon Volcano



Cover of *Labi: Mga Tula* (2013). Most of the poems here were written after Typhoon Reming hit the region in 2006. Bagyo at Vulkan are the overarching themes of this collection



mga inagos, ngunit alam nating nasa mismong lugar kung saan nangyari ang shooting ng *Kagadanan*, silang mga naroroon sa malawak na parang ng delubyo, sa mga bangin at pampang ng pung-aw, sa ilalim ng mga punong nabungkal ang mga ugat at nalagas ang mga dahong, tila mga kalansay na sinasalamin marahil kung ano ang nasa ilalim, ang mga patay na magiging mga labi, na kalauna'y magiging mga alaala, silang hindi pa man nakuha at o hindi na ganap pang makukuha ay naririyang na't nagpaparamdam sa pelikulang *Kagadanan* at ngayo'y nagpaparamdam sa akin sa pamamagitan ng links na pinadala sa akin ni Patrick Campos at pinananood, paputol-putol, habang mula sa kung nasaan ako, ang isang kapit-bahay namin ay nilagyan na ng tarapaulin na pula ng lokal na gobyerno at dito nakasulat ang house lockdown. *Barwal lumabas. Barwal rin ang mga palabas.* Kailangang tulad ng mga batas ng tugma at sukat, kailangang sumunod upang mapanatili ang kaayusan at huwag maging pasaway.

Sa panahong ito ng pandemya at ng militaristikong panuntunan ng gobyerno, pinanood ko ang *Kagadanan* ng may bigat sa dibdib at ilang gabing tila pinupulikat ang aking ulirat, sapagkat bukod sa kung anumang nasabi na, pinatutuloy ako ng

pelikula sa kung ano ang sa palagay ko'y hindi nasabi, ang hindi nakuha, ang hindi naroroon, na siyang bukal ng apokaliptikong bisyong hinahanap ko sa obrang ito. Sa pamamagitan ng ganitong interbensyon ni Diaz bilang mamemelikula at ako bilang isang makata at mamemelikula rin mula sa Bikol, ang pangunahing pook na pinangyarihan ng *Kagadanan*, nais kong maghandong ng ilang nilay tungkol sa poetika ng tula at ng pelikula na siya ring aking iniaangkop sa aking mga gawain bilang isang manunulat mula sa Bikol, ang aking Patmos, ang aking Padang, na higit ngayong pinaliliwanag ng masalimuot na apokaliptikong bisyon ni Diaz na linulubos kong maramdaman sa mga panahong ng mga lockdown at quarantine.

Sa paghahanap ng apokaliptikong bisyon nais kong makisangkot sa pagbasa ng *Kagadanan* upang isulong ang *buhay* nito bilang isang likha-sining na nililok tulad ng mga bato ni Catalina na kaniyang hinubog tungo sa isang bagong lalang upang ang pinsala'y masalat tulad ng mga pilat, markahan, sakupin ang bahagi ng Mayon, ng bulkan bilang kaniyang materyal, bilang lunsaran. Narito ang isang tulang hinugot ko mula sa karanasan ng Reming noong 2006:

Inaamin kong sa panahon ng tag-ulan ko nakuha ang sugat. Lumangoy ako sa magkahalong burak at baha na parang suka ng isang dambuhala. Sana'y nakuha kong lunurin ang takot— ang mga uod ng niyog na muling kinakain ang aking mga pilat. At dahil hindi itong tagtuyot ang gamot sa isinarang pandama, lalong pinamamanhid araw ang natitirang bahagi ng utak.

Maaari bang manglanggas sa panahong unti-unting nalalagas ang mga natitirang dahong pilit na kumakapit sa sangang kalansay— habang dahan-dahang hinahawi ng hangin ang mga buhangin upang ipakita ang mga nakakubling bangkay na ngayon ay payapang ginagawang pataba ng lupa?

Malamang dahil sa tagtuyot ay mahimok na bumisita ang mga turista upang malula sa utog na utong ng bulkan at tingnan ang lamat ng nakaraang pinsala. Tiyak kong may ilang darating na parang mga uwak at pagpipiyestahan ang aming sugat. Maaaring bumili sila ng ilang gamit na maiuwi: sundang, bag na abaka, rosaryong yari sa buskay o larawang kuha sa bulkan. Sa isang banda, marahil may isang hindi na hihingiing iuwi pa ang sukli: 'Abuloy ko na yan 'Ne...', sabay hawak sa kamay ng tinderang bata at tiklop ng kanyang mata na parang dalagang pasaklot na hinangin ang suot na palda. Samantalang ang ilan sa kanila ay maaaring magkatuwaang maghanap ng mga batong gagawing anting-anting, hihimas-himasin at uusisain kung pwedeng gawing panghilod o ilagay sa akwaryum, na sa kalauna'y maaaring ipukol na lamang ito sa kawalan habang nasa biyahe, ibinubulong: 'Tabi-tabi po...'<sup>1</sup>



Diaz with one of his brothers, taken in January 1973. Courtesy of Lav Diaz



Photo of Mayon Volcano and Pugot in Legazpi City, a World War II Memorial in honor of the Filipino soldiers who died during the war. Image from Mike Price's collection, Michigan, USA

Sa buong pelikula ng *Kagadanan*, tumatak sa akin ang hindi pagpapakita ng bulkan, bilang ang pangunahing rebelasyon ng pelikula ni Diaz. Ang hindi nagpapakitang ito, dahil sa nalalambungan ito ng mga makakapal na ulap na mararamdaman lamang sa matalas na tunog ng hangin sa paligid, tanda na katatapos pa lamang ng unos. Hanging humahalo sa mga testimonya, mga nanunumbat, nang-uusig, na mga interviewee na hindi ko rin makilala kung sino sa kanila ang sino, silang muling isinasalaysay ang kanilang danas, kung paano sila nakaligtas at kung sinu-sino ang hindi nakaligtas o ang mga tauhang maaaring ginabayan ng konsepto o iskrip ni Diaz habang pinag-uusapan ang isang akda ni Tolstoy o isinusumpa ang bulkan. Ang Mayong na tinutukoy ni Catalina na matris ng sigalot, ang dahilan ng kaniyang poot na naririyang lamang at nalalambungan, na tila nahihiya o higit na nagpapakahiwaga ngunit alam natin talagang wala namang pakialam, walang malay, na naririyang.

Kung gayon, ang mga talinhaga o metapora kabilang ang buong anyo ng anumang wika ng tao, ang mga elehiya at tagulaylay at ang buong aparato ng kaniyang sining o artikulasyon, ang poetika at politika nito ay lagi't laging mahuhulog sa paghuhuwad o pagagagad sa kalikasan, sa kaniyang *nagwarwalang anuman*. May ilang matandang paniniwala sa Albay na nagsasabing mula sa *mayo* sa wala, ang pangalan ng bulkan, *mayong pangaran. Walang pangalan.* Taliwas ito sa popular na kuwento na nagmula ang pangalang Mayon sa *Daragang Magayon* o sa dalagang inililing matapos siyang tamaan ng isang ligaw na palaso sa isang digmang

Ang poetika at politika nito ay lagi't laging mahuhulog sa paghuhuwad o pagagagad sa kalikasan, sa kaniyang *nagwarwalang anuman*.

*maglalagay sa kaniya sa tabimik.* Sa unang pagpapaliwanag gusto kong maniwala, sa kawalang pangalan, na may dagdag na paniniwala o babala na hindi maaaring pangalanan sapagkat ang pagpapangalan sa bulkan ay mangangahulugan ng huling paghuhukom, ng isang apokalipsis, na magiging dahilan ng ganap na pagsabog at pagkawak nito, at mula rito ang pagkasira ng buong sansinukob. Sa kawalan ng pangalan sa *mayo* (kawalan) ang kaniyang totoong *gayon* (ringal). Para sa akin, may sinasabi ito sa maaaring maging poetika ng paglikha, isang rebelasyon ang kawalan. Lahat maging ang *Kagadanan* ay pagbabakasakali lamang na masagad ang kahulugan ng ating mga karanasan ng ating mga buhay na umiinog ayon sa kung ano ang likas sa ating mga pagtakas at paglikas.

Maging ang mga salaysay o mga sinasabing mga sabi-sabi tungkol sa mamang makikiinum at tinanggihan kahit isang baso at mula rito ang ganting-tubig ng langit, ang parusa ng kawalang-kabutihang loob, ang pagiging Sodom at Gomora





Scenes from Lav Diaz's *Kagadanan sa Banwaan ning mga Engkanto* (Sine Olivia Pilipinas, 2007). Screenshot by author

ng Padang. Sa mga kuwentong isinalaysay ng mga interviewee kasama na ang ugnayang nagbibigkis sa ama sa kaniyang pamilya ay mga pagtatangka nating bumuo ng salaysay at ng saysay upang bigyang katuturan ang nagaganap, na palayo nang palayo sa ating hinagap. Kung kaya sa imahinasyon, ng mga posibilidad, ng hinala at mga himala, sinasaling natin ang mga akala, nananahan tayo sa kawalang katiyakan, *sa tagilid na daga*, upang mula rito'y lumikha ng mga tula at pelikulang katulad ng *Kagadanan*.

Ika nga ni John Berger, sa kaniyang sanaysay na *The White Bird* (1985), “Nature is energy and struggle. It is what exists without any promise. If it can be thought of by man as an arena, a setting, it has to be thought of as one which lends itself as much as evil as to good. Its energy is fearsomely indifferent. The first necessity of life is shelter. Shelter against nature. The first prayer is prayer for protection. The first sign of life is pain. If the Creation was purposeful, its purpose is a hidden one which can only be discovered intangibly within signs, never by the evidence of what happens.”<sup>2</sup> Kung gayon, anong puwang ng mga guwang na iniwan ng *Kagadanan*, ng kamatayan sa harapan ng ating mga tula, awit, at kuwento, ng mga pelikula at palabas?

Sa isang awiting Bikolnon, sinasabi ng mang-aawit na, *marasa pa, mas marbay na mapara*, kung hindi man lamang mamahalin, mas mabuti pa ang *mapara sa kinaban*, ang mabura, ang maglaho. Hindi kamatayan ang sinasabing magiging katumbas nang hindi pagtugon sa pag-ibig, kundi ang paglaho, kundi ang pagkabura, katulad sa kung paano nalalambungan ang bulkan sa buong pelikula ng *Kagadanan*. Sa ganitong *pagkapara*, sa ganitong hindi nakikita/pagpapakita, umiinog, sa taya ko, ang paniniwala ng mga Bikolnon sa tawong-lipod, na siyang maaaring itumbas sa salitang engkanto na partikular na sinusuong ng pelikulang ito ni Diaz, bagaman may sariling lulan ang salitang engkanto sa kung paano ito pumasok sa ating mga lokal na bokabularyo, at naging katumbas ng tawong-lipod. Tawo, o tao ang turing sa kanila ngunit *lipod*

*o nalilipodan*, may kung anong uri ng lambong, harang, demarkasyon, o muhon, na siyang namamagitan sa ating mga mortal at sa mga engkanto, sa ating mga buhay at sa kanilang mga patay, sa mga natabunan, sa mga naghuhukay.

Sa katunayan ilang araw pagkatapos ang Reming, napabalitang natabunan muli ang Kagsawa, ang binibisitang tourism site sa Daraga, labi ng pagsabog ng Mayon noong 1814. Sa ganoong uri ng balita, tinimbang namin ang abot ng pinsala sa pamamagitan ng ganoong mga bali-balita. Muling natabunan ang dati nang natabunan, muling nagbalik ang ruta ng mga matandang ilog na pinatayuan ng mga gusali at bahay ng mga tao at ngayo'y muling binawi ng kalikasan.

Sa isang banda, anong ibig sabihin ng ating mga pagdalaw sa Kagsawa? Bakit natin dinadalaw ang mga labing katulad nito, ano ang estetika ng guho, ang poetika ng mga bato't nabubulok, na siya rin naman sigurong maaaring itanong natin sa panonood ng pelikula ni Diaz? Sa parehong paraan na patuloy nating itinuturo ang Alamat ni Daragang Magayon na inaangkop naman sa mga klasiko at kontemporaryong tula at kuwentong Bikolnon nina Mariano Perfecto (“Bareta Dapit Can Sa Volcan Mayong sa Albay kan Junio 1897,” “Guinibong Berson sa Tataramon na Bicol ni Mariano Perfecto Tanganing Sacgod Noarin Pa Man Dai Malignuan nin Tauo sa Siring Na macagnigrihar na Hampac”), Merlinda Bobis (“Cantanda ni Daragang Magayon”), ni Abdon Balde, Jr. (tingnan ang kaniyang koleksyon ng mga kuwento, *Mayong*) at ni Raffi Banzuela (tingnan ang kaniyang koleksyon ng mga rawit-dawit o tula na *Dios Makina*). Artsibo ba ang sining na katulad ng matandang kahulugan ng salitang artsibo, taglay nito ang lunas, at ang lason sa ating kamalayan at gunita, may lamat ang ating mga alamat.

Sa tulang “Ibalon” ni Fray Bernardino Melendreras, na orihinal na nakasulat sa wikang Espanol at kinikilala nang marami bilang “epikong Bikolnon,” makikita ang unang paggamit sa tawong-lipod sa isang akdang pampanitikan bilang pantukoy sa mga nilalalang na bagong likas mula sa Botavara at piniling manahan sa tinuturing na kasalukuyang

## Sa *Kagadanan*, ang kakilala, ang iniibig, ang sinisinta ay mga bangkay na hinuhukay ayon sa lalim ng lungkot at pagasa.

rehiyong Bikol. Sila ang mga bayaning sina Baltog, Bantong at Handyong, mga *tawong-ugis*, o mapuputi, na nagmula sa rasa ng mga tawong-lipod, at sa kanilang pamamahala at pananamantala, nangyari ang bagong panahon, ang sibilisasyon sa magiging Kabikolan katulad sa kung paano ipinakilala ang Kristianismo. Sinupil ng Trinidad ng mga tawong-lipod ang mga halimaw, ang angkan ni Oryol, sina Rabot, ang Tandayag, ang ponong, ang magindara, ang mga may pakpak na pating at kalabaw, ang di kabilang, ang maaari nating ituring na mga engkantong dating nananahan sa ating rehiyon na sa tulang ito ni Melendreras ay naging mga kalaban ng mga tawong-lipod. Hindi ba't ginagawang lehitimo lamang ng tulang ito ang pananakop ng mga tawong-lipod sa mga dating nananahan sa Ibalon? Ang mga Europeo bilang ang mga tawong-lipod at ang mga halimaw ang mga katutubong dating nananahan, ang mga barbaro? Anong uri ng pandarahas ang nakapaloob maging sa anyo at paraan ng ating mga kasalukuyang pagtula at pamemelikula tulad ng *Kagadanan*?

Sa pelikulang *Kagadanan*, nagiging lambong ang lupa, ang makakapal na buhangin at batong lumukob sa buong banwa, kung kaya't nananatili ang paghuhukay sa mga labi nilang mga nalalabi, naghahanap, naghahintay ang mga buhay na kaanak sa kanilang mga bangkay. Tulad ng lupa na maaaring maging pag-aari, nagiging pag-aari ng mga nakaligtas ang kanilang mga bangkay. Hinahanap ito, hanggang sa tuluyang sumuko o ipaubaya na lamang at tanggapin ang kanilang paglaho, ang kanilang pagkabura. Sa kalauna'y matitigil ang mga pag-aalala't pagkabalisa, mapapayapa ang mga buhay at ang mga patay ay tatawagin na lamang bilang mga *namayapa*. May mga hindi mabibilang sa kanila, may mga ililingid, ihihiwalay maging sa kamatayan, dahil may hindi mga matatahimik, mga ligaw na kaluluwang hindi bibitaw, mananatiling magmumulto, magsasaengkanto sila sa ating mga kuwento, na maaaring pagmulan ng mga bagong kuwentong-bayan o kung hindi man isang pelikula kinalauna'y magiging sityo ng katatakutan. Sa Padang, pagkatapos ng Reming, sinasabing kailangang bumusina ang mga magdaraang sasakyan, busina ang katapat sa nagpapakitang mga multo upang huwag itong manakot o maggimbala sa ating kaayusan habang sa isang natuyo't malawak na bangin, isang tiyak na daanan ng kung anupang materyales ang magmumula sa Mayon, patuloy ang makina sa pagtibag at pagpino ng mga bato, isang quarrying site.

Sa *Kagadanan*, ang kakilala, ang iniibig, ang sinisinta ay mga bangkay na hinuhukay ayon sa lalim ng lungkot at pag-asa. Nagiging lipod ng mga bangkay ang lupang nakalambong sa kanila, naging silang mga *lamang-lupa*, tulad ng kung paano nalalambungan ng mga ulap ang bulkan, isang *anyong lupa*. O kung papaniwalaan ang alamat, *nagsasaanyong lupa* tulad ng punso sa may puno, tulad ng bulkan na sa alamat ay isang puntod at sa libingang ito umusbong ang Mayon. Hindi kaya ito ang higit na sinasabi ng alamat, na hindi ito pagdakila sa kagandahan ng isang dalagang naging “collateral damage” sa isang giyera, kundi patotoo ito na ang buong mundo ay banwa ng mga engkanto, libingan ng mga tawong-lipod—isang malaking komposantong naninibasib. Laging may panganib at pagluluksa sa paanan ng bulkan, ito ang *tagilid na lupa*.

Sa naratibo ng bayan ng Buhi, inuugnay nila ang kanilang pagiging banwa sa pagkakalikas nila mula sa mapinsalang pagsabog ng bulkan. Silang mga nakabuhay o nakaligtas. Sa isa pang tula ng prayleng si Melendreras, hindi Daragang Magayon ang bulkan kundi isang maginoong mangingibig ni Tacay, ang nimpa ng lawa na hindi kailanman magagawang ibigin si Mayong, ang bulkan. Dahil sa ganitong pagtanggap sa inaalok na pag-ibig, magaganap ang pagsabog na sisira sa buong bayan ng Buhi, kabilang ang tacay ng lawa. May paniniwalang may isang bayan sa ilalim ng lawa ng Buhi na maaaring siyang naging kanlungan ni Tacay.

Sa Padang, nakatayo ngayon ang isang malaking krus na yari sa mga mismong batong nagmula sa Mayon, at may taunang ritwal ng paggunita sa nangyaring “trahedyo” na parehong tinitingnang parusa ng Diyos, o ang epekto ng pagbabago ng mundo, dahilan ng pag-init ng mga dagat at paglakas ng mga bagyo. O tulad ng pelikulang *Kagadanan*, sinasaklot tayo ng pangangailangang tumula o itula ang ganitong hindik, at lungkot, ang mga agam-agam, tulad sa kung paano nakita ni Juan ang kaniyang bisyon ng langit sa Patmos, pumapailalim tayo sa pusod ng ating karanasang hinahawan ng pelikulang *Kagadanan* ni Diaz na konkretong makikita sa tulang “Padang, Mon Amour” ni Felipe B. Arcos:

baybay baybay tubig gapo baybay baybay gapo  
baybay tubig gapo baybay gapo gapo baybay  
tubig tubig gapo baybay bangkay gapo tubig  
gapo baybay gapo baybay gapo baybay tubig  
gapo baybay baybay baybay<sup>3</sup>



Patuloy ang arkeyolohiya ng dalamhati tulad ng tula ni Arcos na siyang naging lunsaran ko ng aking tulang “Ang Uniberso Ayon Sa Lupa”:

Tao, bato, tao, bato, tao, bato, tao, bato  
 Tao, bato, abo, tao, bato, abo, tao, bato  
 Abo, tao, bato, tao, bato, abo, tao, bato  
 Abo, bato, tao, bato, tao, tao, tao, abo<sup>4</sup>

Marahang basahin ito na parang litanya, paulit-ulit tulad ng mga pangalan ng patay na binabanggit natin sa mga dasal na sa mga salitang ito’y may pagsupling ng liwanag sa mga puwang at guwang at nananatili ang mga sining ng tula, o ng pelikula bilang saksing kaloob ng tao sa hukuman ng kaniyang karanasan gaano man ito kasalimuot at nakagigimbal na halos ikapatid ng ating mga hininga. Patuloy na maghuhukay ang tao ng kaniyang sariling mga kahulugan katulad sa kung paano isinisilid ni Diaz ang isang parabula ng ating karanasang patuloy na manahan sa singsing ng apoy, sa mata ng bagyo. Ngunit ang pelikula ay metapora lamang, ang bulkan na pangalan ay kasangkapan upang ibulid tayo sa higit na rimarim at sindak ng ating mga pagkatao, sa sala-salabid ng naratibo ng mundo.

Bilang isang pelikula, ginagampanan para sa akin ni Diaz ang paglalagat ng mga ganitong bisyong nakasandig sa apokalisipis, ngunit hindi bilang isang maliwanag na rebelasyon kundi isang paghuhukom, isang parousia, isang pagpapasya. Sa katunayan, sa loob ng siyam na oras ang pelikulang *Kagadanan* ni Diaz ay tila pagpapaloob sa karanasan ng eklipse, ang kaniyang kamera bilang araw na panandaliang tumatabing, *lumilipod*, panadaliang *nagpapara*, sa buwan na siyang ang mga engkanto, na siyang banwa, na siyang bulkan, na siyang hukom.



*Kagadanan sa Banwaan ning mga Engkanto*

Sa matandang wikang Bikol, ang hukom na naging kahulugan na ngayon ng “huwes” o “juez” ay nangangahulugan ding “probinsya” o “lalawigan,” o “sakop” o “ang nasasakupan”; ito rin ang kahulugan ng huling araw/sandali ng pagpaparusa, na mangyayari ang ganap na pagkakatag ng bayan ng Diyos, ang Herusalem laban sa Babilonya, magluluwal ang babae ng isang sanggol na magwawakas sa rehimen ng dragon. Ito ang magiging panahon ng mga panahon ayon sa makata ng Patmos. May pag-asa’t katuparan ngunit sa *Kagadanan*, madilim, madagim ang daan pa-Padang na hinawan ni Diaz: pinatatahimik ang makata ng dahas, ang kaniyang dila’y minamanhid, ang kaniyang katawa’y nagiging sityo ng karahasan dahil tulad ng mga buhay nina Benjamin, Catalina at Agusan, na pinabubuklod ng kanilang marahas na musa at personal na kasaysayan, laging mapanglaw ang daan ng sining, at eternal ang kanilang purgatoryo ng mga anino ng mga anino, at ito lamang ang nagpapatotoo sa ngayon, in saecula saecolorum, sa Padang man ito o sa Patmos.

**Kristian Sendon Cordero** is a poet, translator, fictionist, and filmmaker from the Bikol region. His books include *Kulto ni Santiago* (2019), fiction in Bikol and Filipino, where one story he adapted to a screenplay won at the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature, and *Bukal sa Loob, Loob ng Bukal* (2021), a book of poems by Bikolano poets Luis Cabalquinto, Juan Rafael Belgica, Raffi Banzuela, and Gode Calleja, which won the first Rolando Tinio Prize for Translation. He wrote, directed, and co-produced *Hinulid* (2016), the first film of Nora Aunor in her mother tongue, Bikol-Rinconada. Cordero is the deputy director of the Ateneo de Naga University Press and runs the independent bookshop and art hub Savage Mind in Naga City.

#### Endnotes

- 1 Kristian Sendon Cordero, “Pagsalat sa Pilat” sa *Labi: Mga Tula* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013).
- 2 John Berger, “The White Bird,” sa *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1985), 7.
- 3 Felipe B. Arcos, “Padang, Mon Amour” sa *Sagurong: 100 na Kontemporaryong Rawitdawit sa Manlailain na Tataramon Bikol*, pinamatnugutan nina Paz Verdades M. Santos at Kristian Sendon Cordero para sa De La Salle University Centennial Series (Quezon City: Vibal Publishing, 2011).
- 4 Kristian Sendon Cordero, “Ang Uniberso ayon sa Lupa” sa *Labi: Mga Tula* (Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2013).

# To Speak of a Wasteland

Pujita Guha





## Introduction

My worthy friend, gray are all theories.

And green alone is Life's golden tree.

—Goethe

Goethe's quote, from *Faust*, lays bare a binary that colors have come to mediate in the Western enlightenment episteme.<sup>1</sup> Grey, the color of rationality, balance, and judgement, is always antithetical to the organic or vitalistic color of life, green. Moreover, as Jeffrey Cohen notes, much modern thought enthrones green and blue as the go-to colors to represent natural spaces: deep bright hues that evoke pristine and untouched environments.<sup>2</sup> Such untouched landscapes have been the visual and cultural mainstays of western environmentalism, often eliding real histories (and complicities) in the geopolitics of resource extraction. If blue and green represent, respectively, the sublime oceans and pastoral landscapes which obsess environmentalism—environments that were never quite so pristine—I turn to grey to think through how we live in and inherit our damaged, disturbed, and disaster-ridden worlds.

To rephrase in Goethe's terms, I want to ask how grey might become the color of organic vitality, particularly in the context of the Global South (which has its own ecological precarities and predicaments). How do we think of greyness not in opposition to green and the organic vitality it represents, but as the very site to think of life and its emergence in our anthropocenic present(s)? In this short piece, I turn to Lav Diaz's *Kagadanan sa banwaan ning mga engkanto* (*Death in the Land of Encantos*, 2007; henceforth *Encantos*) to ask these questions of greyness.

*Encantos* is set in Bicol, Philippines, right after twin disasters ravaged it: the volcanic eruption of Mount Mayon and the Typhoon Reming.<sup>3</sup> The film revolves primarily around Benjamin "Hamin" Agusan (Roder Camanag), a poet-artist persecuted for his beliefs, who returns to his now ravaged hometown in order to recover the body of his (past?) lover.

But in the course of the film, Hamin experiences his own slow dissolution: a gradual despondency for a Bicol he cannot identify with anymore, which finally leads to an entropic descent into madness. Vivid recollections of his past gnaw away at him—thoughts of his mother's descent into schizophrenia, his father's lonely death, his own failing as a son and as a friend—along with the specters of his failed activist career and police

torture. This culminates with Hamin walking and later running around Bicol's lahar-filled landscape,<sup>4</sup> finally curling up like a foetus until he almost dissolves into the muddy mixture. The entire film thus maps Hamin's traumatized subjectivity onto his relationship with the greying lahar-laden environment: a crisis-ridden subjectivity that tries to adapt to its turbulent, wasted milieu, until it merges and collapses into it completely.

## I.

For Hamin—who constantly recollects the verdant, pastoral Bicol he left behind—the present feels disorienting. What remains is a landscape devastated, burnt all the way down. Bicol in *Encantos* evokes the etymological roots of waste in Latin: *vastus*—the unattended and uninhabited, an empty source point.<sup>5</sup> Crucial to Hamin's experience of the wasteland is its own temporal duality. The lahar landscape embodies both senses of the apocalyptic, having experienced the worst historical traumas, but also the unformed, undetermined origin from which the world sprung forth. As Sebastian Franklin

Opposite page: Hamin curls up on the lahar banks, from Lav Diaz's *Death in the Land of the Encantos* (Sine Olivia Pilipinas, 2007). All screengrabs by author

Figure 2. Hamin and Teodoro by the disheveled landscape



Diaz's long wide frames present this world of entropic, littered materiality with a matter-of-factness—a bureaucratic frigidity that encapsulates land as an abattoir where bodies, objects, whither, rot, and decimate away.



Figure 3. Landscapes from *Encantos*

argues, it is the formless realm that exists before any meaning-making or symbolic exchange—unmarked, uninhabited, and empty.<sup>6</sup> And yet traces of the past remain in the way Diaz presents the post-disaster reality of Bicol. Diaz's Bicol is thus both empty—a seemingly unmarked void—but also littered with tattered objects that speak of a human past, evidence as if of a buried civilization.

As Hamin ambles around, we see the lahar landscape dotted with heavy boulders and a motley of unclaimed items like broken refrigerators, pedestal fans, and baskets. Even the trees look disheveled; the thatched huts reduced to their bare bones. The unmarked emptiness of this wasteland in *Encantos*—its seeming existence both before and beyond historical time—suffuses the film's slowly unfurling landscape. Even the sea in Bicol appears ravaged: darkened by thick grey clouds that hover above the high embankments of lahar far behind in the frame; the washed out, low-lying beach strewn with heavy boulders.

Diaz's long wide frames present this world of entropic, littered materiality with a matter-of-factness—a bureaucratic frigidity that encapsulates land as an abattoir where bodies, objects, whither, rot, and decimate away. As Hamin keeps remarking, Bicol's lahar landscape constantly reminds him of buildings and people that once stood in these now unmarked spaces, which now lay buried under the lahar, fusing with lumps of mud and metal shard. An unmarkedness, an inability to distinguish between landscapes, bodies, and objects, permeates the film. Each object, surface, or contour is barely distinguishable from another, their edges bleeding together. If Lav Diaz's filmography is rife with concerns on the monochromatic image—with its emphasis on stark black and white—*Encantos*' greying, unmarked landscape shapes the film's textural quality, too. Bicol's textural greyness, visualized as an unmarked, low contrast image is doubled, moreover, by the film's poor image quality—the entropic, disheveled landscape engulfed by the noisy image of low-resolution digital video. The film opens with kinetic, frizzy grains enveloping the image on our screens—the sight of thick clouds occluding faraway Mount Mayon—to the sound of a thin, trickling stream which melds with/into the low-resolution video's own machinic hum. It is as if the digital image has weathered in places, bleeding



into and fusing with the landscape it seeks to capture. *Encantos'* digital image then appears to melt away: becoming one with, indiscernible from, the greying landscape itself.

This indistinctiveness marks Hamin's subjective dissolution as well. He ceaselessly recollects his traumatic past, even when his gaze is on the disconcerting present before him. While wastelands encourage us to imagine a tabula rasa—ends that look like new beginnings—the impossibility of actually achieving this transformation—starting afresh, anew—drives Hamin to his desolate end. Overcome by his hallucinations and delusions of persecution, half-naked, his jeans rolled up, Hamin runs helter-skelter, howling and screaming across the vast lahar embankments. He circles around a spot and finally curls on the muddy floor. As he bends inwards, the camera frames him foetalized, swallowed by the grey surrounding landscape. What remains for us is a figure that almost fuses into the infinite greyness of lahar as it meets the ash-laden haze of the skies.

## II.

The American land artist Robert Smithson, concluding his essay "A Tour of the Monuments of Passaic, New Jersey," wrote that one can imagine the irreversibility of eternity only by thinking of the entropic nature of the color grey.<sup>7</sup> He suggested an experiment: take a sandbox with white sand in one half and black in the other, run your hand clockwise through the black and white sands until they mix, then repeat it counter-clockwise. As Smithson pointed out, the second move does not immaculately restore the original white-and-black division but increases the greyness of the mix. It leads to the dissolution of distinct entities into an inseparable acephalous entity, black and white sand particles becoming indistinguishable from each other. Counter-intuitively, the system's greater degree of disorder increases its degree of uniformity.<sup>8</sup> Smithson's sandbox is entropy, embodied in the continuous becoming of the color grey. Smithson's experiment endows grey with a material quality—entropy—while drawing us away from the color's dominant cultural associations with melancholia and mourning. Smithson speaks of grey as a color in becoming; materially composed of other rather divergent colors. What comes of this miscegenation is an ever-deadening medium, a color without much hue or saturation, bereft of life as it were.

I cite Smithson here for several reasons. He allows us to read *Encantos'* use of grey as a material signifier of entropy: of the mixing of volcanic ash and mud, ash and haze, and the flattening out of spatial markers and orientations in this turbulent milieu. In the film, moreover, entropy characterizes both the greying landscape and the traumatized Hamin, who figuratively and effectively merges into the lahar. If grey has been often named the color of despondency and melancholy, *Encantos* rephrases grey as a material quality (of the lahar landscape) via the cultural poetics of entropy: it is a color

always in process, coming into being irreversibly.

Hamin and Smithson remind us that the material becoming of greyness also gets encoded into our gestures and bodily habits. To me, Hamin's circling of the lahar banks, the intermixing of his body and lahar, mimics the circulatory movement across black and white sands through which Smithson's greyness emerges—continuously dissolving the differences of hue in that process.<sup>9</sup> Between Hamin and Smithson's annular movements, one can arrive at a lived experience of greyness and entropy. Greyness rebels against the rational constructions of grids and maps, being forced into discipline and action. It implies an exit from such disciplining—a solipsistic loop whose end is but degeneracy and entropy.

Though in *Encantos*, we might begin by reading grey through an anthropocentric lens—as a color of melancholia and mourning—greyness here travels far beyond these limits to engage with materialistic questions of humans and their entanglement with built environments and landscape. Grey in *Encantos* points to the sheer geologic materiality of the earth, which remains in the aftermath of a volcanic eruption compounded by the typhoon. Grey marks both everything and nothing in the landscape. It points to the dissolution between boundaries (between volcanoes, tornadoes, and land), producing a vast unmarked landscape in its stead. If the history of European thought is one of the production of disciplines, epistemes, and categories—categorization, indexing, and the drawing of lines and boundaries as the basis of all knowledge forms—then greyness counters this propensity for separation and ordering. There is no color, shade, nor hue to extract (from); merely an entanglement to surrender to.

Western enlightenment poetics has always been predicated on a desire to extract the figure from the ground, separate man from the milieu that surrounds him.<sup>10</sup> Extraction is not only material (through conquest and pillage of resources) but also marks our cultural vocabulary—most noticeably the divide between the (human) figure from the ground (substrate). Extraction is invariably linked to the alienation of man from nature. Grey speaks of entanglements, an irrational cohabitation within our environments. Hamin intends to melt into the landscape, undoing the boundary between land and bodies, the figure and ground. Hamin's subjective, mental, and emotional dissolution is then folded into his intention to dissolve into the ground as it were—culminating Lav Diaz's exploration of grey as an entropic medium. In acting out his madness, Hamin produces a continuum or intimacy with the environment unimaginable in our rational schema of the world. Does this mean that only a certain degree of madness enables us to think of how we might inherit our disturbed landscapes in a damaged world?

Grey rescues us, therefore, from the romantic obsession of pure, fresh, absolute colors, reminding us that despite its fate,

grey does not vitiate the Earth's end.<sup>11</sup> To return to Goethe's duality of grey and green, if green has historically been the color of romantic purity and grey of reserved judgement, Diaz in *Encantos* presents grey as the site of entanglement of matter, landscape, and bodies. Grey is the color borne of material intimacy and engagement. Diaz also rescues grey from its purely symbolic function, deeming it the color of the processual mixing of elements, bodies, and color. Grey only signals the turning point in the day when owls, bats, mosquitoes, and the wind thrive, indifferent to our fits of melancholy. Grey is the color of organic vitality, of life in its material unfolding or becoming: but an organic vitality robbed off the pristine sheen of romanticism.

## Conclusion

Critiquing the rational systems of architecture, Smithson maintained that architects build systems that were "isolated, self-contained, [and] ahistorical" in a way.<sup>12</sup> They were closed systems that did not allow anything else to interfere or make their presence felt. Little was considered of a structure's environmental conditions, its extractive substrates, or waste-ridden aftermaths.

If portraits as an artform alienated figures from their grounds, then architecture tended to seal off structures from the environments in which they were built. To critique this stasis of architecture, Smithson poured 20 truckloads of mud on top of a woodshed until the shed's central beam cracked and the building collapsed under this humungous weight. Smithson's *Partially Buried Woodshed* (1970) showed entropy in action – it was both an entity rupturing under the weight of mud and an architectural structure ultimately weathered by time, reduced to sameness. The woodshed buried under mud denoted the process of transformation which people underwent when "abandoned to the forces of nature."<sup>13</sup>

For Diaz, the whole of Bicol is like the buried woodshed, which suffocates under the deadening weight of basalt and lahar deposits that leave it devastated. Ecological disasters then are entropic, their decay occurring beyond the grasp of our human scales. Grey indicates that entropy is not a single event, a rupture that disrupts or creates things anew. It is incremental and accretive, dislocating only but a little bit at every point, in every moment.<sup>14</sup> Hamin's final dissolution into the lahar is but one moment in a process that spans across the 8-hour length of *Encantos*, slowly dawning on us, while Smithson's salt-based entropic sculpture/earthwork *The Spiral Jetty* gradually dissolved over the course of many years. Dissolution thereby forces us to ask how we might think of ecological collapse in the first place.

It is not an event that creates a fundamental break from our pre-existing habits and gestures, but a slow decaying of once familiar things, an accumulation of precarities over time. The expansive lahar-laden land of Bicol allows Hamin to

Grey rescues us, therefore, from the romantic obsession of pure, fresh, absolute colors, reminding us that despite its fate, grey does not vitiate the Earth's end.

figure out and evoke a cosmos within a ravaged, unmarked land through endless performances of flânerie, derive, and detournement. For Hamin, this cosmic expansiveness proves truly inhuman: he is unable to reconcile with both losing his intimate history and grasping and making sense of his present. Hamin's engagement with lahar, then, fundamentally allows him to let go of the burden of grammar and order: to open up to the infinite, the entropic expanse subtending all of his and Bicol's histories.

For Hamin, there is no ideal to fall back upon, no resolution to be anchored to, only some peace to be made with entropy. If the entire moral universe of western enlightenment thought is predicated on anthropocentrism—centering man and his concerns; privileging his alienation (and self-serving superiority) from his milieu—then entropy, with its vast greying flatlands, opens onto scales beyond our own. It points to the violent force of matter that lies outside human governance—a matter we cannot control, master, and engineer into shape. It is purely matter that Hamin must and will merge into. What remains at the end of *Encantos* is an ever-intensifying formlessness, as greying flatlands and Hamin tend to merge into each other.

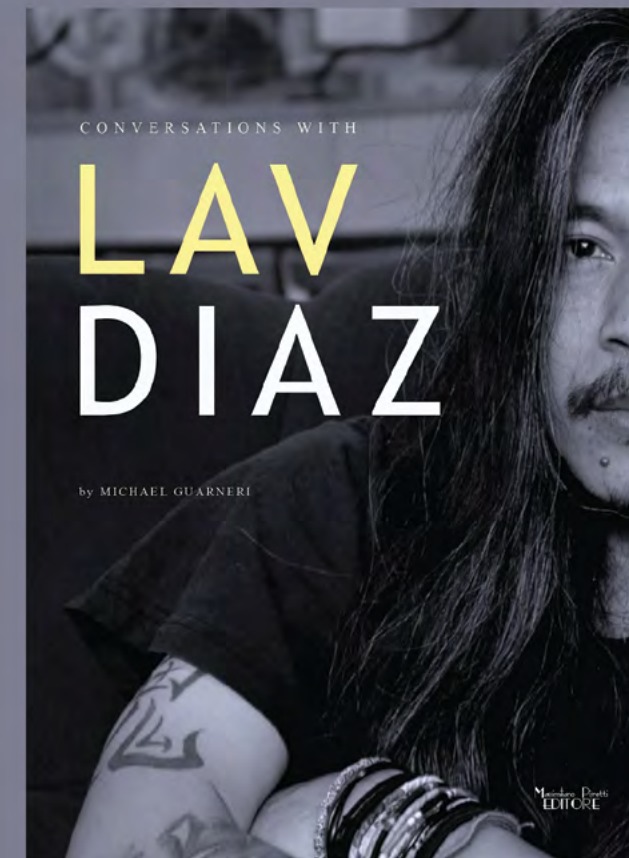
However, Hamin's own political predilections and the marginality and precarity experienced by Bicol and its inhabitants underscores that formlessness is not merely an aesthetic or formal condition; it is as much a political or epistemic framework. Sebastian Franklin reminds us that formlessness in western theory has been sought out as the abject that lies outside formalization, the excess that cannot be subsumed into formal symbolic structures.<sup>15</sup> The formless or the abject is the mad, the indeterminate subject (Hamin) or even the unmarked landscape: Bicol's lahar-covered abyss. And it is this non-formalized space that Diaz probes us to think with greyness, entropy, and dissolution. Greyness speaks to the excessive, the mad, and the indeterminate, but it also proffers an intimate materialist engagement with the matter immanent to our proliferating post-disaster landscapes.



**Pujita Guha** is a PhD Film and Media student and Chancellor's Fellow at the University of California, Santa Barbara. Her doctoral research probes the entanglement of environmental media, forest histories, and Southeast and South Asian cinema, media, and culture. With Abhijan Toto, she runs a curatorial project called the Forest Curriculum that looks at indigenous thought, art, activism, and environmental concerns of the region. Guha has published in *ACT Journal*, *IIC Quarterly*, *Nang*, *Industrial Networks*, and *Cinemas of India*, among others.

#### Endnotes

- Johannes Wolfgang von Goethe, *Faust*, trans. Bernard Taylor (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 1912), 68.
- Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Introduction: Ecology's Rainbow," in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, ed. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), xx.
- Encantos* is in part a documentary, which was begun when Diaz went to Bicol to document its people trying to eke out a life right after the calamity. The film contains extended interviews of the poor ravaged by the events, recovering their lives howsoever they can. Standing beside their battered houses, they speak of their lowly itinerant lives, mired in perpetual scare and anxiety, waylaid by government apathy. Horror stories burst forth: recollections of neighbors burnt, drowned, mixed with miracles of their own survival. On an elementary level, it may seem that the documentary segments supplant the fictional tracks centered on Hamin, countering his solipsism and paranoia against a firm grounding of sociological truth. But the documentary and fiction tracks miscegenate throughout, as characters wander in and out of these boundaries, furnishing personal "narratives of struggle" against a larger, atmospheric affect of despair.
- Lahar is a dark slimy mixture of volcanic lava and mud.
- William Viney, *Waste: A Philosophy of Things* (London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 18.
- Sebastian Franklin, "The Context of Forms," *world picture* 11 (2016): 2.
- Robert Smithson, "Monuments of Passaic: Has Passaic Replaced Rome as the Eternal City?" in *Land and Environmental Art*, ed. Jeffrey Kastner and Brian Wallis (New York: Phaidon Press, 1998), 230.
- Originally developed in the context of thermodynamics, entropy refers to a condition of high energy molecules (i.e., molecules possessing heat) and low energy (i.e., colder) molecules thoroughly mixed within a system, thus reducing the system's overall usable energy and ability to perform work. (This isn't a precise definition; entropy in thermodynamics is the "measure of randomness or disorder" of a system; the colder a system overall, the more its entropy, i.e., its hot and cold particles randomly distributed.) Entropy re-entered intellectual debate in the 1940s with cybernetics, computation, and communication theory, and later into art in the 1960s with land artists like Robert Smithson (Nardelli 2013). Matilde Nardelli, "The Sprawl of Entropy: Cinema, waste, and obsolescence in the 1960s and 1970s," *NECSUS European Journal of Media Studies* 2, no. 2 (2013): 431-45.
- A very large-scale magnification of Hamin's spiraling steps by the lahar banks, Robert Smithson's *The Spiral Jetty* (1970) is a 1500-foot-long and a 15-meter-wide counterclockwise coil of basalt and salt crystals jutting from the shore of the Great Salt Lake, Utah. A thoroughfare of material entropy, the spiraling earthwork was meant to decay finally into an undifferentiated state of matter—its inconspicuous core (like the one Hamin embodies) spiraling out. On the Spiral Jetty, the downward gaze swinging side to side could only pick out random salt crystals deposited on its edges: the entire mass echoing irregular, fractal horizons. At its core, the red colorations of the Salt Lake met the brackish grey of the basalt scooped up from the earth, with the salt crusts precariously balanced against loose mud fissures, oozing slush occasionally. True to all things fated to entropic ruin, the Spiral Jetty succumbed to the inevitable transformative forces of nature. Despite its heavy, calculated engineering, the jetty slowly submerged under water—waning into a grey, indistinct mass—thereby cementing its status as an earthwork in perpetual becoming.
- Jussi Parikka, *A Geology of Media* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 139.
- Cohen, "Grey," in *Prismatic Ecology: Ecotheory Beyond Green*, 270-89.
- Robert Smithson, "Entropy Made Visible," interview by Alison Sky, in *Robt Smithson: The Collective Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley and Los Angeles, California: University of California Press, 1996), 309.
- Land and Environmental Art*, ed. Kastner and Wallis, 99.
- Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2011).
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## GUNITA'T PANAHON

Rebyu ng *Conversations with Lav Diaz* ni Michael Guarneri

Paul Alcoseba Castillo

Kung may pinatutunayan si Michael Guarneri sa kaniyang *Conversations With Lav Diaz*, ito ayon: hindi maaaring ihiwalay ang likha sa may-akda. Narito siya't nagbibigay ng mga sapantaha hinggil sa kinalalagyang lipunan ng bawat pelikulang sadyang nilikha para rito. Malaking bahagi ang mga panayam sa aklat sa tuluyang paglikha ng kahulugan, sa pagbibigay ng konteksto't paghahayag ng mga subtext. Kahit inuulit ng direktor sa loob ng sampung taon, madalas iniwan niyang matuklasan ng nanonood ang kahulugan sa natunghayan.

Mainam ang anyong pinili ni Guarneri, ang tagapanayam, upang marahang hanguin mula kay Diaz ang proseso't esensiya ng mga pelikula tuwing inilalabas ang mga ito sa ibang bansa. Nahihigitan nito ang karaniwang talakayan sa haba at estetika ng mga kuha. Pero hindi basta lumulusong ang palitan ng dalawa sa malaking kahulugan o sa intensiyon ng direktor. Bagaman, mababatid ng mambabasa ang inihandang pananaliksik kaugnay ng nilalaman ng pelikula, nagbubukas

ang bawat diyalogo sa paglubog sa maituturing teknikal na aspekto ng paglikha sa indibidwal na obra: paghahanap ng lokasyon, pagbuno sa budget, kolaborasyon sa mga aktor. Ngunit unti-unti, lumalagos ang pag-uusap papunta sa usapin ng sining at agham panlipunan tulad ng relasyon ng kuwentong folk at panitikan sa sine, at pakikisangkot ng politika't kasaysayan sa nilalaman ng pelikula.

Ang serye ng mga panayam ay pagtatangkang malirip, at kahit paano, suriin ang nababatid ng direktor hindi lamang sa kaniyang pag-akda kundi maging ang lagay ng lipunang pinagmumulan ng mga kuwentong tinatangkilik sa ibang bahagi ng daigdig. Sa isang panig, naging mapagmuni ang talakayan para kay Diaz, na kinailangang muli't muling magbalik-tanaw sa kaniyang kabataan sa Mindanao—na tila ground zero o laboratoryo ng batas militar bago at habang ipinatutupad ito noong dekada sitenta. Ang kakatwa rito, walang pinag-iba ang kontekstong pinagmulan niya sa kinahaharap ngayon. Halos 50 taon mula nang ipatupad ang



diktaturya, at limang siglo mula ng dumaong ang ekspedisyong Magallanes-Elcano, ang dalawang pangyayari sa kasaysayan na bumura sa kultura na nais namang buhayin muli ng direktor.

Sa magkakaibang panayam sa kaniya sa *Conversations*, mahalaga ang magkakatulad niyang pahayag hinggil sa nararapat munang pagbabalik sa nakaraan. Sa mga tinalakay na pelikula, dito niya magkasabay na sinusuri't tinutuligsa ang nananatiling pamamalakad kahit makailang beses nang napalitan ang mananakop at mga pangulo, lalo mula kay Marcos hanggang Duterte. Kaya nang mabanggit si Brocka at ang mga obrang pumaksa sa kasagsagan ng batas militar, umaalingawngaw ito kay Diaz sa panahon ng war on drugs sa kaniyang *Mula Sa Kung Ano ang Noon* (2014), *Panahon ng Halimaw* (2018), at *Ang Hupa* (2019). Ayon kay Diaz, pagpapatuloy lamang ito sa dati nang naratibo buhat ng magsimula siyang gumawa ng pelikula panahon pa ng "Pito-pito films."

Kahit 2010 nagsimula ang mga panayam ni Guarneri sa aklat, tinalunton niya rito ang naunang mga likha sa filmography ni Diaz, sapat para mapalitaw na hindi nalalayo sa sistemang piyudal at pasismo ang mga kombensiyon at limitasyong itinatakdang ng studio system sa kalayaan ng direktor. Ang industriya ng pelikula ang mikrokosmong bersiyon ng nagaganap sa antas pambansa. Sa level na ito, binigyang liwanag sa panayam kung paanong sistematiko't malawakan ang panlilinsad sa mga institusyon na sinimulan sa panahon ni Marcos at umiiral hanggang kay Duterte. Para sa direktor, ang dalawang nabanggit ay mga "master politician" — mga aral sa kasaysayan upang manipulahin ang sakop na kapos ang pag-unawa sa lumipas. Kaya sa iba't ibang panayam sa aklat, mapagtatag niya ang halaga ng pag-uwi na lagi't laging bukal ng paglikha ni Diaz.

Sa pagbabalik na ito higit na nangingibabaw ang layunin ni Diaz bilang auteur: ang pag-aralan ang nakalipas kahit humuhulagpos ito sa pagtangan ng mamamayan. Tungkulin itong lumalampas sa kahuli-hulihang kuwadro ng kamera't telon. Pero kasabay ito ng panangis niya, bilang cultural worker, na walang puwang sa bansa kahit ang pinaka-Filipino sa mga likha niya. Sa madaling sabi, maraming balakid upang maibalik ang binura sa ating kasaysayan at kultura, ngunit ang sining ng pelikula ay isang aspekto lamang ng pagisisikap na halughugin

ang angkla ng nakaraan at ariin itong muli.

Ang kakayahang sineng ilahad ang trauma sa dating sariling kultura ay hawig sa panukala ni Alison Landsberg hinggil sa halaga ng paglinang sa empatiya.<sup>1</sup> Sa paggabay ng sining biswal, hahantong ito sa tuluyang pag-angkin ng nanonood sa nakaraan upang mabuo sa kaniya ang pagiging mamamayan. Mahalaga ang ganitong pagtanaw dahil paulit-ulit na babangitin ni Diaz ang tradisyong Malay na nilinsad, pinatawan ng kabi-kabilang restriksiyon ng mga nagharing kamalayan hanggang tuluyang nawala. Ngunit sa pelikula, naigigiit niya ito batay sa mga naitala ng alaala sa liblib na lupalop ng kaniyang pagkabata. Personal man ang pinagmumulan nito, kaugnay naman ito ng historikal na nagdaan na ayon kay Virgilio S. Almario, "may katangiang kaloob ng gunita't haraya ang may-akda."<sup>2</sup> Sa ganitong paraan, naipatanaw ni Diaz ang kaniyang sariling pagtingin sa katutubong haraya.

Marahil napansin din ni Guarneri, sa mga huling panayam, ang sumisidhing himig ng mensahe ni Diaz para sa mga dati nang tumatangkilik at lalo sa nais pang maabot ng pelikula niya. Lalong lumalim ang lunggati ni Diaz na gisingin ang lipunan dahil batid niyang marami nang panahon ang nasayang at maaaring humantong sa puntong wala nang mabalikan at magluklok muli ng tuluyang wawasak sa natitirang mabuti sa kultura.

Ipinatanaw ng *Conversations* na hindi laging natutumbasan ng pelikula ang intensiyon, ang nais talakayin ni Diaz. Iginigiit niyang ang proseso't nilalaman ng bawat obra'y hinahango niya sa alaala kaya lahat ay pagtataya upang maipabatid sa nanonood. Sapagkat mahalaga ang pananatili ng pagpapahiwatig ng akda sa halip na isinasampal ang politika sa nakatunghay. Sa kaso ng filmmaker, tunay ngang ang personal ay politikal, at sa aklat ni Guarneri, nagkaroon ng puwang and direktor upang linawin ang paglikha niya. Maging ang mga nangyari sa kanayunan noong panahon ng batas militar, na hindi bahagi ng karaniwang diskurso sa lipunan, ay binigyang-hubog ng sariling salita ni Diaz habang inaako ang responsabilidad na bawiin ang binura sa ating gunita.

\* Michael Guarneri's *Conversations with Lav Diaz (2010-2020)* (2020) is published by Massimiliano Piretti Editore (Bologna, Italy) and distributed worldwide by Idea Books

Si **Paul Alcoseba Castillo** ay nagtuturo ng Panitikan at Malikhaing Pagsulat sa Unibersidad ng Santo Tomas at kasalukuyang kumukuha ng Doktorado sa Panitikan. Kinilala na ang mga akda niya sa mga patimpalak pampanitikan sa bansa kabilang ang National Book Awards para sa unang aklat niya, ang *Walang Iisang Salita* (USTPH, 2018). Nagsusulat din siya ng mga pagsusuri ng pelikulang Filipino sa blog na *Kung Sine Sine Lang*.

#### Endnotes

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# STORIES FROM THE MARGINS

A Narrative Analysis of Social Advocacy Cinema

by Tudla Productions

Herwin Benedictos Cabasal



Tudla Productions (formerly known as Tudla Multimedia Network) is an alternative multimedia collective, comprised of filmmakers, media practitioners, students, volunteers, and cultural workers, that utilizes different forms of media (e.g., newsreel, public service announcement, short film, and video documentary) in exposing the struggles and narratives of marginalized sectors of society. Based in the National Capital Region (NCR), Tudla collaborates with grassroots communities, people's organizations, non-governmental organizations, cultural groups, and institutions for the advancement of various social advocacies. Since its establishment in 2003, Tudla, which literally means "aiming" or "targeting," explores alternative platforms and modes of production, distribution, and exhibition that have a clear intent of serving those who are disfavored, disenfranchised, or deprived of human rights and social justice.<sup>1</sup>

Social advocacy cinema is a mode of film practice that serves as a tool for progressive advocacy and activism, featuring and documenting the collective struggles of the people and their long-time pursuit for national liberation.<sup>2</sup> These are also known as political films<sup>3</sup> or people's cinema<sup>4</sup> (*sineng bayan*) as one of the categories of alternative cinema<sup>5</sup>, along with other forms of media (e.g., newspapers, radio, newsreels, photography, social media) that are popularized by alternative multimedia collectives such as Tudla Productions, Kodao Productions, Mayday Multimedia, PinoyMedia Center, Film Weekly, RESBAK, Southern Tagalog Exposure, Aninaw Productions, Sine Panayanon, Kilab Multimedia and The Breakaway Media, among many others. The radical aesthetics, imagery, and issues presented through social advocacy cinema are anchored on noble and patriotic aims: narrating stories from the margins; exposing the social, cultural, economic, and political issues that affect the nation; and mobilizing the

people to advance social change.<sup>6</sup> This type of cinema that exists outside the confines of commercial and auteur-driven filmmaking questions and challenges dominant cinema's standardized production, systems of representation, and hegemonic narratives.<sup>7</sup>

Tudla Productions, one of the alternative and political film collectives in the country that engage in social advocacy filmmaking, aims to inspire the creation and proliferation of socially relevant and progressive audiovisual productions to cultivate critical consciousness in the public. This is why in 2009, they conceived and launched the Pandayang Lino Brocka Political Film and New Media Festival<sup>8</sup> in cooperation with the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) and UP Film Center. Having undergone twelve festival cycles as of this writing, Pandayang Lino Brocka is known as an annual cultural gathering and space for discourse where audiovisual works produced by independent and alternative filmmakers and collectives across the country are screened and discussed. They delve into pressing human rights issues and themes on history, national sovereignty, social movements, and people's freedoms, following the late Lino Brocka's principle that film and politics cannot be dissociated.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the mainstream film festivals, Pandayang Lino Brocka brings cinema to alternative screening spaces like schools, compounds, streets, covered courts, marketplaces, factories, and picket lines to reach out the grassroots communities.

Apart from the regular production of newsreels, Tudla also produces public service announcements (e.g., *Bagong Juan dela Cruz*), music videos (e.g., *Bubay Aktibista*; *Harana*; *Katribu Ko*; *Barikada*) and even short narrative films (e.g., *Barikada*). Tudla is also popularly known for their collective

production of video documentaries that are distributed and exhibited in alternative spaces (e.g., political film festivals, social media, online video sharing platforms, streets, picket lines, and other grassroots settings). Their filmography includes but is not limited to *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* (2005); *Daang Bakal* (2005); *Unos* (2012); *Pinaglabanan* (2011); *Yolanda Aftermath* (2013); *PNoy's Human Rights Records in Summary* (2013); *100 Days of Injustice* (2014); *Lupa at Hustisya* (2014); *Atohan* (2015); *Kababaihan sa Int'l. Women's Day* (2016); *Workers Demand for National Minimum Wage* (2016); *Unang Buwan ng Homeless Camp sa Mendiola* (2017); *Kampuhan Kontra Kontraktuwalisasyon* (2017); *Himulayan* (2018); *Hindi Lang Numero* (2020); *Ang Babay ay Bubay* (2021); and *Hacienda Yulo* (2021), among others. These video documentaries follow recurring patterns and a narrative structure underpinned by social and political commentary on issues encountered by urban poor communities, workers, peasant farmers, indigenous peoples, youth and women, and victims of human rights violations, social injustice, and other forms of oppression and exploitation.

As an example, *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* (2005) was a joint project of Ecumenical Institute for Labor Education and Research Inc., Peasant Alliance of Central Luzon, and Tudla Productions in cooperation with Farm Workers Alliance in Hacienda Luisita, Focus Central Luzon, and Mayday Productions. It is a 38-minute video documentary written and directed by Onin Tagaro that deals with the plight and struggles of millworkers and farmworkers of the sugar refinery and plantation in Central Azucarera de Tarlac and Hacienda Luisita which resulted in the massacre of seven strikers on November 16, 2004.<sup>10</sup> *Pinaglabanan* (2011) is a 40-minute video documentary collectively produced by Tudla Productions, Sandigang Maralitang Nagkakaisa (SAMANA), Gabriela-Corazon de Jesus, KADAMAY-Corazon de Jesus, Anakbayan-Corazon de Jesus, and Sining ang Bala ng Kabataan (SABAK). Directed by Lady Ann Salem, it documents and narrates how the urban poor residents of Corazon de Jesus, San Juan City have united to resist demolition and eviction imposed by their local government. From these two video documentaries, a significant question arises: How do the sectoral narratives presented in the social advocacy cinema of Tudla Productions allow the public to see and understand the state of the nation from the perspectives of the marginalized?

In this paper, I will take Tudla Productions' *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* and *Pinaglabanan* as film-texts and objects for narrative analysis. First, I will briefly discuss the sociopolitical history informing the films, from the Marcos regime to the time that Tudla Productions and other related media groups emerged. Second, I will examine the interplay of elements in the narrative structure of the films, such as the characters, their conflicts, goals, struggles, and resolutions, to substantiate the particularities of how Tudla Productions represents stories from the margins. Lastly, I will discuss the relationship of Tudla Productions' social advocacy cinema with other radical and political cinematic



Pandayang Lino Brocka tours different schools in the country



*Pinaglabanan* (Lady Ann Salem, Tudla Productions, 2011). All screengrabs by author



*Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* (Onin Tagaro, Tudla Productions, 2005)

Opposite page: *Sineng Kalye* screening. Courtesy of Tudla Productions

Pandayang Lino Brocka Political Film and New Media Festival usually held at UPFI Film Center. Courtesy of Pandayang Lino Brocka







The barricade against demolition at Corazon de Jesus.  
Courtesy of Tudla



Street art by a resident of Corazon de Jesus during an Indignation Rally against violent demolition



Clearing Demolition at Corazon de Jesus, San Juan City

traditions (e.g., Soviet Montage, Italian Neorealism, Third Cinema) and how they remain relevant today.

### Citizen Empowerment in the Time of Social Unrest

Ferdinand Marcos's tenure as head of the state from 1965 to 1986 has been heavily criticized through the years for the extreme corruption and rampant suppression of democratic processes, especially when he placed the entire country under Martial Law in 1972.<sup>11</sup> The declaration of Proclamation No. 1081 gave Marcos the power to abolish Congress, reorganize the bureaucracy, and become the sole legislator issuing decrees, proclamations, letters of instruction, and executive orders.<sup>12</sup> The fascist rule of Marcos became known in the history of the Philippines for its "human rights abuses, excesses of cronyism and corruption, and economic mismanagement."<sup>13</sup>

Media censorship encompassed all publications, radio, and TV stations, which were ordered closed until given a permit to operate.<sup>14</sup> However, despite censorship and intimidation from the government, various cause-oriented groups, non-government organizations, and alternative media groups persisted to provide alternative and factual sources of information that helped in raising awareness about the true conditions of the people. According to film historian Nick Deocampo, some of those who took the challenge were Communication Foundation for Asia (*A Spark of Courage*, 1984; *Children of the Regime*, 1985; *People Power Revolution: The Philippine Experience*, 1986); and AsiaVisions Media Foundation (*Wings of Deceit*, 1982; *Arrogance of Power*, 1983; and *Lakbayan*, 1984).<sup>15</sup> They produced films and documentaries about social issues and the terrors of state repression during Martial Law, which continued even after the Marcos Regime. The production of social advocacy films has thus likewise continued until today.<sup>16</sup>

The corrupt rule of Marcos was ended by the People Power Revolution in February 1986, because of what sociologist Randolph S. David asserts was "the failure of Marcos's program of repressive developmentalism."<sup>17</sup> In the succeeding years, the newly established government of Corazon Aquino would restore and strengthen democratic institutions from 1986 to 1992; however, her term would nevertheless be "incapable of providing the poor the basic services they needed so they might live productive lives,"<sup>18</sup> which was not a sound foundation for sustainable democracy. During her administration, genuine land reform did not materialize, not least because Aquino herself belonged to the Cojuangco clan that owned Hacienda Luisita, a vast sugar plantation and one of the worst pictures of agrarian problems in the country.<sup>19</sup>

Walden Bello et al. writes in *The Anti-Development State: The Political Economy of Permanent Crisis in the Philippines* that "the promise of political liberation and economic and social progress that accompanied the overthrow of the Marcos dictatorship in February 1986 has remained just that: a promise."<sup>20</sup> Bello asserts that the Philippines remains hopelessly mired in poverty and underdevelopment because of "the ruling elite factions' control over people, production, markets and resources and the successful subordination of the state to

their interests."<sup>21</sup> Looking at the present situation, the dystopian conditions of the country and terrifying conflicts of our time seem eternally inscribed in the struggles of the Filipino.

The peoples' struggles against monopoly and bureaucrat capitalism, neoliberalism, neocolonialism, imperialism, feudalism, and fascism from the Marcos regime have continued across the different administrations.<sup>22</sup> The decades since the year 2000 were mired in issues on extreme poverty, hunger, rampant corruption, unemployment, heinous crimes, and extrajudicial killings that pushed alternative multimedia collectives, the marginalized sectors, and other cause-oriented groups and institutions to join forces and bravely confront these pressing issues. Lady Ann Salem, one of the social advocacy filmmakers from Tudla Productions, relays in one account how video documentaries and other audiovisual works inspire and engage the marginalized in these struggles:

Ang general definition naman ng aktibismo yung kumilos ka para may magawa na bago at tumindig sa isang bagay. Saka hindi lang ito ang platform ng activism, hindi pa nga ito ang pinaka-direct na way. Pero kung sa amin parang effective s'ya na medium. Kasi 'yung audiovisual na medium 'yung isa pang advantage n'ya yung reflexivity, 'yung 'pag napapanood ng tao ang sarili nya, iniisip nya "ay parang galit ako a, parang ang tapang ko!" Nabibigyan siya ng pag-asa doon sa nakikita niya o nagawa niya. Nagkakaroon siya ng time para, na hindi niya afford a, kasi halimbawa tali siya sa paggawa, pagtatrabaho, kulang ang pera, kulang sahod, ganyan, hindi na niya nagagawang mag-reflect doon sa sarili niya e, sa kanyang political, moral, and social consciousness. Pero kapag nakikita niya 'yung video naiintindihan niya sa isang paraan, kahit sa isang pagkakataon ang kanyang sarili, ang kanyang naging paninindigan.<sup>23</sup>

According to Luis Teodoro, the existence and proliferation of these political and progressive media outfits "is at the same time an indication of the many deficiencies in society and governance as well as of increasing citizen empowerment."<sup>24</sup> Rene B. Azurin likewise believes that "people who feel alienated from their government will express themselves in the only ways they think they might still be heard."<sup>25</sup> Propelled by the democratic mass movement, Tudla Productions and its contemporaries have likewise exerted significant effort to reflect and present the collective inner workings and struggles of Filipino society while carrying out creative resistance against social injustice. Erika Cruz, another member of Tudla Productions, shared in an interview,

Ang battlefield ay hindi lang nakikita sa lipunan na kung saan marginalized ang mga taong hindi nabibigyan ng boses sa media. Sa media rin talaga doon sila hindi nabibigyan ng espasyo. Sa isang contested space katulad ng media, nakita ko na kapag mabibigyan mo ng boses ang mga tao magiging terrain ito para magmulat, para mag-organisa, para ma-mobilisa ang mga tao. So ang film, hindi lang s'ya pang-enlighten. Hindi lang s'ya pang-agitate. These are our first few steps towards the liberation that we aim for. Kumbaga, kailangan may follow up talaga na may critical thinking na mangyayari, merong action, merong pagbubuo ng mga organisasyon na mangyayari para ma-push forward 'yung mga kampanya at adbokasiya ng mamayang tinutulungan namin.<sup>26</sup>



Behind the scenes of *Barikada* (Tudla Productions, 2011), a short narrative film based on the true story of the urban poor community in Corazon de Jesus, when their shelters were about to be demolished by the local government in 2011 to give way for infrastructure projects





Hacienda Luisita Massacre 7th Anniversary Commemoration, dated Nov 16, 2011



Interfaith assembly for the Hacienda Luisita farmers, dated July 29, 2011

### Documenting the Sectoral Narratives:

#### The Case of *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* and *Pinaglabanan*

“Classical narrative cinema”<sup>27</sup> is traditionally structured in this order: the story is about a character with whom we can empathize; his or her life is disrupted by a problem; he or she, in the desire to achieve something, seeks a goal; this goal is difficult to achieve but he or she must strive for it nevertheless; and then the story must come to a satisfying resolution. This conventional storytelling structure is innate in protagonist-driven and individually motivated “classical Hollywood cinema”<sup>28</sup> which is currently the dominant mode of filmmaking in the world, the Philippines included. Dealing with stories from the margins, the video documentaries of Tudla Productions in some ways conform with the conventional narrative structure but deliberately replace them with elements that articulate a more subversive discourse: marginalized sectors of society as characters; social issues as conflicts; social change as a goal; and movements toward the fulfillment of social advocacy as resolutions that favor the people and the greater good of the nation.

The characters in the narratives of the video documentaries of Tudla Productions are prevalently marginal communities or social sectors. These are represented by the urban poor community (e.g., *Daang-Bakal*, *Barikada*, *Unang Buwan ng Homeless Camp sa Mendiola*, *Ang Bahay ay Buhay*, *Hacienda Yulo*); working class (e.g., *Workers Demand for National Minimum Wage*, *Kampuhan Kontra Kontraktuwalisasyon*, *Hindi Lang Numero*); peasant farmers (e.g., *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo*, *Lupa at Hustisya*); indigenous peoples (e.g., *Atohan*, *Himulayanan*); women sector (e.g., *Kababaihan sa Int’l. Women’s Day*); and victims of natural calamities (e.g., *Unos*, *Yolanda Aftermath*, *100 Days of Injustice*). These are the “subalterns” of society,<sup>29</sup> or those in the margins who are voiceless and inferior: the poor working class, peasants, and others who are oppressed and have limited or no access to power.

In *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* and *Pinaglabanan*, the narrative elements that make up the storytelling structure of social advocacy cinema depict social realism that manifests authenticity and advocates for political goals toward social transformation and liberation. The millworkers and farmworkers in Hacienda Luisita serve as the main characters of *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo*. They “[earn] less than half what the average Filipino worker does”<sup>30</sup> and “do not own the land they till.”<sup>31</sup> Meanwhile, the characters of *Pinaglabanan* are the members of the urban poor community in Brgy. Corazon de Jesus, San Juan City who have resided in the village for more than three decades. The Presidential Commission for the Urban Poor (PCUP) defines the urban poor community as

the underprivileged or homeless sector of society – the unemployed, underemployed and the irregularly employed, or who are incapable of meeting the minimum basic needs, and who live in slums, squatter and resettlement areas, sidewalks, dumpsites, road right-of-way, cemeteries, unoccupied government or private lands or along danger zones like railroad tracks, esteros, riverbanks, high tension wires, or other places in urban areas.<sup>32</sup>

In the social advocacy cinema of Tudla Productions, the life of the subaltern community is disrupted by a conflict or a series of social issues like demolitions and evictions; labor disputes such as contractualization and illegal dismissal of workers; land-grabbing by private sectors; forced disappearances and extrajudicial killings; natural and man-made disasters and tragedies; children and women abuse; environmental degradation; and gender inequality, to name a few. The antagonistic forces like what the peasant farmers from *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* and the urban poor community in *Pinaglabanan* encounter in the films are brought upon them by the dominant system and the ruling class, or those who hold state power and control the means of production.

In *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo*, the central conflict arises from the refusal of the Cojuangco clan to distribute the lands of Hacienda Luisita to its tillers as prescribed by law, and to recognize the rights of the farmworkers to own the land. Hacienda Luisita is a 6,453-hectare sugarcane plantation that should have been distributed to the farmers by 1967, but it did not happen. Instead, the Cojuangco family used their power to legalize their claim on Hacienda Luisita through the Comprehensive Agrarian Reform Law in 1985, and the farmworkers lost the right to own the land.<sup>33</sup> In *Pinaglabanan*, the central conflict emerges from the demolition of homes and eviction of the residents in Corazon de Jesus in order to give way to the construction of San Juan City’s extension of its new White House-like city hall. Many of the families would be displaced from their homes and from their means livelihood, which was why they staunchly refused the remote relocation site in Rodriguez, Rizal that was offered to them.<sup>34</sup>

Toward goals to assert their constitutional and universal human rights; rights to social services, security, education, and a life of peace and justice; the protection of their women and children; and the protection of their livelihood in labor policies, the millworkers and farmworkers of Central Azucarera de Tarlac and Hacienda Luisita in *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo* unite to demand for the recognition of their rights, increase in wages, additional benefits, additional workdays, and termination of land use conversion. The oppressive conditions strengthen the unity of 600 workers under Central Azucarera de Tarlac Labor Union (CATLU) and more than 5,000 farmworkers under the United Luisita Workers Union (ULWU) as they commence a strike on November 6, 2004 to voice out their needs. Likewise, in *Pinaglabanan*, the residents of Brgy. Corazon de Jesus unite to resist demolition and eviction, supported by progressive groups such as Gabriela, KADAMAY, and Anakbayan-Corazon de Jesus to fight for their rights to housing and access to basic social services and security.

In these video documentaries, the marginalized sectors as characters mobilize themselves to engage in street protests, demonstrations, vigils, hunger strikes, to pursue goals that do not focus on individual satisfaction but are aspirations that strengthen and restore the dignity of their communities. Alongside other organizations, they produce music, songs, poetry, theatrical performances, and visual arts to creatively express their resistance. The leaders of their progressive organizations engage in dialogues with government authorities, decision-makers, and private sectors to present their views, stance, and alternatively proposed solutions. Sometimes, issues are brought to courts for litigation or legal action. These struggles that the non-fictional characters of Tudla Productions’ social advocacy cinema are not presented as spectacles such as those found in poverty pornography; instead, the marginalized sectors are represented as empowered and active citizens who can stand and fight for what they advocate. The role of Tudla Productions, as well as other



Scene from *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo*

alternative multimedia collectives, is then to amplify that voice, to use media and cinema to take these valuable discourses to the general public.

As the narrative progresses in *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo*, the police and soldiers are dispatched to stop the strike and disperse the blockade. Repressively, they use tear gas, water cannons, guns, and military vehicles to violently disperse the crowd. On the 16th of November 2004, seven died among the farmworkers of Hacienda Luisita in defending the picket line. More than 40 were injured and hurt from bullets, teargas, and truncheons. 112 were arrested and detained. The footage shows that the gun shots came from the dispersal team, but the authorities have since denied this charge.<sup>35</sup> The massacre that occurred demonstrates the grim reality that the path to a better future for the toiling masses means a life-and-death struggle as those who rule society will do everything within their might, wealth, and power to maintain the status quo.

Meanwhile, the residents of Brgy. Corazon de Jesus, San Juan City in *Pinaglabanan* prepare and barricade their community when the notice of demolition expires. The local government of San Juan City still pushes through with the demolition, but with the help of supporters from other progressive organizations, the residents of Brgy. Corazon de Jesus stand their ground. *Pinaglabanan* documents one of the most violent demolitions when more than 100 families were affected, 13 residents and supporters were arrested and detained, and 40 of them were injured on January 25, 2011.<sup>36</sup>

Oftentimes, social advocacy films do not end satisfactorily but imply what an ideal ending should be as a course of action: for audiences to advance a society that gives land to the farmers; seeks social justice; passes and implements egalitarian policies; and recognizes and respects human rights. *Sa Ngalan*





Sineng Kalye, an activity by Tudla Productions, brings social advocacy cinema to alternative spaces like streets and compounds

*ng Tubo* ends on the people of Hacienda Luisita and their supporters bringing honor and respect to their comrades who gave their lives for the land: Jessie Valdez, Jhune David, Adriano Caballero, Jhaivie Basilio, Jaime Pastidio, Juancho Sanchez, and Jesus Laza. In *Pinaglabanan*, while fifty homes were demolished in Corazon de Jesus on January 25, 2011, because of the resistance of the people, the demolition of hundreds more is halted. The local government would still attempt to implement the demolition several times, but the urban poor community would remain staunch in their resistance.

The recurring narrative patterns of Tudla Productions' social advocacy cinema, as seen in *Pinaglabanan* and *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo*, deal with the struggles of the marginalized sectors, usually as a community, instead of the bourgeois individuals as a hero of the story. They are not treated as individuals with individual troubles; instead, they confront collective struggles of the marginalized sectors of society. If the problems or questions raised in Hollywood films and mainstream cinema are satisfyingly resolved to close the narrative, conflicts and goals of sectors that are presented in social advocacy cinema continue even outside the cinematic frames. It is a real-life pursuit for the resolution of real problems and not a narrative told only for entertainment or leisure.

### Film as a Tool of Social Advocacy: Inspired by Political Film Movements

The practice of storytelling in social advocacy cinema by Tudla Productions can be compared to other radical and progressive film movements canonized in the history of world cinema by the likes of Soviet Montage, Italian Neorealism, and Third Cinema. These film movements amplify stories from the margins on class struggle and sociopolitical crisis, and critique oppressive systems and ideologies. Revolutionary filmmakers of Soviet Montage such as Sergei Eisenstein, Vsevolod Pudovkin, and Dziga Vertov from 1925 to 1933 in the Soviet Union deliberately downplayed the individualism of characters, instead representing them as members of social classes – the working class, peasants, or the proletariat – to depict stories of oppression, historical rebellion, and uprising (e.g., *Strike, 1925; Battleship Potemkin, 1925; October, 1928*).<sup>37</sup> In the same vein, the social advocacy films of Tudla Productions have shunned the “star system”<sup>38</sup> that puts the spotlight on individual movie icons and idols. Instead, they focus on ordinary, real people and resist pandering to the constructed images of celebrification.

Italian Neorealism as a film movement that emerged in the 1940s to the early 1950s as a reaction to fascist rule in Italy followed the tenets of “narrative simplicity, true-to-life stories, real locations, everyday language in dialogue, important social and political issues in its content as well as... frequent use of non-professional actors.”<sup>39</sup> Certainly, social advocacy cinema's capture of social reality is different from the notion



The residents of Corazon de Jesus and supporters fight back during the demolition day, dated June 3, 2011



Another Sineng Kalye screening

of reality in classical Hollywood cinema that is ordered and naturalized by a formal system that only serves the needs of the narrative. Realism in social advocacy cinema is particularly and firmly grounded on the real issues of oppression of the people and suppression of their dissent: “the approach becomes presentational rather than representational.”<sup>40</sup> There is an authenticity to the characters, settings, and scenes as they portray life as it is, and, in particular, the lives of subaltern groups and the conditions that oppress them.

Third Cinema, or the cinema of liberation, was the anti-imperialist cinematic movement that proliferated in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s which aimed to raise the political consciousness of spectators and engage them in critical reflection of their surroundings to inspire them to take revolutionary action and improve their conditions.<sup>41</sup> Conceived as a militant reaction against authoritarian oppression and neocolonialism, the theory and praxis of Third Cinema were proposed by Argentinean film theorists and filmmakers Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino who labelled Hollywood as “First Cinema” and European art film, which opposes the conventions of Hollywood but gives emphasis to individual expression of the auteur, as “Second Cinema.”<sup>42</sup> The aesthetics and storytelling structure of Third Cinema films “oppose the cinema of characters, individuals, and authors with a cinema of themes, the masses, and collective work”<sup>43</sup> in a similar way that social advocacy cinema of Tudla Productions replaces escapist entertainment with progressive and truthful imagery to disturb and inspire action.

Audiences as part of the critical public sphere are thus encouraged to act. In Third Cinema, “the world is scrutinized, unraveled, rediscovered.”<sup>44</sup> Likewise, Tudla Productions' social advocacy cinema seeks audiences' reflective detachment rather than emotional involvement by encouraging the audience to think objectively about the narratives that they watch, to identify with the critical consciousness and political stance

of the marginalized sectors, to reflect on their arguments, understand them, and chart a course of action. In doing so, it is hoped that the *greatness* of the Filipino audience as pronounced by Lino Brocka will be evident in due time when we see them demanding for solutions in accordance with the goals of social advocacy, not for their individual needs, but for the greater good of the nation. This would materialize the adage of Karl Marx that points to the important distinction between interpretation and action in the work of social advocacy and revolution: that “philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.”<sup>45</sup>

### Conclusion

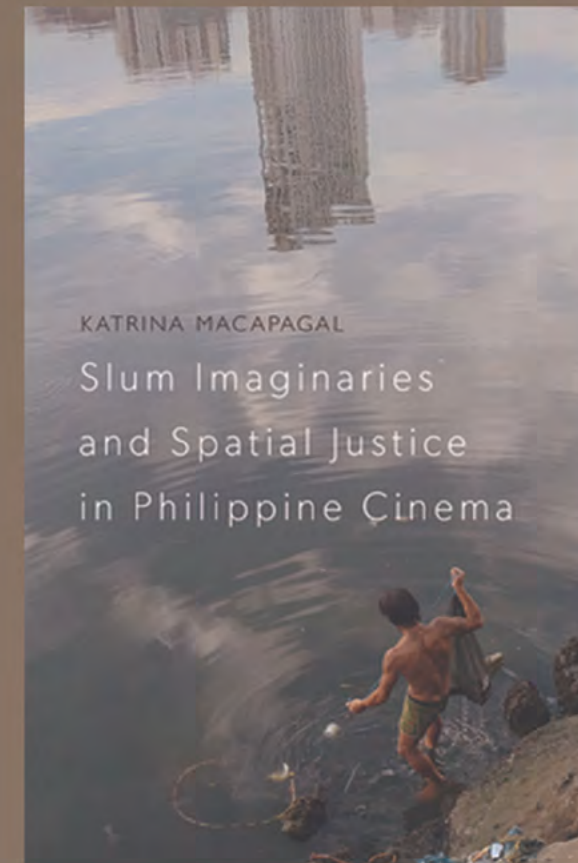
The social advocacy cinema of Tudla Productions upholds the authenticity of cinema as a truthful and liberating reflection of society departing from the dominant aesthetics of filmmaking that is preoccupied with escapism and fantasy. They provide a human face to the seemingly abstract concept of social injustice, and creatively communicate their stand on issues to inspire collective action. As “the rich tradition of struggle has become a motive force of Philippine history,”<sup>46</sup> the sectoral narratives that we witness from social advocacy cinema form an integral part of the “social struggle for equality, progress, and freedom of all citizens.”<sup>47</sup> These stories from the margins are brought to public consciousness not as media spectacles but as oases of narrative truths. Not merely spectators, the critical public sphere is therefore expected to exhibit critical thinking, question social conditions, and advocate emancipation of all peoples from the margins.



**Herwin Benedictos Cabasal** is a social advocacy filmmaker and lecturer at the Department of Communication, Far Eastern University-Manila. He has taught communication, film, and media courses at Centro Escolar University, Mapua University, and the Polytechnic University of the Philippines. He obtained his MA in Media Studies (Film) from the University of the Philippines Film Institute. Currently, he serves as Public Relations Director of the Southeast Asian Media Studies Association.

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## NAVIGATING THE URBAN JUNGLE IN CINEMATIC SPACES

A Review of *Slum Imaginaries and Spatial Justice in Philippine Cinema*

by Katrina Macapagal

Mary Anne C. Mallari

Katrina Macapagal's book, *Slum Imaginaries and Spatial Justice in Philippine Cinema*, published by Edinburgh University Press, offers a novel theoretical understanding of contemporary Philippine urban cinema using Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the chronotope. The chronotope, which means time-space, enables a more focused examination of specific scenes in the films. Formulating a theory called the slum chronotope, Macapagal effectively appropriates this literary theory to analyze the slum imaginaries in Philippine cinema and relates these representations to larger discourses of social justice or injustice. The strength of this book lies in the interdisciplinary reading of influential city films from 2005-2017, locating Philippine cinema and its relationship to fundamental discourses about poverty and the Philippine slums. The book also discusses a

timely topic because of the relevance of its issues to Duterte's war on drugs.

The chapters of *Slum Imaginaries* are structured by film genres, making the book easy to follow while offering an in-depth interdisciplinary look at the slums in actual socio-political and cultural discourses. Macapagal's use of this Bakhtinian theory allows for this effective genre-based organization of the book chapters since the genre's nuances are applied based on Philippine contexts. Furthermore, the central image of the slum chronotope leads to the exploration of related chronotopes, making the discussion of the films detailed and intertextual. Thus, Filipino and non-Filipino readers will find the book an excellent analytical introduction to the study of Philippine urban-based poverty films.



In Part One, which consists of the first three chapters, the author outlines the theoretical underpinnings of her analysis and locates the slum chronotope in the context of Philippine urban cinema. Macapagal discusses this and the spatial dimensions of social justice, further showing how impoverished communities are constantly disenfranchised primarily because of capitalist and neoliberal policies. This point implies that film becomes an aesthetic mediation of the reality it tries to portray since these filmic representations of the slums offer similar real-life scenarios, suggesting the relevance of the book's arguments beyond the cinematic text.

Part Two analyzes the films, starting with the coming-of-age movies in Chapter Four, namely, Aureus Solito's *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (2006) and Jim Libiran's *Tribu* (2007). Macapagal's reading of the films focuses on the agency of the young protagonists, who are often thought to lack the power to create their own spaces. The author locates chronotopes of passage by defining essential scenes where the young characters become more mature, an approach that fits the coming-of-age genre.

Melodrama is the highlight of Chapter Five, concentrating on the films *Kubrador* (Jeffrey Jeturian, 2007), *Foster Child* (Brillante Mendoza, 2007), and *Lola* (also by Mendoza, 2010). In dissecting melodrama, the author explained affective chronotopes, which forward the narratives of the films. Moreover, a similarity that connects the chosen movies is the action of walking that unfolds the melodramatic mode and the imaginaries of spatial in/justice. Amy in *Kubrador* walks every day to collect bets for illegal gambling amid fears that the police will catch her. Thelma's walks show her way out of the labyrinthine slums and into the commercial district to go to the adoptive parents of her foster child. The grandmothers in *Lola* tread the streets of Manila with a careful gait as they seek justice for their grandchildren. In addition, Macapagal emphasizes that while these films are considered melodramatic, they still exhibit restraint, a quality that sets these films apart from other mainstream melodramas while underscoring how their characters yearn for justice.

Macapagal also analyzes action films and associates these with the film noir genre in Chapter Six. The movies *Kinatay* (Brillante Mendoza, 2009), *Metro Manila* (Sean Ellis, 2013), and *On the Job* (Erik Matti, 2013) are the main objects of the discussion on the chronotopes of mobility and

how these problematize the male subjects and their struggle for spatial justice. In *Kinatay*, the protagonist Peping is forced to make choices while traveling in a van. In *Metro Manila*, Oscar is anxious during the one-person heist he stages. In the crime thriller *On the Job*, several chase scenes, whether on foot or by vehicles, suggest the inner conflicts of the male figures to make their own moral choices. On the other hand, the image of prisons as slums is also a crucial idea that defines how the characters struggle for spatial justice. The study of the films shows male moralities and anxieties and how these things elaborate social justice or the lack of it in the urban space.

Another novel way of understanding Philippine urban films introduced in the book is the appropriation of the image of slums in a foreign country, with the experience of the migrants as a central image in Chapter Seven. Calling the experiences of the migrants as chronotopes of in/visibility, Macapagal examines Hannah Espia's film, *Transit* (2013), which was shot in Tel Aviv, Israel. *Transit* narrates the experiences and conflicts of the Filipinos in Israel who have settled there with their families. The struggles of the Filipino migrants to claim their own space in a foreign land suggest their invisibility in the society, while their assimilation into the Israeli culture illustrates their visibility.

Chapter Eight dovetails into discussing how the slum chronotope relates to the current controversy of the war on drugs imposed by Rodrigo Duterte on the Philippine population. Using Alberto 'Treb' Monteras II's film, *Respeto* (2017), the author investigates the interaction of the slums with the chronotopes of performance, as seen through the culture of flip-top that Hendrix, the teenage protagonist of the movie, participates in. The lyrics in the flip-top battles often refer to the violence of Duterte's extrajudicial killings, which have similarities to the hostilities that occurred during the Martial Law.

Overall, *Slum Imaginaries and Spatial Justice in Philippine Cinema* contributes to cinema and cultural studies. Macapagal is aware of the limitations of her research and informs the reader about these (for example, the inclusion of three films by Brillante Mendoza or the chosen films' limited time frame). The awareness of these limitations pushes more scholars to pursue further studies in the field and explore other arguments that could enrich the main proposals of the book, leading to broader interdisciplinary discourses using cinematic art.

**Mary Anne C. Mallari** is a PhD in Literature candidate at De La Salle University-Manila, studying Philippine regional cinema. She teaches literature at the University of Santo Tomas-Manila and is an active member of the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SOFIA).

**Endnotes**

1 Katrina Macapagal, *Slum Imaginaries and Spatial Justice in Philippine Cinema* (Edinburgh University Press, 2021).

# CONSTRUCTING THE BABAENG PILIPINA IDEAL

*Tulisan and the Three Faces of  
Postwar Filipino Femininity*

Gershom Chua





As the classic Sampaguita Pictures logo fades out, the audience is immediately treated to a stunning tableau—movie queen Susan Roces kneeling on the ground, donning a nightgown with her hair down, fearfully beholding a gun in the foreground, her hands clasped together as though in prayer. Behind her stands rival movie queen Amalia Fuentes, one hand cupping over Roces' mouth, the other holding a knife at her throat. They hold the pose for a beat before Fuentes eyes the necklace around Roces' neck, yanks it off her, and backs away.

Roces is left trembling as Fuentes and her henchman exit the luxuriously furnished bedroom, and a woman revealed to be the mother of the former's character scrambles in to gather her in an embrace. Her mother soothes a visibly traumatized Susan, cooing, "O Senyang, mabuti at ligtas ka" (O Senyang, thank goodness you are safe), and praises her for not trying to resist her captors. The shaken matriarch then proceeds to think aloud that had the *tulisan*es (bandits) chanced upon her daughter's twin, Roberta, the latter would have put up a fight and she would surely have lost one of them that night.

The camera then tracks from the huddled women on the floor and pans to a portrait on a nightstand behind them, showing Roces once again—photographed as Senyang's twin sister Roberta—this time in a smart riding outfit, confidently holding up and aiming a shotgun and visibly registering a character a world away from the sniveling young woman in this opening scene.

In this tight 55-second pre-credits sequence, José de Villa's *Tulisan* (1962)<sup>1</sup> economically introduces audiences to its three central female protagonists—the gentle and fragile town lass Senyang, the tempestuous bandit princess Fernanda, and the no-nonsense co-ed Roberta—played by the decade's ruling celluloid royalties Roces and Fuentes.

**The Three Faces of Postwar Filipino Femininity in *Tulisan***

Adapted from a popular serialized komiks story of the same name by Pablo S. Gomez, *Tulisan* follows the dramatic clashes between the townfolk of rural San Antonio and the bandit groups that periodically pillage and ransack their town.

Fuentes plays the titular *tulisan*/bandit princess Fernanda who steals from the rich families of San Antonio in order to amass an impressive enough loot to present to the matriarch of another bandit group, the fearsome and notorious bandit queen Garuda, in exchange for the hand of one of the latter's sons in marriage. She crosses paths with the local heiress Senyang—the scene that opens the film—as the latter's mansion is her last stop before making her way to Garuda's hideout, *ang Paraiso ni Garuda* (Garuda's Paradise).

Garuda's camp is revealed to be a small gender-equal utopia, as its inhabitants, all outlaws composed equally of men and women, are free to do as they please so long as they live according to a code of honor created by Garuda herself—one that involves the protection of womenfolk against assault and the doling out of punishment that the matriarch adjudges for every offense.



Figure 1. The opening tableau from José de Villa's *Tulisan* (Sampaguita Pictures, 1962). All screengrabs by author



Figure 2. Roces as Senyang being comforted after the attack, and the portrait of her twin Roberta



Figure 3. Film poster from IMDb; *Hiwaga Komiks* cover image from Video 48

Flipping traditional Filipino norms of courtship on their head, Fernanda brandishes her martial skills—knife-throwing and sharp shooting—and impresses Garuda. She is given a choice of the bandit queen's two sons, Marco and Adel, selecting the latter and presenting him with the necklace she stole the night prior, only to be swiftly turned down.

Adel insists on his freedom to choose for himself: "Salamat, binibini. Karangalan ni Adel ang mapili mo. Sayang at di mo ako kilala. Dito, ako ang humahabol ng usa na ibig kong kainin, at kung anuman ang kailangan ko, ako ang kumukuha. Kung ako man ay iibig, ako ang pipili." (Thank you, miss. It is an honor to be chosen. It's a waste though that you do not seem to know me at all. Here, I hunt the deer I wish to eat, and I get for myself whatever I need. If I ever fall in love, I'll be the one to choose.)

Unwilling to accept rejection, Fernanda stays on in Garuda's camp with her entourage, and that same night serenades Adel, an inversion of the traditional *harana*. Adel pays her no mind as his attention is directed at the photograph he finds inside the locket of the necklace he was gifted with—that of gentle-faced Senyang. He confides in his brother Marco that he has seen the woman once before, in one of their raids across San Antonio, and has not been able to get her off his mind since, and thus resolves to seek her out once again come daybreak.

Back at the mansion, Senyang is reintroduced into the story. This time, the plot is deliberately made to come to a standstill, dissipating the sense of scandalized revelry that has arisen from Fuentes' subversions of traditional gender norms through a lingering close-up of Roces approximating the same blocking assumed by the former in the previous scene, with the latter's demureness serving as an ideological antidote and visualized in a reversal of the previous shot sequence—the first being a wide shot to a close-up vis-à-vis a close-up to a medium shot in the next.

Senyang expresses her excitement for their forthcoming wedding with her fiancé Carding, and the languid pace of the pair's sweet exchange induces a state of contemplative admiration as audiences are made to gaze at Roces' soft features and stillness, making a pointed contrast with the stillness that Fuentes' character succumbs to only after the failure of a full day's exertion.

While both images share visual resemblance—the striking figures and features of then-reigning movie queens made front-and-center, viewed from or framed by the almost fetishistic gaze of male characters (effectively, a gaze that the audience is made to assume and identify with)—the two are made to be regarded differently, with Fuentes/Fernanda, on the one hand, meant to be beheld as a frustrated tigress settling in after a failed hunt, calm but still unpredictably dangerous, and Roces/Senyang, on the other hand, as a well-tended fire in a cool rural night, welcoming and bereft of any hint of harm because of its containment. The imageries both stars-in-their-characters conjure are deliberate as they correspond not just with their then-burgeoning star personas which each will go on to perfect and reinforce throughout their reigns, but more importantly with two of the three circulating cultural imaginaries of Filipino womanhood during their time.

Fernanda—the titular *tulisan* anti-heroine—reveals the postwar Filipino fascination with the Amazona, women warriors of the Anti-Japanese Guerilla Movement and later the Huks, "the first major political and military organization in the country to include and actively recruit women."<sup>4</sup> Vina Lanzona, in her work *Amazons of the Huk Rebellion: Gender*



Figure 4. Bandit matriarch Garuda (Ely Roque) laughs at the incredulity of the suddenly domestic situation she finds herself in with rival bandit king Bandong Agila (Pablo Guevarra), Fernanda's father: "Ikaw, isang pinuno ng tulisan, namamanhikan? Ha!" (You, a bandit king, come bearing gifts for a marriage proposal? Ha!)



Figure 5. [L-R first row: Tony Marzan as Marco, Amalia Fuentes as Fernanda, and Tito Galla as Adel]





Figure 6. Fuentas as Fernanda serenading Adel



Figure 7. Roces as Senyang and Greg Martin as her fiancé Carding



Figure 8. Fuentas as Fernanda rides out in the opening credits sequence

*Sex, and Revolution in the Philippines*, notes how “women played a central role in the Huk rebellion, and a significant number of Filipino women, mostly from peasant backgrounds, abandoned their traditional roles in Philippine society to participate in the struggle.”<sup>5</sup>

Stories featuring their capture and surrender filled the headlines of Filipino newspapers from the end of the war until the late '50s, when both Fuentas and Roces made their mark in local filmdom as next-in-line to the thrones formerly held by Gloria Romero and Nida Blanca.<sup>6</sup> The female anti-state fighters that gripped the popular imagination through accounts of their defeat by US-backed Philippine military forces were often represented as curious and ambiguous figures of feminine intrigue—“as both fearless warriors who had to be apprehended and [as] female victims who had to be rescued,” as Lanzona points out.<sup>7</sup> This ambiguity characterized the coverage of the first major guerillera held into military custody in 1947—Remedios Gomez alias Kumander Liwayway, a former beauty queen of Pampanga fiestas turned popular figure of communist resistance—as the press tried to account for the celebrity she enjoyed even among her captors who regarded her as an admired heroine from the war against the Japanese, a feared leader of the-now enemy forces, and a fragile figure of alluring beauty despite the ravages of hunger and exhaustion from protracted warfare, all embodied by one person.<sup>8</sup>

The Amazona moniker not just efficiently combines the elements of danger and beauty which the female rebels have come to be associated with, but also brings up a third element—that of a supposed connection to raw, natural power, being a force-of-nature herself—that all make up the essential star image of Fuentas.

Cesar Orsal, in *Movie Queen: Pagbuo ng Mito at Kapangyarihang Kultural ng Babae sa Lipunan*, calls Fuentas' star image the “Diosa”—one that foregrounds her sex, her physical beauty, and the desire and fear she arouses in men and among her admirers.<sup>9</sup> While the direct translation only bears the English word “Goddess,” several of the other attributes of Fuentas' public persona—“independiente, impulsibo, prangka, [I]jagi niyang iginigiit ang kaniyang iniisip na kadalasan ay ipinagkakamaling kasupladahan o katigasan ng ulo” (independent, impulsive, frank, and often insisting on her way that gets mistaken for haughtiness or stubbornness), which account for the other half of her affinity for notoriety—renders the initial translation insufficient however. To capture all the facets that qualify Fuentas' embodiment of the Goddess, the related literary archetype “Bitch-Goddess” might provide a more particularized fit. Described as “...adored because of her beauty, ...her appearance allures and entices her worshippers... [until they] become her victims and the goddess herself becomes a bitch, ...an emasculator,”<sup>10</sup> the universal archetype of the Bitch-Goddess thus best represents the power and danger behind Fuentas' signature star image.

Indeed, in the same year of this film's release, Fuentas figured in one of the biggest controversies of her career when she broke her contract with home studio Sampaguita Pictures by accepting a



Figure 9. Doña Gabriela (Isa Rino) to daughter Senyang: “Marahil ay niluob ng Diyos na ang isa sa inyo ni Roberta ay maging pang-tahanan para makadama naman ako ng isang kaligayahan sa pagpapakasal ng isang anak” (Perhaps the Lord has willed that between your sister Roberta and yourself, you have come to be fond of domesticity so that I may know the joy of marrying off one of my children)

significantly large offer (of P50,000, more than five times the P8,000 she was receiving per picture on contract) to appear in a film produced by an independent film outfit, RA Fans, established by fans of her love team with then-sweetheart Romeo Vasquez. The ensuing court case and publicity only further galvanized her Bitch Goddess image and her reputation proved scandal-resistant, successfully reaching a compromise with studio patriarch Jose Perez who obligated her to complete her final film assignment in exchange for her freedom from their restrictive contract.<sup>11</sup>

Fuentas' was a most dangerously alluring, powerfully unpredictable, impossibly untamable femininity that posed a potent threat to traditional patriarchal power, onscreen and off.<sup>12</sup> This face of Filipino femininity stands in stark and powerful contrast to the subdued, subservient, and non-threatening face put up by Roces' Senyang.

Senyang—whose performance of femininity Fernanda's threatens, both ideologically (within the film's discourse) and literally (within the film's diagesis)—stands in for the then-still-praised Hispanic feminine ideal of the Angel del Hogar (or the Angel of the Home/Hearth). Mina Roces, in her work on the cultural images that the early Filipino suffragettes negotiated and conjured to advance their cause in the 1930s, outlined the attributes of the Angel del Hogar as a woman who was “convent-bred, religious, charitable, demure, chaste, [and] strictly located in the domestic sphere.”<sup>13</sup> Epitomized by Rizal's immortal archetype Maria Clara from *Noli me tangere*,

this version of femininity was one drawn from equating gender with corresponding Christian values, essentializing specific virtues to be feminine and reducing womanhood into the embodiment of these virtues.

Modesto de Castro's 1864 pastoral, *Pagsusulatan nang Dalawang Binibini na si Urbana at si Feliza* (The Correspondence of the Ladies Urbana and Feliza), served as the quintessential book of female manners and spirituality from its initial publication at the wane of the Spanish colonization until decades into Philippine Independence from American rule.<sup>14</sup> Used as the primary textbook for most values education classes until the 1960s, which speaks to the power this particular imagination of the feminine continued to hold in the decade of Roces and Fuentas' rule as foremost queens of the Philippine silver screen, the epistolary novel lists down the essential traits of the Angel del Hogar as hardworking, demure, modest, filial, and protects her purity/virginity with utmost priority.<sup>15</sup> This ideal foregrounded the particularly Christian spirituality of Filipino womanhood, concretized in her public performance of virtues associated with her sex, which simultaneously put her on a moral pedestal while effectively confining her within the home and out of the public sphere to help keep out the moral corruption of the world. Roces' Senyang embodies both of these elements—possessing moral superiority over Fuentas' Fernanda whilst being under constant threat from the corrupt world around her, of which Fernanda is a huge part.

Immediately after the scene that reintroduced Senyang into the story and brought the audience up to speed with her character's impending marriage, she is seen back in the bedroom where she was first attacked, once again in her mother Doña Gabriela's arms. This time though, the embrace is tender not tense, expressing their joy that the betrothal has received the blessings of the couple's parents. Senyang's mood turns sour briefly as she remembers her twin Roberta sending word of the latter's inability to leave university to be with her on her special day, but her mother pleads for her understanding as Roberta has obligations to attend to as a scholar.

Senyang asks for her mother's counsel as she enters this new stage of her life, and Doña Gabriela is only too pleased to have her daughter express filial love by seeking her continued involvement. It is only fitting—indeed, telling of Senyang's embodiment of the Angel del Hogar—that this moment ends with her in front of her bedroom altar, lifting up her future plans in prayer.

The next day, we find Senyang in church—the only other place the audience sees her visit as part of her character's routine, other than the different spaces in their home. Emerging from mass, Senyang and beau Carding lock eyes with the tulisan Adel, who has come to town to seek her out after rejecting Fernanda the night before. They exchange



tense stares, but the latter is unable to approach Senyang nor introduce himself to her. He eventually relents and goes on his way, leaving Senyang wondering aloud if she has seen him before and why she sensed such sadness in his eyes.

We later learn that Adel had intended to kidnap Senyang right then, even with the presence of another man with her, to take her back with him to their camp to make her his wife, but for some unknown compulsion abandoned this course of action. Within the *Angel del Hogar* discourse though, the fact that Adel's impure intentions towards Senyang does not prosper makes sense, if not for the presence of her righteous fiancé there to protect her purity, then for the assurance that both were indeed at the threshold of the House of God, where Senyang's virtues were justly rewarded by divine protection.

What proves of curious interest then, when juxtaposed with that failure, is the relative ease and efficiency with which Fernanda is able to exact harm on her romantic rival, holy protection be damned.

Fernanda, upon learning about Adel's feelings for Senyang and his once-aborted plan to take the latter away, decides to do it herself out of spite. She stalks Senyang's movements and on the night of her wedding, and as the carriage waited to take the bride to church, Fernanda intercepts the procession and kidnaps Senyang, taking her to her mountainous hideout.

Contrary to the komiks cover's promised scenario of a male-tulisan-kidnapping-his-bride, it is the *Amazona*/bandit princess, whose femininity is in constant dialectical tension with the *Angel del Hogar*/domestic heiress, who is able to enact this violence, revealing the narrative's first thesis on Filipino femininity—that it is the figure of unchecked, dangerous, worldly femininity that is the threat/corruption that the morally superior but fragile feminine ideal is to be protected against.

Not knowing the peril that her twin finds herself in, Roces' other character Roberta finally makes her entrance into the narrative, arriving at the house a few minutes after her sister's abduction, bearing gifts and intending to surprise Senyang with her attendance. Dressed in a smart shooting jacket of gleaming leather, Roces as college-educated Roberta finds the household in a confused panic and immediately takes charge, a breath of fresh air to her earlier measured and restricted performance as Senyang.

Roces' Roberta is thrilling to watch as the contrast between her two characters' personalities are markedly pointed. Co-ed Roberta is headstrong and bold, while Senyang is passive and timid. Roberta moves the plot along with her actions, the myriad choices she makes and the depth of forethought she exhibits in making them, while Senyang quite literally has events and incidents happen to her, her mere presence always a cue for the narrative to slow down or even halt. In many ways, the thrill that Roberta brings to the story



Figure 10. Senyang, Carding, and Adel have a stand-off by the church doors



Figure 11. Fernanda kidnaps the bride Senyang, leaving the latter's mother to faint in fear



Figure 12. Roces as Roberta finally enters in the second half of the film

is similar to that of Fernanda's, but the film later takes pains to give nuance to this delineation.

The very night of Senyang's disappearance, Roberta wastes no time and seeks out her twin's fiancé to ask if he knows anyone who could have perpetrated the kidnapping. Expecting to help a man elbow-deep in planning and coordinating her sister's rescue efforts, Roberta is appalled to find that Carding has been reduced to a bumbling, heartbroken drunk, wallowing in despair that the local government could promise no assistance to the search because of their lack of funds and manpower.

Seeing Roberta at the door and mistaking her for Senyang, Carding whimpers his relief before being stopped dead in his tracks by Roberta, who proceeds to give him a stern wake-up call. With terse words, she neither emasculates nor tears down Carding, instead slaps sense into him with a much-needed reality check.

She employs this same tactful toughness the following morning, as she addresses the men of the hacienda and the town who have come to gather at their mansion, effectively soliciting their support to not only rescue her sister but also rid San Antonio of the pestilence of bandit pillaging.

Roberta's assertive brand of femininity differs from Fernanda's in the way she wields power vis-à-vis traditionally patriarchal institutions such as the man of the house and the male mob. Whereas Fernanda's sex serves both to allure and threaten masculine power, Roberta's seeks to collaborate and compliment. Within the paradigm of Roberta's performance of femininity, the power dynamic between the sexes is neither one of competition nor domination but of equal and complimentary partnership. This is very much rooted in the third cultural imaginary of femininity circulating at that time to which Roberta corresponds—that of the *Nueva Mujer Moderna* (New Modern Woman).

Described as "English-speaking, public school educated (preferably university-educated), a professional or a 'clubwoman' active in civic work," the *Nueva Mujer Moderna* is a particularly American contribution to the popular construction of Filipino femininity that emphasized the public role of women in society.<sup>16</sup> Initially called the *Girl-Filipina* (note the purposeful use of the English language to name this image), it was historically pitted against the *Dalagang Pilipina* (Filipino Maiden), a synonym then for the Hispanic *Angel del Hogar*, within academic and socio-political debates concerning the changing gender expectations of the 1920s and 30s.<sup>17</sup>

In a 1931 foreword to Perfecto Laguio's controversial treatise on Filipino womanhood, *Our Modern Woman: A National Problem*, then Director of the National Library Teodoro M. Kalaw differentiates between the *Nueva Mujer Moderna*/*Girl-Filipina* and *Angel del Hogar*/*Dalagang Pilipina*:

While the 'dalaga' was the flower of the house, the *GIRL-FILIPINA* was the life of society. She was wide awake, conscious of her opportunities, and perhaps a trifle bold; while the "dalaga" was more timid, more shy, very humble and ingeniously frank. The "dalaga" considered men an enemy to fear and to whom, as the inferior, she owed respect. The modern *GIRL-FILIPINA* looked on men as her equal, an equal in every sense except in that of physiological make-up.<sup>18</sup>

Aside from the obvious difference of constructing both images along the competing discourses of spirituality (*Angel del Hogar*) and secularity (*Nueva Mujer Moderna*), the most salient and immediately incompatible aspects of both



Figure 13. Roberta: "Paano makakabalik ang Senyang na minamahal mo, gayung sa halip na gumawa ka ng paraan para iligtas siya, ikaw ay naglalasing?" ("How will your beloved Senyang return to you if, instead of drawing plans to save her, you are drowning in drink instead?")



Figure 14. Roberta's words prove effective as a sober Carding joins the menfolk to support her crusade the following day



faces of femininity are the spaces they have carved out for women. While the Nueva Mujer Moderna insists that women should take their place among men in civil society as co-equal and co-responsible members of the body politic, the Angel del Hogar necessitates protection from the dangers of the corrupted world by staying put in the home. Roberta's and Senyang's fates then follow the logical dictates of the cultural imaginaries they respectively embody.

Heading into the wilderness, Roberta takes her place at the head of her sister's rescue party, sometimes running ahead of the pack but mostly alongside them, matching their every inch and step. As the trek through the mountains takes its toll, a curious moment of role reversal unfolds.

At a brief stop to catch their breath and let their horses rest, Carding sees Roberta reclining at the base of a nearby tree trunk, her eyes restlessly scanning the horizon for any signs of the bandits' hideout. He takes it upon himself to fetch her a face towel and a jug of water to help her cool down. The rest of the rescue party sees this exchange and maintains a respectful distance, neither teasing Carding for his sudden almost romantic gesture nor calling him names for taking on the traditionally feminine role of nurturer and caregiver.

That Carding is not reduced to a cuckold nor a sissy in that moment of concern while Roberta assumes the pose of a weary explorer speaks to the sense of safety men are made to feel in the face of this particular performance of femininity. This brief moment of tenderness ends as Roberta realizes their party still has a lot of terrain left to cover before dark and corrals the men to head out once again.

Not soon after, their party crosses paths with Adel, who himself is on his way to Fernanda's mountainous hideout after hearing about what the latter did to Senyang. At first mistaking Roberta for her twin, just as Carding first did then, Adel fills her in on who is responsible for her sister's capture and volunteers his services as guide to their rescue party. Though at first suspicious, Roberta eventually accepts the bandit's assistance.

Back in Fernanda's lair, Senyang is made to suffer the former's indignation and scrutiny. Now removed from the protection of church and home, she is made to stay in a cave of rudimentary amenities—a flimsy bed of bamboo, sackcloth for a blanket, and the natural openings of the cave as her door, windows, and skylight. With her white terno and messed up hair against the crevices of the cave walls and stalactites, Senyang is the picture of cultured femininity in literal and symbolic danger, out of her element in harsh, inhospitable nature, unlike Fernanda whose ruggedness and forcefulness almost make her raw, natural surroundings fit her like a glove.

Having this pair of polar opposite performances of femininity in such close visual proximity results in a brief but heartbreakingly comic scene of masquerade as Senyang is made to strip off her terno so that Fernanda can try it on. Fernanda mimics the other's demureness and tries to act the part, starting out mockingly then quickly turning sincere in an effort to take on a performance of femininity deemed more desirable by the man she has set her eyes on, only to be caught by her bandit king father, Bandong Agila, who proceeds to openly ridicule her pitiful attempt at traditional femininity in front of his men. Frustrated and humiliated, Fernanda sheds off the terno and throws it back at the still clueless Senyang, leaving the latter alone as she reasserts her dominance over her men who laugh and sing in revelry.

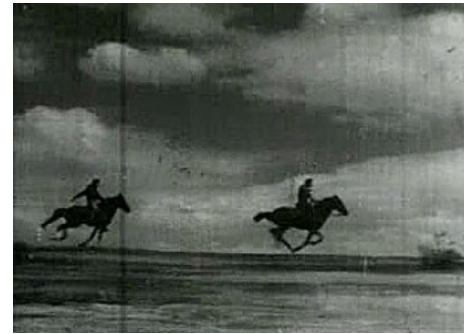


Figure 15. Senyang, Carding, and their rescue party seek out the bandits' hideout



Figure 16. Carding offers Senyang refreshments while they stop for rest



Fig. 17. Fernanda insists on trying on Senyang's bridal terno, only to be mocked by her men.

Unbeknownst to Fernanda and Bandong Agila, one of their foot soldiers Duko stays behind as the party leaves. Now able to satiate his lust without interference, he watches the frail Senyang redo her terno from one of the cave openings and, deciding to push his luck, lunges at her in a violent, almost sadistic assault.

The frightened Senyang, exhibiting more fight than she has ever shown capable thus far, resists and tries to push off Duko's attack, enacting Modesto de Castro's maxim on the Angel del Hogar's purity-primacy. Indeed, this scene dramatizes the paradox at the heart of the then already considered antiquated but still admired feminine ideal—that the Angel del Hogar's moral superiority is apotheosized in her vain attempt to guard and protect her own fragility and vulnerability against the overpowering evils of the corrupt and fallen world, a doomed task romanticized precisely for its impossible nature.

After much struggle, Senyang's frantic cries for help are eventually answered—if not as divine reward for upholding her purity, then as a practical dictate of contemporary censorship laws—by the return of Fernanda, who runs in just in time to witness the attack. Incensed with frustration, Duko resists Fernanda's orders to fall back, even threatening to overpower her as well. The latter proves more adept at fighting back, as she pins him to the ground and pummels him with her outrage. Duko is able to throw her back though and, just as he is about to grab at her, gets shot squarely in the forehead by Fernanda's right-hand man who rushes to her aid. Eyes bulging wide from deathly shock and with blood gushing down his face, Duko falls at Senyang's feet, sending the heiress into a hysterical, traumatized fit.

For the first time in the story, we are introduced to a seemingly psychic connection between the twins, as Roberta, sleeping under the shade of some shrubbery for the night, awakes in terror, filled with the same fear that had just overtaken Senyang. This almost spiritual connection figures in again later during the climactic end, serving the film's final thesis on Filipino womanhood.

Early the following day, Roberta's party, with Adel's help, traverses the rugged country for the last time, finally locating the cave in which Fernanda has kept Senyang imprisoned.

In one of the most impressive onscreen special effects created during the studio era, the audience is finally treated to the sight of Rocés/Senyang reuniting and interacting with Rocés/Roberta in the same scene, within the same frame through a seamless double-exposure shot. The pleasure of having two Roceses onscreen is undercut by the tragic state in which Roberta finds her sister. Senyang is in such pitiful mental shape that she is unable to recognize her twin, cowering away as Roberta tries to embrace her.

Remorseful for the compounded tragedies she has caused Senyang to suffer, Fernanda comes to ask for the latter's forgiveness and to arrange for her return that very morning, only to chance upon another woman who looks exactly like her captive but who holds herself with as much power and fury that match her own.

As if beholding such state-of-the-art camera trickery was not thrilling enough for contemporary audiences, they are then treated to a sequence of film magic that is much more organic but just as enthralling—seeing box office rivals Rocés and Fuentes, this time equally matched in characterization, battle it out in a full-blown physical brawl.



Figure 18. Duko (Sabas San Juan) attempts to get his way with the vulnerable Senyang



Figure 19. Twins Senyang and Roberta are revealed to have a psychic connection



Figure 20. The moment the two Roceses meet



In the ensuing skirmish, both Roberta and Fernanda trade and take blows from each other, with no woman able to out-skill or out-fight the other. While this may have been strategically designed to titillate but not offend either camps of the two movie queen's fandoms, the decision to portray both characters standing in for the Amazona and the Nueva Mujer Moderna within the film's discourse on Filipino femininity as neither ascendant nor superior to the other speaks volumes about the hesitation with which contemporary society approached the embodiment and performance of female power then—in both its emasculating and complimentary forms. The refusal to adjudicate an actual winner between the two may extend beyond the more practical concern of star image/prestige and into a statement about which femininity is deemed more acceptable in the form they have then taken, in this case neither, with both made palatable only as objects of spectacle.

With a gun lying on the ground some feet away and both women on the floor grappling with each other whilst trying to reach for what could help them end this once and for all, it takes the intervention of the two men in Roberta's party—Carding and Adel, who run in from the ongoing gunfire outside, exchanged between Fernanda's bandits and the menfolk of San Antonio—to break them up and force a temporary truce.

The chaos created by the foursome's scuffle triggers a panic attack in the distraught Senyang who runs away from the violence, out of the cave that has been her prison, and unwittingly into the rain of bullets outside. The four try to stop her but are too late as Senyang is shot in the back the moment she reaches the mouth of the cave.

Roberta, Carding, and Adel rush to get Senyang away from the melee as Fernanda seeks out the shooter and guns him down herself in vengeance. The four huddle around a mortally wounded Senyang as the pain from the gunshot brings her a moment of clarity.

In her fiancé's arms, Senyang laments about missing their wedding. Turning to Roberta, she thanks her sister for coming to her rescue and asks that she promise to take care of their mother on her behalf. They try to get her to conserve her strength, but she carries on, and with her dying breath promises that she will not leave Carding's side because she will live on in the life of her twin Roberta: "Carding, mabubuhay pa rin ako sa kanyang katauhan" (Carding, I will live on in her person.).

As the Angel del Hogar, Senyang achieves her ultimate apotheosis in death, as her face is photographed with an almost unnatural glow that slowly dims as she passes on. Even more notable is Senyang's conscious recognition, in her last moments, of her and Roberta's psychic connection, that by claiming to be able to live on in her sister's life, she invokes the notion of twins not as two distinct individuals who happen to be mirror images of each other—be it their physicalities or personalities—but as two halves of a larger self. By living on in Roberta, Senyang implies that her sister will bear the continuity of her legacy, her relationships,



Figure 21. The threesome finally face off



Figure 22. The money shot in the film's poster and much of its promotional materials, framed by this exchange between Fernanda and Roberta: "Hindi. Hindi kita lalabanan. Maniwala ka sanang pinagsisihan ko ang lahat" (No, I refuse to fight you. Please believe that I have regretted all I've done) / "Lumaban ka, sapagkat sa iyong kamatayan lamang ang aking kasiyahan" (Fight, for only your death will bring me joy)



Figure 23. Movie queens Roces and Fuentes fight to the death

and her responsibilities. Indeed, at the end of the film, once the four emerge as the sole survivors of this all-out clash between the bandits and the townsfolk, they literally walk out into the sunset in pairs—with Adel realizing he can learn to care for a repentant Fernanda because of their shared values and way of life, and Carding offering Roberta the necklace that Senyang had always worn but was taken from her at the start of the film, thus putting the whole plot into motion then and signifying the beginning of another story shared henceforth with Roberta.

### Tulisan and the Construction of the Babaeng Pilipina Ideal

By declaring that her death marks not her own end but the beginning of her living on in the life of her twin, Senyang not only makes a tragic sacrifice to gift Roberta with the romance she knows her sister's life lacks, but as the Angel del Hogar she dramatizes how postwar Filipino women negotiated the incongruous and contradictory aspects of the antiquated Hispanic feminine ideal with the changing demands of the modern world as embodied by Roberta's Nueva Mujer Moderna. By making a point to vocalize this persistence of her spirit before killing off Senyang at its climactic end, the film's discourse on contemporary Filipino femininity indicates that the emergent postwar ideal—which may be identified as the essential star image that Roces herself comes to embody and perfect onscreen and off, the "Babaeng Pilipina" (Filipina Woman)—is the amalgamation of the merits of the increasingly obsolete Angel del Hogar and the pre-war American-endorsed Nueva Mujer Moderna. With the Angel del Hogar's demise, what passes with her is the fragility and homeboundness of the performance of Filipino female spirituality and what lives on and changes within the Nueva Mujer Moderna's original performance of civic centrality is a restored albeit modified sense of Christian female morality serving as the new core from which the Babaeng Pilipina's active public participation emanates.

The resultant hybrid, this new Babaeng Pilipina ideal, that brings together the moral/spiritual and civic/political dimensions of the two previous imaginaries may be seen in the transformation that Roberta undergoes at the very end of the narrative, as she walks off into the sunset with her new man by her side. Apart from navigating the eventual domesticity that her budding romance will bring into her life, her character's capacity and appetite for vengeance and violence, justified as they were, have been quelled and replaced by a newfound ability to co-exist with and even forgive the perpetrator of her sister's suffering, revealing the change that has taken place within her character and hinting that indeed some aspect of Senyang's moral ascendancy and impossible spirituality now lives within her. However, this is not a complete metamorphosis as she retains integral aspects of her former self, such as her independence and assertiveness, visualized by her walking alongside and close to, and not in the arms of, her new romantic interest.



Figure 24. Senyang, running with her hair flying about her face and her torn terno rustling about her, recalls the imagery of Inang Bayan in peril



Figure 25. A dying Senyang makes a final promise





Figure 26. Roberta, Fernanda, Carding, and Adel emerge as the final four survivors of the bloodbath

As embodied by the changed Roberta, the Babaeng Pilipina retains the internal tensions inherent in the still persistent contradictions within the original imaginaries from which it has been created, and the continuous management and negotiation of this unstable new creation are the meat and conflict for much of the other characters Roces brings to life in her films after *Tulisan*. The duality motif recurs in much of Roces' filmography, such as in her landmark film *Maruja* (1967) directed by Armando de Guzman,<sup>19</sup> featuring a story of reincarnation and a role with which she has been associated throughout her career. Such is its enduring appeal that she even revisits the character in the semi-sequel *Gumising Ka, Maruja* (1978) directed by Lino Brocka.<sup>20</sup> In *Divina Gracia* (1970), also directed by de Guzman,<sup>21</sup> Roces gets to be the anti-heroine to her own heroine, this time co-starring her husband Fernando Poe, Jr. In all of them, the dialectical tension presented by either reincarnated but distinct personalities or a pair of diametrically opposed twins always ends in the aesthetic moment of eventual but unstable and momentary unity, playing out onscreen the drama and difficulties of creative synthesis.

Apparent too in *Tulisan's* final discourse is that the cultural imaginary of the Amazona is ultimately marginalized and rejected from the emergent postwar Babaeng Pilipina ideal, taking on nothing of her qualities nor her revolutionary merits. The Amazona is utilized as the film's central spectacle, indulging in the scandal that she creates and leaves in her wake, reveling in the way she threatens male power, but making sure to put her back in her place by the end. What is deemed acceptable—the version of Fernanda that we witness as the credits roll—is a repentant and morally redeemed but neutered shadow of all the female power and potency she represented at the start. Indeed, the film ends by taming and eliminating the danger its titular character posed towards patriarchal structures and systems, proffering to audiences instead a new, more palatable construction of Filipino femininity.

**Gershom Chua** is an instructor of communication theory and film studies in the Department of Communication at the Ateneo de Manila University.

**Endnotes**

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- 15 Modesto de Castro, *Pagsusulatan nang Dalawang Binibini na si Urbana at ni Feliza*, ed. Romulo P. Baquiran, Jr. (Quezon City: Sentro ng Wikang Filipino, 1996), 9.
- 16 Roces, "Is the Suffragist," 27.
- 17 Perfecto E. Laguio, *Our Modern Woman: A National Problem* (Manila: The Philaw Book Supply, 1932), v.
- 18 Teodoro M. Kalaw, foreword to *Our Modern Woman: A National Problem*, v-vi. (Capitalizations as in the original)
- 19 *Maruja*, directed by Armando de Guzman (1967; LEA Productions).
- 20 *Gumising Ka, Maruja*, directed by Lino Brocka (1978; FPJ Productions).
- 21 *Divina Gracia*, directed by Armando de Guzman (1970; FPJ Productions).



Scrutiny of the role of music in films is a less-traveled path in the study of Philippine cinema. Music in films is merely seen as an empathic sonic ingredient for the majority of spectators. However, in the film *Pilipino Kostum—No Touch!* I presuppose that this sonic presence has indeed more to offer. The music in this film serves as an actant that figuratively narrates in the form of a sonic character. The nature of music as an aural actant works to its advantage, for it can easily permeate between diegetic (sound source emanating from the diegesis or story) and non-diegetic (sound source from outside the diegesis) dimensions in cinema.

Each cue (the individual music piece in the soundtrack) of the studied film was analyzed for its sonic function in this article.

Directed by Manuel Conde in 1955, *Pilipino Kostum—No Touch!* showcases the opposition between two ideologies: the traditional and modern. This framework is manifested through a myriad of juxtapositions between music cues, costumes, mannerisms, the speech of actants, diegetic space, and time. The music scorers of this film are Francisco Buencamino Jr., Restie Umali, and Neo Ragas, while the lyrics for the duet of Mario Montenegro (Arturo) and Emma Alegre (Adeling) were written by Levi Celerio. Other actors in the film include Leroy Salvador (Badong), Lita Gutierrez (Melba), Alfonso Carvajal, Bayani Casimiro, Naty Bernardo, Jose Corazon de Jesus, Jr., Dan Mesinas, Fely Acuna, and Donato Buencamino. The story is by Jose de Cordova, and it was released by LVN Pictures.

The film revolves around Arturo's quest to tie the knot with the woman he truly desires finally. The problem, however, is that he has quite a few to choose from, so he decides to meet with them one by one on separate occasions. With no luck in the city, he then goes to a rural place with his cousin Badong. There, Arturo meets Adeling and falls for her. However, the arrival of Arturo's mother from the United States of America would complicate matters since she chooses a different woman for her son to marry. This woman is Arturo's former girlfriend, Melba. With a heavy heart, Arturo agrees to wed Melba. Fortunately, Arturo's "heart" has an ingenious plan. The day of the marriage comes. Arturo marches down the aisle in the church, but halfway through the altar, he collapses due to heart failure.

This sequence of shots shows three contrasting moods: wonder, fear, and anger.

His doctor, Dr. Makabuhay, then approaches him and listens to the former's heart's instructions on saving Arturo from his fatal state. The heart tells Dr. Makabuhay that Adeling is the cure. Badong then fetches Adeling and visits Arturo. Adeling's profession of love to Arturo revives the latter, and they end up as a couple at the end of the film

The social aspect of this film is critical about the normative discourse during the time of its creation. Together with the rest of the filmmakers, Conde suggested a way to resolve the polarity between modernity and tradition. In consequence, the only way for both principles to prosper is to coexist. The conflict of ideologies is focalized in the duet scene of Arturo and Adeling. Here is the transcription of the song lyrics:



Figure 1. Scenes from Manuel Conde's *Pilipino Kostum—No Touch!* (LVN Pictures, 1955). Arturo and his heart. All screengrabs by author



Figure 2. Badong and Arturo



Figure 3. Badong, Arturo, and his heart  
This sequence of shots shows three contrasting moods: wonder, fear, and anger

## Analyzing the Indispensable Role of Music in Manuel Conde's *Pilipino Kostum—No Touch!*

Crisancti L. Macazo



- Adeling: Sa nayon namin ay mag-ingat  
huwag kang bigla-bigla sanang manghawak  
naging ugali namin dito kahit pa kamay: “no touch!”  
Kung ang hangad mo ay paglingap  
at pag-undang ‘di na huhupa  
ang ukol dito ay tinginan lamang at “no touch!”  
Ang bangus wala nang lasa kung hinihipo tuwina  
Ganyan din pag ‘di ka magtigil ka, “no touch” muna!  
Kaya kung ayaw mong matodas,  
sa itak na ubod ng talas  
ang Pilipino kostum ay ating sundin, “no touch!”
- Arturo: Papaano tayo aasenso kung ang ugali ay antigo?  
Ligaw-tingin ay bunga ng pangarap na panay hangin.  
Kaya wala tayong progreso,  
sa ligawan ay atrasado  
dalaga’y ayaw mabisto kahit na may gusto!  
Bulaklak gumaganda dahil sa init ng araw.  
Ang pisil sa palad mo’y saksing tunay ang suyuan.  
Kahit ako ay mapahamak ng dahil sa aking paglingap  
Bayaan mong ‘di ko sundin ang nais mong “no touch!”
- Adeling: Ang harot sa suyuan ay may pusong salawahan  
Kung ako ang susundin ang ibig ko’y ligaw [na] pormal.
- Arturo: Dalisay ang aking paglingap  
Manalig kang hindi kukupas.
- Adeling: Ang Pilipino kostum ay ating sundin, “no touch!”

**TRANSLATION**

- Adeling: Be cautious in our village  
Do not hold [my hand] drastically  
It is customary that hands—no touch!  
If you wish for attention  
To invite relentlessly  
the practice here is gazing and no touch!  
The milkfish will lose its taste when constantly touched  
It’s the same here, no touch yet!  
So if you don’t want to die from a bolo’s blade  
Respect the Filipino custom, no touch!
- Arturo: How do we prosper if our we keep the old ways  
Love gazing is but a product of a dream full of air  
That’s why we don’t progress when even in courting  
we fall short,  
when a maiden denies even when she likes.  
A flower blooms beautifully because of sunlight  
A touch of your hand is a symbol of my true affection  
Even if I suffer with the thought  
That you let me not follow your way.
- Adeling: The rowdiness in courting has a fickle heart  
If I were to be followed, formal courting is what I want
- Arturo: My intention is pure  
Have faith that it will never flicker.
- Adeling: Conform with the Filipino custom, no touch!

(Transcription and translation mine.)

In the duet above, Adeling’s part, read as traditional, is always in triple time and accompanied by a rondalla ensemble, while Arturo’s part, read as modern, is always in common time and played by a big band ensemble. In my observation, it is a common practice during this period in films that rural living or rustic life scene is accompanied by a guitar or rondalla music which I denote as “traditional.” Also, a big band ensemble comprised of brass, woodwind, and percussion instruments are commonly used to underscore scenes that highlight American (or Western) trends; thus, I interpret them as “modern.” Furthermore, for the former, traditions have to be preserved, respected and kept the way it is since that is the way of life. This is also supported by Adeling’s religiously wearing of traditional costumes. However, apparently, for Arturo, old customs need to be supplanted with modernity in order to prosper in life. His costumes before meeting Adeling noticeably highlight new fashion or American. The dichotomy between the traditional and modern is further juxtaposed by visually showing the differences between the characters’ costumes and dance steps. Aurally, the characters’ dialogue also hints at their ideologies, not to mention the musical ensembles utilized to play the varying music cues. An example is the use of the guitar to depict rustic living (Figure 4).

The conflict between these ideologies is then resolved through hybridization and sonically interpreted by the interchange between rondalla and big band music. This diegetic series of quotations portrays an attitude of open-mindedness: modernity is not detrimental to society as long as people are willing to embrace them both (see Figure 5 for the clip showing the ideological conflict utilized in music).

As a film that juxtaposes “modernity” and “tradition” embodied by American and Filipino cultures, respectively, the tension between these two differing ideologies is mediated through aural and visual cues. The film audiences are drawn to the mediations made by the filmmakers who share the social perspective to what is “modern” and what is “obsolete.” It is also important to note that the juxtaposition of ideologies starts from the conception of the title itself written both in Filipino and English, where the latter implies sarcasm or mockery.

The film is mainly made up of comical cues from the start to the end. Occasional chromaticism and stingers are heard in the scenes portraying uncertainty and hilarious acts. Romantic tonal cues generally underscore the courtship of Arturo and Adeling, while the rest of the diegetic and non-diegetic cues project the contrasting ideologies. Collective intrinsic diegetic cue is heard to depict the collective voice or thought of characters in the diegesis. Short cues are employed as repositories of sonic and image embedded meanings. Rondalla and solo guitar diegetic music are used, which are indexical of tradition and rural life. Music cues under this category employ triple time.

On the other hand, big band music is indexical of “modernity” and high social status. Music cues composed under this category are in common time. Localized from Spanish, rondalla is associated with a repertory consisting primarily of folk music in triple time, such as “Pandanguhan” (Fandango Dancing), “Ili-ili Tulog Anay” (Lullaby), and “Bahay Kubo” (Nipa Hut). I posit that this style is a symbol of an “old-fashioned” sound. This assumption is based on the observation of films during this time.

In addition, none of the cues involving acoustic guitar and rondalla were in duple time, except when the merging of the two ideologies occurred. The filmmakers resolve the modern–tradition conflict through the simultaneous playing of “modern” music by the rondalla and big band visually and sonically. By saying this, I turn to the compositional technique of the music scorers, where they merged the two contrasting instrumental ensembles to play harmoniously as one big ensemble. This amalgamation is further supported through costumes, dance, and other visual cues. The pairing of partying guests with one another regardless of personal ideologies manifests the resolution. Thus, the hybridity of sound and image portrays the resolved ideologies. The following diagram summarizes my interpretation:

This film is about the freedom of choice in selecting a lifetime partner. Further, earlier in the film, Arturo’s heart (outwardly physicalized and exaggerated) would approve or disapprove of the woman through the quasi-diegetic



Figure 4. To establish the simplicity of rural life, a romantic guitar solo underscores this scene.



92  
li - ngap, ba - ya - an mong 'di ko sun - din ang na - is mong 'no

96  
Ang ha - rot sa su - yu - an ay may pu - song sa - touch!

Rondalla

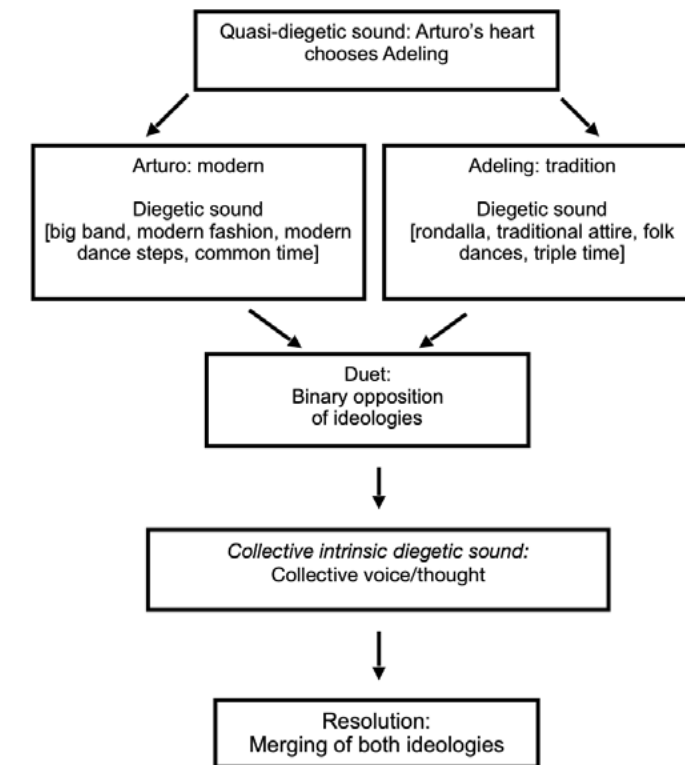
Figure 5. Measures 92–101 of the duet of Adeling and Arturo cue. Notations by author.

sound that it creates. The thud of a bass drum represents the heartbeat sound leitmotif.<sup>1</sup> Most of the time, the heartbeat is accompanied by comical or enigmatic non-diegetic music. The mise-en-scène in the first appearance of Arturo's heart depicts the ambiguity of the former's mental state (See Figures 1–3).<sup>2</sup> This design extends from the visuals to the soundtrack. Evidently, Arturo is not the only one confused in this sequence whether what he sees and hears is also perceived by his cousin, Badong. The spectators are questioning this as well at this point. From the spectators' focal point, Arturo is either hallucinating or dreaming because he seems to talk to someone or something outside of the frame of the image.<sup>3</sup> Yet, it is ambiguous because the spectators can construe otherwise. Arturo's interlocutor, his cousin, talks to him directly (although he cannot see the talking heart, thus implying Arturo is awake and conscious). This sequence is essential to show the clear-cut difference between the current and future events that will occur during Arturo's heart failure sequence in the church—his marriage to Melba. Thus, in the wedding ceremony sequence, Arturo's heart instructs Dr. Makabuhay to fetch Adeling, the woman Arturo truly desires to aid in his recovery. In the earlier scene, as mentioned previously, the sound of Arturo's heart is quasi-diegetic, where it appears that only Arturo hears the "voice" of his heart. However, in the nuptial sequence, the heart's voice is heard by Dr. Makabuhay as well.

For this reason, I label this as a *collective intrinsic diegetic* sound—the sound heard beyond one character or actant in the diegesis.<sup>4</sup> The voice of Arturo's heart can now be elucidated as the voice of another individual's conscience with regards to choosing a wedded partner. The "voice" states that wealth nor the culture where one belongs is not as crucial as consensual love binding two individuals together. In this film, the heart's voice urges the spectators to find true love regardless of social class, ideology, and material context. This device is seen in the final sequence, in which Dr. Makabuhay "heard" the voice of Arturo's heart. The spectators overhear this voice that led to the doctor's rationalization of the cause of Arturo's heart failure. It is due to the desire of Arturo's mother to wed Melba. However, he does not love her; he only longs for Adeling. The collective intrinsic diegetic sound enlightens the spectators and film's characters of the essence of true love when it comes to marriage in contrast to an arranged one. The quasi-diegetic sound of Arturo's heart could be read as his conscience alone. Moreover, his "heart" informs him whom it wants for a genuine partner in life. During Arturo and Adeling's courtship, a juxtaposition of customs and traditions is symbolized by the sounds between modernity and tradition.

The conceptual dichotomy between modernity and tradition continues to the sound-image display in the pamamanhikan sequence. Two main groups of characters

Diagram: Binary Opposition



Framework by author

are juxtaposed according to their respective ideologies, costumes, accompanying music, and dance. The side of Arturo is "modern," while that of Adeling's camp is "tradition," embracing the folk. In sum, the juxtapositions include (1) rondalla versus big band, (2) traditional costume versus American fashion, and (3) folk music and dances versus American "popular" music and dances. The end title is also performed at the final sequence by the "harmonious" ensemble of rondalla and big band.

The viewers constantly experience a quasi-diegetic cue. Such refers to the sound and voice of Arturo's heart, who can talk to him and even create musical tones to signal him whenever it wants him to know, approve or disapprove of something (or someone). Whenever there is a dream sequence in the film, the quasi-diegetic sound accompanies the serialist non-diegetic leitmotif. Serial music or serialism "is that in which a structural 'series' of notes governs the total development of the composition. It originated in Schoenberg's atonality, leading to his system of composing with 12 notes (1923)."<sup>5</sup> In this manner, the leitmotif itself is an actant in the event. A simpler leitmotif in the film is the drum pulse of Arturo's heart. The sound of the drum always signals the conversation between Arturo and his heart. The drum pulse takes on various colors, played on a tympani, sometimes on a bass drum, and sometimes even on a side drum. Another sound element is rondalla music. Whenever the ensemble

plays, the film viewers' attention is directed to rustic living. Some people may then label it as "old-fashioned," while others may think of it as a "regression from progress" based on the tone of the film's diegesis. But on deeper examination, this element possesses the essential qualities of Filipino customs and traditions. Rondalla is already a syncretized culture, combining Hispanic and local cultures. The music brought by the Spanish colonizers to the country has been fully embraced and localized by Filipino composers. Then enters the American trend and concept of modernization. The arrival of the new ideology is an inference to the spectators' point of view that aims to revisit their principles that would accept the inevitable modernity as presented in the film. Thus, should Filipinos move away from their Hispanic culture and embrace the current American trend—its music, dances, and way of life? The film resolves this opposition by embracing both in a mediated hybridity.

Seen through the framework of larawan,<sup>6</sup> the film outlines the opposition between western and local cultures or Filipino customs as opposed to the 1950s American-dominated Filipino culture sweeping the country. This film observes ways of thinking on this matter and offers a possible direction that culture could take. Though comical, it contains various stands on the customary. Should we keep what has been going on through the years, or should locals embrace the changing times and accept whatever culture the Western world,



particularly the United States of America, offers? A deeper inquiry regarding the characters played by Adeling and Arturo signifies the spectators' conflicting ideologies.

On the one hand, back during the days when one was afraid of the unstoppable and fast-paced changes happening in society, a dilemma emerges. The conundrum that, if totally embraced, modernity will consume traditions and customs that give identity and rootedness to Filipinos. On the other hand, in reference to the film, the belief about modernity as the “new messiah” that will deliver citizenry from slow, rustic, and simple living loudly reverberates as the solution to prosperity. Nevertheless, the fear that customs might disappear and modernity as the solution to progress is resolved through the intercession of filmmakers, spearheaded by the director, to embrace both ideologies to strengthen one another. Modernization may take place while keeping customs and traditions at the same pace at any given time. Consequently, Adeling and Arturo are the personifications of the mediated ideologies where the mediation in the narrative is done through wedlock. The parallelism of this resolution for the spectators is through accepting both ideologies as equally important and must be nurtured hand-in-hand.

As a highly musical film, which is common among films during the period when *Pilipino Kostum—No Touch!*

was created, music clearly plays a major role as an actant in delivering the message of the film narrative. With the current trend in local and primarily commercial cinema, the exposition and mediation of the dichotomy in this film may have been manifested differently. Perhaps, mainly through the spoken dialogue, costumes, and setting if it were to be made today.

In contrast, the current local cinema is now less musical. By saying musical, I refer to the instrumental performance, singing, and dancing in films. Nowadays, most music cues are simply supplied to underscore a scene but not as actants or music that take the role of an actor or narrator in the narrative. This I regard as the music track being generally utilized only to enhance the emotional aspects in cinema.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, I believe that revisiting the social value of this film is vital to the present time since, as to my observation, a good number of film spectators prefer Hollywood or foreign films over local cinema. There is always the danger of prejudice over the foreign to the point where local films are not given due respect and attention. Although preserving customs and traditions is not a current problem anymore, a reminder about coexisting ideologies is always essential. For this reason, may we be constantly reminded about the Arturos and Adelings in the society as we take on the challenges in pursuing prosperity in life.

**Crisancti L. Macazo** is a violinist, educator, vlogger, and independent scholar. He obtained his PhD in Music from the University of the Philippines Diliman in 2020. He was conferred with the Master of Music in Music Education, Applied in Violin Pedagogy by Santa Isabel College, Manila, in 2012 with a Meritissimus award. He received his Bachelor of Music from the University of Santo Tomas and the Rector's Award for Academic Excellence in Music in 1999.

#### Endnotes

- 1 “A [leit]motif is a theme whose recurrences remain specifically directed and unchanged in their diegetic associations.” See Gorbman, *Unheard Melodies*, 27.
- 2 David Bordwell explains: “*Mise en scène* seeks to sharpen oppositions: contrasts among characters, among scenes and moods, between characters and stage space as a whole. *Mise en scène* thus selects from a panoply of materials and procedures to create thematically unified, forceful production.” *The Cinema of Eisenstein* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), 144.
- 3 This is interpreted by Michel Chion as “acousmètre” in which the source of a sound-character is offscreen. Eventually, the source of this sound will unfold. See *Audio-Vision: Sound On Screen* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 129–31.
- 4 Collective intrinsic diegetic sound (or music) is “a sound heard by more than one character (but not all) in the diegesis of a film and the spectators.” Crisancti Macazo, “Music and Image: The Soundtrack of Manuel Conde's Extant Films, 1941–1958” (PhD diss., University of the Philippines, 2019), 333.
- 5 Encyclopedia.com.. “Serialism.” *Oxford University Press*. Last modified June 8, 2018. [www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/performing-arts/music-theory-forms-and-instruments/serial-music](http://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/performing-arts/music-theory-forms-and-instruments/serial-music)
- 6 “*Larawan* as a noun refers to an image in the form of a picture, a photograph, and a portrait. As a verb, it takes the form “to describe” (*ilarawan*). This ushers to the notion of spectators' gaze to see what is not visible or vague to the eyes. To reckon, Barthes' take on “photographic paradox” (19) is vital in this study. A photograph is not the total depiction of the subject. A spectator would always infer from his recollection of experiences to appreciate and understand what he is gazing at. *Larawan*, in the same respect, is an inquiry of the socio-cultural experiences of the spectators. In associating the spectator's self to the character and events in the diegesis of a film, he goes beyond the boundaries of the silver screen or any viewing apparatus to subliminally inquire about what the eyes and the ears experience in the cinema. *Paglalarawan* is the act of recreating an experience that is presented by a narrating agent beyond the frames of a picture, an event, or anything that has a story to tell.” See Macazo, 26–27; Roland Barthes, “The Photographic Message” in *Image Music Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (Fontana Press, 1977), 15–31.
- 7 According to Jerrold Levinson, “The thematic, instrumental, and stylistic continuities typical of film scores help to create a consistency of tone or feeling across the span of a film especially where the events presented are not tightly connected in a dramatic sense.” *Contemplating Art: Essays in Aesthetics*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 181.

## “That Should Be The Status Quo”

### An Interview with Antoinette Jadaone

Patrick F. Campos





Romantic comedy cuts both ways. The notion of romance in the genre is premised on traditional values, harboring bourgeois aspirations, foregrounding heteronormative stories, and extolling marriage or its promise as the ultimate happy ending for everyone. Especially when laced with humor, lighthearted romance can be an escapist fare, carved out moments to distract one's self from often harsh realities that one must deal with beyond the screen.

At the same time, however, when they are much loved in a culture, such as in the Philippines where they have dominated the big and small screens for decades in terms of the number of releases, gross receipts, and ratings, rom-coms can illuminate the shifting values of a community. For instance, those surrounding gender and familial expectations or the role of work and money in “personal” relationships, and the travails of (idealized) “ordinary” people with whom fans identify.

Because they are close to people's hearts and index the outlook of the cultural moment, rom-coms harbor the potential to interrogate unquestioned norms, customs, and institutions. And when humor is deployed for this purpose, the genre can be sharply critical. Thus, the rom-com, by definition, is clichéd, but it can be progressive.

It is in this ambivalent space where screenwriter and director Antoinette Jadaone can be located because she has endeavored to break the narrative and thematic rules of the genre that she adores. For instance, the happy-ending embrace is not the default conclusion of her films, such as that in her first breakthrough rom-com, *That Thing Called Tadhana* (2014), or in the love-triangle narrative *The Achy Breaky Hearts* (2016). With her work starring the erstwhile love team James Reid and Nadine Lustre (the TV series, *On the Wings of Love* [2015] and *Till I Met You* [2016], and the film *Never Not Love You* [2018]), she boldly explores the continuum of friendship and romance along the lines of gender-fluid desire and delves into the ‘use value’ of marriage and the layers of ‘labor’ involved in making a relationship work while the romantic couple negotiates the place of ambition, mobility, and economics in their shared life.

Her work is also distinct for its apparent recognition of the audience's awareness of popular media's codes and stereotypes, which she harnesses for the comedy and foregrounds to comment on the very same codes and stereotypes. We see this reflexivity at work in many of her films, including *Beauty in a Bottle* (2013), *You're My Boss* (2015), and *All You Need Is Pag-ibig* (2015). But it is deftly wielded in her first full-length film, *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay* (2011), *Ekstra* (2013), whose screenplay she co-wrote, and in her most recent film, *Fan Girl* (2020), which all offer metafilmic critiques of popular culture. This reflexive streak is the line we can follow to appreciate how she has tried to exceed herself and the genre she is most known for.

Though she acknowledges her debt to earlier Filipino comedies—notably by Joyce Bernal, from whose work one can trace Jadaone's early screwball characterizations of women, and films produced by Star Cinema, for which she eventually made many films—Jadaone herself has recalibrated the local audience's expectations. That is, she has not only broken genre conventions; she has set new ones, placing her in an ambivalent position vis-à-vis the status quo she underlines in this interview. In our conversation, Jadaone reflects on her filmmaking philosophy and the changing trajectory of her style and preoccupations.

**You made your first full-length films in the early 2010s, but you have been making shorts since the mid-2000s. Paint a picture of the film scene when you were starting.**

Paumpisa pa lang noon ang Cinemalaya at Cinema One Originals. Super saya na noon kapag ma-semifinalist, tapos magpi-pitch ka. I remember being so happy but also so nervous when I pitched for the first time for Cinemalaya and Cinema One Originals. Habang nasa pila, nakikita ko ‘yong ibang experienced filmmakers na magpi-pitch din, tapos iniisip ko, *shit, okay, one slot down*. I pitched three or four times sa Cinemalaya and Cinema One Originals before I got in via *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay*.

I also miss Cinemania [International Film Festival]. [Festival director] Tikoy Aguiluz championed short films. Ang sarap lang manood sa sinehan ng mga foreign films tapos magfa-fangirl ka sa mga directors na iniimbitahan nila. Naalala ko no'ng dumating dito si Quentin Tarantino. Habol ako sa kaniya kasi bihira naman makapunta dito ang mga director ng mga pelikulang pinapanood mo lang. Starstruck talaga.

***Six Degrees* is very different from your later films. How would you describe its place in your filmography?**

Even before film school, rom-coms talaga ang pinapanood ko at mga Pinoy comedies. Pumasok ako ng UP [University of the Philippines], ‘di ko kilala sina Wong Kar-wai at Fellini. But I've always been unabashedly a fan of Pinoy pop culture. I always thought my first film would be a rom-com. ‘Yong mga una kong nasulat, laging may love story. Pero hindi ako nakakapasok sa Cinemalaya at Cinema One Originals.

‘Yong *Six Degrees*, it was a product of my experience as a production assistant and script continuity supervisor noong nagtrabaho na ako sa industriya. As a PA and scriptcon, ako ang bahala sa mga talents, or “extras.” Ako ang nagpapabasa ng lines, ako ang nagrehearse sa kanila bago isalang sa director at assistant director (AD). Doon ko nakita ‘yong pagkakaiba ng talents sa celebrities. Then I started writing *Six Degrees*. Hindi siya rom-com, pero sa isang banda, love story pa rin. Hindi nga lang romantic love. But it was who I was noong panahon na ‘yon.

Ang naging parehas sa mga pelikula ko—kahit sa mga short films ko—babae ang bida. Nag-iiba lang ng anyo o ng genre, pero babae ‘yong nasa unahan. Hindi ko napansin ‘yon lalo no'ng nag-uumpisa ako. Pero naging natural sa akin na gusto ko, *kurwento 'to ng babae*. In the case of my early short films, batang babae.<sup>1</sup>

I always loved the idea of being inside the cinema with a lot of people watching the same film, laughing at the same time, kikiligin nang sabay, matatawa nang sabay, maiiyak nang sabay. ‘Yon ang cinema experience na kinamulatan ko sa panonood ng Pinoy rom-coms at comedies. Na-push ko naman sa *Six Degrees*. It was a great feeling to watch it with other people—this time, not just as a viewer but as the filmmaker.



Directing Lilia Cuntapay. Courtesy of Glenn Ituriaga



At work on the set of *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay* (Cinema One Originals & Post Manila, 2011). Courtesy of Glenn Ituriaga



With DOP Sol Garcia. Images courtesy of Antoinette Jadaone, except where noted





Holding the Cinemalaya Best Screenplay Balanghai trophy for *Ekstra* (Jeffrey Jeturian, Cinemalaya Foundation & Quantum Films, 2013)

With Irene Villamor and Joyce Bernal

I always loved the idea of being inside the cinema with a lot of people watching the same film, laughing at the same time, kikiligin nang sabay, matatawa nang sabay, maiiyak nang sabay.

**Six Degrees, Fan Girl, and your other films and co-writing credits like Ekstra display an acute awareness of the excesses of media culture.**

Pinoy pop culture girl talaga ako. Lumaki ako sa gan'ong environment, sa gan'ong pamilya. Pinalaki ako ng *Eat Bulaga*, Dolfy films, Tito Vic & Joey, *Liwayway*, *Tempo*, *People's Journal*, kaya 'yon na rin ang humubog sa kung ano ako as a filmmaker.

Noong nag-UP ako, doon ko minahal nang lubos ang pelikula. Ang taas ng tingin ko sa pelikula. Tapos no'ng nag-umpisa na ako sa industriya, parang na-shatter 'yong gan'ong pagtingin ko, kasi finished product lang lagi ang napapanood ko.

Noong naging bahagi na ako ng mga gumagawa ng pelikula, doon ko narealize na, ay, *mahirap pala. Ay, hindi pala gan'on kadali. Ay, ang dami palang mali sa sistema.* Long working hours, underpaid staff and crew, creative compromises, may politics, may business side, may celebrities na pinangangalagaan. So nagkaroon ng ibang pagtingin sa pelikula at pagpepelikula habang nabubuo ko 'yong sarili ko.

I was very lucky that I got to work with Joyce Bernal and Irene Villamor from the start. Nahubog nila 'yong pagtingin ko sa pelikula. So siguro, sa tulong ng mga danas ko sa film school sa UP na mga film theories, sa kinalakihan kong pagmamahal sa Pinoy cinema at pop culture, at 'yong naging mga danas ko noong nagtrabaho na ako, lahat 'yon nakatulong bumuo ng sarili kong pagtingin sa pelikula at sa industriya, and ultimately, sa lipunan.

**From making shorts and Six Degrees to making mainstream rom-coms, how did you imagine addressing the popular audience?**

I have always been a rom-com girl—I'm a consumer of rom-com. Kaya ang dream ko talaga, maging romantic comedy director—kasi doon ako lumaki. Later on ko na lang na-realize 'yong power—and responsibility—na mero ang mainstream cinema, ang nabibigay no'n sa writer at/o director ng popular cinema. It started as just a simple pangarap, tapos no'ng nandoon na ako, saka pa lang nag-dawn sa akin 'yong malaking opportunity at responsibility of speaking to the consumers of popular media.



With the crew in London for *Never Not Love You* (Viva Films & Project 8 Corner San Joaquin Projects, 2018)



With Irene Villamor directing Sofia Andres



With PD Digo Ricio, Lilia Cuntapay, programmer Roger Garcia, at the Far East Film Festival in Udine



With Bianca Balbuena-Liew and Dan Villegas at the Berlinale

**Your endings are not always happy. Sometimes they're sad, ambiguous, open-ended.**

Bilang matagal na nga akong consumer ng rom-coms, alam ko na kung ano 'yong gusto ko at ayaw ko sa mga rom-coms. Sabi nga ni Anne Curtis sa *No Other Woman* (2011), "I know the market because I am the market." Kahit consumer ako ng popular cinema, critic din ako. Marami akong kuda. So, when it was time for me to make my own films, alam ko na kung ano 'yong mga gusto kong mapanood, hindi mapanood, at baguhin. I made the rom-com I wanted to see for myself.

**For example, the closing embrace in Alone/Together (2019) has been interpreted in different ways. If Christine and Raf did not end up with each other, then the negotiation between independence and marriage becomes the highlight. But fans of Liza Soberano and Enrique Gil on social media read the ending as the start of their getting back together.**

Ang totoo, hindi ko alam. I only wrote up to what was in the film so kung ano man ang desisyon nila pagkatapos, sila na 'yon. Baliw man pakinggan pero tini-treat ko talagang mga totoong tao ang characters ko na may sariling desisyon lalo sa ending.

For me, it wasn't ambiguous. From the start, I knew I was telling Christine's story. So kapag nabuo na siya, buo na ang kuwento. Raf appearing toward the end was just icing on the cake. Kaya I purposely made Christine fulfill her dream first bago sila magkita ulit ni Raf sa dulo. Mag-isa niyang nabalik ang sarili niya. Hindi niya kailangan ng tulong ni Raf. Kung magkita man sila ni Raf, kung maging sila man after, bahala na sila, basta ang importante, buo siya bilang siya.

**Most of the implied audiences of your romance movies are fans of the stars in the lead roles. Do you factor in the fans when you write or direct?**

Depende kung umpisa pa lang ay may mga non-negotiables na ang management. We lay the cards on the table before the start of the project. Pero, in general, no. Again, loyalty must be to the story. If it serves the story, go. Kung 'di magustuhan ng fans, gano'n talaga. Ang mahalaga, akma sa kuwento ang nangyayari.

**That Thing Called Tadhana was a phenomenal hit, warmly received by the popular audience despite its then unconventional storytelling style and ending. Could you give your thoughts on the changing tastes of the audience?**

Malaking part ng success ng *That Thing Called Tadhana* ay timing. In the 2010s, 'yon talaga ang peak ng rom-coms ng Star Cinema, featuring the biggest love teams or stars like John Lloyd Cruz, Sarah Geronimo, Toni Gonzaga. Super hit talaga sila. Minahal ng mga tao. Pero dahil siguro sunud-sunod, nanawa rin sila.



Fan din ako ng Star Cinema rom-coms. Nanonood talaga ako sa sinehan, madalas nga opening day or opening week. So nakikita ko 'yong similarities sa story o sa treatment. May theme song, may best friend, may magkaibang family or group of friends, may sounding board na nagsasabi sa bida kung ano ang dapat gawin, very glossy, may slo-mo, wala silang pores.

So no'ng narelease ang *Tadhana* in 2014 sa Cinema One Originals and in 2015 in theaters nationwide, sakto ang timing, kaya ang tingin ng rom-com fans ay bago 'to. Kasi walang best friend, walang pamilya, walang kaibigan, dalawang tao lang na nagkukuwentuhan. Ni wala ngang kiss. Tapos kung ano ang pinagkukuwentuhan natin over beer at lasing tayo, 'yon ang pinagkukuwentuhan nina Mace at Anthony. Sa totoo lang, hindi naman bago ang dalawang taong nagkukuwentuhan lang sa pelikula, pero sa Pinoy audience, bago siya.

Perfect timing lang talaga. Kumbaga, ang tagal sila sineservan ng Putahe A, na gusto naman nila, so no'ng may biglang naghain na Putahe B, *ay, try ko rin 'to, baka naman masarap din.*

It was an unexpected success. Sinulat ko lang ang mga sarili kong danas at danas ng mga kaibigan ko, mga nasagap kong tsika sa MRT, coffee shops. Ginawa kong pelikula, ginawa kong script. Kaya rin siguro relatable. Kasi kuwento talaga ng mga totoong tao. Nagkataon lang, si Angelica Panganiban ang gumanap.

#### Were you also influenced by the *Before* trilogy?

Yep! Pero *Before Sunset* (2004) pa lang ang napanood ko n'on. Naisip ko, puwede pala 'yon, dalawang characters sa pelikula na

nagkukuwentuhan lang.

#### *That Thing Called Tadhana* clearly marked your voice, your trajectory, and set you apart from other romance and comedy directors.

Definitely! I wanted my own kind of rom-com. Plus, madrama talaga akong tao. Really, off my blog, my journals ang *Tadhana*. I was writing blogs in college. Kapag nasasaktan ako, nagsusulat ako. Kapag naiiyak ako, nagsusulat ako. Kapag masaya ako, nagsusulat ako.

I didn't know that I was already starting to write *Tadhana* then. Sabi nga nila, writing doesn't start with the first scene you write on the blank page. For me, it started more than ten years before *Tadhana*. 'Yong pagmamahal ko sa *Tadhana*, nando'n na pala even before I started writing it. So, it really was my voice. I didn't know it then, but yes, it was the start of how I would write later on.

#### Being in the industry, I'm sure you've had to make many compromises.

Ang dami! I have worked years in the mainstream as a scriptcon and in TV as a PA and scriptcon, but those years still didn't prepare me enough no'ng ako na ang director. When I was starting, hindi ko pa alam kung paano i-deal ang mga compromises. Madalas, oo lang ako nang oo, kasi ang iniisip ko, *bata pa lang ako, bago lang ako, mas alam nila 'yan.* May inilalaban pa rin ako, pero I second-guessed myself most of the time and gave in.

One would be 'yong biglaang playdate. Kailangang maagang matapos ang pelikula kasi napaaga ang playdate. I understand



With Richard Yap and Jodi Sta. Maria

that it will be good for the film in terms of kung gaano karaming manonood—precious playdates kasi ang Valentine's Day, Black Saturday, at Christmas—at kung may kasabay bang Hollywood films na malalakas. Kumbaga, business decision. In the end, [my films with good playdates] turned out to be box-office hits, which was a dream for a young director like me.

Creatively though, it was stressful because I had to shoot every day, then go straight to editing. I wasn't used to that timeline kasi mahilig akong mag-revise, and I love taking time with studying my film, my material, time para mag-experiment, para magkamali. But that experience—'yong being restricted, being limited—'weirdly pushed me to think of ways to be creative, to explore. Habang nalilimit ka, habang nilalagay ka sa loob ng isang kahon, mas lalo kang nakakaisip ng paraan kung paano makalabas sa kahon.

I was relatively young when I went mainstream. I wasn't as confident and secure. Kamada ko 'yong kuwento, 'yong script, kasi ako 'yong nagsulat. Alam ko ang vision ko sa pelikula. But when I was starting, I felt I was only a small voice. But those years, ang dami kong natutunan.

As a scriptcon for Star Cinema and a fan of mainstream films, I always knew na ang pelikula, hindi lang siya craft and art—business din siya. Naintindihan ko na 'yon early on, lalo no'ng scriptcon ako kay Direk Joyce and how the studio always had a hand in the creative process. Siguro sobrang okay na galing ako sa mainstream, pero 'yong roots ko, indie pa rin; doon ako nagsimula. So, I only had to find that middle ground.

I don't think I have non-negotiables. The writer's loyalty is always to the story.

**Most of your women characters are independent-minded and strong-willed but must contend with social pressures and cultural expectations. Do you have non-negotiables when it comes to writing women characters, regardless of plot or genre?**

I don't think I have non-negotiables. The writer's loyalty is always to the story. Writers must be able to write any character no matter how unsympathetic if it serves the overall statement of the film. Hindi ko sinasabi sa sarili kong, *ay, dapat strong female characters ang isusulat mo ba.*

I owe a lot to the women I grew up and I worked with when I was starting in the industry. I was surrounded by strong women—my Mama, kapatid ko, my high-school teachers. Sina Direk Joyce, Irene, mga line producers, mga babae silang lahat holding key positions sa set, and all strong, independent women. So sila na talaga ang imahe ng babae sa akin kahit dati pa. Kaya no'ng nagsusulat na ako, 'yon ang babae para sa akin, strong, independent, matapang, speaks her mind.

Basta mga babae sila, hindi kailangang tawaging “strong women.” That's the dream, na when we see strong female characters in films, hindi na siya ico-commend, kasi, 'yon na talaga dapat ang status quo.



With the crew in Mt. Kiltapan for *That Thing Called Tadhana* (Cinema One Originals, Epicmedia, Monoxide Works, One Dash Zero Cinetools, 2014)



Angelica Panganiban, JM de Guzman, Jadaone field questions at the presscon of *Tadhana*



With film critics Oggs Cruz, Philbert Dy, Richard Bolisay, and producers Bianca Balbuena and Lilit Reyes, carrying the Audience Choice for *Tadhana* and Best Short Film prize for *Ang Nanay Kong Noisy*





With women crew: AD Joi Bayan, camera operators Cesca Lee and Anne Monzon, shooting *Fan Girl* (Black Sheep, Globe Studios, Epicmedia, Cross World Productions, Project 8 Projects, 2020)

**Are there story elements from your films that, looking back, you would change?**

I can never watch my films and not think of any scene or decision I want to re-do. Kung puwede lang baguhin at balikan! Pero, I think, kasama 'yon sa magic ng film. It's like a time capsule for the filmmaker. 'Pag pinapanood mo ang old films mo, you see yourself transported to that young version of you—her philosophies, mga pinagdaraan niya noon, mga pinaniniwalaan niya noon. I'll give it to my youth.

**Which films or filmmakers influenced you?**

I developed my humor because of working with Direk Joyce, easily one of the funniest people I know. 'Yong kilig, 'yong rom-com sense ko, I developed through watching a lot of Pinoy rom-coms—Olivia Lamasan, Star Cinema, Jolina Magdangal-Marvin Agustin movies—but how to direct kilig and comic timing, kay Direk Joyce ko nahasa.

Working with Direk Joyce and Irene Villamor (AD siya, scriptcon ako) for over eight years, 'yon talaga ang naghubog ng work ethics ko at pag-ibig sa pelikula.

I was blessed to have started in the industry working with them, whose passion for film, hindi matatawaran. I was working with excellent and passionate people on set, mga beterano na sa industriya—DOP Charlie Peralta, editor Marya Ignacio—mga taong nakikita ko lang dati ang mga pangalan sa credits ng pelikula, ngayon kadaupang-palad ko na. 'Yong standard ko ng work ethics, passion, pagmamahal sa pelikula, tumaas dahil sa kanila.

Later on, when I had a creative breakdown and I had to pause for a year dahil tingin ko naburn out na ako, wala akong masulat, hindi ako makasulat, I wasn't happy anymore with my filmmaking, my friend [film critic] Richard Bolisay introduced me to the cinema of Olivier Assayas and Asghar Farhadi. [Film editor] Ben Tolentino introduced me to the cinema of Andrea Arnold. For a year, I immersed myself in their cinema, watching their films over and over again, taking down notes, asking myself why they used a close up instead of a medium shot, watching their interviews and masterclasses. After that year of rest and introspection, I wrote *Love You to the Stars and Back*. Rom-com pa rin, oo, pero I did it with much more confidence, at may paniniwala sa boses ko.

**Indeed, there'd been a noticeable change in your films from *Love You to Stars and Back* (2017) onward. They have darker themes—terminal disease, crime, rape. *Never Not Love You* is literally darker, too, with its preponderance of powerful night sequences. Your last three films are not rom-coms anymore. Do you see yourself moving in this direction,**

**farther from the feel-good stories you're known for?**

Definitely. Pero gagawa pa rin ako ng love stories, hindi na lang muna siguro rom-com. Sa totoo lang, napagod na rin ako sa rom-com. Parang hindi na siya ako ngayon, sa kung sino ako ngayon.

When I was doing rom-coms, I was this dreamy girl na kakapasok pa lang sa industriya, full of idealism, full of angst in life, too. Nachannel ko na lahat ng energy na 'yon sa mga nagawa ko. Films are always personal to the filmmaker. Tumatanda na rin ako. Nasimot ko na siguro lahat ng kilig sa katawan ko, kaya may iba na akong hinahanap ngayon. May love pa rin at romance, pero sa ibang anyo naman.

Ang philosophy ko naman sa paggawa ng mga proyekto ay, if it excites you, go. Kapag hindi tumatalon ang puso ko, 'wag na muna. Kilala ko na ang sarili ko. Kapag pinipilit ko ang mga kuwento, hindi maganda ang labas. Pero kapag nae-excite ako, laging magandang pangitain. At mahirap makuha 'yon ha, lalo dahil ang tagal ko nang nagpepelikula. Kaya kapag dumarating 'yong gano'ng lukso ng dugo at puso, go.

***Fan Girl* could be seen partly as a meta-commentary on your previous works because fans form a significant part of your audience, but it takes a much darker turn. Tell me about your changing outlook.**

Yes, it started as that! Actually, 'yong unang director's statement ko, about fan culture lang talaga, celebrity culture. Ibang-iba sa kinalabasan ng *Fan Girl*. Kasi hindi na lang siya about fandoms sa celebrities na artista, pero fandoms na rin sa mga pulitiko. Blind fanaticism. Nag-evolve siya habang tumatagal. Habang palala nang palala si Duterte, sumabay 'yong pagbabago ng statement ng *Fan Girl*.

Nagustuhan ko 'yong ako na filmmaker no'ng ginagawa at ginawa ko yung *Fan Girl*. Nag-umpisa ang *Fan Girl* noong 2015. It was only an idea, a concept. Pinalabas siya ng 2020. Five years 'yon na na-develop, and in those years, nakita ko rin 'yong journey ko as a filmmaker, as a storyteller. I took my time.

It was my first film na nakapasok sa international project markets and labs, with international mentors. Yung exposure na 'yon, malaki ang nadulot sa pagtingin ko sa *Fan Girl*, and in my storytelling in general. In 2015, it was just a rom-com fan's story. Hindi pa si Duterte ang presidente natin noon. Pero *Fan Girl* changed with our times, with our political climate. So it had to adapt to that change, at hinayaan ko lang.





With directors Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes



At UPFI with Enrique Gil, Liza Soberano, and filmmakers, writers, and producers Sari Dalena, Monchito Nocon, Keith Sicat, Alemberg Ang, John Torres, Seymour Sanchez, and Rod Marmol. Courtesy of Sari Dalena

Hinayaan kong si fan girl ay nabubuhay na parang totoong tao, hindi lang siya nabubuhay sa kuwento ko, sa script ko. Nabubuhay siya sa panahon ni Duterte. Isang batang babae in a man's world, in Duterte's Manila.

We were almost ready to shoot in 2016, pero hindi natuloy because our initial casting line-up fell through. But it was blessing in disguise. Simula no'n, naging philosophy ko na 'yong 'everything happens for a reason,' and that everything is part of the process. Cinema is the process. 'Yan ang tinandaan ko no'ng nakausap ko si Raya [Martin]. Ewan ko kung naaalala pa niya, pero tumatak talaga sa akin.

I am excited about the films I will make in the future. Baon ko lahat ng natutunan ko sa *Fan Girl*, sa lahat ng nagawa ko before that. I guess 'yon ang pinakamahalaga sa ngayon para hindi mawala 'yong fire. Ang dali-dali kasing mawala no'n. Pero kailangang ingatan. Kapag may kuwento akong nae-excite ako gawin, kahit maliit na ningas lang 'yan, iniingatan ko. Susubukan kong paapuyin. Bihira na lang 'yan, pero kapag dumating naman, *pak*, alam kong hindi ko kailangan apulahin.

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**Patrick F. Campos** is a film scholar and programmer. He programs the annual Tingin Southeast Asian Film Festival in Manila and co-organizes the biennial Association of Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference (ASEAC). For ASEAC this year, he programmed Cinematic Counter-Cartographies of Southeast Asia, composed of films from Timor Leste, Jakarta, Sabah, Mindanao, Pattani, Chiang Mai, and Rakhine. His most recent book is the co-authored archival-visual and critical pedagogical text, *Scenes Reclaimed: CCP 50 x Cinemalaya 15* (2020).

#### Endnotes

- 1 Jadaone's short films include *it feels so good to be alive* (2005); *plano* (2005); *Saling Pusa* (2006); *Pink Ranger: Akin Ka Lang* (2006); *Tumbang Preso* (2008); and *Ang Nanay Kong Noisy* (2014).

# HELLO, LOVE, LIBERAL DEMOCRACY

The Politics of the Contemporary Filipino Romance Film

Janus Isaac V. Nolasco





Ako ang umayos sa iyo, kaya akin ka.  
—Lani to Kai, *The Day After Valentine's* (2018)<sup>2</sup>



Opposite page: Liza Soberano as Audrey in *Everyday I Love You* (Mae Cruz- Alviar, ABS-CBN Film Productions, Inc., 2015). All screengrabs by author

A scene from *That Thing Called Tadhana* (Antoinette Jadaone, Cinema One Originals, 2014)

### Opening Scene

The year 2014 was a milestone in the Filipinos' enduring love affair with the romance genre.<sup>3</sup> A film, *That Thing Called Tadhana* “set off . . . a movement.”<sup>4</sup> This was “Romcom 2.0.”<sup>5</sup> Departing from its predecessors,<sup>6</sup> it offered more progressive portraits of women,<sup>7</sup> abandoned the traditional happy endings, and focused on the theme of “self-love.”<sup>8</sup>

Films like *Tadhana* have come out since. The output was a huge leap from the 2000s, when only 17 romantic films from ABS-CBN were released. In contrast, there were already 76 such films between 2010 and the end of 2018.<sup>9</sup> Needless to say, the profits poured in.<sup>10</sup> Responding to market demand, ABS-CBN opened Black Sheep in 2018, a studio that accommodates less traditional, studio-restricted, and more experimental films.<sup>11</sup> Today, *Hello, Love, Goodbye* is the highest-grossing Filipino film.<sup>12</sup>

Despite its popularity, however, the contemporary Filipino romance film has received relatively little attention from academic critics, who still seem favor more “serious,” social-realist, and explicitly political, cinema.<sup>13</sup>

### The Argument

Seeking to fill this gap, this essay shows how several romance films since 2015 challenge relations of dependence and hierarchy in Philippine politics and society; they either espouse equality in relationships, and/or embrace the liberal democratic values of individualism and self-determination. Considering that any text—art, film, literature—reflects and responds to the problems posed by the society that produced it,<sup>13</sup> the essay also shows how the contemporary Filipino romance film registers conflicting social values. This tension appears as a painful transition from a benighted past or present marked by unequal, hierarchical relationships to a future that lives by equality and autonomy.

By no means do I claim all romance films since 2014 are liberal democratic. But by linking the genre to liberal democratic values, this essay also challenges interpretations that lament the genre's apolitical nature. A recent and definitive work on Philippine cinema charges the romance film of “escapism.”<sup>14</sup> Also, analyzing *That Thing Called Tadhana*, Rolando Tolentino argues that it speaks of:

narsisimo na ikaw lang ang mapagpasiya, ikaw ang mahalaga, ikaw lang ang makakapag-move on—ito ang indibidwalismo sa neoliberalismo. . . Walang political at istorikal sa pelikula, walang political killings. . . , walang napipintong pangangailangan ng pagbabago, walang kontraktuwalisasyon o militarisasyon ng mga Lumad at ng kanilang eskuwelahan, at iba pang pahaging or patama man lang sa aktuwal na historical at political na kaganapan.<sup>15</sup>

This is correct. But it is also unfair. Yes, cinema should raise social awareness. However, a romantic film cannot be expected to do so; neither can it be judged—fairly at least—for a task for which it was not created. Working within specific conventions, it does not engage in radical polemics. People watch romance films not to learn about social issues. At the same time though, romance cinema does not *literally* have to depict such issues to engage them.

Also, *Tadhana's* ideology of the self does dovetail with that of neoliberalism. But a different politics surfaces when the film (and others like it) is set against a culture of hierarchy, dependence, and a lack of autonomy in the Philippines. In a (semi)feudal order that limits self-determination and individualism, self-affirmation ceases to be reactionary and becomes a hallmark of a democratic society.

### Hierarchy and Dependence

The contemporary Filipino romance film challenges relations of hierarchy, subordination, and dependence that characterize Philippine politics and society. For instance, the

A different politics surfaces when the film (and others like it) is set against a culture of hierarchy, dependence, and a lack of autonomy in the Philippines.

poor depend on politicians for land and money, a relation that engenders “utang na loob” and helps entrench political dynasties.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, this culture permeates social relations. The Philippines scores low on an individualism index, and rates high in terms of hierarchy.<sup>17</sup> In the spirit of unity and communalism, subordinates are told, “sumunod na lang kayo.”<sup>18</sup> Relations in the workplace, and those between the government and its citizens, are hierarchical, as are those in the family. The youth often hear variations of “habang nasa pamamahay kita, ako masusunod.”

Many Filipinos anchor their identities on their families,<sup>19</sup> who supply the primary rationale for their careers or even marriage partners. Consider overseas Filipino workers who send money to their families, or to sacrifice their own plans to provide financial assistance to relatives. Migration and remittances also help generate a culture of “dependence,”<sup>20</sup> where those who left behind in the Philippines are said to have little incentive to strike out for one's own. Collectively, these norms of hierarchy, dependence, and communalism militate against autonomy or a full-blown, American-style individualism.



Audrey in *Everyday I Love You*, kneeling, symbolizing her subservience to Tristan, who comes from a landed family in Negros





Christine about to break up with Greg in *Alone/Together* (Antoinette Jadaone, Black Sheep Productions, 2019)

### Challenging Dependence and Hierarchy

*Alone/Together* (2019)

In *Alone/Together*, Christine Lazaro (Liza Soberano) is a bright art studies student who dreams of becoming a museum director. But her plan to “change the world” falls apart when she is implicated in an estafa case. Sometime after college, she breaks up with Rafael Toledo (Enrique Gil), ends up working as an assistant to Greg Fausto (Adrian Alandy), and gives up on her dream. The rest of the film charts her redemption. When she tells her boyfriend and employer, Greg, that she wants to return to the art world, he says that she “can’t stand on her own.” Christine quits and breaks up with him.

...Tama na, it’s over... You saved me, I served you... You support me, but not enough to make me fly... I am a child... I should be dreaming, conquering the world... I built my life, my career, my dreams around you...

Dependence, inferiority, and infantilization characterize this relationship. Literally her patron, Greg saved Christine from a legal predicament, and gave her a job when no one else would. She served him (partly) out of utang na loob. *Alone/Together* chafes against this arrangement, and champions autonomy and self-determination.

*Ulan* (2019)

In *Ulan*, Maya (Nadine Lustre) finds her true love, Peter (Carlo Aquino), but is denied by the heavens. This tragedy is framed through a refreshing homage to Philippine folklore, including traditional beliefs on rain.

As a young girl, Maya witnesses a marriage of two tikbalangs, and speaks with them about love conquering all, a belief she carries into adulthood. She is, however, unlucky in her relationships, all of which end while or because it is raining. This leads her to hate weddings, to give up on love, and to believe she is cursed.

In *Ulan*, folklore imposes its logic on, and mirrors, the events in Maya’s life. If her relationships end because of rain, she is by extension a tikbalang whose love affairs the heavens frown upon. Just when she and Peter are about to finally end up together, a storm kills him off. Also, if a typhoon represents a lost love and the rage of a woman betrayed, Maya fits the bill. Losing Peter, she lashes out in anger and disillusionment. Love was supposed to conquer all. Folklore in *Ulan* represents an all-powerful order that determines the fate of individuals.

But Maya never gives up on love, an affirmation symbolized by the film’s final sequence: she meets her younger self, and both jump happily in the rain. While there is no storming or overturning the heavens, love in *Ulan* is a form of resistance, a Kierkegaardian commitment to the self.

At the same time, Maya’s attitude to love changes. In one scene, she muses that people are often advised to save some for themselves when they enter a relationship. She realizes, however, that in loving, she will never lose anything. Love is as infinite as the power of the heavens.

Such boundlessness overturns a self-debasing, martyr-like love found in unequal, hierarchical relationships. In Maya’s case, she was enslaved to love—in love with the idea of love, as her friend Topi (Josef Elizalde) remarked. But she eventually discovers a healthier, more enriching notion of the phenomenon, where it is no longer an imperative to sacrifice one’s identity. This is part of her transformation. Once self-absorbed and love-obsessed, she now helps, and reads to, street children. By volunteering, she finds a sense of freedom, and a new meaning in life beyond the standard happily-ever-after with a man.

*100 Tula Para Kay Stella* (2017)

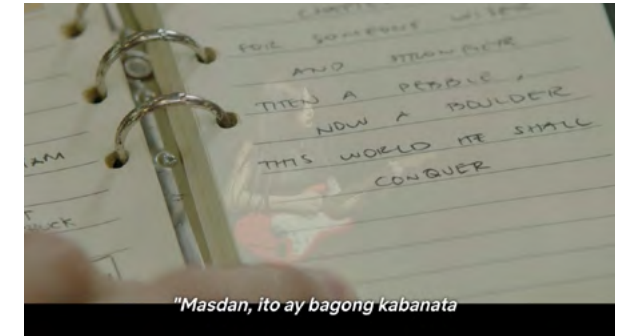
In *100 Tula Para Kay Stella* (2017), Fidel (JC Santos) is hopelessly devoted to Stella (Bela Padilla). Idealizing her, he is willing to forego his plans for her sake. She loves Fidel too at some point, but refuses to continue the relationship with him, saying she didn’t want to use him. Their relationship was a missed opportunity not just because of unlucky circumstances but also because it would have been based on anything but equality. The film refuses to countenance that kind of loving. As Stella puts it, “Hindi ko naman deserve maging mundo mo” while Fidel later declares, “Behold, this is a new chapter for someone wiser and stronger.”

*Everyday I Love You* (2015)

In *Everyday I Love You* Audrey (Liza Soberano) dreams of becoming a TV host, but is “naunahan ng takot.” Afraid to pursue her goals, she is faithfully devoted to Tristan Montelibano (Gerald Anderson), the son of a *hacendero* in Negros Occidental, the sugar capital of the Philippines, and the hub of an industry dominated by a powerful landed elite.

For much of the film, Audrey remains devoted and subordinate. “Naghihintay pa rin ako... hangga’t sa bumalik siya...” Tristan forbids her from pursuing her passions, and wants her to know how to cook, like the trait of the ideal housewife.

That Audrey eventually leaves the haciendero him for Ethan (Enrique Gil) symbolizes a shift and liberation from this traditional, sexist, and feudal order. As Silay Scooter Girl (SSG), she embraces her autonomy, dreams, and happiness. Thanking Ethan, she says “... kahit mukha akong tanga... nag-enjoy pa rin naman ako... nalimutan ko yung lungkot ko at namimiss ko si Tristan...” Even her mom tells her, after watching the first episode, “Buhay na buhay ka.”



Fidel pens his final poem to assert his moving-on in *100 Tula Para Kay Stella* (Jason Paul Laxamana, Viva Films, 2017)



*Ulan* (Irene Villamor, Viva Films, 2019) is an homage to Filipino folklore; two tikbalangs get married in defiance of the gods



In *Ulan*, folkloric motifs mirror events in Maya’s life



The Montelibano land in *Everyday I Love You*. Tristan symbolizes the “feudal” order that Audrey is to leave behind



Audrey living her dream as Silay Scooter Girl in *Everyday I Love You*



Gali helps Mara when she was locked out of her condo unit in *Isa Pa, With Feelings*





Gali and Mara dance in the final sequence of *Isa Pa, With Feelings* (Prime Cruz, Black Sheep Productions, 2019), exemplifying their equal and mutually dependent relationship

#### *Isa Pa, With Feelings* (2018)

Like *Everyday I Love You*, *Isa Pa, With Feelings* (2018) has an unequivocally happy ending. Gali Pastrano (Carlo Aquino), who is deaf, and Mara Navarro (Maine Mendoza), who is of hearing, end up together. The film projects love as a relationship between equals,<sup>21</sup> and like *100 Tula Para Kay Stella*, rejects the kind based on hierarchy and one-sided dependence.

Because of his condition and bitter experiences, Gali cannot accept that Mara's love for him is genuine. For him, their relationship is built on pity and convenience. A flashback explains why his previous relationship with Annica (Arci Muñoz) didn't work out. It is tainted not just by an insecurity that Annica will leave, but also by his expectation that she serve and cater to his needs. For instance, she needs to sign for him when they have company. "Yaya mo ba ako?" she says. Theirs is an unequal relationship, and Gali feels that his condition demands that she treat him that way.

Realizing his mistake, he makes amends with Mara. He admits he loves her, but still feels that it is not right, wishes that he were of hearing too, and fears that Mara will eventually grow tired of him because of the inevitable misunderstandings they will have. To which she simply responds, "Then I'll be deaf for you." This entails some sacrifice on the woman's part (again?!), but the line also symbolizes their equality and their shared vulnerability, on which their relationship is reconstructed.<sup>22</sup> Gali and Mara are no longer yaya and amo, but mutually dependent equals, evident in the final ballroom-dancing scene and interspersed with, among other things, flashbacks of the instances they help each other.

#### *The Hows of Us* (2018)

The *Hows of Us* begins with a statement of male-female interdependence, but depicts a relationship based on gender imbalance. Chafing against female servitude, it calls for self-determination on behalf of its protagonist, George (Kathryn Bernardo).

George and Primo (Daniel Padilla) meet and fall in love, but their relationship sours as she becomes the breadwinner while Primo pursues his passion for music. He has a band that hasn't hit the big time. George is left with all the practical stuff, working as a real estate agent to help pay the bills and manage the household. She is also a medical student, but has to skip an important exam because Primo irresponsibly gets drunk the night before, collapsing in the middle of the road.

George finally breaks down. "Pagod na pagod na ako," she laments. "Nauubos na ako," she adds, referring to her many sacrifices, not least putting off her dreams of becoming a doctor. Focused on his passion and blinded by patriarchy, Primo doesn't help in, even disdains, the household chores. Also, instead of buying George a cupcake for her birthday, he gives her an LP instead. She accuses him of having the wrong priorities; he has money to buy a record, but none to get a pastry. And so they break up. George has it better on her own. The separation is an espousal of female independence, though as we shall see, it is nevertheless undercut by their getting back together in the end.



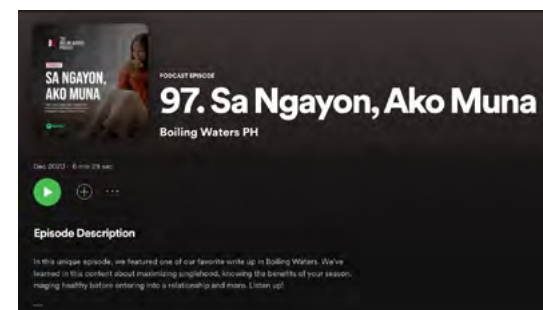
George complains to Primo about his birthday gift in *The Hows of Us* (Cathy Garcia-Molina, Star Cinema, 2018)



Maya relishes the rain anew, symbolizing her self-affirmation amidst a tragedy



The plot twist in *The Hows of Us*: George finds the letter that leads her to get back together with Primo



Screenshot of a Boiling Waters PH episode on Spotify

## A Working Spectrum or Typology of the Romance Film

### *Singlehood and Liberal Democracy*

*Ulan* and *100 Tula Para Kay Stella* are only two recent films that have eschewed the happy ending of the romance genre. This trend is partly attributed to a desire for novelty and to the jadedness of its audience. But this formal shift also arises from a political logic. Liberal democracy demands singlehood; it must frustrate the genre's (and the audience's expectations of) traditional happily-ever-after endings. It pushes the protagonists to assert (or at least live with) their independence, look out after themselves, and pursue their dreams.

### *Happy Endings: From Dependence to Equality*

*Isa Pa, With Feelings* and *The Hows of Us* still hew to the traditional happy endings of the romance genre, but not before reconstructing relationships on a more equal basis. In the latter, George and Primo live separate lives. Later on, Primo changes for the better in Europe, engage in domestic work to help his family. Returning home, he says that when he first arrived abroad, all he had was "arrogance and anger." The once selfish and patriarchal Primo sacrifices his share from the sale of the house (he owns it with George) to help defray the costs of her younger brother's eye operation. At this point, the film justifies their separation, during which they, Primo in particular, change for the better. "We became better persons, didn't we?" George tells him. Only after this transformation do they get back together.

Only a handful of films have been examined here, and though they seem to be cherry-picked, other movies can be analyzed according to whether and to what extent they fit into either category. *Hello, Love, Goodbye* takes the singlehood path, for instance, as do *Meet Me in St. Gallen* (2018) or *Never Not Love You* (2018).

## The Social Context of the Contemporary Filipino Romance Film

### *Affirmation of the Self*

The affirmation of the self in *Alone/Together*, *Ulan*, and *Everyday I Love You* seems to be part of the contemporary zeitgeist. For instance, the Commission on Population and Development launched "My Body, My Own," a campaign to promote the notion of "bodily autonomy," which refers to "the power to make choices over their own bodies and future."<sup>23</sup> Also, articles advise people how to "move on," and there are calls to "celebrate" singlehood<sup>24</sup> or at least to affirm the self.<sup>25</sup> This celebration parallels the rise of social media as a vehicle for self-expression, the popularity of self-care, mental health, and adulting.





Stella in *100 Tula Para Kay Stella*. Many female protagonists in Rom Com 2 challenge stereotypes of the shy, meek Filipina.



In *100 Tula Para Kay Stella*, Stella is enveloped in mist and fades out, symbolizing her idealization by Fidel, and is to be treated like an illusion that eventually fades away

### Changing Family Dynamics

Running parallel to this growing individualism is a critique of hierarchical relationships in families.<sup>26</sup> There have also been shifts in the “family value system,”<sup>27</sup> “the transition of the family from a traditional-oriented dominated type,”<sup>28</sup> the decline of marriages,<sup>29</sup> the increase in the number of single Filipinos,<sup>30</sup> and the rise of one-person households.<sup>31</sup> These changing demographics are somewhat evident in many romance films, where the families of the protagonists play only a little role, if at all. In *Everyday I Love You*, family is to be left behind since Audrey has to move to Manila to do her new dream job. In *Isa Pa, With Feelings*, Mara’s family ceases to play a role after she fails the board exam, with the narrative focusing on her relationship with Gali, whose family we never meet. In *Ulan* and *Alone/Together*, families just have a supporting role.

### Shifting Gender Norms and Industry Shifts

Today, women (are encouraged to) break stereotypes and expectations. It is not surprising then that the politics of the contemporary Filipino romance film is expressed through narratives of assertive women, or at least women who (learn to) accept their independence. In this sense, female empowerment dovetails with the politics of liberal democracy. More importantly, if these female characters speak up, that’s partly because more directors (and writers) now have some say in a film’s content.<sup>32</sup> This new generation of directors are breaking the conventions of the romance genre and challenging the conservative representation of women in Philippine cinema.<sup>33</sup>

### Non-Traditional Love

Lately, there also has been some pushback against traditional romantic norms. One writer complains against the

idea that love is about utang na loob,<sup>34</sup> evident in Maya (*Ulan*), Fidel (*100 Tula Para Kay Stella*), and Audrey (*Everyday I Love You*), who all grow out of their self-demeaning notions of love. These changing notions dovetail with the films’ subversion, or at least critique of, gender roles and the genre’s happily-ever-after endings.

### The Specter of Tradition

However, one must not exaggerate the foregoing trends, which should also include the growth of the service economy, the expansion of the middle class, and the rise of millennials, the target market of RomCom 2.0. Misogyny and sexism continue to thrive in the country. Despite an emergent individualism, the family still plays a role in people’s lives, particularly for the Filipino youth.<sup>35</sup> Communalism informs Philippine populism, entailing a defense of, and deference to, authority, especially that of the state.<sup>36</sup>

In this light, just as Philippine society retains such values, so does the romance genre encode the powerful pull of tradition, which in the films appears as a status quo marked by inequality and hierarchy and/or as a typical trust in happily-ever-after. Particularly reflective of this tension—between tradition and change—are varying degrees of hesitation to go all the way, either to champion singlehood or to abandon the past or present. In *Everyday I Love You*, *Isa Pa, With Feelings*, and *The Hows of Us*, the lovers do end up together, even if the basis of relationships must shift to equality and respect for female autonomy. Female empowerment is all good, but it does not necessarily mean everybody must stay single.

Also, Audrey in *Everyday I Love You* can’t just leave Tristan, and it takes her some convincing to do so. And the departure is set up in such a way that she has to receive his blessing. *The Hows of Us* resorts to a complicated plot twist to undercut, though not wholly disregard, its own pro-women message, and to come up with the traditional happy ending.

The past—in the form of a lost or idealized love or a way of life—constantly weighs on the present that barely moves into the future.

And the ending of *100 Tula Para Kay Stella* has a tearful Fidel asking if he can ever move on from Stella. This hesitation generates much of the drama in some of these films, and helps explain why they elicit so much hugot and feels.

Even in the films that take the singlehood route, the past still haunts the present. Though it is overcome in the end, the protagonists barely do so. The stories of Christine, Maya, and Fidel represent the drama and difficulty in transitioning from the past and present—embodied by dependence and hierarchy—to a future symbolized by autonomy and independence. The past—in the form of a lost or idealized love or a way of life—constantly weighs on the present that barely moves into the future. And when they do, the endings are bittersweet, for there is a simultaneous recognition of loss and gain.

In *Alone/Together*, for instance, Christine travels to New York, which epitomizes her dreams, and embodies the space where she is (temporarily) free from the relationship that ties her down back home. The Big Apple rekindles her passion for art, and she almost gets back together with Rafael, who accompanies her. However, even after having had a glimpse of freedom, she rationalizes her relationship with Greg, denies her feelings for Raf, and seems keen to settle for her current life. Raf calls her a coward, and she argues back that it also takes bravery to accept her fate. Christine does pull through and gets her dream job back home, but only after much drama and hesitation.

In one reading at least, there is no happy ending with Raf, but even in the final scene, when they reunite at the museum looking at the *Spoliarium*, the film tantalizingly hints that they *could* still get back together, if not then, then at some later point. After all, this last sequence literally returns to the past, since *Alone/Together* opens in the museum, also in front of Luna’s painting.

Similarly, in *100 Tula Para Kay Stella*, Fidel goes through a tortuous courtship and relationship with Stella, only for them to end up separated and in tears. The film explores the many hits and misses of their bond, ever driving the hope of the happily-ever-after. In the penultimate scene, when they meet again, Stella tells Fidel that she actually loved him too,



Two (would-be) lovers in conversation in *That Thing Called Tadhana*. In many romance films, the family has figured less and less



In *Everyday I Love you*, Audrey breaks up with Tristan, who also gives his blessing for her to leave



Christine visits the Metropolitan Museum in New York, a space that represents her freedom from the relationship that ties her down in the Philippines. As in Romantic thought, art in *Alone/Together* is intimately connected to freedom





In *Alone/Together*, Raf berates Christine for settling for Greg, even when she still loves Raf



The final meeting of Fidel and Stella in *100 Tula Para Kay Stella*



Christine Lazaro in *Alone/Together* returns to the art world

but they can't be together since she is already pregnant and is in a relationship with another man. Throughout the narrative, the film dangles the possibility of the happily-ever-after, only to yank it away in the end.<sup>37</sup>

#### *Between the Past and Present*

One could charge these films with sadism, playing on their audience's expectations of a happy ending only to frustrate them in the end. But this so-near-yet-so-far sensation also illustrates how the protagonists, and perhaps Philippine society in general, is caught between conflicting values. They are trapped in the past and present, even as they are pulled into the future. In their own way, Christine, Fidel, Audrey, Gali, Mara, George, and Primo cannot simply get over their past or their present, i.e. a previous or current relationship or a hoped-for love. However, they are forced to be free, single, and/or equal.

Like a Sartrean existential imperative, the movies have to drag them (and the audiences) out of their current state into a brighter present and future. In this sense, they chart the tortuous emergence of the liberal democratic subject in the Philippines—single or self-determining, autonomous but of equal standing with others—and of a society that eschews unequal relations and a one-sided dependence. Like the protagonists' journey, however, this social transformation can and will be painful and difficult, entailing much hesitation, even a “fear of freedom,” as Erich Fromm put it.

#### *Industry Shifts*

That the contemporary Filipino romance film encodes a tension between past and present parallels a shift in the film industry itself. If the female characters in these movies speak up, that's partly because their mostly women directors now have a say in the film's content.<sup>38</sup> In turn, that shift belongs to, and constitutes, a broader trend. For the most part, the contemporary Filipino romance genre exemplifies a compromise and collaboration between the liberal, progressive ideals of indie film and the conservative, commercial imperatives of mainstream cinema. The establishment of Black Sheep is a case in point.

For its part, this development builds on the “maindie” phenomenon, where independent films are not only seen as “an alternative to the local mainstream industry but [also] as a bridge to the local mainstream industry...works began to cross into more mainstream narratives and aesthetics.”<sup>39</sup> Directors who started out in indie cinema now write and direct big-budget romance movies from established studios like Star Cinema. The case of Antoinette Jadaone—who also had to adopt to the branding guidelines of Star Cinema in one film—is illustrative here.<sup>40</sup> At the same time, mainstream studios themselves are adapting and thus contributing to the evolution of the romcom genre.<sup>41</sup>



George and Primo in *The Hows of Us*. The love team is still a traditional feature of the contemporary romance film

By no means does this claim that mainstream films only became liberal after RomCom 2. In fact, many pre-2014 romance films adumbrate its call for autonomy and self-determination. All the same, Star Cinema's *The Hows of Us* and *Everyday I Love You* represent a critique of patriarchy. And many of Viva Film's productions, *Ulan* and *100 Tula Para Kay Stella*, among others, dispense with the happy endings. Of course, all these films never fully depart from the traditions of the genre. They are still bankrolled by big studios, rely on time-tested motifs, play on the expectation of a happy ending, and, for a few at least, count on love teams.

#### *The Final Scene*

This essay has shown how several recent Filipino romance films challenges a culture of hierarchy and dependence, and promotes the values of autonomy and independence. This espousal comes in two ways. They either allow protagonists to end up single or reconstruct relationships on an equal basis. The films register contradictions in Philippine society, which is caught between conflicting value systems and which appears as a painful tension between, and transition from, an unequal, hierarchical past or present into a liberal democratic future. Of course, calls for individualism and autonomy can never replace mass movements or institutional/structural politics. While former may seem atomistic or bourgeois, freedom and self-determination are the goals of any radical politics.

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**Janus Isaac V. Nolasco** is a university researcher at the Asian Center, University of the Philippines Diliman, where he majored in West Asia for an MA in Asian Studies, focusing on the region's premodern history, culture, and society. A member of the Young Critics' Circle Film Desk, he was recently appointed senior lecturer at the UP Asian Center.



## Endnotes

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# BEFORE WHAT'S NEXT

Conversations on Regional Cinema of the Early Years of the 21st Century

Mary Karen L. Gancio



This continuously evolving movement is redefining the landscape of Philippine cinema. [...] We just need to document it. Maybe there are more opportunities for film scholars to write about regional cinema or regional filmmakers – about how they produce their films and the challenges they encounter. – Arnel Mardoquio, 2014.

This statement and the following interview excerpts were culled from my conversations with pioneer digital filmmakers from different parts of the country. They include Christopher Gozum, director of *Anacbanua* (The Child of the Sun, 2009), from Pangasinan; Ray Gibraltar, director of *Wanted: Border* (2009), from Iloilo; Remton Zuasola, director of *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (The Dream of Eleuteria, 2010), from Cebu; Sherad Anthony Sanchez, director of *Huling Balyan ng Bubi* (Woven Stories of the Other, 2006), and Arnel Mardoquio, director of *Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim* (Stars' Journey into the Dark Night, 2012), both from Davao del Sur. The interviews were conducted separately from August 2013 to August 2014 in Quezon City, Pangasinan, and Laguna as part of my research on Philippine regional cinema. Therefore, it is important to note that the insights provided here are based on the mindset of these filmmakers eight years ago.

Previous page: Scene from *Jungle Love* (Sherad Anthony Sanchez, Salida Productions, 2012). Images courtesy of respective directors interviewed, except where noted

Scene from Christopher Gozum's, *Anacbanua* (Sine Caboloan Co. Ltd., 2009). This feature-length experimental film is the recipient of the Lino Brocka Grand Prize & Best Director Award (Digital Lokal Section) during the 11th Cinemania International Film Festival 2009. From Sine Caboloan Facebook page



When regional cinema was a reemerging concept in the early 2000s, it was convenient to refer to the abovementioned filmmakers' works as "regional" films. However, with the sustained attention given to films from places outside of Manila, it has arguably become uncomfortable to simply call them as such—as if subordinately distinguishing them from cinema in the country's capital. Additionally, with the collaboration of filmmakers from various parts of the Philippines and even beyond—crossing geographical and cultural boundaries—distinguishing films as regional or national can be problematic. It is, therefore, essential that we avoid these limiting categorizations; instead, we should pay attention to the experiences of these filmmakers as formed by cultural as much as individual circumstances. While perspectives about this concept are currently in flux, a glimpse at these filmmakers' varying but intersecting insights can aid in further understanding our country's cinema and its continuing evolution.

#### KAREEN GANCIO: What's your motivation for making films?

**ARNEL MARDOQUIO:** I believe that cinema has a specific social function. First, it can educate. Second, it can inspire. Personal motivations do not drive my filmmaking. Of course, it becomes personal because it is my craft. But I develop my craft for my mission to help change Mindanao, change the nation. This is a mission, a commitment. I don't have an industry, but I will see to it that we can produce films with the help of grassroots communities.

My films are not only intended to promote language. It aims to promote identity – the special identity of Mindanaoans: the tribe people, Lumads, Christian settlers, Bangsamoro. This is a unique society that people from Luzon or Visayas do not easily understand. That's why for me, film is an exceptional medium that can help promote this identity. This can help us realize that the Filipinos are more than just the Tagalogs; Filipino society comprises various communities, each deserving of proper representation.



Scene from Gozum's *Lawas Kan Pinabli* (Sine Caboloan Co. Ltd., 2011). This experimental documentary presents a fictional narrative and interviews with eight Filipino migrant workers in the Middle East. From Sine Caboloan Facebook page



Scene from Sanchez's *Imburnal* (Salida Productions, 2008), Cinema One Originals' Best Picture in 2008 and recipient of the Woosuk and the Network for the Promotion of Asian Cinema (NETPAC) Awards during the 10th Jeonju International Film Festival

I would react every time I see mainstream films depicting female Muslims from Mindanao as cowards or submissive. For me, their representation is different. In reality, we have many brilliant women in Mindanao—female leaders, mediators who would resolve conflicts in the community. Some women would carry arms and become rebels. That's what filmmakers from Manila don't understand. Of course, they can make films about the people in Mindanao, but the films should be well-researched with respect to the culture.

I also want to explain through my films the impact of a nationalized industry. For instance, we should not purchase imported cars. Instead, we should manufacture our own cars – move the industry from the wheels, the screws, bearing, chassis. This concept has been existing for so long here in the Philippines.

For me, a filmmaker's vision is founded upon his vision of his society. I believe that art should serve a political cause, not simply create art for art's sake. It should have social responsibility.

**CHRISTOPHER GOZUM:** Around 2005, I had a chance to meet young Pangasinan scholars; some were also poets. During that time, the writing of literature in the native tongue was also reemerging.

I think we influenced each other, and I wanted to present the works of these Pangasinan poets.

I later developed the idea that the local or native intelligentsia should have the initiative to study their own culture. Given that we are equipped with tools and education, we should not wait for institutions from Manila to visit here and make sense of our local experience.

I don't like that scenario where a filmmaker or media practitioner from the center, from Manila, visits the provinces

and makes a movie about the local experience. Because there will be misrepresentations, like postcard products, the outcome can appear touristy, superficial.

Sadly, the locals themselves look down on their mother tongue, their local culture. It's probably because of education. From elementary school to high school, it has been ingrained in our consciousness that our local language is inferior to Tagalog or English. The media is also responsible for this kind of consciousness.

We don't give value to our local language, the different aspects of our local culture such as farming, fishing, and local knowledge of medicinal plants.

Cinema can serve as a tool to help propagate local culture.

I am doing what I do now, not only because I am a filmmaker. Of course, it is my way of self-expression, but it is also my advocacy. Let's just say of the 100 percent of what I'm doing now, 20 percent of that is my advocacy to promote the consciousness in the community—to appreciate the mother tongue and the unique aspects of our culture. Filmmakers from different parts of the country could also make this part of their agenda.

From 2005 until now, I try to teach myself about the different aspects of local culture slowly. I'm starting to learn about local plants and trees; I read old dictionaries of the Pangasinan language written by priests from the Spanish period. I try to learn like if I hear a term that I am not familiar with, I list it down and find out its meaning.

For filmmakers, exposure to one's own culture beyond mere familiarity can give more substance and depth to their works.

**SHERAD ANTHONY SANCHEZ:** I did not produce my films because I wanted to promote Bisaya language or regional cinema. There was no such consciousness. At that time, it was





Scene from Sanchez's *Huling Balyan Ng Bubi* (Salida Productions, 2006), Cinema One's Cinema One Originals' Best Picture, Director, and Screenplay in 2006



Cast of Remton Siega Zuasola's *Damgo ni Eleuteria* (Panumduman Pictures, 2010). Both the film and Zuasola were recognized as Gawad Urian's Best Picture and Best Director respectively in 2011. From *Damgo ni Eleuteria* Facebook page

pure. I just wanted to make films. I did not think of impressing people or pushing a political agenda, propaganda, or regional cinema.

I support regional cinema, but to be honest, I'm not going to fight for it. Because I'm a filmmaker first. For some people, it may be a betrayal of the culture, the region. But no. I'm protecting my sincerity to create an experience for other people—an experience that is pure and clear without pushing for a designed perspective; instead, a perspective that is nuanced and imperfect, honest and true, very beautiful. For example, if you're a Marxist, a socialist, and then you make a film that shares a Marxist perspective, does it reflect the regions? Does it reflect the Philippine situation? Not entirely. But if you allow the chaos and craziness of the Filipino experience, compounded... you will see that you offer something different. According to [Ingmar] Bergman, you don't think about the message. Because you will limit the possibilities of truth that will come out of your film—the truth coming from sincere nuances of your reality.

I need to be sincere first. As a filmmaker, I am hesitant to be political. This is especially true because, in Mindanao, a filmmaker needs access. When you are political, your access becomes limited. I also don't want to be cultural because I believe that films are not only cultural artifacts. They are not just serving culture. I don't intend it to be. I am surprised that some like my films – even shocked if there would be those who can comprehend.

However, I don't consider my films as random. They are designed. Weirdly, they're logically designed, logically sound. I love theories. I love structures. I'm a student of literature. It is in my blood to have logic. But then again, probably we [referring to his contemporaries in the independent filmmaking scene] were just not romantic to have a message.

We're just using what we have to communicate an experience.

The moral is not the primary objective. Because if it is moral, it is dictating. It is preachy. What you want is to communicate a specific experience that can be a prism of truths. They don't tell you the truth. They lead you to a truth. The truth comes out of honesty, sincerity, and challenge constructs, systems, or systematic constructs.

**KG: What do you remember the most from the earlier years of your filmmaking experience?**

**RAY GIBRALTAR:** The idea of films in Hiligaynon has not always been readily accepted. There's always a struggle. During the first Cinemalaya festival (in 2005), I pitched. The title of the film was "Tag-Lugar." It was accepted as one of the semi-finalists. The first question the panelists asked was, "What dialect is this?" I felt I had to correct them; it's not a "dialect" but a "language." I told them that it's called Karay-a. I explained that it's considered a bastardized Hiligaynon. They asked, who can understand this? Well, 70 percent of the people in Panay. They asked, who is your audience? I said, everyone, since the film will be subtitled. I thought their question was absurd. They negotiated if I could use Tagalog for the dialogues instead. They said the films should make sale; otherwise, how will they sustain the festival?

I did not compromise.

I find that ironic because two or three years after that, several films emerged from the regions.

Meanwhile, back in Iloilo, although we managed to have regular screening of my film *When Timarwa Meets Delgado*

(2007) in SM City, it was difficult to mount. Because it was an independent effort. But I had to tell my story. I had to start.

We started Bantayan Film Festival in 2004. It started with workshops. We invited everyone who is interested. We hold the screening of the films at the stadium in Guimbal. The stadium is always filled with people on every film fest night, usually on the second or third night. The equipment is all provided by the locals. We invited film practitioners from Manila who conducted workshops for free. We only paid for their travel expenses, meals, and accommodation. These film practitioners were very happy to do this because they were learning as well. The students inspired them. Plus, they are often burned out from the industry. So, conducting these workshops is a breath of fresh air for them.

**REMTON SIEGA ZUASOLA:** I used to have a theater group of young people from our community. When I started to make films, they became my actors, crew, propmen, etc. The same group is still my filmmaking circle in Cebu.

When we were starting, everyone was a volunteer—the actors, the crew. We were only able to give them meals. As for the equipment, members of our collective would offer what they have for free.

Until Tessa [Villegas], my first producer, asked me how much I would need to produce my film. I would tell her that whatever is the available fund, we will make it work. That became our system then. But I would always ensure that my producer collects at least the same amount that she shells out for my film. I entered my films in festivals for the chance to win the cash prize that will help us produce our next film. But I should note that my first short film, *To Siomai Love* (2009), was produced just for fun with my friends from my theater group—not for festivals.

**SAS:** Around 2005 or 2006, we were making full-length feature films on our own. Until boom! I think that year exploded. That was the resurgence of independent cinema.

It was by chance that I got associated with regional cinema. I did not know that I made the first film from Mindanao and by Mindanaoans for a long time—but of course, there were regional short films at the time when filmmaking became sporadic. But I was not conscious. I was an Atenean. I was sheltered.

You had these filmmakers with varying aesthetics, different tastes. Every time we are together, we just wanted to make films, have fun. We don't really have a political agenda—well, I guess except for Lav [Diaz]; even the post-colonial issues of Raya Martin is a personal taste. It's not really because of any post-colonial [grudge], which makes it brilliant. John



Ray Gibraltar instructing actress Rosanna Roces on the set of *Wanted: Border* (Cinema One Originals, 2009). The film was Cinema One Originals' Best Picture in 2009

Torres made a personal diary, a testament to that generation's uniqueness and individuality. This is where my disconnect from the current generation comes in. When they make films, they will tell you, this is for Cannes, this is for Venice. Because at that time, we did not have a political agenda—even this regional cinema agenda. We were naïve back then about all these things. Even now, we want to pretend we are still naïve.

**KG: What's your take on the concept of regional cinema?**

**RSZ:** When I was starting, it was entirely for fun. But later, together with my group, we realized that we could build our local film industry. So we agreed to make films for us, for Cebu.

While we realize that we could contribute to Philippine Cinema without going to Manila, we also observe that once local filmmakers make a name for themselves in the national scene, their next logical step is to leave Cebu and stay in Manila. Every time this happens, we experience a brain drain in the local film scene. So, we go back to agree that we must cultivate what we have at the moment in Cebu until such time we have enough filmmakers to sustain the production of films. I think of it as a farm or garden where we plant seeds and wait until they grow enough to sustain themselves.

It started as a personal pursuit until it became a group movement. What we are proud of the most is the Binisaya Film Festival. Before this, we used to have Sinulog Film Festival in Cebu, but that was a bit limiting because the theme requires that there must be an element of the Sto. Niño in the films.





Arnel Mardoquio (center in white) during shoot of *Sheika* (Sine Mindanaw, 2010), recipient of 2011 Gawad Urian Awards for Best Screenplay (Mardoquio), Best Actress (Fe Ging Ging Hyde), and Best Editing (Willie Apa, Jr., Arthur Ian Garcia)

filmmakers who can become experts in the different aspects of their filmmaking, technical or artistic. They are developed locally, which means that local filmmakers can develop their crafts in their local contexts.

While there's no clear consciousness of the future direction of this movement, it has inspired a gathering of filmmakers.

**CG:** We should not see regional cinema as inferior. From a Filipino academic perspective, let's view it as equal to what we have in Manila. Regional cinema should not be viewed as a branch of the cinema in Manila. Instead, it should be envisioned as an independent unit connected to the movement in Manila. Independent but connected. Decentralized. That's how I envision it.

It can stand on its own. It can penetrate other communities within and outside the country. It operates on its terms and not as dictated by national institutions. I believe that outsiders should make an effort to understand the local culture.

I think it will take a long time before these local film centers can reach the national consciousness. More effort is needed. Maybe if there's a locally produced film that can penetrate large, mainstream film festivals like the Metro Manila Film Festival that can pull audiences, that would trigger awareness and acceptance.

We need to educate our audience. It's a good idea to screen these films in schools. Then, maybe local filmmakers can produce films with mainstream taste but with the agenda to make local audiences appreciate local culture. Once Manila distributors see films like these that are popular among the audience, they would be able to say that there's a market for these films and eventually decide to distribute them.

**RG:** Being regionalistic does not necessarily mean being non-nationalistic. For me, once we can embrace our roots, we will understand our "Filipino-ness" better. It does not promote division.

If I am to define the concept of regional cinema, it is the artist. It is the way the artist thinks. If you came from the region, your roots would influence your work. The artists embrace their being someone coming from the countryside, from Bacolod, from Iloilo. The artist may even be outside the country. For example, I'm living here in Manila [but] my works still reflect my culture as Ilonggo.

When I write, I won't have other sources of inspiration but my experiences growing up in Guimbal, in Iloilo. Another example is Erik Matti. Sometimes, you would notice that his films include jokes that only Ilonggo people could understand, or he would include Kinaray-a language in the dialogue—and we would recognize that as Ilonggos.

If the artist grew up somewhere away from his home province, I think that artist should exert effort to get to know his or her roots. Because as far as I am concerned, a serious artist would always find a way to understand his/her origin.

When shooting a film with a regional concept, the milieu or the location plays a vital role. So, if I shoot an independent film with a local-based story, I would go for local actors and locations.

Regional concepts are alive in the mainstream. They have influenced the mainstream. Although the concepts from the regions are often bastardized once mainstreamed, they still manage to create a new art form. The concept is turned into a new art form. A noteworthy example is Suzette Doctolero's *Amaya* (2011-2012). That reflected Suzette's Ilonggo influence. Although the details could have been improved with research, the show managed to promote regional myth.

Let's avoid trying to be authentic. There is no such thing. This is just like our culture, which is a mix of several influences. What is important is that regional concepts can influence the mainstream. We just need to get better at researching to offer better narratives.

Regional cinema is not a festival. But in terms of the structure, it is nice that agencies such as FDCP [Film Development Council of the Philippines], CCP [Cultural Center of the Philippines], NCCA [National Commission on Culture and the Arts] organize these festivals where filmmakers can participate. Festivals also enable the exposure of these films outside the country. This can make the global audience realize that stories from the Philippines are not only about slums or dumpsites.

I dream of a more mainstreamed regional cinema. The way I see it, the audience of regional films is still limited to independent cinema. It is not mainstream yet.

Generally, I think regional cinema is already recognized in this generation. Just look at the best films of this decade; most, if not all, came from the regions.

**KG: What should be done to sustain the production of films from different parts of the country?**

**AM:** The number one problem is not funding. Filmmakers can still make films even without grants. The problem is audience. Distribution.

Distribution is a serious and critical issue. Why? Try to ask who owns the distribution channels—the capitalists. How were they able to establish themselves? They lobbied that in Congress to enable them to distribute blockbuster films with favorable tax conditions. They also own the movie theaters. They managed to establish the market here in the country. Now, even the local film industry is on the peripherals. It has been sidestepped. This means that to counter that, this issue should also be elevated to the legislative level.

This has a lot to do with the law. The capitalists may have defined the trade, but if the law would say otherwise, it can redefine the landscape of Philippine cinema. This is not just a problem of regional cinema or alternative cinema. Even the mainstream suffers from this problem.

In my opinion, the specific function of government agencies such as FDCP is to look at the problem in distribution channels closely. They might need to create a commission that can study the distribution channels, develop a proposal to improve the situation, and lobby that in Congress.

For me, it is difficult to produce films especially in the context of the regions. In my case, I produce full-length films. Once, there were capitalists who invested in my films. But the film did not earn enough, so the investors did not get any return. This resulted in strained relations between us. But I know I need to process this experience. That was not necessarily a problem. Instead, that became part of the learning process. It served as my inspiration.

Filmmakers should learn how to market their films, or at least have a marketing arm to do this for them. Marketing is essential. Filmmakers and producers are often shortsighted. We are unable to invest on the marketing side. If we can borrow some best practices from the mainstream industry, that would be the concept that producers have identified a market, and then they pay filmmakers to create films for that market.

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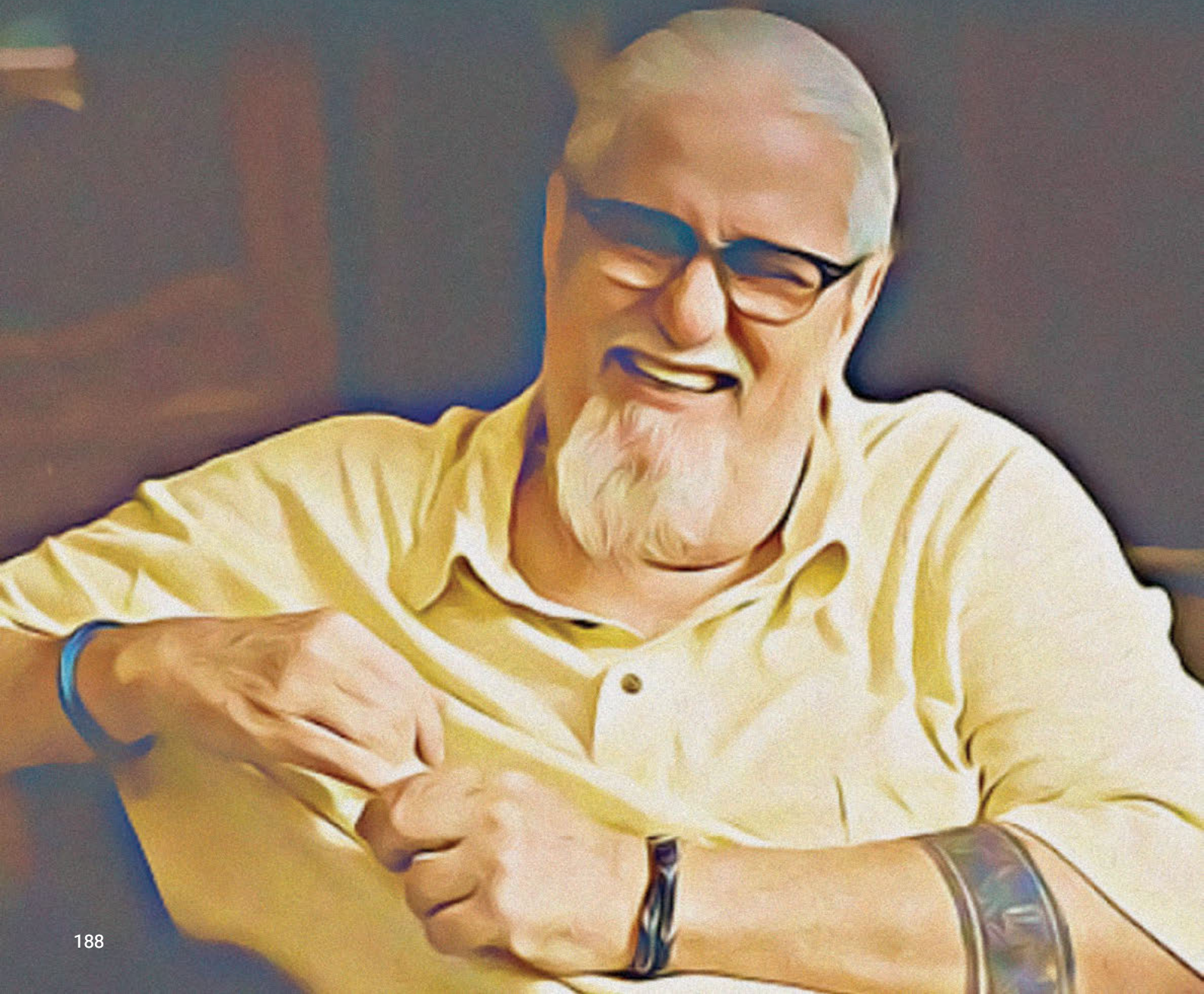
**Mary Karen L. Gancio** is a Davao-born Ilongga whose primary research interests include the historiography of Philippine cinema and film archiving. She is an instructor at the College of Communication of the West Visayas State University, a freelance communication coach, and an advocate of information literacy and the microlearning approach to education.



# BLAME IT ON ORO

Peque Gallaga and Negros Occidental

Vicente Garcia Groyon



Although Peque Gallaga was born, raised, and educated in Manila, he spent most of his career working in Manila and shot and set the majority of his films in Manila (and Luzon), he remains bound in the national consciousness to Bacolod City, a synecdoche for the province of Negros Occidental. After toiling in relative obscurity in theater, advertising, television, and film, he leaped to national and international attention in 1982 with his first full-length film as a solo director. That singular epic, arguably his masterpiece, cemented his persona as the Bacolod director, the hacendero auteur. *Oro, Plata, Mata* cast two wealthy Negrosanon families as sympathetic protagonists, its rosy vision at odds with more politically correct stances of the period, especially given the concurrent collapse of the sugar industry in Negros. Gallaga's politics were conflated with the aesthetics of this single film, which cast a long shadow over his career.

In truth, his Bacolod roots are less important to his film oeuvre than to other aspects of his life as an artist. The city became a kind of home base that functioned as retreat and refuge for recharging and regrouping and served as a laboratory for experiments in education and training as well as directorial work. However, it rarely found center stage in his films—only a handful of which are set or shot in Bacolod, and only a few of which draw directly on the province's lore and history. Gallaga's films are generally centered on Luzon (itself a synecdoche for the Philippine nation), and intentionally so. Having started his career in advertising, he prioritized communicating to as broad an audience of Filipinos as possible. He spent a good part of his life trying to tap into an elusive "Pinoy masa" sensibility, elusive because of his upper-class background, itself a function of economics rather than geography.

His life shows a pattern of cyclical departures and homecomings between the capital and Negros Occidental. Bacolod became his home after his father died and his mother moved the family back to her hometown, where he completed his college education. After graduating from La Salle College-Bacolod, he left for Manila where (after a year in Spain studying art), he began working in advertising, television, theater, and film for several years. He returned to Bacolod after the declaration of Martial Law and the release of his first film, *Binhi* (1973; co-directed with Butch Perez). He spent a few years there recovering from a crippling depression while being a househusband and teaching at La Salle Bacolod. It was during this period when he plunged back into theater work, creating the Maskara Theatre Ensemble, staging legendary local productions, developing the "Being" acting workshops, and training many of the people who would become the Bacolod Mafia, his coterie of creative collaborators who would go on to make their names in the industry.

Opposite page: Peque Gallaga's Last Speech: "Make Your Garden Grow." Courtesy of Peque Gallaga: Bugal sang banwa Facebook page

Manila and film work beckoned after a few years, and he began working as an actor and production designer on some films by Eddie Romero and Ishmael Bernal, dividing his time between his Bacolod home and the capital. This bi-regional period culminated with *Oro, Plata, Mata*, and after that film's success, he relocated to Manila, living and working there for fifteen years.

He maintained ties with Bacolod during the heyday of his career, creating the Negros Summer Workshops (NSW) in 1991, ensuring that April and May were spent in and around Bacolod. However, all his film work during this period was located in Luzon. The NSW trained generations of actors, directors, writers, and other film and theater professionals who would go on to have successful creative careers even as the Bacolod Mafia fell prey to infighting and factionalism. As a mentor and colleague, Gallaga generously shared pathways into the mainstream film, television, and advertising industries. Aside from the education and training, his most significant contribution to Negrosanon artists was making the dream palpable and attainable.

The grind of directing and co-directing an average of two films a year took its toll, and the end of the 1990s saw him returning to Bacolod, where he shot three potboilers in quick succession before going into hiatus. The retreat was as strategic as it was practical, brought about by a mutual animosity that had sprung up between Gallaga and the film industry. He was no longer a hot director, he had fought with one too many people in the business, and he was tired of "eating the spoonful of shit" that each project's negotiations seemed to require of him.

In Bacolod, he turned to other interests, focusing on the NSW and the cultural life at his alma mater, now the University of St. La Salle, all while taking stock of his career and figuring out what to do next. He worked intermittently in film in the 2000s, trying his hand at shoestring indie filmmaking before eventually reuniting with Regal Films and its matriarch, Mother Lily Monteverde, for two final projects (*Seduction* in 2012 and the rebooted *T'yanak* in 2014). Otherwise, he settled into his retirement, turning to pencil sketching, teaching, acting, and shepherding new talent as a creative consultant on other directors' films.

Despite a long and successful film career that saw him dipping his toes in almost all genres, he remained forever associated with the hacenderos of Negros Occidental, thanks





Peque Gallaga with Malou Jacob together with the cast and production of *Anatomiya sang Korupsiyon* at the Gallaga Theater. Courtesy of Bugal sang banwa

to *Oro*. The fact is, *Oro* is an anomaly in his filmography. He made only one other historical drama (*Virgin Forest*, 1984) and only one other war film (*Isang Araw Walang Diyos* or *Wakwak*, 1989) on a comparatively epic scale, and he thought of these three films as his war trilogy. People tend to forget that he followed up *Oro* with a fan-service comedy, *Bad Bananas sa Puting Tabing* (1983), before finding commercial success with horror and fantasy films, starting with the “Manananggal” episode of the first *Shake, Rattle & Roll* (1984) and *Once Upon a Time* in 1986. There was also a brief detour into the “bold” movie trend, which yielded the only film whose critical acclaim could match *Oro*’s—*Scorpio Nights* (1985). He returned to Negros as a shooting location and setting only in the latter stages of his career.

The rest of the time, Gallaga tried his hand at action, melodrama, and comedy, took a stab at a couple of Pinoy icons—Panday and Darna—and developed a subgenre of films for children and young adults that told their stories from their protagonists’ youthful perspectives and granted them agency and autonomy. His feature-length films were set in Metro Manila or elsewhere in Luzon-as-Philippines, were all in Tagalog, and tended to be contemporary and of the moment, born out of an ad man’s desire to find the pulse of the now. *Gangland* (1998), with its gritty look and MTV-style editing, and *Pinoy/Blonde* (2005), with its metafictional flourishes and experiments with digital technology and animation, manifest this urge most clearly. While these films were received with respectful indulgence and decent box office returns, critical regard for Gallaga’s output diminished over the years, and because of the prevailing bias for neorealism, none of his later films would ever be elevated to heights of *Scorpio Nights* or *Oro*.



Scene highlight of *Anatomiya sang Korupsiyon*. Courtesy of Bugal sang banwa



The director at work. Courtesy of Bugal sang banwa



Dolphy as Puga, the cowardly Tikbalang in *Once Upon a Time* (Peque Gallaga & Lore Reyes, Regal Films, 1986).



With Janice de Belen and Richard Gomez in the Tikbalang fable *Once Upon a Time*. Aside from the Tikbalang played by Dolphy, the film featured an array of fantastic creatures, most of them whimsical and invented to serve the film’s narrative



Trying on Irma Alegre’s bat wings in the “Manananggal” episode of the very first *Shake, Rattle & Roll* (Emmanuel H. Borlaza, Ishmael Bernal, & Peque Gallaga, Athena Productions, 1984), on location in Lilio, Laguna. The heavy rattan and jute wings spanned 18 feet, and was created by Production Designer Rodell Cruz

\* Photos and descriptions, except where noted, courtesy of Lore Reyes, long-time creative partner of Gallaga

Neorealism demanded that films train their lenses on the poor and downtrodden, often to the point of fetishizing squalor and suffering. The rich could only be lampooned or caricatured as villains or comic relief, or else fetishized themselves in komiks melodramas that were perceived as unrealistic, aspirational fantasy productions. Believing that there was more nuance to the Pinoy milieu, Gallaga consistently resisted these conventions, which partly explains the disdain with which much of his filmography is viewed.

This disdain also coincided with his enduring collaboration with co-director/writer (and non-Negrosanon) Lore Reyes. This was a partnership born out of necessity—Gallaga suffered a heart attack after completing *Virgin Forest* and was advised by doctors that the stress of filmmaking could kill him. While sharing directing and screenwriting duties allowed Gallaga to make more films in what would be the most productive and profitable years of his career, his output with Reyes was not as well-received as his solo work, even if their films performed well at the box office and later gained cult followings. Together, Gallaga and Reyes revitalized horror films, beginning with *Tiyanak* (1988) and the second and third installments of the *Shake, Rattle, and Roll* franchise, whose basic template they shaped. There was also the cycle of children’s movies that began in 1995 with *Batang X* and *Baby Love*, followed by *Magic Temple* (1996) and *Magic Kingdom: Alamat ng Damortis* (1997), and culminated with *Puso ng Pasko* (1998).

Gallaga directed or co-directed with Reyes, only five feature films set or shot in Negros Occidental. He also made a pair of short films there, “Tamawo” (2011) and “Tabang” (2016). Of these films, *Oro* is perhaps the least “Bacolod” of them all.

Although Gallaga wrote the treatment for *Oro* with Mario Taguiwalo, drawing on the wartime stories of Gallaga’s Bacolod relatives, the screenplay was fleshed out by Jose Javier Reyes, who provided not only the Tagalog dialogue and the memorable title but also one of the most indelible images of the movie—the mahjong motif. So substantial was Joey Reyes’s contribution that Gallaga ceded sole credit for the screenplay to him. The creative team responsible for creating the film’s images, primarily cinematographer Rody Lacap, production designers Don Escudero and Rodell Cruz, and costume designer Salvador Bernal, were flown in from Manila. Although the film is populated with bit players and extras from Negros Occidental, the major speaking parts were played by Manila-based talent. Bacolodnon Joel Torre and Ronnie Lazaro, in their first screen roles, had to be dubbed by the same uncredited voice actor because of their Negrosanon accents, while the other prominent Bacolodnon in the cast, Kuh Ledesma, had no lines.





Gina Alajar as the Aswang Matriarch in *Sa Piling ng Aswang* (Peque Gallaga & Lore Reyes, MAQ Productions, Serafim Productions, 1999). Shot entirely on Mt. Kanlaon in Negros Occidental, the story portrayed the aswang myth based on Western Visayan notions of the mythical monster

*Oro* is, in effect, a story about Negros Occidental told by people from Manila (including, arguably, Gallaga). It is an image of Negros Occidental and its fabled hacendero culture that plays to, and plays up, the stereotypes associated with the province in the national imagination. Its warm reception in Negros Occidental was generated more by its sympathetic, mythicized portrayal than its verisimilitude or authenticity because during the economic recession of the 1970s and '80s, the fabulous world of these golden-age hacenderos was as far removed from Negrosanon of the time as it was from the rest of the country.

The rest of Gallaga's Bacolod films are closer to home. He had a more direct hand in writing their screenplays, and by then, he had trained enough Negrosanon talent to take more prominent roles behind and in front of the camera. In *Kabit ni Mrs. Montero* (1999), he found contemporary Negrosanon parallels for D. H. Lawrence's post-WWI England. In *Unfaithful Wife 2* (1999), he complicates the premise of the original story with the impact of a gossipy fishbowl community of a small city. Although *Sa Piling ng mga Aswang* (1999) is nominally set in Panay, it draws on pan-Visayan folklore involving aswang and mambabarang, albeit with the usual Gallaga embellishments and flourishes.

Ever intent on connecting with the mainstream Filipino audience, Gallaga was interested in local folklore and turned to it constantly for inspiration. He gathered information like a magpie and brought out the shiniest pieces to incorporate into his work. These were most visible in his horror and fantasy films, which used elements from Philippine lower mythology such as the tikbalang (*Once Upon a Time*), the manananggal (*Shake, Rattle, and Roll*), and the eponymous tiyanak, or urban legends like the Tenyente Gimo story ("Aswang," *Shake, Rattle & Roll 2*, 1990) and the white lady of New Manila (*Hirwaga sa Balete Drive*, 1988). He relished the world-building component of making fantasy films like the *Magic Temple* duology or the more recent *Magikland* (2020), in which he drew on Negrosanon culture to create a backstory for a planned theme park in Negros Occidental. His concepts hewed close to western high fantasy tropes while remaining grounded in a Southeast Asian idiom.

The lore he gathered wasn't always supernatural. Observations from everyday life and information gleaned from gossip also found their way into his films. This could be as subtle as the ominous hiccuping of the tukô in *Oro* or the sibilant hiss with which the card players of *Scorpio Nights* accompany the chorus of "The Boxer," or as overt as the Brocka-versus-Bernal debate that becomes a thematic thread in *Pinoy/Blonde*. In *Unfaithful Wife 2*, a bit of real Bacolod gossip involving a housewife caught in flagrante at a motel who had to escape the premises shrouded in a bedsheet becomes a catalyst for one of the heroes. He was interested in eliciting the shock of recognition as a way of connecting more viscerally with his target audience.



Cogie Domingo disemboweled by an aswang in the opening sequence of *Sa Piling ng Aswang*

Still, his relationship to folklore wasn't always faithfully accurate—sometimes, culture just became evocative details divorced from their original contexts. He would often use Bisaya or Hiligaynon words to provide an otherworldly or exotic flavor to his fantasy worlds—the characters Sambag (sampaloc) and Gamay (small) in *Magic Temple*, for instance, or the character/place names used in the video game in *Magikland*—Kanlaon, Patag, Marapara, Mandalagan. In a memorable 1980s TV experiment based on an improvisational theater piece, a woman (Vivian Velez) is held hostage in a heist gone wrong by men who all speak in Hiligaynon (originally gibberish), and the men's inability to communicate with their hostage or the cops provides the episode's conflict and humor. Many times, he improved on folklore convincingly, coming up with a backstory for the white lady of Balete Drive and claiming that the manananggal rubs oil on her torso to coax her flesh to split or that the tiyanak sheds its skin when it shapeshifts into a baby, the skin becoming its swaddling cloth and key to its destruction. In Borgesian fashion, his embellishments have become part of the folklore for many people.

None of this explains the enduring association in the public imagination of Gallaga with Negros Occidental and the hacendero class. Perhaps it was the general air of his laid-back, genteel, coño persona, mestizo features, or the fact that he never mastered Tagalog (when writing their screenplays, Lore Reyes translated Gallaga's dialogue from English). Whatever it was, he resisted the association and left behind a string of films that charted his attempts to nail the Filipino essence.

Bacolod City eventually became a home, but it was a haven he withdrew to for most of his life when Manila became intolerable, and finally when it rejected him. As a parting shot, Gallaga's swan song *Sonata* (2013) allegorizes his relationship with Bacolod and Manila. He had nursed its concept for years before receiving a grant that allowed him to produce it without interference. In it, an opera singer who has inexplicably lost her voice retreats to the hacienda manor of her youth, where she reignites her passion for art and life through a friendship with a local boy. The film's premise echoes Gallaga's career, revealing his anxieties about his work and legacy. *Sonata* was shot on the hacienda location of the first half of *Oro* and features the same star. Through this film, he literally and figuratively returns to the site and domains of the initial big successes of his youth—first in theater, then in film—in an

**Vincente Garcia Groyon** has written and co-written a number of feature-length films, among them *Namets!* (2008), *Agaton & Mindy* (2009, with Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes), and *Kabisera* (2013, with Alfonso Torre). He has written and directed a handful of short films and scripts for the nonfiction films *Bahay Nakpil-Bautista* (2012), *Botong Francisco: A Nation Imagined* (2013), and the libretto for the cantata *A Fire In The Soul* (2011). He has also published a novel, a collection of short stories, and edited anthologies of short fiction and essays.



Several versions of the tiyanak prosthetic prop were created for the filming: "Throw job" was a cuddly inert prop used for throwing into the action, so the actor, as the puppeteer can grab it and make it go for one's jugular. "Hand job" was made of soft elastic rubber and was a hand puppet. "Blow job" was a fully-articulated prop with robotics and animatronics capable of crawling and changing its facial expressions; the jokey monicker derives from the veins on its forehead that throb when puppeteers blow air into its balloon-like valves

attempt to reclaim his mojo. The film's cruel twist—the boy drowns accidentally, leaving the diva temporarily bereft—suggests that Gallaga recognizes the folly of seeking strength and passion outside oneself while echoing the insight that practically all the heroes of his films arrive at: *kaya ko na ito*. Whatever the challenge is, his heroes find ways of rising to it, drawing on inner resources and intuition. Predictably, *Sonata* was well-received by the people who saw it, who were perhaps relieved that he had returned to the subject matter he was most associated with, the box that he had worked so hard to break out of throughout his career.





# PEQUE GALLAGA

## Handuraw (Reminiscing)

Lawrence Fajardo

ANGLE: PEQUE GALLAGA

It was an afternoon that changed my life to be one of the very few who had the fortune to meet filmmaker Peque Gallaga in the halls of La Salle Bacolod that summer of 1991. I was a quite errant first-year high school student on disciplinary probation that year and was sanctioned to clean several areas of the campus. Miss Gancia, the administrative assistant, placed the hallways and classrooms in my care for eighty hours or so.

Assigned to sweep dry leaves that fell from a tree, I noisily rushed to clean my turf with a walis-tingting as fast as I could, but a thin man with a black mustache came out of his classroom and told me to be quiet. I did as I was told, but it made me wonder what they were doing in that room, so I peeked in from the small cross-shaped hole on the door, not knowing that I was looking into my future through that cross.

What I saw made me think they were crazy. I was shocked but also fascinated. Scared of being discovered, I returned to my task quietly.

After a while, another man walked in my direction. He was larger than life and called my attention with a big booming voice, telling me again to keep the noise down because they could not concentrate. I was tongue-tied but angry; I felt that they kept delaying me from finishing my chore.

I met them again later and found out that the thin man was filmmaker Lore Reyes, and the second man with the big voice was *the* Peque Gallaga. They were conducting an acting workshop for teachers. It turned out, this would become the first of many Negros Summer Workshops, a yearly event that continued until the 2000s. This undertaking was significant for us in Bacolod because there was no film school in the Visayas at that time, and not everyone could study film in Manila.

A week later, Miss Gancia informed us that Direk Peque's group was looking for three high school students to audition for a play. It was to be staged in Language Arts hall, now called Gallaga Theatre. The deal was that if we get accepted in the play, the hours of cleaning will be waived. I did try, I think Barney Molina or Roy Lachica handled the audition, but I didn't know if I passed. I backed out before finding out because I was informed that if I missed three rehearsal absences, my clocked cleaning efforts would be nulled, and I didn't like the prospects of that rule.

With my broom in hand, I watched them rehearse from the sidelines. They still did weird things in my eyes. Finally, I finished the probation and spent the rest of the summer in my hometown of Murcia while they mounted the play successfully. *Handuraw Sang Cauntao* was about a family coming to terms with the death of their father. It was an improvisational play by the first batch of "being" students.

I was not into the arts then because I wanted to be a

basketball player. My mother's wish was for me to be the next Francis Arnaiz, a Bacolod sports icon. However, a part of me was attracted to the arts, and perhaps fate led me to encounter Direk Peque and his company again.

In 1992, my friend, one of the three boys who auditioned successfully for *Cauntao* earlier, asked me if I wanted to help him paint a set for the play *Candide* by Voltaire. It was to be directed by Direk Peque and choreographed by Rene Hinojales, the first play to be staged in the newly built Performing Arts Theatre (PAC). We painted the panels assigned to us, which was an easy task. But I had my reservations about the process. I watched them rehearse, and I saw them do things that were not normal for me. I slowly understood why these people were passionate about what they do, why they needed a quiet environment, and why they also made a lot of noise. Again, I watched from the sidelines, but this time without a broom, and I now enjoyed and learned from them. I called them weirdos in 1991, but a year later, I became one of them.

This transition led me to enter the high school theater group of La Salle (KAMINI), moderated by Jane Prado, who was also part of the *Cauntao* cast. In my third year of high school, we were exposed to many acting workshops using the syllabus that Direk Peque and company prepared and introduced to us very early on: from the systems of Stanislavski, Adler, Spolin to Morris.

Continuing the Negros Summer Workshops, Direk Peque would hustle back and forth from Manila to Bacolod, guiding many artists each summer. It was the month when more than a hundred attendees learned from him and the other mentors. Bacolod never lacked artists, and a well-respected film director made an effort to return to his province and instruct young people like me. This certainly had a great impact on the artistry

Previous page: Photo courtesy of Peque Gallaga: Bugal sang banwa Facebook page

Negros Summer workshops (Director's apprenticeship, 2007). Photos courtesy of author, except where noted





in the region. Theater, acting, production management, production design, cinematography, editing, director's apprenticeship, and more were taught during these workshops.

These experiences and the subsequent workshops also introduced me to other artists who would become my lifelong teachers and friends: Milton Dionzon, who revealed to me the magic of acting in *Candide* by portraying a 60-year-old man even though he was only in his 30s; Rudy Reveche, who was a very effective narrator in *Candide*, and acted in my film *Teniente* (1999); Adrian Torres, who was the set decorator of *Candide* and worked as a production designer for several Erik Matti movies; Barney Molina who mentored me in ABS-CBN Bacolod; Manny Montelibano, who became my friend, taught me how to edit and use the camera when I was starting; Tanya Lopez, my Maskara Theater Ensemble moderator and teacher, who guided me in honing my craft in acting and stage design; and Gabby Fernandez, who pioneered improv in Bacolod. I remember Richard Padernal, who taught cinematography, and Rodell Cruz, an excellent production designer—both of whom I met in the Negros Summer Workshop. With Direk Peque's mentoring, these people became successful and gave back to the community.

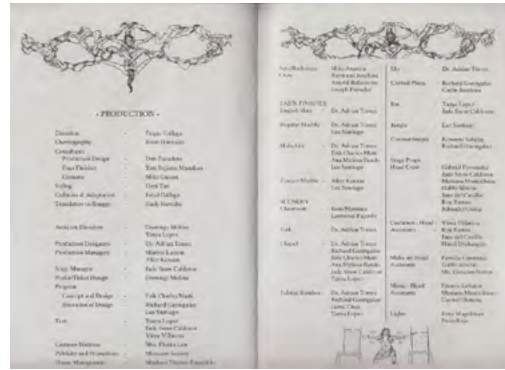
Like many others, I subconsciously wanted to follow in Direk Peque's footsteps. So, I took up Mass Communication in college. I also joined the Maskara Theater ensemble, a group that Direk Peque founded in 1972.

In 1995, I accidentally turned to film. I took the Film Production summer workshop facilitated by Direk Lore, which was also part of the Mass Communication curriculum. We were to learn filmmaking in the context of production management. I tried to improvise and learn by doing, knowing that it was my first time handling the camera.

The first-ever Piaya Awards was an encouraging and fun contest for film production management students. It led to a short digital film festival called the Grand Crystal Piaya that awarded 25,000 pesos to the filmmakers who would win Best Short Film. It welcomed both professional and amateur filmmakers, and its first winner was Jay Abello in 1998. Everybody anticipated the Grand Crystal Piaya and the annual Negros Summer Workshops because they offered many opportunities to Negrosan artists. The theater and film community in Negros was growing and very much alive. It paved the way for a lot of us.

It was exhilarating whenever Direk Peque brought his production team to shoot in Bacolod because he would also invite actors and industry professionals to share their knowledge about their craft. It was also good for film students to see and experience the essence of being in an actual set. I was even part of the crowd in *Kabit ni Mrs. Montero* (1999) in a 30-second scene with Gardo Versoza and a local artist, Louie Dormido, with a herd of goats in the foreground. Direk Peque also shot *Sa Piling Ng Aswang* (1999) and *Unfaithful Wife 2* (1999) in Bacolod. Other actors from our region that Direk Peque helped nurture were Joel Torre, Ronnie Lazaro, and Dwight Gaston. The people he helped bring into the film industry were humorously referred to as the Ilonggo mafia.

Then, in 2000, Direk Peque went into semi-retirement from the industry and assumed the role of artist-in-residence at the University of St. La Salle. I got a call for something I was waiting for for a long time and needed to do before leaving Bacolod. I finally auditioned to work with



*Candide* (1992) playbill



Scene from *Candide*



NSW Film Production instructors Lore Reyes, Manny Montelibano, and Lawrence Fajardo



Film Production class (2008)



At Penguin for my *Liwang sa Dilim* (Philippine Center for Substance Abuse Management, 2006) short film premiere

him in the restaging of *Handurao Sang Cauntao*, the play that awakened my interest in the craft. Spending time with actors I looked up to made it feel like we were a family, just enjoying each other's company. Every night after rehearsals, there would be a party at a local sisig place called Taste Station 1; we would drink and share stories about theater in the '70s.

I will never forget that year. Direk Peque allowed me to explore the craft of acting and various approaches to it. Working closely with him helped prepare us and boosted our confidence. Peque Gallaga stood as our director but also our father.

Many things have happened to his other students and me since then. Yes, it took time before I tried my luck in Manila, but having learned from reliable masters like Direk Peque made the road easier. One only needs to be brave to take it.

His works had always been related to fantasy, folklore, and horror. When I created *Teniente*, a short horror film based on an urban legend of Teniente Gimo, I used a line that resonated with me from one of Direk Peque's films. One of the characters in *Shake, Rattle, and Roll's* "Manananggal" episode (1984) said, "Umuwi ka na, patay ngayon ang Diyos." The line was powerful, although I edited it out eventually because it

might be too much or seem disrespectful. So, imagine my joy when on the set of his *Sa Piling Ng Aswang*, where I was part of the art department, he approached me to say that he would borrow one of my shots from *Teniente* to use in his film, also inspired by the story of Teniente Gimo.

His humility made us respect him more.

Direk Peque would always say, "The only failure is not doing the exercise. Learn by doing." He was a teacher who chose to liberate instead of dictate. He taught us never to be trapped in a box and limited by what others thought was wrong and right; he taught us to think everything always has options. He showed us that in teaching, words and commands did not suffice. Knowledge must be gained from experience and then exercised. Only when you're free can you truly discover new things.

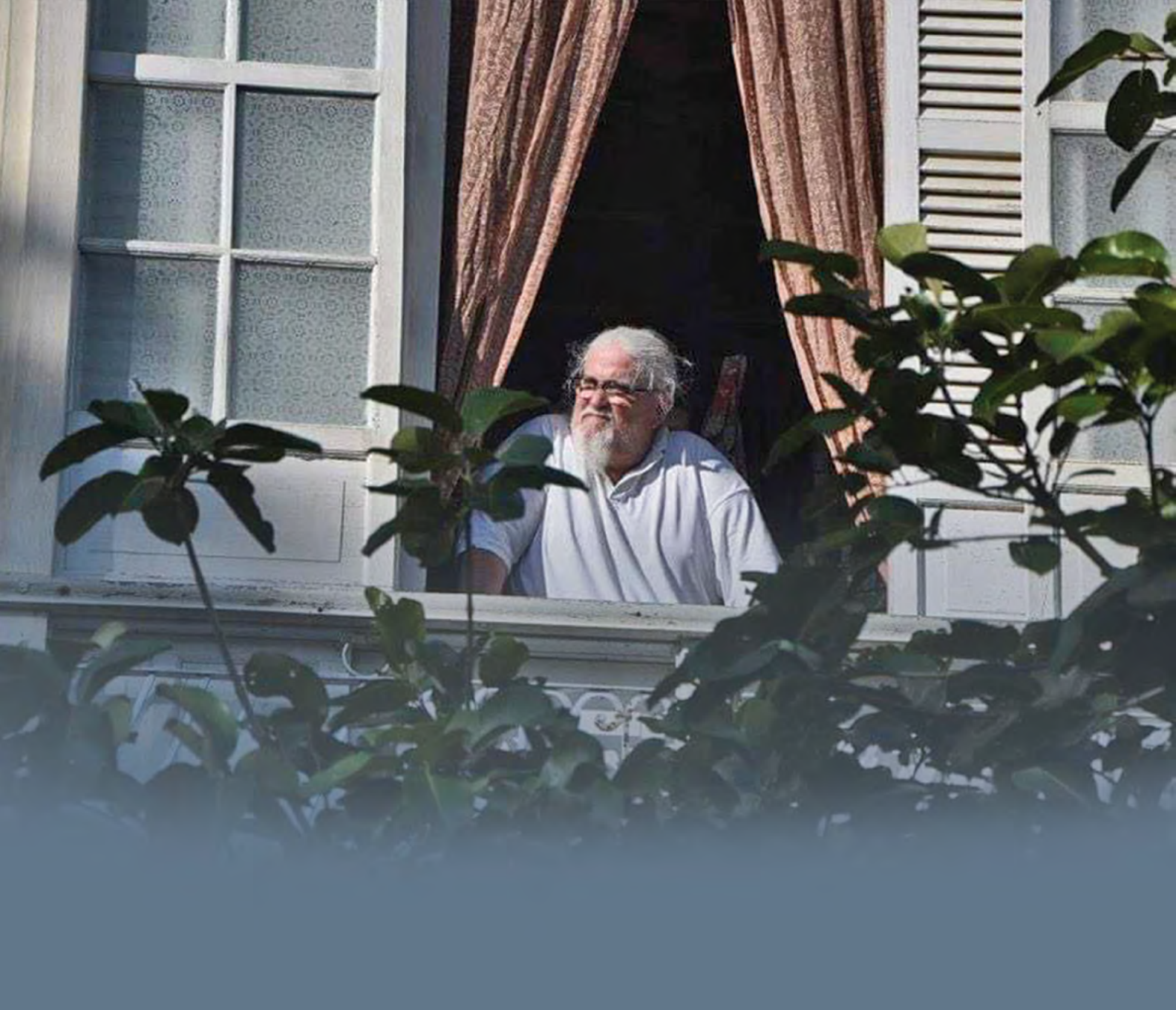
Many benefited from his mentorship, and our perspective changed with him as our teacher. Without his guidance, I would not have been as ready to walk this path. We were fortunate because we saw his methods. It made a difference when the artist is physically present to instruct and answer your questions directly about the craft and the profession.

Direk Peque did make his garden grow, and he made a difference in his own backyard. The play *Handurao* was about a family returning to their old home. His students might have disagreements, but they have not forgotten their ties, and they help each other. This was Direk Peque's impact in Negros. Whenever he was there, the creativity flowed in the family, the community, and the region.

He was a mentor and a friend. He was a visionary who recognized passion and opened the door for many to pass through. This is the reason many film artists emerged from Negros. Though we never had the chance to work together again, I realized that one of the moments that decided my destiny was when I peeked through that cross on the door of his workshop room with a broom in hand. It was a peek into another life just waiting to be discovered.

**Lawrence Fajardo** is a director, producer, screenwriter, and editor. His works include the short film *Kultado* (2005), the television mini-series *Tukhang* (2017-2018), and the films *Amok* (2011), *Posas* (2012), *Imbisibol* (2015), and *Kintsugi* (2020), which have been screened in national and international film festivals. He has received prizes from the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, Young Critics Circle Film Desk, Cinemalaya, CinemaOne Originals, and SINAG Maynila, among others.



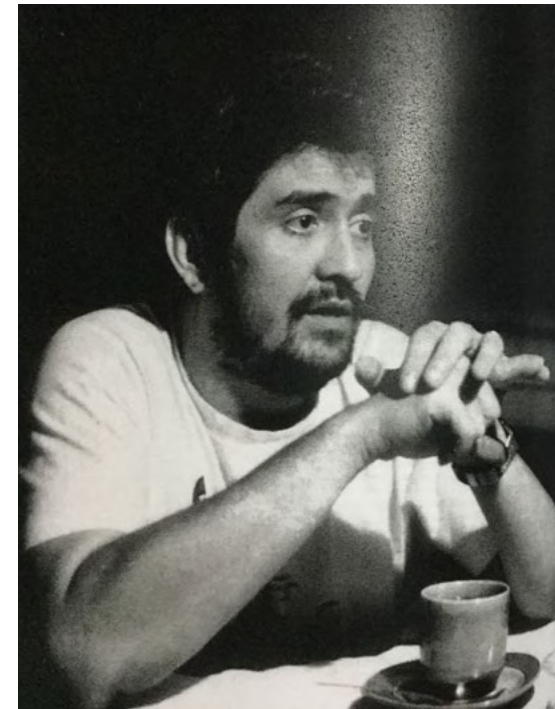


# Peque Gallaga

## and How He Made His Garden Grow

Elvert Bañares

ANGLE: PEQUE GALLAGA



It was one eventful day—at least for me—in the year 2003 that one of the country’s top directors would be meeting with me. It’s like a meeting between David and Goliath—only that, this time, the latter is a god, not a villain. We were to meet, at my invitation, to talk about Direk Peque’s participation in the 3rd eKsperim[E]nto Festival of Film, Video & New Media (2003)—a festival that supported and programmed very independent and clandestine films done by unknown and marginalized filmmakers.<sup>1</sup> The words “unknown” and “marginalized” attracted the good director, who was impressed that the festival’s winner for Best Student Film the year that preceded this one was from Dumaguete. It was quite unheard of in film festivals then except for Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video, which awarded regional films as early as 1993.<sup>2</sup>

The meeting was cordial, but I was excited as hell. A Peque Gallaga film, most often done in directorial partnership with director Lore Reyes, was always something I anticipated. From *Oro Plata Mata* (1982) to the early *Shake, Rattle & Roll* (1984), and *Once Upon a Time* (1987), I’ve been an avid follower when “follows” weren’t yet virtual. Direk Peque agreed to head the international jury of eKsperim[E]nto with one of the earliest records of “online deliberations,” and he accepted it without pay or compensation, knowing that it was an almost zero-budget festival. During that warm meeting at Starbucks, then located at the old Pedro Gil wing of Robinsons Ermita, Manila, we talked about regional movements and homegrown achievements, with him sharing stories about the Negros Summer Workshops, the first set of regular workshops done outside of the National Capital Region, and me telling him about what we were doing in Iloilo. That meeting was the start of a string of collaborations in film education and film training. In Direk Peque’s words via text after our meeting, “It’s a case of kindred spirits, Elvert.”



Below: Peque Gallaga directing Christopher de Leon. Images in this and the following article are from the collection of the Gallaga Family, Jo Macasa, and CineKasimanwa: Western Visayas Film Festival

The Negros Summer Workshops—called by its nickname, NSW—was co-founded by Direk Peque, Direk Lore, and poet and playwright Dr. Elsie Coscolluela in 1990.<sup>3</sup> The workshops, which later on got national attention, accepted participants from all over the country. For a workshop in the regions to get students from Manila to come over to Bacolod City was more than a feat. It was the other way around especially during the ’90s. Six years later, filmmakers Jo Macasa and Manny Montelibano organized the Piaya Awards. Jo told me that it was Direk Peque that named it Piaya, after the local delicacy of Negros Occidental. She enthusiastically told me: “It was supposed to be a small gathering of Film Production students under Lore, but Peque made it significantly huge. During the first Piaya Awards, I told him I was giving a Lifetime Achievement Award. And he said, ‘Please, don’t give it to me.’ I said, we planned to give it to Lore as one of the founders. He said, ‘Good! Name the lifetime achievement award The Brother Alexis Gonzales Award.’ Brother Alexis was his mentor in theater.”<sup>4</sup>

The NSW “was able to produce three generations of well-trained creative and technical people who went on to become well-regarded professionals in their chosen fields of the performing arts,” said Direk Lore, who knew Direk Peque as early as 1975 but only became close to him a decade later when the latter asked him to be his co-







director while the former acted as production manager for *Unfaithful Wife* (1986).<sup>5</sup> The NSW would produce future directors like Erik Matti, Law Fajardo, and Jay Abello; writers like Vicente Garcia Groyon; and local actors like Tanya Lopez, who was part of the pioneering batch and later on became a driving force in the region as a director for theater and a cultural manager of flagship projects in the Western Visayas particularly Negros Occidental.

The man who co-founded the Negros Summer Workshops, one of the earliest training programs for filmmakers and artists outside of Metro Manila (meaning “regional” in today’s terms), would later on invite me as one of the judges for the Crystal Piaya Awards—proof that apart from getting directors and actors from the mainstream film industry in Manila, Direk Peque was open to inviting an independent filmmaker on the board of jury.<sup>6</sup> Through these engagements, I was able to see the film outputs of NSW, and I deliberated with the likes of actors (and then MOWELFUND Executive Director) Ms. Boots Anson Roa, Mark Gil, Richard Gomez, and Cherie Gil; and, directors Jerry Lopez Sineneng and Jerome Pobocan. This experience was one of my earliest recollections of a film competition deliberated heavily, giving close attention to the competing films done by the participants of the workshops. The Crystal Piaya Awards, the culminating activity of each Negros Summer Workshop, was one of the few competitions I’d judged where the attention to narrative and technical detail was quite thorough.

Direk Peque believed in local talents and mentored actors like Joel Torre and Ronnie Lazaro from Bacolod City and Sagay City, respectively (both in Negros Occidental). Apart from actors, graduates of NSW were hired as part of his creative and technical teams as early as 1992. Direk Lore said that this happened by “natural progression.” By the end of the ‘90s, they had an almost all-Ilonggo Art Department in their feature films. Direk Lore told me, “Many products of NSW were in other departments too like lights and camera, make-up and production management,” because, might I add, they were trained under the NSW. The industry assignments became a regular gig for locals was not just because they came from Negros. It’s also because Peque and Lore saw the incomparable service they get from the almost all-Ilonggo Art Department. In Direk Lore’s words, “We were spoiled rotten by them.”<sup>7</sup>

Having started as a production designer for classics like Eddie Romero’s *Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (1976) and Ishmael Bernal’s *Manila by Night/City After Dark* (1980), Direk Peque’s films (both his solo outings and those with Direk Lore) were uniquely visual; they would always have that certain look, often creating a universe of their own. His penchant for fantasy and superstition could also be attributed to the provincial stories, the folklore and superstitious beliefs he knew intimately.

Even names and identities of the characters in Direk Peque’s films were frequently injected with local flavors, like Puga (Dolphy in *Once Upon a Time*), Bahaw (*Dugo ng Panday*, 1993), Sambag and Gamay (*Magic Temple*, 1996), and the “Ilonggo student” (*Scorpio Nights*, 1985). Moreover, as every Gallaga-Reyes film would



Gallaga with Lore Reyes and Cherie Gil during the making of *Sonata*



Addressing young people



Gallaga and Reyes attend the screening of their shorts and give talks at the CineKasimanwa



Gallaga, Reyes, Chart Motus, Jo Macasa, the author

become the talk of the town, locals would observe that character names in several films had the same names as Negros-based actors like Milton and Tanya (*Shake, Rattle & Roll II*, 1990)<sup>8</sup> and even two main characters named after Direk Peque’s son, Jubal (*Magic Temple*) and wife, Madie (*T’yanak*, 2014).<sup>9</sup>

The use of regional talents didn’t stop at the names of characters. Direk Lore told me that he and Direk Peque would fly Negros-based actors to Manila like Bacolod stage actress Marilu Santamaria for an essential role in *Magic Kingdom: Ang Alamat ng Damortis* (1997), Tanya Lopez for “Ate” (second episode, *Shake, Rattle & Roll III*, 1991), and actor-director Rene Hinojales for *Puso ng Pasko* (1998). Hinojales was also tasked to choreograph Jolina Magdangal’s three-minute music video for the latter film, which, according to Direk Lore, “was intrinsic in the movie plot.”<sup>10</sup>

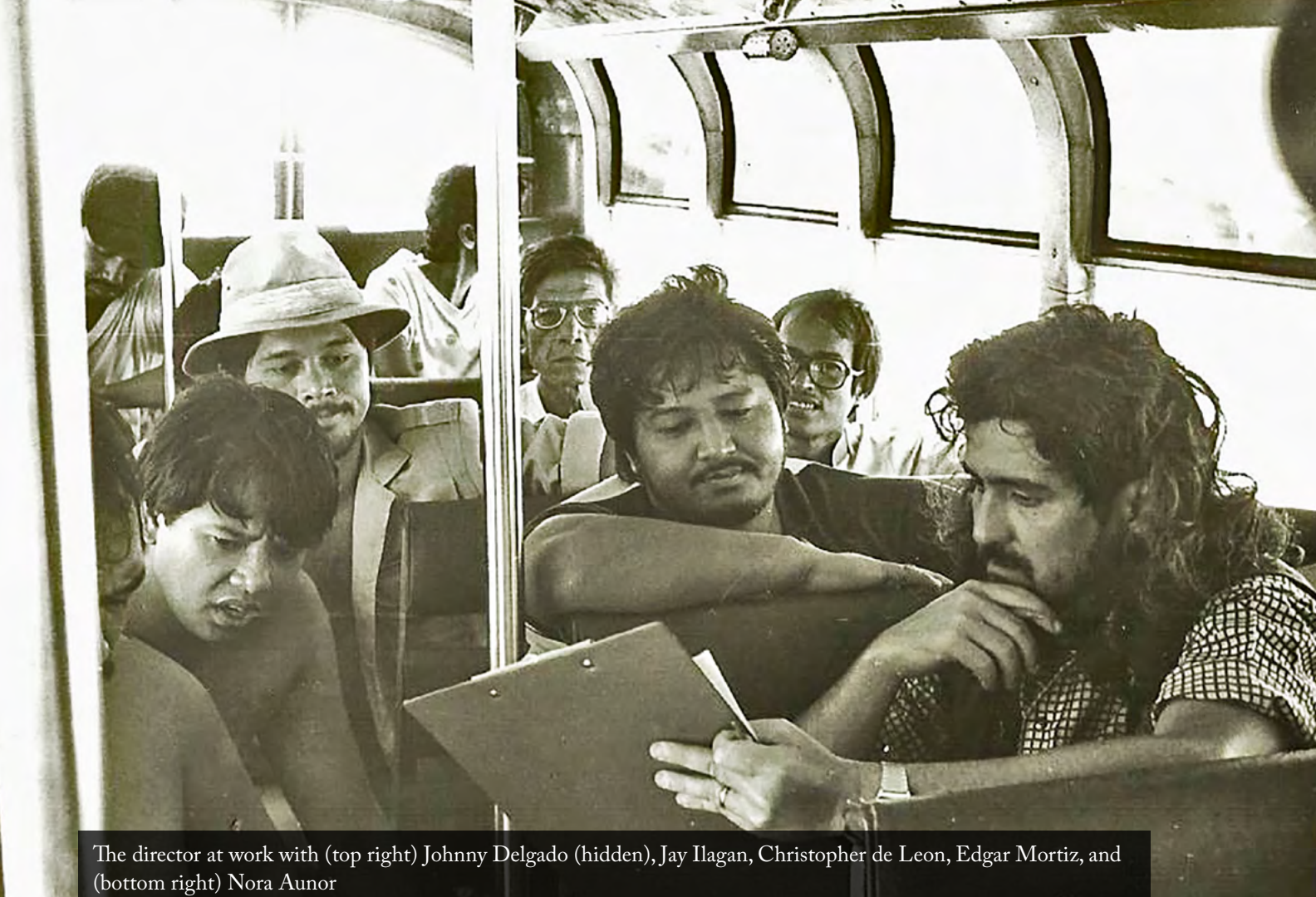
For a long while after my NSW judging stints, I went back to being an observer, a fan if you will, watching later works from the Gallaga-Reyes tandem like *Pinoy Blonde* (2005), *Agaton & Mindy* (2009) and *Sonata* (2013).<sup>11</sup> I followed from afar until 2013 when I programmed *Sonata* to be the closing film of the first edition of CineKasimanwa: Western Visayas Film Festival in Iloilo City. For this event, Direk Peque and Direk Lore with Jo Mocasa flew to Iloilo City, gracing the full house festival screening.<sup>12</sup> The locals loved *Sonata* because it resonated with them (something I did not observe in Metro Manila during the film’s regular run). People were crying inside the movie house even after the credits had rolled. For its emotional effect on local audiences, one can genuinely say that it perfectly captured the regional spirit.

The year after, I co-founded with Tanya Lopez the Bakunawa Cinema of the Young in Bacolod City. Our guest of honor and Co-Chair of the Board of Jury (with Direk Lore) was Direk Peque. When I told him about our plan to have him as a guest during the awards night at the University of St. La Salle, he told me something I would never forget: “I will do this for you, Tanya, and the kids.” It was something I was grateful for as the film entries were outputs from my summer film classes as a visiting film lecturer. The awards night was a reunion of sorts for him and the USLS Community with then-Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs Marie Therese Jochico and Masscom Department Chair Hannah Papasin Mariveles, representing the school.

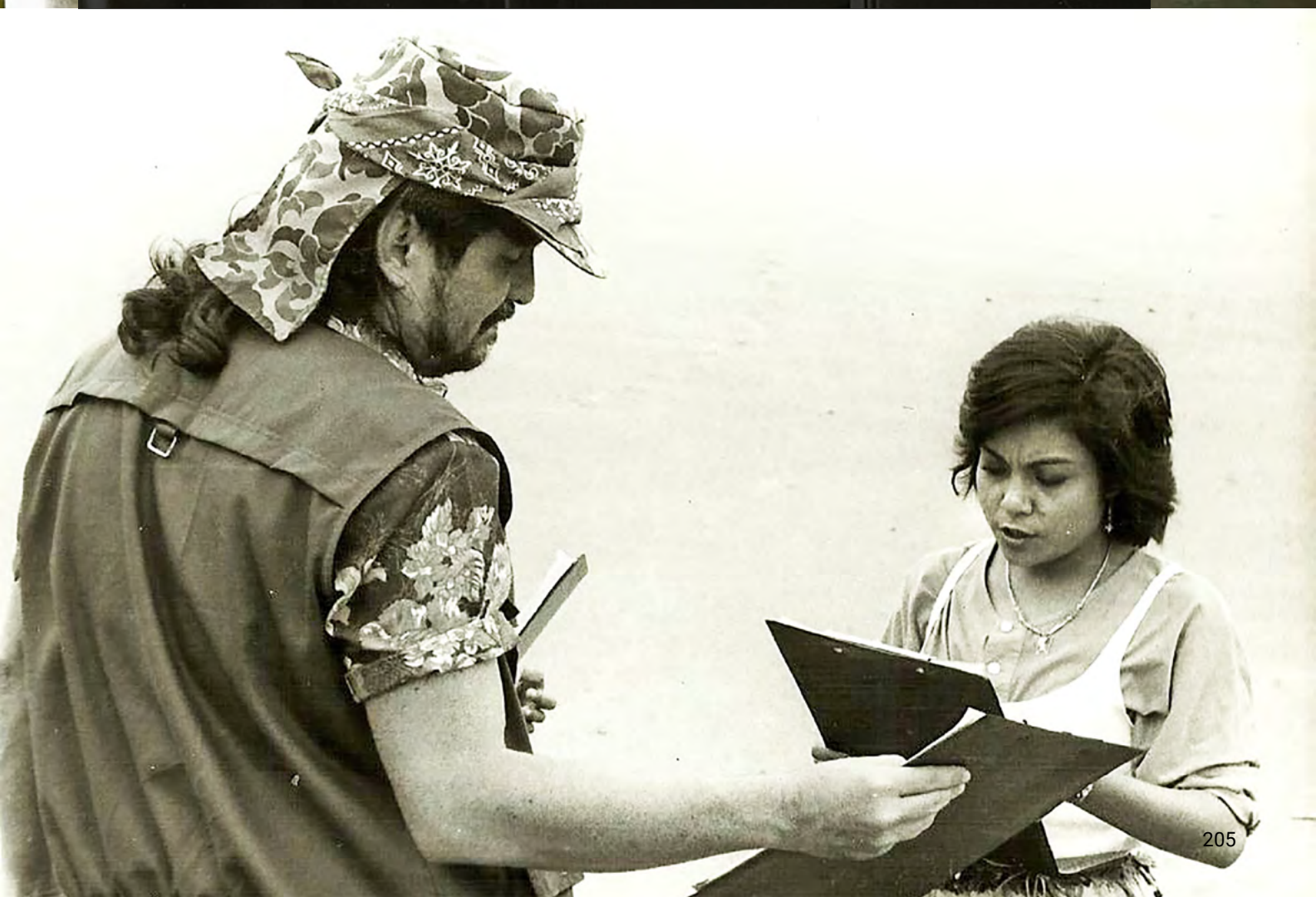
Because of his Facebook name, many speculated that “Bakunawa” was named after Direk Peque, but the festival got its name from the Visayan mythical creature when Tanya, Banjo Hinolan, and I were brainstorming for its name.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, Direk Peque’s guesting meant a lot for the community and especially for the young students.

Two years following their guesting in CineKasimwans, I told Direk Peque, Direk Lore, and Jo that there should be a kind of giving back, reminiscing my judging stint at NSW. In 2015, Peque and Lore chaired the jury, and Jo gave workshops on production management.<sup>14</sup> During this edition, CineKasimanwa screened shorts directed by Direk Peque and Direk Lore. These were also screened at Cine Exmundo or the University of the Philippines Visayas Cinematheque. *Tamawo* (2011) and *Bayi Sa Aparador* (2013) are all in Hiligaynon and were shot in Bacolod City. The last short film he directed, *Tabang* (2016), was screened in the fourth edition of CineKasimanwa.<sup>15</sup>





The director at work with (top right) Johnny Delgado (hidden), Jay Ilagan, Christopher de Leon, Edgar Mortiz, and (bottom right) Nora Aunor





During the awards night of CineKasimanwa’s third edition where he spoke on behalf of the jury, Direk Peque mentioned the top-notch quality of films from Iloilo, saying, “Before, Iloilo was here (gesturing a bottom hand), and Bacolod was here (raising his other hand way up high). But, after seeing the crop of films from Iloilo for the past two years, now it’s the opposite (shifting the hand gestures).”

Direk Peque’s generous praise became inspirational to many filmmakers in attendance. For an artist of his caliber and stature, he was always gracious and a consistent motivator to a new generation of filmmakers. Outside his films and his circle, he would act in many independent films by young filmmakers, starting with the short *Shit Happens* (2005) by Nich Perez, winning Best Director in Crystal Piaya that year. Other notable ones include *Woman of the Ruins* (2013) by Keith Sicat, *Islands* (2013) by Whammy Alcazaren, and *Relaks, It’s Just Pag-ibig* (2014) by Antoinette Jadaone and Irene Villamor.<sup>16</sup>

Negros would always be at the heart of Direk Peque. He and Direk Lore shot three feature films and three shorts in Negros, mainly hiring local actors and technical crew. His films, from bookend (*Oro, Plata, Mata*) to bookend (*Tabang*), were in many ways what would truly constitute as “regional.” Everything in between his career as filmmaker, educator, visual artist, and mentor was all about “making his garden grow,” training and mentoring the community to make them all become fellow artists.<sup>17</sup>

**Elvert Bañares** is a filmmaker, film producer, multidisciplinary artist, educator, and film festival organizer. He is the founder of CineKasimanwa: Western Visayas Film Festival and the Western Visayas Film Grants; consultant of then Cinema Values Reorientation Program of the NCCA and FAP; and Festival Director of Bakunawa Young Cinema and Sine Halaga Film Festival.

#### Endnotes

1 eKsperim[EN]to Festival of Film & New Media was one of the first film festivals in Southeast Asia to feature digital, student, and regional films from different parts of the world. It was founded in 1999 and ran until 2005.

2 Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video is Asia’s longest running film competition of independent and regional films. It is organized by the Cultural Center of the Philippines and now screened during the Cinemalaya.

3 From my online interview with Ms. Jo Macasa, one of the pioneering and successful graduates of NSW, on August 4, 2021. Jo is Peque’s trusted production manager and later on road manager to the Gallaga-Reyes directorial tandem.

4 Interview with Macasa.

5 During my online interview with Director Lore Reyes on August 5, 2021. Direk Lore had been the production manager of three of Peque’s films, namely *Virgin Forest* (1985), *Scorpio Nights*, and *Unfaithful Wife*.

6 The next year, I was invited again, making me the only one to judge in two Crystal Piaya Awards. The invitation was significant because I was the only independent filmmaker from the regions who was part of the jury during those two consecutive years.

7 Direk Lore’s answer to my question: Did you have a conscious decision to get local talents onscreen and off?

8 Milton Dionzon and Tanya Lopez, both from Bacolod City, are actordirectors doing community theater and film acting for decades now.

9 Actor Madeleine “Madie” Gallaga also acted in films like *Namets!* (2008) by Jay Abello and *Hinugot Sa Langit* (1985) by Ishmael Bernal.

10 Interview with Reyes.

11 A personal favorite shot in Negros with a highly Ilonggo sensibility.

12 At SM Cinema Iloilo City with a capacity of over 800 seats.

13 The suggestion came from yours truly during our brainstorming at C’s (Lacson Street) as it was supposed to be the name of CineKasimanwa before we decided otherwise.

14 The jury was composed of Direk Peque, Direk Lore, director and editor Tara Illenberger, and then NCCA cinema committee, Mr. Teddy Co.

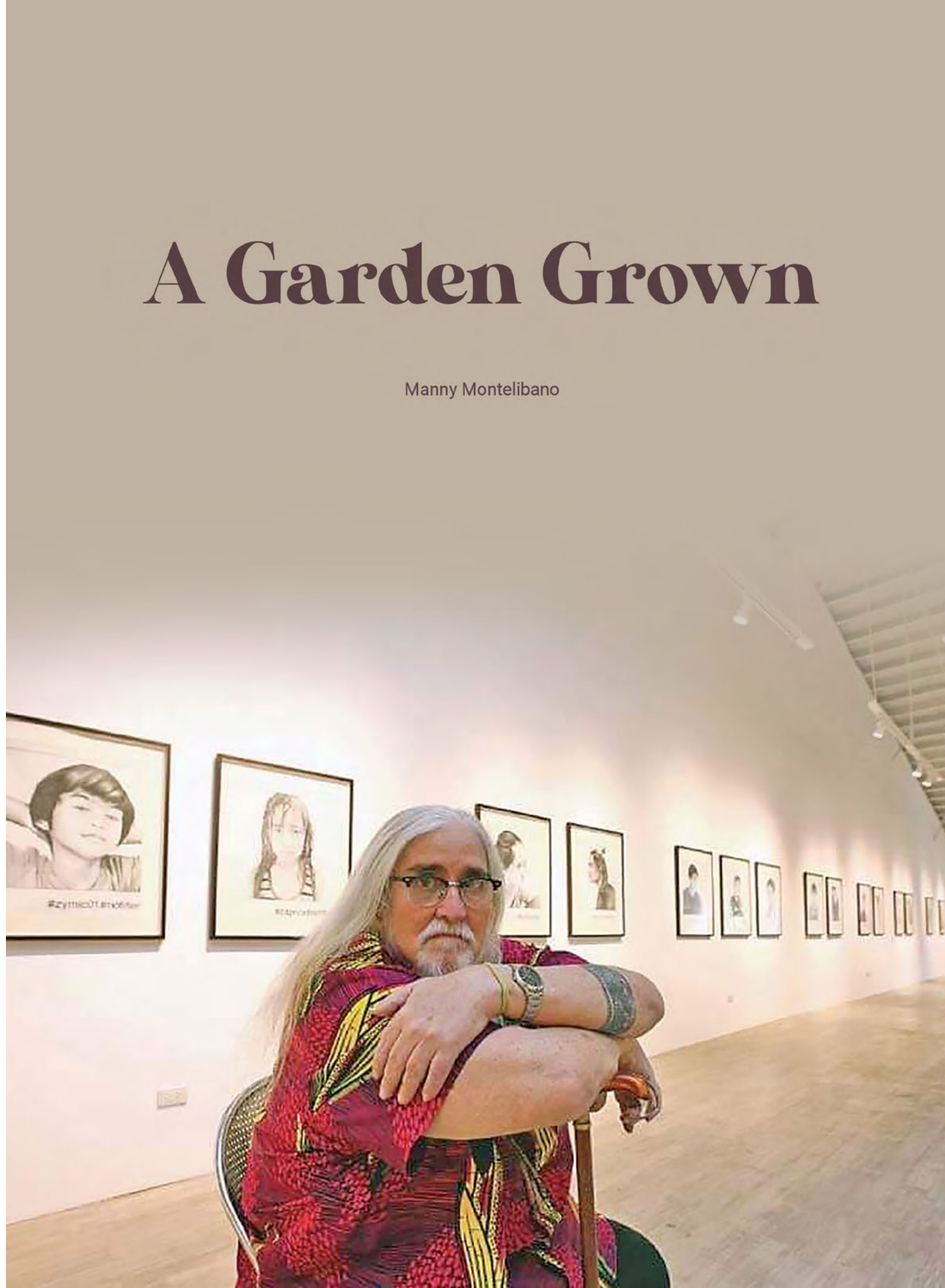
15 CineKasimanwa is the first festival to screen all short films by directors Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes during its first edition (2013) at the Cinema Exmundo or the UPV Cinematheque. This was made possible in partnership with the Division of Humanities then headed by Martin Genodepa who would later become Vice-Chancellor of UP Visayas and Head of UPV-OICA. The UPV Cinematheque, a constant partner of CineKasimanwa since it started, was under Frances Lacuesta (2013), Alfredo Diaz (2015, 2016), and Genodepa thereafter. Direk Peque and Lore with Jo Macasa guested in CineKasimanwa three times: in the first (2013), third (2015), and fourth (2016) editions, but their films were programmed four times including *T’yanak* in 2014. Their succeeding guesting were supported NCCA’s cinema committee then headed by Chair Teddy Co and FDCCP’s Cinematheque Iloilo managed by its then Officer-in-Charge and now Regional Officer, Daniella Caro. CineKasimanwa’s programming of Direk Peque and Lore’s work extended in online platforms as their short film *Bayi Sa Aparador* was included in the CineKasimanwa curated line-up in Viddsee.

16 Direk Peque acted twice in Antoinette Jadaone’s films. He also appeared in *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay* (2011). Direk Peque popularized the titular character as his “resident” aswang in his horror films. He also acted twice for films by Sigfried Barros Sanchez, *Ang Anak ni Brocka* (2005) and *Huling Biyahe* (2012, co-directed by Racquel Zaballero-Sanchez).

17 As part of his last speech at the Gallaga Theater, named after him, of the University of St. La Salle – Bacolod City on August 15, 2019.

# A Garden Grown

Manny Montelibano





Peque Gallaga started the Negros Summer Workshops with Lore Reyes, Dr. Elsie Coscolluela and Br. Augustine Boquer at the University of St. La Salle (USLS) in Bacolod City as a summer creative education in 1990. Classes were intensive: four hours that sometimes extended to six when discussions become thought-provoking, for five to six days a week, for four weeks, at the end of which students needed to have produced outputs to show for their participation. The Negros Summer Workshops' film process planted the seeds for the development of the craft and nurtured young filmmakers' passion for cinema, such that the Workshops grew a pool of talented filmmakers that influenced the creative industries, not only in Negros, but also in the rest of the Philippines.

Under Peque's leadership, local and international film practitioners came to teach and share their expertise with the students. Participants came from all over the Philippines: from professional actors and movie staff to film enthusiasts, a broad spectrum of people joined to learn from the workshops. Expertise was not a requirement. It was a chance for people to make mistakes and learn from them.

While doing the workshops, Peque and Lore were at times in the middle of pre-producing their next movie or project. After the workshop, they would continue with their film work, and some of the graduates of the workshops would be invited to join the production and apply what they learned in real production space.

The sensibility of Peque Gallaga is palpably reflected in his films, with their precise, sophisticated plots, ensemble performances, powerful acting direction, strong and evocative visuals, and dramatic flair of film elements. His *Oro Plata Mata*, *Virgin Forest*, *Scorpio Nights*, *Isang Araw Walang Diyos*, *Baby Love*, *Shake Rattle and Roll*, and *Pinoy Blonde*, many of which he worked on with Lore, depict a range of stories that both reflect and comment on our strange and beautiful world, inspiring many artists and filmmakers craft their own.

For Peque, filmmaking is a collaborative art. As a result, his style of direction was always an inclusive vision. He incorporated different artistic opinions from his team and mastered this process to combine cinematic elements that produced masterful *mise en scene*. Along with Lore, his most frequent collaborator, he always respected the stories he was telling and the people who created these works with him, their team, and film crew. "To be an artist," Peque had said in one of his Director's Apprenticeship classes, "you have to be honest, generous, personal, and specific."

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**Manny Montelibano** holds a Bachelor's degree in Economics from the University of St. La Salle in Bacolod City, where he is currently director of the Institute of the Moving Image. He is an active cultural worker especially in the Visayas region, affiliated with various organizations. In 2015, he represented the Philippines at the 56th Venice Biennale.

The sensibility of Peque Gallaga is palpably reflected in his films, with their precise, sophisticated plots, ensemble performances, powerful acting direction, strong and evocative visuals, and dramatic flair of film elements.

The Negros Workshops produced generations of professional actors, directors, production designers, sound designers, production managers, writers, producers, artists, and even teachers. Some are familiar names now, like Erik Matti, Gabriel Fernandez, Jay Abello, Lawrence Fajardo, and others. The workshops also extended to community theater work and even empowered tourism officers to produce their own promotional materials in the local government. On the practical side of things, we can say the workshops did give career opportunities that supported participants and their families across time and place, going well beyond their contributions to the art and craft of cinema.

During one of those workshop summers, I remember Peque telling his students to "make your garden grow." He was speaking passionately about nurturing our communities in every way that we could. The same is obvious in his own artistic process: he had created a garden, a blooming community of artists and filmmakers.

The Negros Summer Workshops eventually left USLS to become the Bacollywood Workshops at Gallery Orange - Art District; and now, it has become the Bacolod Workshops. Students have become teachers, and sometimes the original teachers come back once in a while, sometimes as an instructor, sometimes even as a student again.

Today, Peque's legacy continues, and as we pay the gift that has been his life and his oeuvre forward, the garden grows and continues to bloom.

# ANG PAROLANG GINTO NG SAMBAYANANG PILIPINO

Munting Parangal Para kay Bienvenido Lumbera

Nicanor G. Tiongson





Sa parangal na ito, nais kong balikan ang naging papel ni Bien Lumbera sa pagpapaunlad ng wika at kulturang Pilipino bilang guro, bilang iskolar, kritiko, at artista, at bilang tao.

### Guro ng Panitikan

Nang una kong marinig ang pangalan ni Bien noong 1961, hindi ako masyadong na-*impress*. *Freshman* ako noon sa Ateneo at inuuri ang mga guro sa Ingles ayon sa mga seksiyon na tinuturuan nila. Malinaw ang herarkiya ng estudyante at guro. Ang section A ay binubuo ng pinakamahuhusay na gradweyt ng Ateneo High School at tinuturuan ng mga paring Hesuwita sa pangkalahatan. Ang section B ay binubuo ng mga nangungunang estudyante mula sa mga “provincial Ateneos” at ilang taga-Ateneo High School na rin, na napapailalim kay Rolando Tinio. Ang section C ay binubuo ng mga honor students ng ibang mahusay na hayskul sa iba’t ibang probinsiya, na tinuturuan ni Eric Torres; and section D ay binubuo ng mga estudyante mula sa iba’t ibang hayskul na pribado o publiko, etc. at nasa ilalim ni Bien Lumbera. Bago pa si Bien noon sa Ateneo at palagay ko’y hindi pa alam ng administrasyon kung ano ang kalibre niya. Pero noon pa ma’y pinangarap ko nang maging guro sina Rolando, Eric at Bien, ang matunog na triumvirato ng English Department.

Nagkatotoo ang aking pangarap. Bilang Humanitites major, kinailangan kong kumuha ng units sa panitikan, bukod sa pilosopiya at kasaysayan. Kaya naging guro ko, at nina Leo Garcia, Luigi Francia, Pete Lacaba at Manuel Pichel, si Rolando sa Modern Poetry, si Eric sa 18<sup>th</sup> Century English Literature, at si Bien sa Modern Novel. Napapatunganga ako noon kay Rolando na ang bawat klase ay nasa *performance level* at umaatikabo ang *English accent*. Nabighani ako sa abilidad ni Eric na maiugnay sina Pope at Swift sa musika ni Mozart at Haydn at sa mga pintura ni Watteau at Fragonard. Pero totoong namangha ako kay Bien, na walang drama at napakatahimik pa nga, pero malinaw ang paglalalahad, masinop ang pananaliksik, matalas ang panunuri, at malalim ang naa-arok ng isip. Lalo ko pang hinangaan ang galing ni Bien sa pagsusuri nang maging guro ko siya sa UP sa mga kursong doktoral. Nang ako’y magsimula na ring magturo, una sa Ateneo, at pagkatapos sa UP, nagamit ko ang mga teknik sa pagtuturo ng triumviratong ito, pero habang tumatagal, mas pinahalagahan ko ang estilo ng pagtuturo ni Bien. Sa aking palagay, mas malalim ang pagkakatuto ng mag-aaral, hindi sa magarbong paglelektur kundi sa pagtuturong nagbibigay sa kanila ng espasyo at panahon para limiin ang mga kaisipang idinudulot sa kanila sa banayad at mabining paraan. Ganito rin ang paraang ginamit ni Bien bilang tagapayo ko nang

sulatin ko na ang aking disertasyon tungkol sa Komedyang sa Parañaque.

Nagtapos ako sa Ateneo noong 1965 at nag-*volunteer* na magturo sa Notre Dame of Jolo College para “makita ang tunay na mundo.” Pagbalik ko sa Maynila noong 1966, hindi ko matiyak kung ano ang magiging direksiyon ng buhay ko. Noon ako binigyan ng mahalagang payo ni Bien. Ayon daw kay Propesor Agoncillo (na adviser ni Bien sa kaniyang disertasyon), may bubuksang bagong programa sa UP na Master of Arts in Philippine Studies sa ilalim ni Propesor Yabes. Bakit di ko daw pakialaman. Sa kinalabasan, ako pala ang magiging kauna-unahang estudyante ng MA Phil Studies Program sa UP. At dito na nagsimulang mabuo ang oryentasyong makabayan, na naging tanglaw ng aking buhay. Dahil kay Bien.

Natapos ko ang lahat ng yunits sa MA, pero hindi ko matapos-tapos ang pananaliksik sa napili kong paksa: ang sinakulo sa Malolos. Gayunman, noong 1968, kinuha ako ni Bien para maging instraktor sa English Department na pinamumunuan niya. Tuwang-tuwa ako sa aking unang trabaho, kahit ang suweldo ay 700 pesos. Kasi parang barkada lamang ang mga guro sa departamento—sina Bien at Rolando, at kaming nakababatang guro—sina Badong Bernal, Rolly Perez, ako, at si Cecilia Locsin-Nava. Madalas noon ang party sa munting apartment ni Bien sa Esteban Abada, kung saan di magkamayaw ang bidahan at minsan nama’y tahimik na tahimik dahil nakikinig sa monologo (na may kasamang luha) mula sa *The Seagull* na isinalin sa Cebuano at ginampanan ng bagong tuklas na aktres ni Rolando, si Laurice Guillen. Noong 1969, dinirihe ni Rolando ang *Paglipas ng Dilim*, at sangkot kaming lahat dito, si Badong bilang *costume designer*, ako at si Laurice bilang koro, at si Bien sa pananaliksik.

Pero nag-iiba na rin ang panahon noon pa man. Lumakas ang mga tinig ng protesta laban sa rehimeng Marcos, na nagdulo sa pagsiklab ng First Quarter Storm. Unti-unti nang kumiling at sumanib si Bien sa kilusang makabayan, bagay na nakamamangha sapagkat dahil sa gayong komitment ay sinugal ni Bien ang sarili niyang posisyon sa Ateneo (siya na ang isa sa iginagalang na *full professor* sa kolehiyo noon). Noon niya inanyayahan na sumapi na rin sa kilusan ang ilang nakababatang guro, tulad ko. Kasabay ng pag-igting ng tunggalian sa lipunan, iniluwal ang kilusan para sa Pilipinisasyon sa Ateneo. Bilang tugon sa hinihingi ng Pilipinisasyon, nilikha ng Ateneo ang Philippine Studies Department noong 1971, sa ilalim ni Bien. Kinuha ni Bien bilang *full-time faculty* si Virgilio Almarino at ang inyong lingkod, at bilang *part-time faculty* sina Rolando at Eric mula sa English Department (na mas gustong tumambay sa amin kaysa sa English.) Nagsimula na kaming magturo sa Filipino at gumawa ng mga teksbuk para sa mga kurso sa maikling kuwento, tula, at sanaysay na ituturo sa Filipino. Bilang bahagi ng pagpapaunlad sa wikang Filipino, itinalaga ako ni Bien



Agustin Sotto, Lumbera, and Ricky Lee ca. the early 1980s

Next page: Lumbera with his children ca. the early 1980s

bilang patnugot ng kauna-unahang dyornal sa Filipino sa buong bansa—ang *Katipunan*. Nagkaroon ito ng apat na isyu, na tila hindi nagustuhan ng administrasyon dahil sa kaniyang kulay, pero di na rin nila kinailangang supilin dahil natiklop nang kusa nang ideklara ang Martial Law noong Setyembre 1972.

Pagbagsak ng batas militar, nagtago muna kaming tatlo nina Bien at Rio sa kani-kaniyang lungga. Pagkatapos, pinuntahan namin ni Rio si Bien sa bahay ni Rolando sa Gagalangin, kung saan siya nagtatago. Minabuti naming tatlo na huwag na munang pumasok sa Ateneo, lalo’t nasa listahan daw ng mga “subersibong” organisasyon na hinahanap ng militar ang Panulat para sa Kaunlaran ng Sambayanan (PAKSA), na kinabibilangan namin at pinamumunuan ni Bien. Sa loob ng ilang buwan, tumira si Bien sa isang UG house, na nirerentan ni Maita Gomez at kaniyang anak, at nakasama niya doon sina Ed Maranan at Aida Santos, si Boni Ilagan at paminsan-minsan ako. Nabulabog ang bahay na iyon at iniwan ng grupo.

Matapos ang dalawang taon ay magkakaiba na kami ng landas. Nagpatuloy si Bien sa underground, pero nahuli at nakulong noong 1974. At gusto ko man ay hindi ko siya madalaw sa bilangguan, pagkat may nagsabing sa interogasyon ng isang nahuling kasama ay tinatanong daw kung sino si Isagani, na siyang pangalang gamit ko sa kilusan. Samantala at sa kabila nito, ako nama’y lumantad na, at nagsimula nang magturo sa St. Scho noong 1973, salamat kay Sister Mary John, at sa UP mula 1974, habang pinamamahalaan ko ang Dulaang Babaylan—kasama sina Anton Juan, Doreen Fernandez, at Jonas Sebastian—na binubuo ng dating mga aktibistang miyembro ng Panday Sining at Kamanyang. Nang makalabas si Bien, di nagtagal at nagpakasal na sila ni Shayne sa kapilya ng arsobispo sa Mandaluyong. Ang kambal na anak nila ay naging inaanak namin ni Badong. Gayunman, hindi ko pa rin maatim na tawaging kumpare si Bien.

Nang hindi na makabalik si Bien sa Ateneo, tinanggap niya ang paanyaya na magturo sa aming departamento, ang Departamento ng Filipino at Panitikan ng Pilipinas sa UP. *Ateneo’s loss was UP’s gain*. Sa simula, nagsiksikan na lang muna kami ni Bien sa aking kuwarto sa FC, dahil wala nang bakanteng kuwarto. Naging malaking asset si Bien sa Departamento. Nagturo siya ng iba’t ibang kurso sa panitikan sa antas na undergraduate at graduate, habang nag-eedit ng *Sagisag at Diliman Review* at nagsusulat ng kaniyang mga dula at mga libro. Nagpatuloy din ang pakikisangkot niya sa mga kilos-protesta laban sa sensura sa panahon ni MTRCB chair Manuel Morato at laban sa malawakang korapsiyon sa panahon ni Erap at ni GMA. Lumaki pang lalo ang pangalan ni Bien sa akademya at sa bansa, at kahit nagretiro na siya noong 1997, patuloy siyang nakiisa sa mga kilusang makabayan.

Previous page: Young Bien Lumbera. Photos courtesy of Silay Lumbera, except where noted





**Iskolar, Kritiko, at Malikhaing Manunulat**

Sa Ateneo noong dekada 1960, malaki ang naging papel ni Bien sa pagbubuo ng mga lektur sa panitikan at sining na Pilipino, na tinipon sa *Brown Heritage*. Siya rin ang nagsimula at nagpatakbo ng Urian Lectures I-III, taunang serye ng mga panayam tungkol sa mga kasaysayan, manunulat, akda ng panitikang Pilipino, na inilalathala pagkatapos sa *Philippine Studies* (nagsalita rito sina Amado Hernandez, Teodoro Agoncillo, Felipe Padilla de Leon, Rogelio Sikat, Pedro Dandan, atbp). Sa *graduate level*, si Bien ang unang nagturo ng mga kurso sa panulaang Pilipino, dulang Pilipino, nobelang Pilipino, at iba pang asignatura. Kaya naman masasabing siya ang nagbukas ng pinto para makapasok sa pag-aaral ng panitikang Pilipino ang iba-ibang henerasyon ng mga iskolar at kritikong Pilipino—sa henerasyon nina Virgilio Almario, Soledad Reyes, Isagani Cruz, at inyong lingkod, sa henerasyon nina Lennette Mirano, Chari Lucero, Rose Yu, Tet Maceda, Lulu Torres-Reyes, Apo Chua, at Preachy Legasto, at sa henerasyon nina Roland Tolentino, Joi Barrios, Glecly Atienza, Leo Zafra, at Jerry Respeto.

Bilang iskolar at kritiko ng pelikula, isa si Bien sa pinakaunang nagsulat tungkol sa pelikula (na noo’y minamata bilang mababaw na pasatiempo lamang) sa dyornal na akademiko, at pati na sa mga diyaryo at magasin. Naging bahagi siya ng unang grupo ng mga kritiko at guro na nagtatag ng Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino noong Mayo 1, 1976 sa Taza de Oro. Kasama niya rito ang mga dating estudyante o kapwa guro sa Ateneo, tulad nina Pio de Castro III, Manuel Pichel, Nicanor Tiongson, Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., Gino Dormiendo, at Nestor Torre Jr, na siyang naging unang tagapangulo, at mga kaguro sa UP na sina Behn Cervantes at Petronilo Bn. Daroy, at kaibigang si Mario Hernando. Mula noon at hanggang ngayon ay patuloy na namamayagpag ang Manunuri, at ang Gawad Urian, ayon sa mga nasa industriya na mismo, ang kinikilala bilang “pinakaprestihiyosong” award sa mga artista ng pelikula. Malaki ang naging papel ni Bien sa naging kredibilidad ng grupo, pagkat, bilang pinaka-senior sa lahat ng kasapi, naging halimbawa siya ng kritikong matalisik magsuri, may puso para sa pelikulang Pinoy at di matatawarang integridad. Sa pagpanaw ni Bien, dalawa na lamang sa orihinal na manunuri ang narito pa’t naglilingkod—ako at si Doy del Mundo, pero natitiyak ko na aalagaan ng mga naiwang miyembro ang integridad ng Gawad Urian. Bago ko malimutan, si Bien ang nagbigay ng pangalang Gawad Urian sa award ng Manunuri, na tumutukoy sa batong ginagamit ng mga alahero para matukoy ang uri ng ginto ng isang alahas.

Ngunit pinakamalaking ambag ni Bien sa iskolarsip at kritisismo ng panitikan at pelikulang Pilipino ang mga librong sinulat niya: ang *Tagalog Poetry: 1570-1898*, ang kauna-unahang malalimang pag-aaral sa kasaysayan ng panulaang Tagalog; at ang mga antolohiya ng mga kritikal na sanaysay,

tulad ng *Abot Tanaw, Writing the Nation/Pag-akda ng Bansa, Bayan at Lipunan*; at ang mga antolohiyang pinamatnugutan niya tulad ng *Philippine Literature: A History and Anthology, Bangon: Antolohiya ng mga Dulang Mapanghimagsik*, at *Filipino Writing: Philippine Literature from the Regions*.

Bilang creative artist, pinakakilala si Bien sa mga librettong sinulat niya para sa *Tales of the Manuvou* (musika ni Nonon Pederro, koryograpiya ni Alice Reyes, disenyo ni Badong Bernal), na pinanggalingan ng awit na “Noong Unang Panahon,” at *Rama, Hari* (musika ni Ryan Cayabyab, koryograpiya ni Alice Reyes, disenyo ni Badong Bernal) para sa Ballet Philippines (sinabi ni Ryan na na-*inspire* siya sa rikit ng liriks na ginawa ni Bien); at para sa *Nasa Puso ang Amerika* (co-writer Johven Velasco, direksiyon ni Gardy Labad, disenyo ni Weni Gamboa) para sa PETA; at para sa mga dulang musikal na *Noli Me Tangere* (musika ni Ryan Cayabyab, direksiyon ni Nonon Padilla, disenyo ni Badong Bernal) para sa Tanghalang Pilipino; *Bayani* (musika ni Jim Paredes, direksiyon ni Leo Rialp, disenyo ni Badong Bernal), *May Palabas Bukas* (musika ni Lucio San Pedro), at *Hibik at Himagsik nina Victoria Laktaw atbp.* (musika ni Lucien Letaba, direksiyon ni Alex Cortes, disenyo ni Badong Bernal). Bilang makata, tampok ang kaniyang mga antolohiyang *Likhang Dila, Likhang Diwa, Balaybay, Poetika/Pulitika*, at ang pamosong “A Eulogy for Roaches.”

**Bilang Tao**

Ngunit hindi lamang makabayang bisyunaryo at lider si Bien, at primera klaseng iskolar, kritiko, mandudula’t makata. Higit sa lahat, siya ay may napakagandang loob na marunong umunawa sa nangangailangan. Noong nasa second year ako sa Ateneo, umalis ako sa Ateneo dorm para tumira sa Challenge House, dahil akala ko ibig kong maging Heswita. Matapos lamang ang ilang buwan ay natanto ko na hindi talaga para sa akin ang pagpapari, kaya umalis ako sa Challenge House nang hindi pa tapos ang semestre. Pero wala na palang bakanteng kuwarto sa dorm at hindi naman ako maaaring mag-uwian sa Malolos. Tinanong ko si Bien kung may kuwarto ba akong

Next page:  
Lumbera and Lav Diaz with the Concerned Artists of the Philippines at a protest rally

The original members of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino ca. the late 1970s: (seated, L-R) Nestor Torre, Petronilo Daroy, Bienvenido Lumbera; (standing, L-R) Pio de Castro III, Nicanor Tiongson, Behn Cervantes, Manuel Pichel, Justino Dormiendo, Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr., and Mario Hernando. From *The Urian Anthology 1970-1979* (Manila: ML Morato, 1983)





marerentahan sa bahay kung saan may nirentahan siyang kuwarto, na malapit sa Ateneo. Wala na raw, pero pinakiusapan niya ang may-ari na hayaan na lang akong makisuno sa kaniyang kuwarto hanggang ako'y makabalik sa Ateneo dorm. Alam kong nakaabala ako sa kaniya sa ginawa niyang iyon, kaya hindi ko malilimutan ang munting kagandahang loob na iyon na sumalba sa akin nang minsang ako'y nagipit. Dagdag pa roon, habang nasa ilalim kami ng iisang bubong, pinahiram niya sa akin ang alinmang librong ibig kong basahin o plakang gusto kong pakinggan sa kaniyang malaking koleksiyon ng *classical music*.

At dumating ang panahon na nagpasiya akong humiwalay sa kilusan nang nagkakasalungat na ang aming mga paniniwala. Mabigat ang loob ko na humiwalay, pagkat patuloy akong naniniwala sa pagbubuo ng isang lipunang may pagkakapantay-pantay. May matatalim na puna ang ilang opisyal ng kilusan na nakarating sa akin, pero wala akong narinig na kahit isang masakit na salita kay Bien. Sa katunayan, alam kong naunawaan ako ni Bien, dahil kilala niya ang aking pagkatao mula pa nang maging estudyante niya ako. Nang paalis na ako sa miting na iyon, ngumiti siya at sinabi, “kasama ka pa rin kahit ano pa.” Doon ko nadama ang lawak ng pag-iisip at lalim ng pang-unawa ni Bien. Walang nangyaring gahanip mang pagbabago sa aming pagkakaibigan matapos akong humiwalay sa kilusan, na (ang buhay nga naman!) siya rin ang nagpakilala sa akin. Ano pa nga ba ang hahanapin sa isang kaibigan at kasama?

Marahil, kung meron mang naging batik sa aming pagkakaibigan, iyon ay pagkukulang ko, sapagkat hindi ko natapatan nang ganap ang maraming kabutihang loob na pinakita sa akin ni Bien sa anim na dekada ng aming pagkakakilala sa isa't isa.

#### Sa Pagwawakas

Kapag iniisip ko si Bien at ang kaniyang pagkatao, ang pumapasok sa isip ko ay ang imahe ng isang parola, isang parolang ginto (pasintabi sa tatay ni Doy del Mundo). Pagkat ang imaheng iyon ang kumakatawan sa pinakamaganda niyang katangian. Ang parola'y matatag at matibay, tulad ng prinsipyo at paninindigan ni Bien; ang parola'y maaasahan at mapagkandiling gabay, tulad ng pag-aalaga at pagmamalasakit ni Bien sa mga kasama at kaibigan; ang parola'y may liwanag na tanglaw-sa bagyo ma't sa rilim-tulad ng pagtuturo ni Bien na nagmulat sa mata ng libo-libong kabataan, at umakay sa marami pang walang muwang, naliligaw, nag-aalinlangan o nabubulagan, kahit sa pinakamadilim na panahon ng batas militar. Parolang ginto ng sambayanang Pilipino. Iyon si Bien.

Salamat, Bien, sa iyong buhay na nagpayaman sa kahulugan ng pagiging Pilipino nating lahat.

\* Unang binasa ng may-akda sa online tribyut kay Bien ng Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino at ibang taga-industriya ng pelikula, ika-30 ng Setyembre 2021.

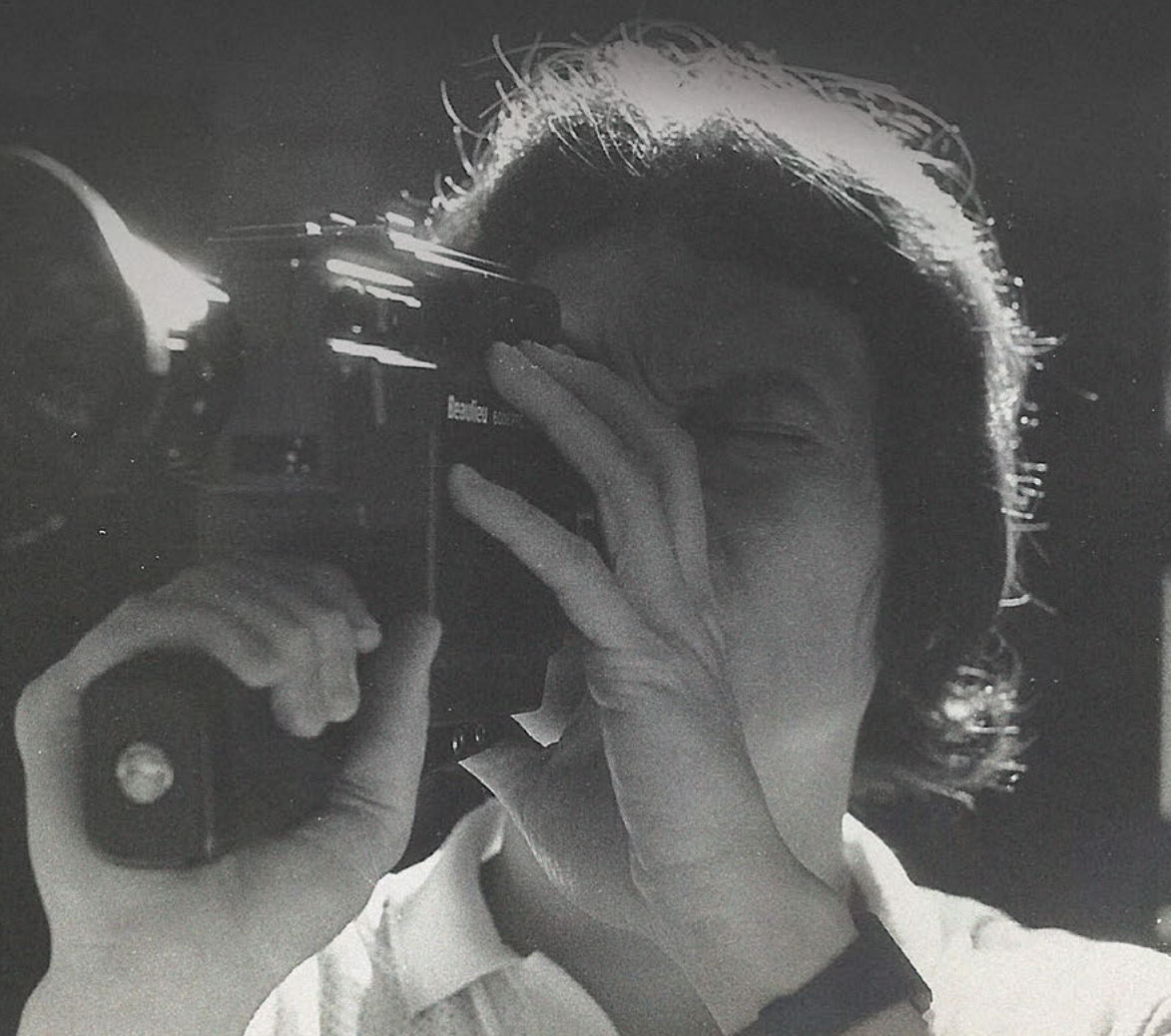
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**Nicanor G. Tiongson**, a film and theater scholar and critic, playwright, and cultural administrator, is professor emeritus of the University of the Philippines Diliman. He served as vice-president and artistic director of the Cultural Center of the Philippines (1986-1994) and dean of the UP College of Mass Communication (2003-2006). He has written and edited books on Philippine theater and film.



# Passionate Light-Sharer

## A Tribute to Surf Reyes



**S**urf Reyes (1945-2021) helped launch one of the earliest film education programs in the Philippines at the Movie Workers Welfare Foundation, Inc. (MOWELFUND) in 1979 and eventually became Mowelfund Film Institute's (MFI) founding director in 1980. MFI is a key institution that shaped alternative filmmakers using forms that, at the time of the school's founding, were considered peripheral. He devoted his entire career as a strong advocate of visual literacy and the democratization of filmmaking in the country even before the digital period. He is a mentor to many film practitioners, a passionate "Light-sharer" who inspired my work.

—Ricky Orellana



Surf Reyes and Teddy Co chats with British film critic Tony Rayns at Mowelfund Plaza in 1987

Opposite page: Surf Reyes holds a Beaulieu 6008 PRO super-8 film camera. Images courtesy of author

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**Ricky Orellana**, a director, editor, and animator, is a board member of the Animation Council of the Philippines (ACPI) and the Samahan ng mga Filipinong Arkivista para sa Pelikula (SOFIA). He is a graduate of the Mowelfund Film Institute's Total Filmmaking Workshop Batch '85, and in 2020, became the first alumnus appointed as MFI Director.





Surf Reyes, seated beside Nick Deocampo, together with Mowelfund founder Joseph Estrada huddle with the Independent Film & Video Festival organizers on July 26, 1986.



# You're the Top!

## A Tribute to Virginia Moreno

ARCHIVE

**V**irginia Reyes Moreno (1923–2021), poet, dramatist, professor, and cultural icon, hailed from Tondo. Dubbed as a high priestess of Philippine poetry, she was the only woman in the literary group The Ravens. She authored *Batik Maker and Other Poems* and the plays *The Onyx Wolf* and *Itim Asu*, which was adapted into ballet at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. She managed *Los Indios Bravo* in Malate and founded and served as long-time director of the storied UP Film Center, whose film festivals and alternative programming shaped and forever changed generations of artists, filmmakers, and cinephiles. She was fondly referred to as “Tita Virgie” or “Aling Barang” by close friends, former students, and admirers. For a free-spirited woman with a fierce vision, who built a film center, championed young filmmakers, mentored countless humanities students, and wore three masks - she is truly extraordinary. As Nick Joaquin once sang, “You’re the top! You’re Virgie Moreno!”

—Sari Dalena



Moreno with BenCab and Nick Joaquin in 1977 at the UP Bulwagang Rizal. Courtesy of BenCab

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**Sari Dalena** is an independent filmmaker and holds an MFA in Film Production from New York University. She is a recipient of the Fulbright-Hayes scholarship, New York Asian Cultural Council Fellowship, NYU Tisch School of the Arts Graduate Fellowship, and the 13 Artists Award at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. She is a professor and former director of the University of the Philippines Film Institute.





At the 3rd Manila Short Film Festival in 1983 (L-R): Moreno, Michael Parsons, Surf Reyes, Pandy Aviado. Photos courtesy of UP Film Institute Archives, except where noted



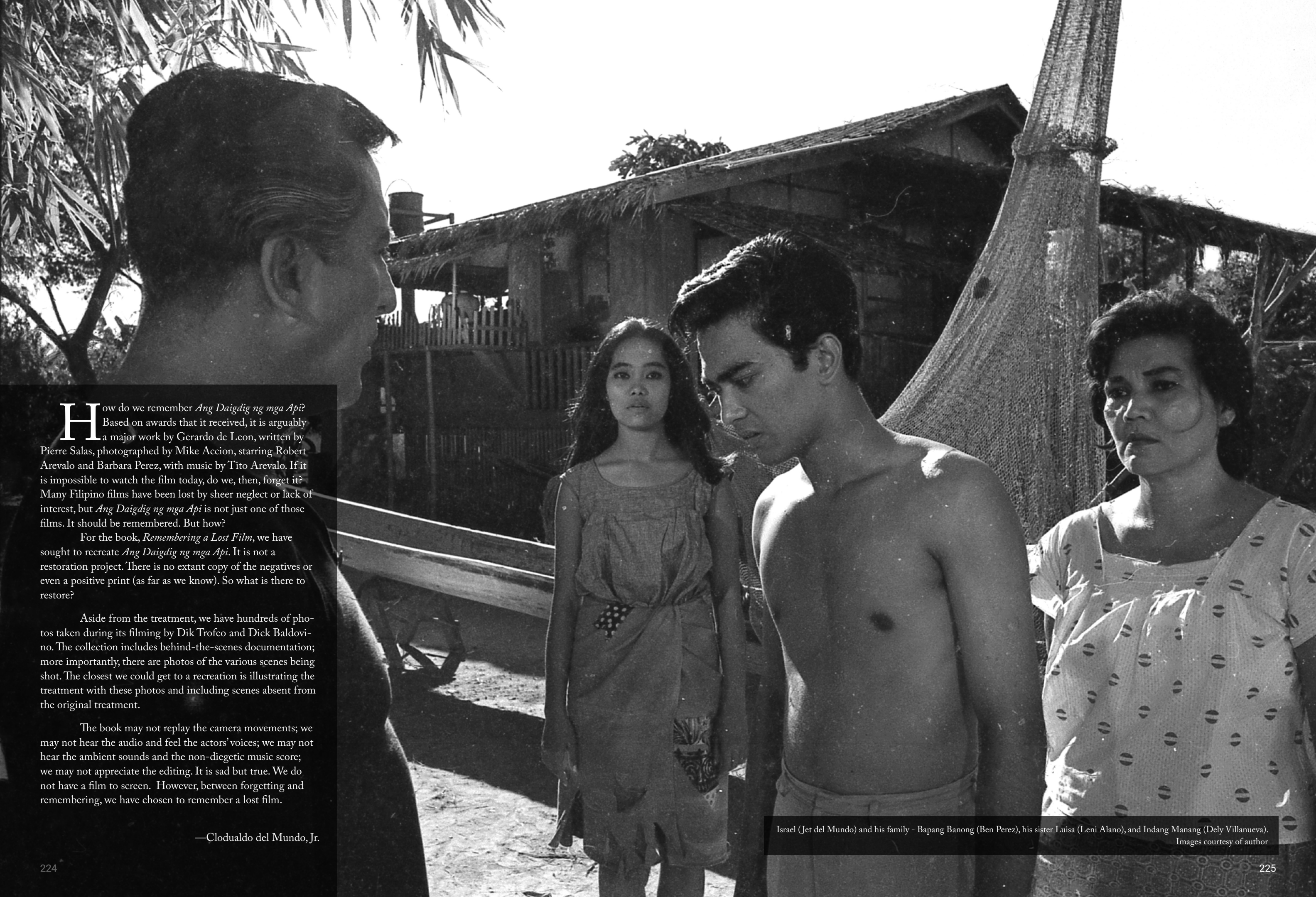
Moreno at the UNESCO World Heritage Summit in 1989 with Gemma Cruz

# Recreating *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api* (Dir., Gerardo de Leon, 1965)



Book cover of *Daigdig ng mga Api: Remembering a Lost Film* (forthcoming)





**H**ow do we remember *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api*? Based on awards that it received, it is arguably a major work by Gerardo de Leon, written by Pierre Salas, photographed by Mike Accion, starring Robert Arevalo and Barbara Perez, with music by Tito Arevalo. If it is impossible to watch the film today, do we, then, forget it? Many Filipino films have been lost by sheer neglect or lack of interest, but *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api* is not just one of those films. It should be remembered. But how?

For the book, *Remembering a Lost Film*, we have sought to recreate *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api*. It is not a restoration project. There is no extant copy of the negatives or even a positive print (as far as we know). So what is there to restore?

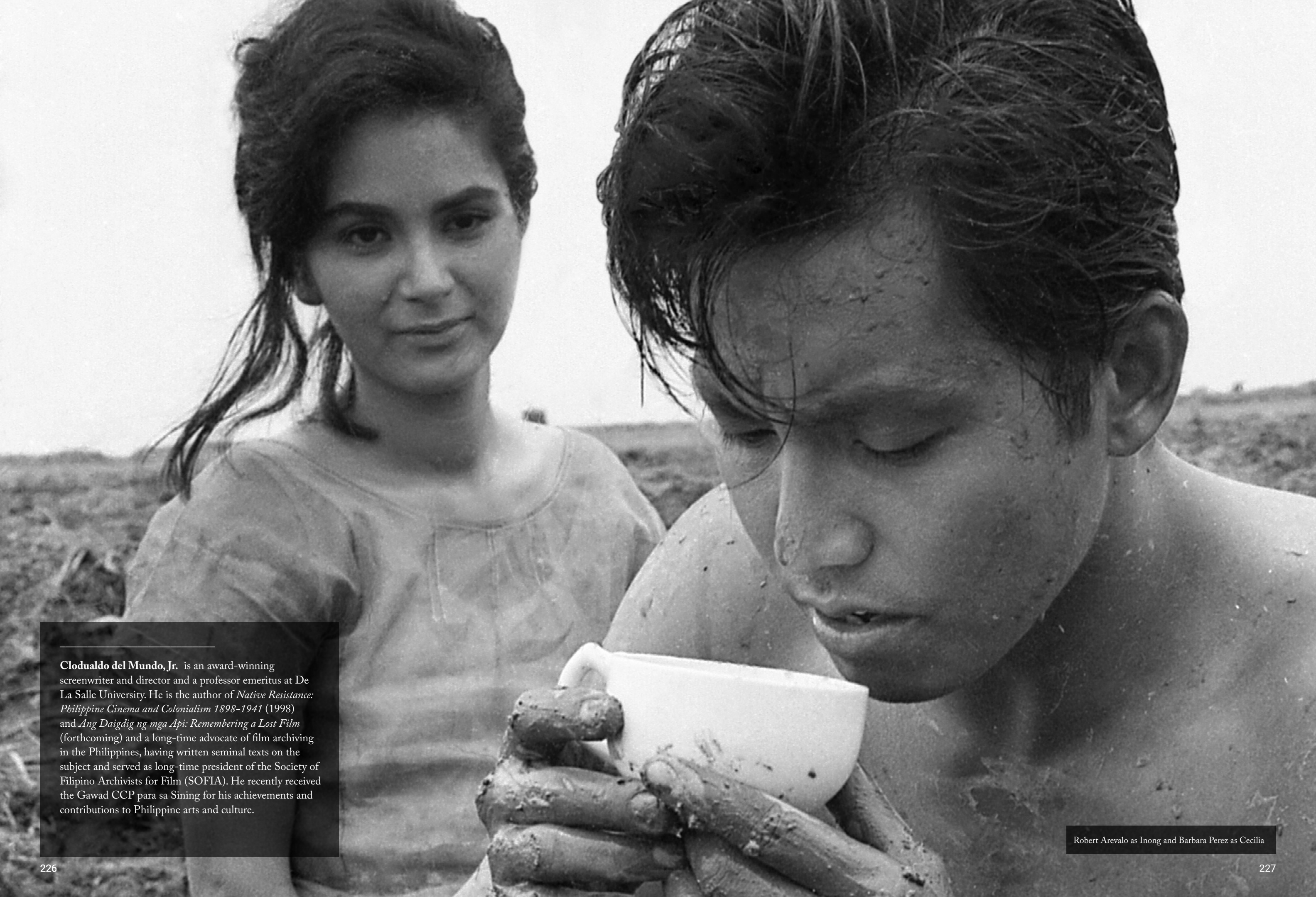
Aside from the treatment, we have hundreds of photos taken during its filming by Dik Trofeo and Dick Baldovino. The collection includes behind-the-scenes documentation; more importantly, there are photos of the various scenes being shot. The closest we could get to a recreation is illustrating the treatment with these photos and including scenes absent from the original treatment.

The book may not replay the camera movements; we may not hear the audio and feel the actors' voices; we may not hear the ambient sounds and the non-diegetic music score; we may not appreciate the editing. It is sad but true. We do not have a film to screen. However, between forgetting and remembering, we have chosen to remember a lost film.

—Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr.

Israel (Jet del Mundo) and his family - Bapang Banong (Ben Perez), his sister Luisa (Leni Alano), and Indang Manang (Dely Villanueva).  
Images courtesy of author





**Clodualdo del Mundo, Jr.** is an award-winning screenwriter and director and a professor emeritus at De La Salle University. He is the author of *Native Resistance: Philippine Cinema and Colonialism 1898-1941* (1998) and *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api: Remembering a Lost Film* (forthcoming) and a long-time advocate of film archiving in the Philippines, having written seminal texts on the subject and served as long-time president of the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SOFIA). He recently received the Gawad CCP para sa Sining for his achievements and contributions to Philippine arts and culture.

Robert Arevalo as Inong and Barbara Perez as Cecilia





# Toward an Autonomous Philippine Audiovisual Archives

Bliss Cua Lim  
Benedict Salazar Olgado  
Rosemarie Omnes Roque

On April 15, 2021, the co-authors submitted a position paper on the interrelated House Bills 1745, 2320, 4332, 8171, and 8924 regarding the creation of the National Film Archive of the Philippines to Rep. Christopher V.P. De Venecia, Chairperson of the newly-established House of Representatives (HOR) Special Committee on Creative Industry and Performing Arts (SCCIPA) of the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress. Then on June 7, 2021, the co-authors submitted a second position paper to the Joint Technical Working Group (TWG) meetings convened by Rep. De Venecia and Rep. Cristal L. Bagatsing; Rep. Bagatsing is Chair of the Joint TWG.

The first position paper focuses on issues of scope (arguing for audiovisual archiving rather than film archiving) and administrative autonomy (opposing the subsumption of the proposed archive under the auspices of the Film Development Council of the Philippines [FDCP]). In turn, the second position paper, originally submitted along with a marked-up version of a draft Substitute Bill, recommends that the new agency be named the Philippine Audiovisual Archives (PAVA) and attached to the National Commission for Culture and the Arts; it also offers specific proposals regarding the qualifications and the processes for nominating, vetting, and appointing PAVA's leadership in order to ensure stakeholder consultation and the sustainability and autonomy of the envisioned agency.

Previously, on May 17, 2017, under the 17<sup>th</sup> Congress, Olgado and Roque submitted their position paper regarding House Bill No. 2404, "An act creating the National Film Archive to be managed by the Film Development Council, and appropriating funds therefor," to the House of Representatives Committee on Public Information. The same position paper was submitted to principal author Rep. Lucy Marie Torres-Gomez. Later, on March 12, 2018, Lim submitted her own position paper and, together with Roque, met with Rep. Torres-Gomez for a legislative consultation on the National Film Archive bill authored by the latter. They were joined by Party-List Rep. Antonio Tinio of the Alliance of Concerned Teachers (ACT). These position papers from 2017 to 2018 served as the foundational texts of the co-authors' 2021 position papers on the vital piece of legislation on audiovisual archiving presently being deliberated by the 18<sup>th</sup> Congress. Both position papers are supported by the University of the Philippines School of Library and Information Studies (UP SLIS), the oldest library school in the Philippines.<sup>1</sup>

Initial deliberations on the interrelated bills were conducted on April 16, 2021 and live-streamed via the House of Representatives Facebook page. The five bills were consolidated into one version that pushes for an autonomous Philippine Audiovisual Archives, drawing on the essential provisions in the version authored by Rep. Bagatsing, Rep. De Venecia, and Rep. Sharon S. Garin.

The first TWG meeting immediately took place a week after the initial deliberations. The second and third TWG meetings occurred on August 12 and 19, respectively. At the time of publication, advocates for audiovisual archiving in the Philippines are awaiting the consolidated Bill, entitled "An Act Creating the Philippine Audiovisual Archives"<sup>2</sup> (aka the PAVA bill) resulting from the said TWG meetings.

Opposite page: Images from *Counter/Public: The Politics of Committed Film in the Philippines*. Courtesy of Daniel Rudin



**A POSITION PAPER ON THE INTERRELATED HOUSE BILLS (1745, 2320, 4332, 8171,  
and 8924) REGARDING THE CREATION OF THE NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE OF THE  
PHILIPPINES**

As audiovisual archivists and educators, we commend the noble intention of the proposed bills to ensure the preservation of the audiovisual (AV) heritage of the Filipino people. We wholeheartedly agree with the premise of these bills that our AV heritage “mirrors the human and social condition, dramatizes the people’s struggles towards total liberation and enhances our understanding and appreciation of our social values and national identity.”

After reviewing these bills, there are provisions with which we agree; however, there are provisions which deter the establishment of a long-term sustainable approach to audiovisual preservation.

Above all, it is imperative to create and **sustain an autonomous government institution with audiovisual archiving defined as its sole mandate. While we fervently support the need for a legislative measure in establishing an institution dedicated to archiving Filipino audiovisual heritage that these bills propose, we object to having such a vital institution be under the auspices of the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP).**

We articulate this position further below.

We support the following principles and provisions of these bills:

1. The need to create a national institution for the preservation of our cinematic films and, more broadly, the entirety of our audiovisual heritage as mandated by the 1987 Philippine Constitution Article XIV.
2. The need for this agency’s own legal foundation, equipping it with its own powers and functions.
3. The inclusion of a legal deposit requirement for audiovisual productions.
4. That resources and funds be appropriated to this institution.

We oppose the following provisions for which we provide justifications and present recommendations in response:

**1. We oppose the scope of the proposed institution, consequently reflected in its name, the National Film Archive of the Philippines.**

**Justification of opposition:** The audiovisual heritage of a country goes well beyond its cinema to include many other forms of moving image and audiovisual media. As per UNESCO’s *Audiovisual Archiving Philosophy and Principles* by Dr. Ray Edmonson (2016), “The audiovisual heritage includes but is not limited to the following: recorded sound, radio, film, television, video, digital, or other productions comprising moving images and/or recorded sounds, whether or not primarily intended for distribution to the public. These are objects, materials, works, and intangibles relating to audiovisual documents, whether seen from a technical, industrial, cultural, historical, or other viewpoint; this shall include material relating to the film, broadcasting, and recording industries such as literature, scripts, stills, posters, advertising materials, manuscripts, and artifacts, such as technical equipment or costumes.”<sup>3</sup> Thus, it should include more than feature-length narrative films but also short films, documentaries, experimental film and video art, video games, home movies, and audiovisual recordings of various governmental activities and national events.

**Recommendation:** The institution to be established should preserve the entirety of the country’s audiovisual heritage as defined above and not be limited to film and cinematic productions films by Manila’s commercial film industry. Therefore, we recommend that the institution be called **National Audiovisual Center of the Philippines (Pambansang Sentrong Awdyo-Biswal ng Pilipinas)** to reflect a broader scope of audiovisual works beyond film.

FDCP as mandated by law is solely focused on the development of the Philippine film industry, which does not encompass the pressing need to preserve our audiovisual heritage across a variety of genres and media forms (not only

film but also video, social media, digital games, sound recordings, and moving images in other formats). To be a truly *national* audiovisual collection, the envisioned archive must be committed to collecting and preserving the diversity of our country’s media productions in a variety of Philippine languages (not just Tagalog) originating throughout the archipelago, in regions beyond Manila.

**2. We oppose subsuming the proposed institution under the administrative management of the Film Development Council of the Philippines.**

**Justification of opposition:** The multi-pronged mandate of the FDCP means that audiovisual archiving competes with other film-related projects, since the FDCP is not focused primarily on archiving. While the FDCP effectively initiated the National Film Archives as a program following Republic Act No. 9167 Section 3, the agency has too many functions regarding film production, distribution, promotion, education, and evaluation towards the overall growth of the film industry. In fact, the archival mandate of the FDCP in Republic Act 9167 (2002) consists only of a single sentence, attesting to the fact that the complexity of audiovisual archiving has been overshadowed by the FDCP’s other roles.

The task of preserving audiovisual heritage is neither reducible nor equivalent to the development of the contemporary film industry. Archiving the Philippines’ audiovisual heritage necessitates an institution whose only mandate and priority is preserving and providing access to the national audiovisual heritage. Audiovisual preservation encompasses a variety of complex functions, including appraisal, acquisition, accession, arrangement, description, access, research, advocacy, outreach, conservation, and restoration. Therefore, the complexity of this archival endeavor demands an organizational structure which cannot be subsumed under FDCP’s already multi-faceted administrative and functional organization.

For a national audiovisual center to operate most effectively it needs to be independent from further bureaucratic layers which if under FDCP it would be subjected to. Dr. Edmondson cautions us that audiovisual archival institutions subsumed under a larger umbrella organization “have limited autonomy; they must reflect the worldview, policies and priorities of the parent body and they are subject to the vicissitudes of its organizational life.”<sup>4</sup>

To cite one lamentable historical precedent, the country’s first Film Archives of the Philippines (1981-1986) lasted only five years, collapsing when its mother agency, the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, was dissolved and the censorship board it was subsequently subsumed under, the Board of Review for Motion Pictures and Television, was abolished soon after.<sup>5</sup> The demise of the first national film archive teaches us a crucial historical lesson: changing institutional priorities and the dissolution of umbrella agencies can prove disastrous for audiovisual archiving. By definition, as Dr. Edmondson puts it, “archives have to go on forever.”<sup>6</sup> Institutional permanence, sustainability, and stability are the heart of a national archive’s promise to its citizens.

Another painful historical precedent involves the closure of the Philippine Information Agency’s Motion Picture Division (PIA- MPD) in 2004 on the basis of decisions made by the PIA Director-General at that time, thus dissolving the PIA-MPD’s internationally prominent Film Laboratory and Film Library, a one-of-a-kind archive for government media productions not archived elsewhere.

**Under the FDCP or other umbrella organizations, audiovisual archiving lacks continuity due to short-term appointments to head these state agencies.** As film scholar Dr. Bliss Cua Lim’s research on the history of Philippine film archives emphasizes, archiving in our country has been vulnerable to bureaucratic decisions by short-term presidential appointees to top posts at state film and media entities like the FDCP and the PIA. There is an inherent mismatch between the short-term cycle of government appointments and the vision of archival permanency.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, political appointees to head film-related state agencies with an archival function have historically not come from a professional audiovisual archival or curatorial background. In contrast, per the Philippine Librarianship Act of 2003, only licensed librarians can be employed in Philippine government libraries. This means that historically, audiovisual archiving has been in the decision-making hands of government officials who lack an archival background and who serve limited 6-year terms. This is one reason why sustainable archiving demands an autonomous, self-governing audiovisual archive.



**Recommendation: To establish an institutionally autonomous National Audiovisual Center akin to the National Library, National Museum, and National Archives.**

Previous studies point out the importance of institutional autonomy and sustainability in relation to the preservation of audiovisual heritage. Dr. Edmonson explains in “Film Archiving in the Philippines – A Suggested Strategic Framework,”

An institutionally autonomous national film (AV) archive – like a national library or a national museum – has both a symbolic and a practical role. It is able to represent the medium in all its aspects – as art, entertainment, culture, historical record, technology information or whatever. Further it represents the medium in its own right and not as an aspect as something else. Practically and philosophically, it is in a position to offer coordination and leadership in its field because film archiving in all its aspects is its only priority. It can with authority represent the national film heritage, holistically and symbolically, nationally and internationally.

[...] In practical terms, such an institution is necessary if a shared national task is to be done in a coordinated, economical, and effective way. It can do as much, or as little, as is necessary to achieve this. For example, it can maintain an overview, encourage, and advise. It can encourage standardization and rationalization, and provide central, shared facilities and services which individual archives could not afford to provide. It can be the formal focus of legislation and agreements relating to the preservation of the national film heritage. It can ‘fill in the holes’—be active in areas where no one else is, encourage others to pick up such areas or take up tasks that others want to give up. Of course, a national film (or AV) archive needs the same autonomy and institutional status as a national library or national museum if it is to operate most effectively – and for much the same reasons.<sup>8</sup>

As he reiterates in the Philippine Heritage Summit Report (2013), Edmonson states,

“Complete organizational autonomy is best...as it needs to have professional autonomy in its decision-making and for this fact to be publicly clear, as this is an important aspect of gaining public trust.”<sup>9</sup> Critiquing the top-down administrative chain of the National Film Archives of the Philippines’ current structure, Dr. Bliss Lim states, “Office of the President, to the FDCP, to the NFAP, is not ideal and this is not how it happens in other countries.”<sup>10</sup>

This model of autonomy and sustainability is recommended by UNESCO, ASEAN, and FIAF (International Federation of Film Archives).

Therefore, the structure within the government could take different forms, like a government trust similar to the National Museum, or a government-owned and controlled corporation (GOCC) similar to the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and if not, the agency structure of the National Library or National Archives. Discussions regarding this were explored during the Philippine Cinema Heritage Summit last 2013.

Taking these into consideration, we strongly urge the proponents of these house bills to reformulate it towards an act establishing an autonomous national audiovisual center. We therefore support House Bill 8924 provision of creating a new independent agency. To this end we hope that the body will continue to engage various stakeholders in the archiving profession, academe, cultural organizations, government agencies, filmmakers, and industry representatives.

## A POSITION PAPER ON THE SUBSTITUTE BILL FOR THE INTERRELATED HOUSE BILLS (1745, 2320, 4332, 8171, and 8924) REGARDING THE CREATION OF THE NATIONAL FILM ARCHIVE OF THE PHILIPPINES

We reiterate our appreciation to the honorable representatives, legislative staff, and stakeholders who are all working together to make this long-awaited statute become a reality. We are deeply encouraged by the transparency and openness with which this democratic process has been carried out. It has been an honor and a privilege to have had our voices, as scholars and archivists, be heard and considered throughout the deliberations thus far.

In particular, we are glad that the legislators and an overwhelming majority of the stakeholders support the main points we raised in our initial position paper dated April 15, 2021. The current draft of the Substitute Bill reflects our call for a new autonomous government institution charged with a sole mandate to preserve not only our cinematic history but the entirety of our audiovisual heritage.

The goal of any good legislation is to enact meaningful change when necessary. It addresses the shortcomings of the status quo and acknowledges the limits of earlier mechanisms. To “dream big” – as the Chairs have called on us to do during the last two meetings – means that we not only expand previous legislation but also move away from it when necessary. Our legal framework has equipped us with the ability to amend and repeal prior legislation because it acknowledges that ideas, practices, realities, needs, and objectives change. Thus, we fervently support the Substitute Bill’s espousal, not of incremental change, but of a bold vision to ensure the preservation of the entire audiovisual heritage of the Filipino people, not just our filmic legacy. Preventing the further loss and deterioration of our country’s sound recordings and its dwindling radio and television broadcast history while addressing the growing cultural impact of video games and social media, go well beyond the purview of an existing agency with a one-sentence mandate in relation to film archiving. A national cultural agency devoted to our audiovisual heritage must be more than a subsidiary division in a film-industry-oriented agency. Rather, an institution devoted to the preservation of our audiovisual heritage demands recognition at par with other national cultural agencies attached to the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), such as the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the National Library, the National Museum, and the National Archives. We urge our visionary legislators to remain steadfast to this ideal as we sharpen the provisions of the Bill while navigating nuanced legal, practical, and ideological challenges. We acknowledge that visionary changes are difficult, but such a far-sighted vision should neither succumb to political convenience nor falter in its pursuit of what needs to be done. We owe this much to our people.

Consultative governance is not only the animating principle of our specific proposals but also underpins the process behind the drafting of this position paper and our response to the draft substitute bill (ver. April 19, 2021). Following the generative discussions at the Technical Working Group meeting on April 23, 2021, we reached out to key local stakeholders and leaders in the international audiovisual archiving profession. The recommendations we offer are the outcome of discussions with individuals and stakeholders who work at both private and state collections in the Philippines (archivists at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, ABS-CBN Film Archives, and the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film; and the faculty of the University of the Philippines School of Library and Information Studies). The international dimension of our deliberations centered on best practices and challenges identified by current and former Directors of archives overseas who are also prime movers of the Southeast Asia-Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association: the Asian Film Archive in Singapore; the Thai Film Archive; and the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia. Finally, we also conferred with faculty at New York University’s Moving Image Archiving and Preservation Program and researchers working on the Cinemateca Brasileira in Brazil and the National Film Archive of India.

Kindly refer to our marked-up version of the draft Substitute Bill that we have duly attached to this paper. The proposals, markup, and case studies we offer to the draft substitute bill (ver. April 19, 2021) are meant to sharpen its language and delineate specific provisions with institutional autonomy and sustainability—the organizational pillars of any successful archiving institution—in mind. We expound on our key recommendations below and articulate our position accordingly.



1. **Scope, name, nature of agency/institution**

a. Recommendation: **To adopt definitions set forth in “Audiovisual Archiving Philosophy and Principles” (Edmondson, 2016)**

We recommend the adoption of Dr. Ray Edmondson’s definition of “audiovisual heritage” when we speak of “audiovisual works.”<sup>11</sup> Doing so aligns the scope of the agency with established international definitions and practices. Moreover, it addresses suggestions by various stakeholders during the last TWG meeting on April 23, 2021, to widen the breadth of materials under the purview of the agency,

b. Recommendation: **To change the proposed name of the agency from Philippine Audiovisual Archive Center (PAAC) to Philippine Audiovisual Archive (PAVA)**

The rationale behind this proposed nomenclature is three-fold. First, retaining “archive” while removing “center” avoids semantic redundancy between the two related terms; an “archive center” is tautological. Second, the distinction between “archive” and “center” is key: while “center” denotes a focal point of concentrated activity (for example, the aptly named Cultural Center of the Philippines), “archive” more accurately reflects the mandate of the proposed agency, which is not only to serve as an institutional repository for the country’s audiovisual heritage but also to assemble a capacious and definitive collection of Philippine audiovisual works for the enjoyment and edification of future generations. Thirdly, the proposed name clearly signals the national scope of the proposed cultural agency and its parity with other memory institutions attached to the NCCA. The name “Philippine Audiovisual Archive” (PAVA) updates the prior usage of the Philippine Film Archive (PFA) while distinguishing itself from the National Archive of the Philippines (NAP).

c. Recommendation: **To establish PAVA as a national cultural agency duly attached to the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.**

We recommend that PAVA be administratively attached to the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.<sup>12</sup> Doing so establishes that PAVA is a national cultural agency on an equal level with similar, allied institutions that “work with the principle of partnership, collaboration, and shared responsibility in achieving effectively and efficiently the implementation of cultural programs,”<sup>13</sup> as articulated by the NCCA’s mandate.

Following these recommendations, we propose that Section 3 be amended as follows and that the name change to PAVA be adopted throughout the Bill.

**SECTION. 3. Creation of THE PHILIPPINE AUDIOVISUAL ARCHIVE (PAVA).** *The Philippine Audiovisual Archive, hereinafter referred to as PAVA, is hereby established as a national cultural agency whose main purpose is to administer the national audiovisual archive created under this Act and to determine and implement policies and programs for the preservation of audiovisual works as cultural property, consistent with Republic Act No. 10066, otherwise known as the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 (“NCH Act”), and this Act. PAVA shall be attached to the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.*

*Adapting the consensus definition laid out by Dr. Ray Edmondson in the UNESCO monograph, Audiovisual archiving: philosophy and principles (2016), “Audiovisual works” refer to objects, materials, works, and intangibles relating to audiovisual recordings and documents, whether seen from a technical, industrial, cultural, historical, or other viewpoint, including recorded sound, radio, music, film, television, video games, digital, new media, and transmedial adaptations and their source works in print form, or other productions comprising moving images and/or recorded sounds, whether or not primarily intended for distribution to the public, both published and unpublished, in an audiovisual medium and format now known or yet to be invented. Audiovisual heritage shall also include materials relating to the creation, distribution, access, and study of such audiovisual works in the film, broadcasting, music, recording, and new media*

*sectors, including paratextual materials and ephemera such as scripts, stills, posters, advertising materials, komiks (comics), magazines, newspapers, periodicals, manuscripts, scores, records, technical equipment, and production materials, among others.*

2. **Qualification, appointment, and term limits of PAVA Leadership**

a. Recommendation: **To specify appropriate qualifications for PAVA leadership to ensure competency and suitability**

To ensure that the leaders of PAVA are qualified and capable of managing, shaping, and leading this national cultural agency given its nature and demands, we recommend required qualifications that stipulate specialized education and training and extensive experience in archiving and related audiovisual fields. To this end, we recommend requiring an advanced/graduate degree in a related discipline together with at least six (6) years of administrative/management experience in the field. Individuals who do not have the requisite graduate degree may still be considered provided they have at least ten (10) years of leadership experience in the field. We further specify these points in our proposed revision of the related provisions in the Bill, including spelling out the experiences we believe are necessary requirements for PAVA leadership.

b. Recommendation: **To establish a nomination, vetting, and appointment process that requires stakeholder consultation and remains autonomous of undue political pressure**

To ensure autonomous and consultative governance for PAVA, we recommend a nomination process involving public stakeholders and a vetting mechanism that serves as a check and balance to the President’s appointment privileges. This proposal takes into account the historical lessons of previous short-lived film archives in the Philippines that have collapsed in part due to the missteps of presidentially-appointed leaders who lacked a requisite background in archiving. In our proposed provision, we stipulate that nominations come from relevant stakeholders engaged in the preservation of our audiovisual heritage. In particular, our proposed revisions exhort the historical stakeholders of the Philippines’ decentralized archival advocacy to remain active in shaping the future of PAVA, the very institution that they urged the government to establish. These historical stakeholders vigilantly watched over their own collections while calling for a national audiovisual archive during the twenty-five gap years between the demise of the first Film Archive of the Philippines in 1986 and the re-establishment of the National Film Archive of the Philippines (NFAP, now PFA) in 2011. To be clear, we do not limit stakeholder consultation only to the historical stakeholders of the audiovisual archive advocacy. Rather, we vigorously enjoin other public stakeholders to make their voices heard in the nomination process for PAVA’s leadership.

We recommend that nominations put forward by public stakeholders be reviewed by a task force composed by and from within the ranks of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. The President would then appoint an Executive Director from the roster of qualified candidates produced through this consultative nomination and vetting process. The Executive Director would also have the privilege of putting forward nominees for Deputy Directors for the direct consideration of the President, provided that these nominees also satisfy the qualifications required of PAVA leadership set forth in this Bill. Accordingly, the President would appoint two Deputy Directors from the nominees suggested by the incumbent Executive Director.

c. Recommendation: **To set term and reappointment limits of PAVA Leadership that allow for stability and continuity**

To ensure the institutional sustainability of PAVA through a stable and continuous leadership, we recommend that appointments be for a six-year term, renewable for no more than two (2) terms after the initial appointment, at the pleasure of the current President. In drafting our proposals, we consulted with heads of archives in both government and private audiovisual archives in the Philippines and overseas. All concurred



that short-term limits (6 years, coterminous with the Presidency) give the leadership of archives too little time to craft successful policies, grow the collection, train staff, and groom the next generation of the archive's leadership. Bearing in mind that the people who work in archives embody and actualize its institutional memory, our proposal, which allows for effective leadership to be reappointed, is meant to insure PAVA's institutional continuity and longevity.

Following these recommendations, we propose that Section 4 be amended as follows.

**SECTION. 4. Officers.** – *PAVA shall be headed by an Executive Director with a rank equivalent to a bureau director, who shall also be assisted by two Deputy Directors.*

*To ensure autonomous and consultative governance for PAVA, the President of the Philippines shall appoint the Executive Director of PAVA from a list of qualified candidates nominated by public stakeholders and vetted by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts.*

*The Executive Director shall possess at least a Master's Degree in one of the following fields: Archives, Records Management, Library and Information Science, Communications, Film, Media Studies, Music, History, Museum, Heritage, or Curatorial Studies, Philippine Studies, or other related disciplines specializing in audiovisual works, materials, cultural heritage, and/or curation. Provided, further, that the Executive Director shall have at least six (6) years of administrative / management experience in an archive, library, museum, cultural organization or academic institution that manages and/or studies audiovisual works. An extensive knowledge of Philippine audiovisual works, a strong background in archiving practice and standards, and a proven track record of leadership shall be expected as well of the Executive Director. Should the Executive Director not possess the stipulated academic qualifications, they must have at least ten (10) years of relevant experience as described above. These qualifications apply as well to the Deputy Directors.*

*Nominations for the Executive Director position shall come from public stakeholders engaged in the preservation of Philippine audiovisual heritage. These stakeholders include, but are not limited to, non-governmental entities who have been historically active in the decentralized advocacy for audiovisual archiving, namely, the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SOFILA), the MOWELFUND Film Institute (MFI), and the UP Film Institute (UPFI). Members of the academe in related disciplines and representatives from the audiovisual professions, industries, and sectors are strongly encouraged to put forward nominations as well.*

*Nominations put forward by public stakeholders shall be vetted by a task force constituted by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. The task force shall be composed of representatives from NCCA's national committees on Cinema, Music, Archives, and other relevant committees together with key individuals within the Commission as set forth by NCCA leadership. The task force shall review nominations and come up with a shortlist of qualified nominees from which the President of the Philippines will appoint an Executive Director. The Executive Director must come from this duly vetted shortlist. The Executive Director will then have the privilege to directly put forward nominees for Deputy Directors for consideration of the President, provided that these nominees also satisfy the qualifications required of PAVA leadership set forth in this Bill. Accordingly, the President would appoint two Deputy Directors from the nominees suggested by the incumbent Executive Director.*

*The Executive Director shall serve for an initial term of six (6) years and shall be eligible for reappointment by succeeding presidential administrations, provided that no Executive Director shall serve more than three (3) consecutive terms: Provided, further, if any director fails to complete a term, the person appointed to fill the vacancy shall serve only for the unexpired portion of the term of the Executive Director whom he/she succeeds, unless reappointed: Provided finally, that such service of the unexpired portion shall not be counted as a term.*

*The term of a Deputy Director is coterminous with the nominating Executive Director. The Deputy Director is eligible for reappointment at the pleasure of the Executive Director and the President: Provided that he/she be subjected to the same stipulated term limits; and provided, further, that should a Deputy Director be nominated to the Executive Director post, his/her service as Deputy Director shall be deemed as a separate term.*

*PAVA shall establish its own staffing pattern and salary and compensation scheme within six months from the effectivity of this Act, subject to the rules and regulations of the Department of Budget and Management (DBM) and the Civil Service Commission (CSC).*

### 3. Legal deposit provision for published audiovisual works

**Recommendation: To review existing legal/mandatory deposit systems in crafting provisions that uphold the need to preserve our audiovisual heritage while protecting the rights of copyright owners**

To ensure that PAVA's mandate to preserve our audiovisual heritage is carried out efficiently and effectively, we recommend including a legal deposit provision in the Bill. Mandatory deposit provisions serve two key objectives: first, they ensure the preservation of new releases, a vital consideration given that digital audiovisual media become obsolete more quickly than older analog formats and carriers due to the accelerating market obsolescence of apps, software and hardware, playback systems and digital formats and carriers. Vigilant archival management and robust digital infrastructures are required to manage and migrate digital media to ensure their continued preservation and accessibility. Second, mandatory deposits assure the continued growth of the archive's collection. In the case of a new cultural agency like PAVA, legal deposit provisions ensure that PAVA's audiovisual collection will continue to expand and accurately reflect the range of works being produced in the country.

In proposing the inclusion of a mandatory deposit provision, we acknowledge the concerns raised by media industry stakeholders who wish to ensure that the rights of copyrights holders are upheld; that strategies for distribution and exhibition, particularly with reference to release dates, are maximized; and that potential revenue leakage from piracy be avoided. These important concerns need to be counterbalanced with the recognition that PAVA as a cultural agency and a national archive would function very differently from the for-profit distribution and exhibition model of commercial media industries.

To take one concrete example, the strategic scheduling of commercial media releases is commonly referred to as a "windowing strategy." Windowing refers to releasing and exhibiting the same media content on different media venues and platforms at different times (so-called release "windows"). Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the first release window for a popular film was usually theatrical exhibition in a movie theater, followed by other release windows in ancillary markets: on DVD, online streaming services such as Netflix, in airplanes and hotels, on pay-per-view, and eventually via cable subscriptions and television network broadcast. To be clear, a legal deposit provision for PAVA does not threaten these distribution and exhibition strategies. Archives are not like public libraries, video stores, or movie houses: the ordinary moviegoer cannot walk into an archive, flash a borrower's card, and then watch a newly-released movie with friends and popcorn. Likewise, pirates are unable to make illegal copies of films on deposit in the manner that a commercially released DVD could be quickly dubbed for the pirate DVD stalls of Quiapo in the mid-2000s or in the ways that streaming media can be downloaded and re-uploaded on pirate sites today.

Rather, public access to archives is enabled and constrained by the permissions given by copyright holders. Access requests to PAVA in all forms would be duly vetted and would work within the limits set by copyright holders and established legislation balancing both intellectual property and the public good. Formal protocols for archives stipulate that every request for access is overseen and logged. Typically, research visits to archives are by appointment and require prior information about the user's institutional affiliation and research topic or project. Established archival principles and practices stipulate that copies of works or excerpts of footage are never released without the express permission of copyright holders where applicable. Similarly, any restorations embarked upon by PAVA, as well as retrospective exhibitions of works in its collection, would, per archival principles and the agency's own policies, require rights holders' consent. The underlying principle is that all access arrangements for PAVA — technical and otherwise — would be established and approved by copyright holders.

Thus, rather than opening pathways to illicit access, the legal deposit provision should be understood as a necessary part of the preservation lifecycle, which falls outside the windowing considerations of commercial distribution and exhibition and the revenue leakage posed by piracy.



There are numerous ways of going about a legal mechanism of mandatory acquisition by a national archive. We urge legislators and their legislative staff to closely review and consider the pros and cons of these various models in consultation with stakeholders, specifically producers and copyright holders who have legitimate concerns. In these deliberations, we also urge industry-based stakeholders to see PAVA not as a risk to revenue but rather as a partner in our shared goal of making sure these audiovisual works survive and are made accessible in perpetuity. We can and must do this in ways that uphold the rights of copyright owners while ensuring that our shared national audiovisual heritage remains intact. We ask our fellow stakeholders to consider not only the short-term impact of the legal deposit provision on their distribution and exhibition strategies but also the longer-term impact of archival preservation. The archival longevity of our audiovisual works is not only an inviolable public good; it is also very much in the interests of media producers and rights holders to conserve their media assets for the future.

Following this recommendation and acknowledging the legal complexity of this particular clause, we propose no specific language for this specific provision. Rather, we suggest that, in drafting PAVA's mandatory deposit provisions, the legislators, legislative staff, and stakeholders review the survey of legal deposit mechanisms for cinematographic works in Europe by Sabina Gorini,<sup>14</sup> the evolution of decrees and legislations regarding the legal deposit of books in the Philippines,<sup>15</sup> and the need to explicitly broaden the National Cultural Heritage Act of 2009 (R. A. 10066).

In particular, we urge the various parties involved in developing this Bill to consider mandating archival deposit before an audiovisual work is permitted to be commercially distributed to the public. That is, we suggest that the Substitute Bill make government authorization for the commercial release of new media works contingent upon the prior deposit of such works to PAVA. This might coincide with or be akin to MTRCB's "Permit to Exhibit." Having explained that archival deposit does not pose a threat to the profitability of commercial distribution and exhibition practices, we emphasize that the prompt deposit of new audiovisual works gives the legal deposit provision implementing force by incentivizing content producers to deposit copies with PAVA as a condition for the commercial release of their media products. Otherwise, the legislation or the IRR of PAVA will need to come up with mechanisms to both incentivize and enforce mandatory deposit provisions so as to ensure that parties will adhere to the legal deposit provisions after the initial release of the audiovisual work.

Further, the specifics of this legal deposit provision also need to consider not only legal matters but also technical and practical issues, including the scope of audiovisual works covered and the form and medium of delivery. As the old archival adage goes, "We shouldn't try to save everything because we can't." We defer to the legislative staff to distinguish what needs to be stipulated in the Bill and what can be left to the eventual IRR.

In addition to these three items, we offer minor self-explanatory markup to the draft Substitute Bill. The marked-up version reflects these minor edits and the proposed provisions we have stipulated in this position paper. We hope this will guide the legislators, legislative staff, and our fellow stakeholders in our discussions as we finalize the provisions and form of this legislation.

We encourage our fellow stakeholders to supplement and challenge our ideas where needed, just as we trust the legislative staff to edit and sharpen our language in consideration of legal issues and syntax. Finally, we reiterate the need for all of us to "dream big" and remain steadfast to the ideals we have collectively articulated thus far. With the leadership and support of our visionary legislators, we trust and hope—with the fervor of a tenacious, decades-long audiovisual archive advocacy behind and before us—that this consultative and democratic process will bear fruit.

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**Bliss Cua Lim** is Full Professor of Film and Media Studies at the University of California, Irvine. She is the author of *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic and Temporal Critique* (2009). She is a member of the Editorial Collective of the journal *Camera Obscura: Feminism, Culture, and Media Studies*, published by Duke University Press, and serves on the Advisory Board of *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media and Society*, published by the University of the Philippines College of Mass Communication. Her next book, *The Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema* (forthcoming from Duke University Press), analyzes the histories of state, private, and informal archival efforts as well as the tenacious audiovisual archival advocacy that arose in response to various archival crises.

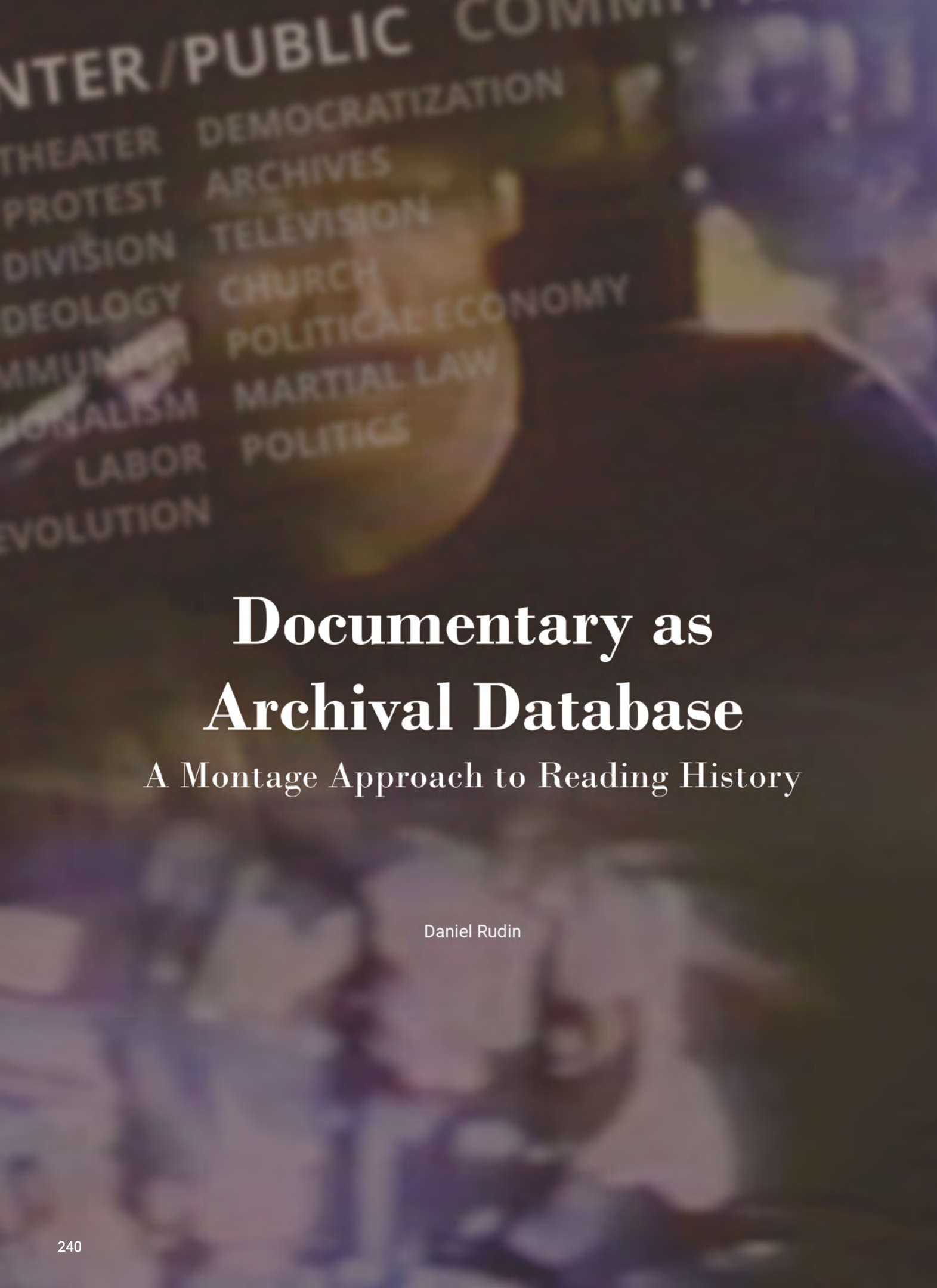
**Benedict Salazar Olgado** is an audiovisual archivist and film historiographer. Currently an Assistant Professor at the School of Library and Information Studies of the University of the Philippines Diliman, he teaches courses in archival theory, audiovisual archives, and digital preservation. Before joining UP SLIS, he served as the inaugural head of the FDCP's National Film Archives of the Philippines initiative from 2012 to 2014. After his directorship, he established ARCHON, a consulting firm based in Manila focusing on archiving, arts management, and cultural policy, serving various public and private institutions in the region. He is an active member of several professional organizations, serving as Chair of the International Outreach Committee of the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA) and as a Councilor of SEAPAVAA. He received his MA in Moving Image Archiving and Preservation at New York University. In 2011, in recognition of his accomplishments as one of the leading young archivists in the field, he was named AMIA-Kodak Fellow in Film Preservation.

**Rosemarie Omnes Roque** is an Assistant Professor at the Polytechnic University of the Philippines (PUP) under the Department of Filipinology and is the research chief of the PUP Center for Labor and Industrial Relations Studies (CLIRS) and Center for Heritage Studies (CHS). She is a member of the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film (SOFIA) and currently serves as its representative to the National Committee on Archives (NCA) of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) from 2017 to 2022. She was the NCA Assistant Secretary from 2017 to 2019 and the NCA Secretary from 2020 to 2022. She is an individual associate member of the Southeast Asia Pacific Audiovisual Archive Association (SEAPAVAA) and an individual member of the International Association of Sound and Audiovisual Archives (IASA) and the Association of Moving Image Archivists (AMIA).

#### Endnotes

- 1 The position paper submitted in May 2017 was signed by Kathleen Lourdes Obille, then dean of the UP SLIS. The recent April 2021 position paper meanwhile is signed by current dean Mary Grace Golfo-Barcelona, also on behalf of the faculty of the UP SLIS. UP SLIS will offer its new graduate program, the Master in Archives and Records Management (MARM), the first of its kind in Southeast Asia, starting this Academic Year 2022-2023.
- 2 In their April 2021 position paper, the co-authors originally proposed that the institution be named National Audiovisual Center of the Philippines (Pambansang Sentrong Awdyo-Biswal ng Pilipinas). In their second June 2021 position paper, they recommended that the name of the envisioned agency be changed to Philippine Audiovisual Archives (PAVA).
- 3 Ray Edmonson, *Audiovisual Archiving: Philosophy and Principles* (3rd ed.), Paris and Bangkok: UNESCO. 2016.
- 4 Edmonson, "Film Archiving in the Philippines—A Suggested Strategic Framework," commissioned by the Society of Filipino Archivists for Film, 1994.
- 5 Executive Order No. 1051 [Ferdinand E. Marcos], Abolition of the Defunct Experimental Cinema of the Philippines and the Transfer of the Functions and Personnel of the Film Archives to the Board of Review for Motion Pictures and Television. Retrieved from [www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1985/08/08/executive-order-no-1051-s-1985;Presidential-Decree-No.-1986-\[Ferdinand-E.-Marcos\]:-Creating-the-Movie-and-Television-Review-and-Classification-Board](http://www.officialgazette.gov.ph/1985/08/08/executive-order-no-1051-s-1985;Presidential-Decree-No.-1986-[Ferdinand-E.-Marcos]:-Creating-the-Movie-and-Television-Review-and-Classification-Board). Retrieved from [www.lawphil.net/statutes/presdecs/pd1985/pd\\_1986\\_1985.html](http://www.lawphil.net/statutes/presdecs/pd1985/pd_1986_1985.html)
- 6 Edmonson, "Notes on Sustainability of Audiovisual Archives," *Proceedings of the Philippine Cinema Heritage Summit: A Report* (pp. 24-25), Manila: National Film Archives of the Philippines. 2013.
- 7 Bliss Cua Lim, "Fragility, Perseverance, and Survival in State-Run Philippine Film Archives," *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* 15.2 (December 2018): 1-40.
- 8 Edmondson, "Film archiving in the Philippines."
- 9 Edmondson, "Notes on Sustainability of Audiovisual Archives."
- 10 Lim, Round Table Transcript from the Philippine Cinema Heritage Summit Report. 2013.
- 11 Edmondson, *Audiovisual Archiving*, pp. 25-28.
- 12 This follows similar directives and legislation such as *Executive Order No. 80*, which placed the Cultural Center of the Philippines, the National Historical Institute (currently, the National Historical Commission of the Philippines), the National Museum, The National Library (currently, The National Library of the Philippines), and the Records, Management, and Archives Office (currently, the National Archives of the Philippines) under the NCCA umbrella; and *Republic Act No. 9155*, which administratively attached these five aforementioned five cultural agencies to the NCCA in addition to the Komisyon sa Wikang Filipino (Commission on the Filipino Language).
- 13 NCCA History and Mandate. [ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/history-and-mandate/](http://ncca.gov.ph/about-ncca-3/history-and-mandate/)
- 14 Sabina Gorini, "The protection of cinematographic heritage in Europe," *IRIS Plus (English ed.)* 2004 (2004). [rm.coe.int/16807833aa](http://rm.coe.int/16807833aa)
- 15 A clear starting point is Presidential Decree No. 812, October 16, 1975 on Legal and Cultural Deposit [lawphil.net/statutes/presdecs/pd1975/pd\\_812\\_1975.html](http://lawphil.net/statutes/presdecs/pd1975/pd_812_1975.html)





# Documentary as Archival Database

## A Montage Approach to Reading History

Daniel Rudin

I chose images of archives and vinegar-syndrome afflicted film as a metaphor to represent reification and memory loss in my research “Counter/Public: The Politics of Committed Film in the Philippines.” The research focuses on the “new cinema” (the 1970s-1980s) and required conversations with archivists, journalists, actors, editors, filmmakers, and activists. These “social history” accounts were lit and filmed with two cameras, then preserved and published in an interactive database documentary. I broke down the material into roughly one-minute edits consisting of tightly intercut, differing, and even contradictory recollections of two interviewees. The “script” for these edits was “written” using qualitative analysis software (f4analyse)—revealing patterns and topics that might not otherwise have surfaced. The viewer can access said edits in the interactive documentary (made in Klynt) by clicking on either COUNTER/PUBLIC or COMMITTED/FILM. The long-form interviews are available from a drop-down menu linked to a YouTube channel. The idea is not only to preserve the excess footage but publish the informant interviews (here, as “social history” integrated into and standing alongside an interactive documentary) for viewers who either reconstruct the research process themselves or—if they prefer—perform their own research. I invite the reader to experience this process at [counterpublic.net](http://counterpublic.net).

**Daniel Rudin** is an artist and scholar focused on the role of the “Left” and “state” in cinema, including democratization and the “new cinema” in the Philippines and twentieth-century avant-garde film. His art practice explores dividing lines between the documentary and the experimental through multi-channel installation, while his journalistic work has focused on labor issues. He currently lectures on video at the University of California, Merced.



(Top-Bottom): Bobby Garcia, Boy Vinarao, Joey Clemente, Ed Delatorre, Nathan Quiampo

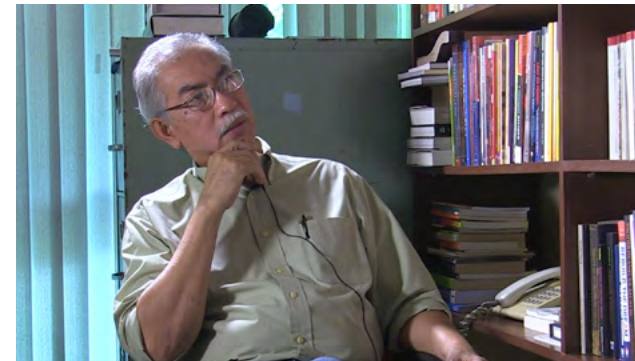
Opposite page: Images from *Counter/Public: The Politics of Committed Film in the Philippines*, courtesy of author





A scene from *Augusto Buenaventura's Sa Kuko ng Agila* (JE Productions, Richfilm, V Rich Film, 1989)

Rez Cortez in *Bangkang Papel sa Dagat ng Apoy* (Edgardo Reyes, Cine Suerte, 1948)



(Top-Bottom): Maloy Tionson, Rose Roque, Randy David

(Top-Bottom): Rez Cortez, Sylvia Mayuga, Nick Deocampo



*Bangkang Papel sa Dagat ng Apoy*



Joseph Estrada in *Bangkang Papel sa Dagat ng Apoy*





# State-funded Microtheaters in the Philippines

Gerald Gracius Pascua

In 2002, SM Cinema,<sup>1</sup> the multiplex cinema pioneer in the country owned by retail giant Sy family and will eventually become the country's largest player in the movie exhibition business,<sup>2</sup> proved to be a gamechanger when they banned the screening of movies classified as R-18 (i.e., restricted to movie-goers aged 18 years old and above) by the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) in their cinemas.<sup>3</sup> Then-Senator Ramon "Bong" Revilla Jr.,<sup>4</sup> who headed the Committee on Mass Media, denounced SM management's decision because of its economic effects on the film industry.<sup>5</sup> MTRCB chief legal counsel Jonathan Presquito observed a steady decline in the number of R-18 movies after SM's imposed ban and that producers often requested the MTRCB to give a rating below R-18 so that their movies are allowed movies to be shown in SM Cinemas.<sup>6</sup>

-18 exhibition migrated to illicit screenings at stand-alone theaters, and private home screenings, except for two state-funded venues because of their educational and cultural mandate: the University of the Philippines Film Center (UP Film Center) and the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). However, these venues designated as censorship-free still had their share of friction with the MTRCB. In 2009, UP Film Center's regular screenings of independent films came under the MTRCB's scrutiny. The classification body threatened to pursue legal action if movies deemed pornographic continue to be shown in the UP Film Center. UP College of Mass Communications Professor Marichel C. Lambino questioned the MTRCB's jurisdiction to regulate UPFI film screenings in her blog.<sup>7</sup>

SM Cinema's unilateral move to stop screening R-18 classified movies and the UP Film Center's experience with censorship are examples of the film exhibition's active role played in shaping film viewing behavior and cultures. While cinema has long been perceived as a heavily mediated, cultural, and economic output resulting from an intertwined network of production, distribution, and exhibition, it is through the latter where mediation can be most palpably observed. As movie audiences decide to buy a ticket to watch a movie, film as both cultural output and economic product becomes more apparent. Conversely, the audience is both a cultural and economic agent. This article further suggests that film exhibition possesses cultural and economic agency. Theaters are not only passive spaces where the audiences watch a film, but also facilitates the cultural and economic dynamics of film production, distribution, and the consumption process. This article mainly focuses on the steady presence of state-funded microtheaters as alternative viewing spaces and how these "limited" spaces operate with/against the imposing cultural and economic hegemony of mall cineplexes.

Opposite page:  
The Brockas playing live music while Rox Lee's film is projected,  
at the UPFI Cine Adarna



Kidlat Tahimik at the Cinematheque Center Davao



A Czechoslovak film screening at the Cinematheque Center Iloilo



Joel Torre at the Cinematheque Center Negros



Arbi Barbarona, Liza Diño-Seguerra, and the FDCP team at the Cinematheque Center Nabunturan. FDCP Cinematheque images from respective Facebook pages





A film festival at the UPFI Film Center

### From microtheaters and back: a very brief history of film exhibition in the Philippines

The early years of motion picture exhibition in Manila arguably began in a microtheater when Francisco Pertierra operated a *cronofotógrafo* out of his listening salon at Escolta in January 1987. The next documented public film screening, which happened about seven months after Pertierra's, was also in a makeshift movie hall, this time an old jewelry shop also located in Escolta.<sup>8</sup> However, it was not until 1902, when American imperialist rule had stabilized, that nascent cinema in the Philippines gradually began to gain ascendancy from theater as the dominant form of in-house public entertainment.

Since the early parts of the 1900s, the *teatros* that were originally exclusive to operettas, operas, and *zarzuelas*—the prevailing form of entertainment at that time—would soon feature motion pictures in their programs as interludes. By 1910, a number of theaters in Manila would showcase films exclusively.<sup>9</sup> As the Americans further established their presence in the country through commerce and culture, imported films from Hollywood challenged local production houses and dominated local movie screens. In 1927, the *Film Daily Yearbook* reported 250 movie theaters in the Philippines.<sup>10</sup> By 1940, the country was reported to have 350 movie theaters, and this count will more than double in about two decades. Several decades after the Philippines gained its independence, many Filipinos remained avid consumers of American exports.<sup>11</sup> By 1971, a total of 921 theaters were listed in the country, most of which were situated in Manila.<sup>12</sup>

The rise of the mall culture in the Philippines beginning in the late 1980s has significantly altered the public's film

consumption behavior. Around that time, mall-owners had begun installing film-viewing facilities in their establishments as part of recreational and entertainment centers. Multiple cinemas were made available in malls, now commonly referred to as multiplexes or cineplexes. From what used to be absolute in the 1970s, only less than five percent of movie screens were housed in stand-alone buildings in 2019. The set-up, driven by economies of scale, proved convenient and efficient for movie-goers and exhibitors. The wide variety of leisure activities and revenue-generating services offered by malls was something stand-alone movie houses cannot compete with. This situation is compounded by technological challenges theater owners must contend with in the advent of digital film production and exhibition. The changing technological and economic realities brought stand-alone movie houses to the brink of extinction by the early 2000s.

The proliferation of malls contributed to the transformation of the film exhibition business in the country. This is highlighted in urbanized areas and city centers where establishing a commercial presence is profitable; malls led to the closure and subsequent replacement of many stand-alone movie houses. For the relatively underdeveloped areas, however, the closure of stand-alone movie houses was not accompanied by newer forms of film viewing venues. This resulted in films becoming less accessible to movie-goers, especially to the far-flung areas. The steeper costs and thinner margins resulted in the increased concentration of movie theaters on locations where theater-owners are more assured of profits.

Alongside this transformation, several alternatives would emerge to challenge the increasing dominance of mall

cineplexes. For example, developments in digital technology encouraged bootlegging and piracy.<sup>13</sup> In the early 2000s, alternative forms of film exhibition gained traction in the form of microtheaters and art houses. These were essentially scaled-down film exhibition venues more suited for fewer audiences. Media scholar Jasmine Trice (2009) recalled the now-defunct *Mag:net Café's* along Katipunan Avenue in Quezon City that held daily screening series that ran from November 2006 to April 2008, as well as *Cubao Expo's Mogwai Cinematheque*, which opened in 2007, as early examples of alternative cinema exhibitions.<sup>14</sup> Another recent addition to this list is *Cinema '76* managed by TBA Studios. It currently has branches in Quezon City and San Juan, which opened in 2016 and 2018. But with the COVID-19 pandemic, *Cinema '76* in San Juan officially announced its closure on September 15, 2021, only retaining their branch in Anonas, Quezon City. There are also the *Black Maria Cinema* in Mandaluyong and *Cinema Centenario* in Maginhawa, Quezon City, which both opened in 2017, although the latter had recently closed;<sup>15</sup> and the *Dream Theater*, which opened in 2018 and is managed by the *Carl Balita Review Center (CBRC)*.<sup>16</sup>

### State-funded film microtheaters

State-funded film exhibition venues likewise gained wider attention in recent years. Under the Office of the President, the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP) is the country's lead government agency for film. Its Cinematheque Centres aim to be an "alternative and accessible venue to expose the audience to both conventional and non-conventional forms of film and programs directed to developing new filmmakers and upgrading the skills of existing ones."<sup>17</sup> It currently has cinematheque centers in Manila, Iloilo, Davao, Zamboanga, Nabunturan (Compostella Valley), and Bacolod (Negros Occidental). The FDCP used to have a cinematheque center in Baguio, but it had to stop operations in 2017 due to location concerns, while the cinematheque center in Zamboanga has been closed for renovation since 2017. Three cinematheque centers regularly screen films: the 100-seater Cinematheque Centre Manila located in Ermita, Manila, the 74-seater Cinematheque Centre Iloilo located in Iloilo City, and the 120-seater Cinematheque Centre Davao located in Davao City.<sup>18</sup>

*Cine Adarna*, on the other hand, is the main screening facility of the UPFI. The 745-seater theater located in the UP Film Center Complex is equipped with 35mm and 16mm projectors, a Christie Digital Cinema Projector (DCP), and a 5.1 Dolby sound system.<sup>19</sup> The complex also houses a newly-renovated 60-seater Videotheque with audio and video equipment. The FDCP Cinematheque Centres, *Cine Adarna*, and Videotheque all provide film screenings to the general public.

Academics Bubbles Asor, Michelle Correa, Richard Bolisay with programmer Noy Lauzon discuss *Parasite* at the UPFI Videotheque

Kontra-GaPi perform at the UPFI Ishmael Bernal Gallery



Rox Lee and Ramon Bautista at the UPFI Ishmael Bernal Gallery





Alvin Yapan in front of the Lino Brocka statue at the Cinematheque Center Manila

The UPFI Cine Adarna and Videotheque screen the most films regularly, averaging more than 30 screenings a month. Among the FDCP venues, Cinematheque Centre Manila has the highest average screenings, with around 27 a month. Cinematheque Centres Iloilo and Davao are comparable with 20 and 16, respectively. Of the 1089 total scheduled screenings across the FDCP and the UP Film Center venues in 2019 up until mid-August, close to 200 films, or around 17 percent, were free screenings (see table). Most of these free screenings were held as part of cultural exchange programs. To give a few examples: Japanese films were screened for free during the Eiga Sai Japanese Film Festival in Cinematheque Centre Manila (February 19-26), Cinematheque Centre Iloilo (February 13-16), and the UP Film Center (August 14-17). Cinematheque Centre Manila also held the first-ever Colombian Film Festival (July 16-18), while the UP Film Center hosted Indonesian (March 6-8 March) and Korean (March 13-15) Film Festivals earlier that year.

Free screenings featuring local films were also made available. Cinematheque Centre Iloilo hosted free screenings for Cinekasimanwa, the Western Visayas Film Festival (January 19-25), while Cinematheque Centre Manila held Sinebernakular (August 22-23), among others. In addition, curated retrospectives were held at the UP Film Center, which have featured Elwood Pérez (February 4-7), RoxLee and Filipino Experimental Filmmaking (February 26-27), and Lino Brocka and Electoral Politics (April 1-5), among others.

#### Monthly Utilization Rate (in percent), by venue, January – August 2019

Sources: Author's calculations using requested reports from the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP) until 17 August 2019 and requested reports from the UP Film Center until 13 August 2019.

Legend: FDCP-M refers to Cinematheque Centre Manila, FDCP-I refers to Cinematheque Centre Iloilo, FDCP-D refers to Cinematheque Centre Davao; UPFC-CA refers to the UP Film Center Cine Adarna, and UPFC-V refers to UP Film Center Videotheque.

Screening records show that, on average, free passes generated more audience traffic. The utilization rate was derived as the percent of the audience turn out with respect to the venue's maximum capacity. Expectedly, movie-goers were more willing to watch if they didn't need to pay. In total, significantly higher utilization rates were observed on all venues that offered free screenings within the year. However, a lot was left to be desired for paid screenings. While these numbers provided a broad picture of film viewership catered by these venues, a more intuitive take on audience reception between paid and free screenings would necessitate looking at the audience's movie preferences.

This initial foray to data provided by FDCP and the UP Film Center provides a strong case for the potential of state-funded cinematheques to incubate an alternative film viewing culture that is different from what is conventionally shown in the mall cineplexes. However, economic and sustainability considerations should be addressed in order for this project to prosper. As forms of film exhibition and film viewership shift due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the role of state-funded cinematheques shall have to be rethought and reinterrogated.

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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**Gerald Gracius Pascua** is an economics consultant and researcher. He was engaged in policy research and analysis in government and international institutions including the Department of Trade and Industry, Asian Development Bank, and the ASEAN Secretariat, and did research on frontier issues in trade policy negotiations, and ASEAN Economic Community regional integration. He was also an economics lecturer at the Ateneo de Manila University and a visiting lecturer at Xavier University – Ateneo de Cagayan.

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# PLAYBACK CINEMA CENTENARIO

Hector Barretto Calma

I'm still unsure if I can narrate our journey in putting up Cinema Centenario without being too emotional after more than a year of closure due to this pandemic. I don't even know where I should begin. All I can remember is that I never dreamt of having my own cinema. I love films both as an audience and as a maker. But to set up a business to showcase them never crossed my mind until the early months of 2016.

My film competed in the Taiwan International Documentary Festival that year. The screenings weren't held in cineplexes like the usual venues in the Philippines. Instead, the festival was housed in an old winery converted into an art space with two theaters dedicated to screening films. The place is called Spot Huashan. I fell in love with the place, its concept, and the community that supported cinema and the arts. For the duration of the festival, I was preoccupied with the idea of setting up something similar in the Philippines.

Upon my return, I asked friends and colleagues to help me establish our own film screening venue. I gathered a mix of film practitioners and film lovers who were on board with my idea. The concept and core ideals of setting up Cinema Centenario were simple: to provide a home to Filipino films, help develop the local audience, and promote the culture of watching films inside the theater.

We had zero ideas on how we were going to do this. Most of us were not into business, but we took this leap of faith that things will work eventually. So, with less than a year in planning and some capital funds out of our personal savings, we opened the doors of Cinema Centenario in December of 2017. Treb Monteras II's acclaimed *Respeto* (2017) was the first film we showed in our 65-seater micro-cinema. It was a sold-out screening.

We named the space Cinema Centenario to pay homage to the centennial celebration of Philippine Cinema. However, we wanted to go beyond its celebration; we wanted to serve the community. To provide a home to Filipino films would mean addressing one of the biggest issues of local filmmakers—the

lack of screening venues—since the priority of cineplexes is Hollywood blockbuster movies even though we keep on hearing the news that Filipino filmmakers were winning at international film festivals every year.

How can the local audience experience and witness these films if the local cinema circuit is snubbing them? In Cinema Centenario, we showcased independent films to an audience that we hoped will grow and gave second chances to local films whose theatrical run was cut short due to low audience turnout. We strategically established our microcinema in Maginhawa Street, known for being a food hub, hoping that we could gain from its foot traffic. We wanted to bring the films to the audience and develop a community of film enthusiasts.

However, it wasn't easy to reach out and introduce "unknown films" to unfamiliar audiences. To address this issue, we created our film festivals, the Maginhawa Film Festival scheduled every December, and the Never Forget Film Festival focused on screening human rights themed films during the commemoration of the declaration of Martial Law by the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos in September. Through these festivals, we encouraged our audiences—both the usual suspects and the newbies—to explore a variety of films outside their customary choices.

We also partnered with several institutions like the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, Commission on Human Rights, Active Vista, Dakila, the University of the Philippines Film Institute, and the ABS-CBN Film Restoration in organizing activities to continue the conversation on topics that we believe are essential in the development and growth of the local audience. In addition, to make the experience different from the normal viewing of films, we organized post-screening discussions, talks, and masterclasses with filmmakers to bridge the gap between them and the audience.

Our two-year existence was not an easy run. Keeping a small cinema afloat that tried to counter the programming of big cineplexes without a predefined business model was



Opposite page and above: The interiors of Cinema Centenario. All images courtesy of author





Cinema Centenario patrons and visitors, top to bottom: Dwein Baltazar pose with the participants of her scriptwriting workshop; Keith Sicat, Sari Dalena, Cesar Hernando, Ellen Ongkeko Marfil; Sid Lucero, Annicka Dolonius, Mario Cornejo; Ditsi Carolino with author

challenging. The whole experience was a learning process, from permit processing down to daily operations. We were open every day, including holidays, as we tried to maximize a whole day to screen films, expecting that we could have enough audience to cover the operational cost. We even organized past midnight screenings, hoping to cater to night owls, but it did not succeed for a while due to the small audience turnout.

A big chunk of our operations involved technology—from the computer system, speakers, to the projector. Maintaining these assets was vital to keep us running, and they didn't come at low prices. We started screening films in video format and later shifted to Digital Camera Package (DCP) to address the security concern of file storage and delivery. This shift opened the doors for us to screen Asian titles, including the Academy award-winning film *Parasite* (2019) by Korean director Bong Joon-Ho.

Over the course of two years, we hosted screenings for local film festivals and introduced their films to our patrons. Block screenings from various fan bases rented the cinema for their meet-and-greet events with their idols. Many participants attended a good number of film workshops and seminars. There was significant growth in audience turnout; we were establishing a slowly thriving community.

We welcomed our supposed third year full of aspirations from our learnings in our first two years. However, the pandemic happened; it shattered our plans, which led us to our shutdown. I felt devastated by our decision to close. During the initial months of the lockdown, I was in denial, thinking that we could still open when things got better. But here we are, still closed, so we did the sensible thing and started selling our assets.

In the last quarter of the first year of lockdown, we decided to set up our own streaming site. We called it MOOV, a wordplay as we moved to the digital space through this virtual cinema that functions as a movie-on-demand platform. We may not replicate the collective experience of watching films inside a movie theater that advocated when we established Cinema Centenario. Nevertheless, our new endeavor carried our same brand of curation, intending to reach a wider audience since the platform is now accessible worldwide.

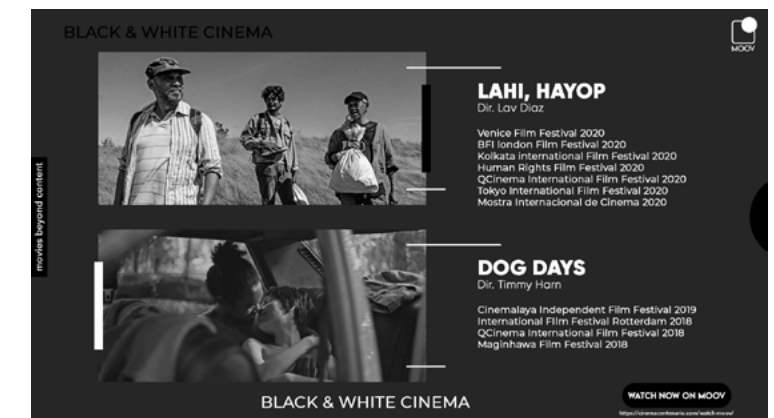
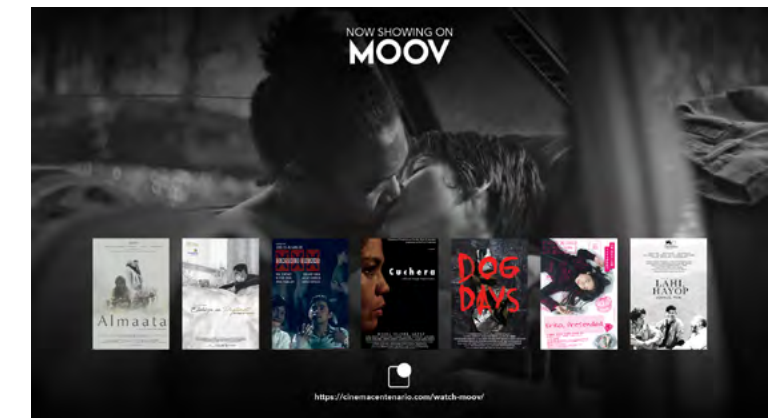
MOOV was formally launched as the platform of the virtual edition of Maginhawa Film Festival in 2020, where we showcased a handful of short films from students and up-and-coming filmmakers. After the festival, we introduced our programming: *Philippine Horizon*, a collection of contemporary films showcasing brave narratives that offer discourse and perspective; *Bahaghari Encounters*, a spotlight dedicated to showcasing LGBTQIA+ stories; *Wide Open*, a showcase comprising of documentaries with distinct cinematic visions that tackle a wide array of topics and subject matters; *Brief Confrontations*, a curation of short films that demonstrate various aesthetics and visions both from up-and-coming filmmakers and established filmmakers; and *Panorama Asia*, a focus on Asian Cinema that represents diverse cinematic styles and distinct points of view.



Ryan Cayabyab; Antoinette Jadaone, Dan Villegas; Lav Diaz

The line-up was handpicked to maintain the quality of the films showcased on the platform. We don't treat films as mere content; we treat them as social artifacts, a record of our time and culture, representing and interpreting who we are as a nation and region. Hopefully, we can sustain the virtual space because it's a different animal from the physical cinema. The Philippine streaming market has tight competition, but we aim to be different while upholding our ideals as an organization.

We still aim to continue the celebration of the Filipino vision and cinematic artistry. Cinema, the way we know it, may be transforming and now moving beyond the four corners of a dark theater. With the changing times and the uncertainties of the new normal, through MOOV, we aim to create a multi-sectoral online community of film lovers—a community that will strive for the positive shaping and development of Philippine Cinema and its audience.



The interface of MOOV

**Hector Barretto Calma** is a filmmaker, writer, cinematographer, editor, and an alumnus of the 2020 Talents Tokyo and the 2021 Buecheon International Fantastic Film Festival–NAFF's Fantastic Film School. His films have been selected and competed at the Taiwan International Documentary Festival and the JOGJA-NETPAC Asian Film Festival. He founded Cinema Centenario in 2017 and the virtual cinema MOOV in 2020. Currently, he is a member of the cinema committee of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts and teaches at iACADEMY.





# Philippine Cinema in the Age of Media Deliveries

Streaming Platforms from the Philippines  
since the COVID-19 Pandemic

Icho Pascual

## Pre-pandemic Streaming in the Philippines

When I started writing this article, mass gatherings and public indoor activities in the Philippines were still prohibited because of the pandemic. As a result, websites like YouTube, Vimeo, Netflix, and other video-on-demand streaming platforms played a crucial role in continuing the distribution and exhibition of the moving image.

Before the pandemic, local (and non-piracy) ventures in streaming platforms from the Philippines already existed. However, Philippine platforms merely touched on its surface compared to those mentioned above. iWantTV, now iWantTFC, was a relatively known platform pre-pandemic. It served as a catch-up tool for those who missed the time-slotted television shows produced mainly by ABS-CBN. Also, filmmaker Mike De Leon uploaded his most recent full-length, *Citizen Jake* (2018), after several theatrical runs. His choice of cinematic afterlife/paradise (he referred to it as “streaming heaven”) was Vimeo.

When the pandemic hit in 2020, Filipino movies were uploaded and showcased by some production companies via YouTube and inspiring community initiatives like the Lockdown Cinema Club.<sup>1</sup> After that, local film festivals like Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival, QCinema International Film Festival, the Metro Manila Film Festival, and many regional and specialized film festivals, including Mindanao Film Festival, Binisaya Film Festival, Ngilngig Asian Fantastic Film Festival, CinemaRehiyon, Active Vista International Human Rights Festival, and International Silent Film Festival Manila, followed the relocation of the moving image to various streaming platforms.

## The Paths of Relocated Cinema

There is a lot to unpack. Let us begin with the “relocation” of a medium.

In *The Lumière Galaxy: Seven Keywords for the Cinema to Come*, Francesco Casetti defines relocation as “the process by which the *experience of a medium* is reactivated and repropose*d elsewhere* than the place in which it was formed, with *alternate devices* and in *new environments*.”<sup>2</sup> It is through these alternative and new avenues that “the life of the previous medium, in its fullness as a cultural form, continues.”<sup>3</sup>

For Casetti, a medium must be valued as a support/device carrying texts beyond its material function. In his words:

A medium is also a cultural form: *It is defined most of all by the way in which it puts us in relation with the world and with others*, and therefore by the type of *experience* that it activates.... Cinema has always been a way of seeing and a way of living—a form of sensibility and a form of understanding.<sup>4</sup>

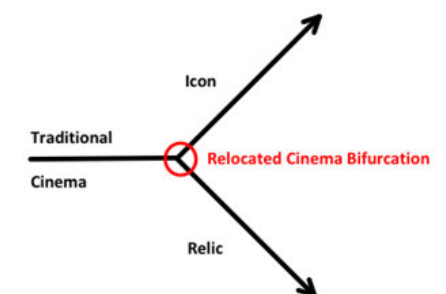
Casetti invites us to reconsider the medium as a cultural form configured by its material reaches and limits. Cinema remains retrievable outside the movie theater, for what matters is the experience—the cultural form—than the support/device.

However, this redemption of the experience succeeds only in part. “[I]t is certainly not the same,” yet “it still retains many of its characteristic traits,” Casetti clarifies.<sup>5</sup> It is worth acknowledging that recognizing an experience provided by a proto-medium (e.g., cinema) in a new environment (e.g., home theater) or alternate device (e.g., smartphone) is a complex operation.<sup>6</sup>

To recognize cinema in its new territories requires effort in observing both the medium and ourselves. Cinema’s move to new devices and environments asks for a fresh pair of eyes that reveals to us that cinema’s relocation is a bifurcation of a path.

One path can be conceptualized as the *Icon* wherein the cinema condition’s modality or environment is considered in objective physical terms, no longer needing reconstruction through imagination. Space is reorganized to mimic the movie theater so that the cinema situation of the auditorium is somehow transferred.<sup>7</sup> Here, the media environment serves as a substitute for the movie theater. Central to the iconic relocation is the experience of cinema’s spectacularity—the cinematographic experience.<sup>8</sup> Examples of these are microcinemas, drive-in cinemas, open-air screenings, and home theaters.

The other route is the *Relic* which prioritizes conveyance. Devices like smartphones or tablets allow content transportation at the palm of the viewer’s hands.<sup>9</sup> These media deliveries present the cinema experience through fragments of what is obtained on the movie theater screen. It ultimately values cinema intimacy—the filmic experience.<sup>10</sup>



The bifurcated relocation of cinema according to Casetti

Opposite page: SM Cinema Drive-in for Japanese Film Festival



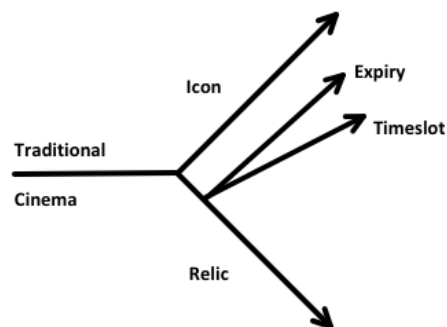
Streaming platforms are easily associated with the latter path of relocation. They function in two ways: As an archive and as media delivery. It houses as much content as it can with the end goal of presenting the moving image whenever, wherever, and however the viewer wants to consume it through whatever device. It provides a connection to the film than to the movie theater.

Surprisingly, upon review of Philippine cinema's ventures to streaming platforms since the pandemic, there have been practices that attempt to regain the cinema situation by activating our memory of cinema's temporality instead of its spectacularity. The relic path seems to have produced two offshoot trails that asymptote the other course. These emergent paths offer the illusion of the cinematographic experience via gestures. They appeal to our *doing* cinema without the movie-going. They ask for a sense of habit, not of a place.

Most Philippine streaming platforms deliver media content while formatting their virtual spaces to simulate a situation from the pre-pandemic normal. The resemblance could be intended or perhaps accidental. Nevertheless, for the viewers, this resemblance hits us like *déjà vu*.

Philippine streaming platforms resemble traditional cinema to a degree because they emphasize transience in digital streaming. Some present their platforms with clear limits. They carry only a handful of content with set streaming dates and durations. In other words, access to the content is not perpetual; it expires. They are temporal files from the archive of media delivery. They need to go for they occupy space. That is at least what is being offered. It approximates the exhibition limits of movie theaters.

Some platforms, especially those born out of television networks, extend their broadcasts to the stream. They feature channels that deliver some of their shows previously aired live only and unrepeatable. The platform "premieres" new episodes of broadcast content and lets us recall the experience of the *timeslot* temporarily since these episodes get archived in the same platform, eventually allowing for anytime access.



The bifurcated relocation of cinema with two offshoot trails

### A Survey of Streaming Platforms from the Philippines

#### Archives of Their Own

Only four streaming platforms from the Philippines tend to exhibit an archival character on their websites. Generally, their content may be accessed anytime and anywhere after payment.

The first of these is Vivamax<sup>11</sup> by Viva Entertainment. It stores a collection of their production output and foreign titles exclusively licensed to them for distribution in the Philippines. Viewers may browse the content using a virtual carousel on the homepage segregated either by conventional platform categorizations or by genre. There is also a changing list of titles that can be accessed free of charge. Otherwise, patterned after Netflix, paying for a monthly premium subscription grants unlimited access to the platform.

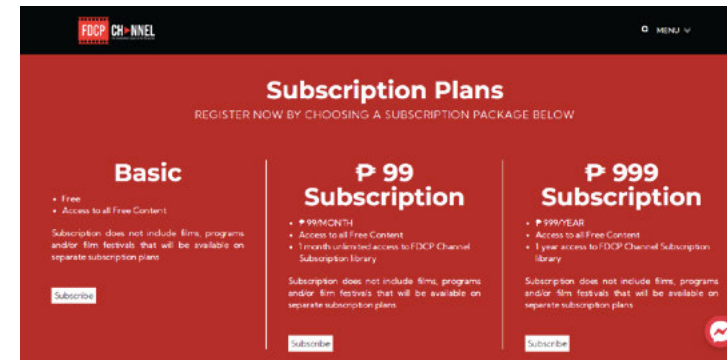
The FDCP Channel<sup>12</sup> of the Film Development Council of the Philippines delivers media content similar to Vivamax. It houses several critically-acclaimed films (mostly Filipino) available for anytime access as long as one has availed a premium subscription to the channel. A basic no-charge subscription is also an option. In addition, the platform welcomes special film programs such as PelikuLAYA: LGBTQIA+ Film Festival, and CineKabalen, to name a few.

Cinema Centenario's move to online streaming with their platform MOOV<sup>13</sup> is somehow akin to the FDCP Channel but with more customized content curation. However, MOOV employs a pay-per-view method for its video-on-demand service, unlike the two mentioned above.

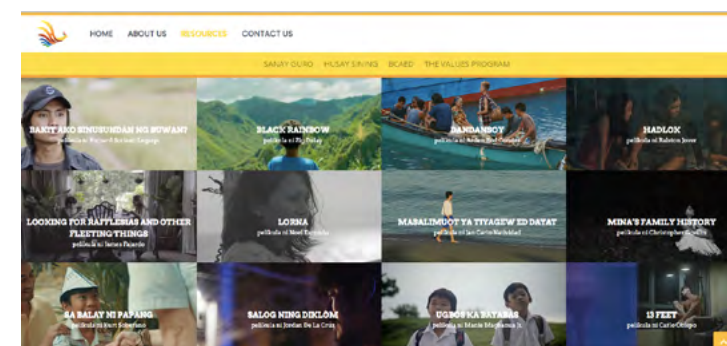
Lastly and quite different from the rest is Sine Halaga<sup>14</sup> which was initially launched in 2021 via Vimeo as Sine Halaga Film Festival. It featured twelve short films funded by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA), and access was free for a limited period. Eventually, Sine Halaga launched its own web page under NCCA's Learning Hub, wherein each short film is packaged with its respective materials such as a trailer, featurette, and, most important of all, study guide.

#### Archives Dependent on YouTube and Vimeo

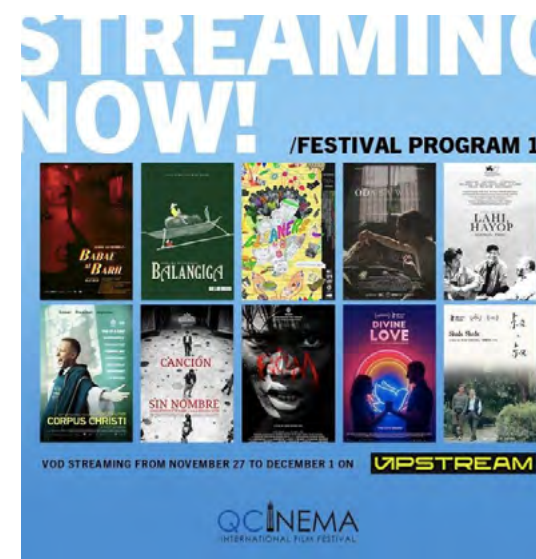
Large production companies like Regal Entertainment, Inc., ABS-CBN Star Cinema, and TBA Studios shifted to online streaming but depended on YouTube's already existing platform.<sup>15</sup> Many of their production outputs are uploaded to their respective channels. In addition to full movies, both channels are laden with a variety of movie clips which are likely uploaded for marketing purposes. Cinema One's YouTube channel features similar content, with a few Cinema One Originals Film Festival titles thrown into the mix.<sup>16</sup> At the onset of the pandemic and as the lifting of the community



FDCP Channel subscription plans, from fdcpcchannel.ph



12 short films of Sine Halaga, from nccalearninghub.com



QCinema International Film Festival on Upstream. Courtesy of QCinema

quarantine grew uncertain, these mentioned channels voluntarily uploaded full versions of some of their films as their contribution to addressing the public's anxiety. Some of these titles remain accessible at the time of this writing.

Filmmaker and LVN scion Mike De Leon has two Citizen Jake channels. One in Vimeo<sup>17</sup> and another in YouTube,<sup>18</sup> which, in particular, works unconventionally. Upon visiting the YouTube channel, only a small number of uploaded videos are shown. However, this doesn't reflect his entire archive since a considerable number of classic Filipino films—most, if not all, by LVN Films—posted in De Leon's Casa Grande Vintage Filipino Cinema Facebook page<sup>19</sup> leads one back to either Citizen Jake channels. That is, one must visit the Casa Grande Vintage Filipino Cinema page on Facebook to browse the titles and locate a film they wish to watch. All the uploaded classic Filipino movies from the '40s until the '80s can be streamed entirely for free on YouTube and Vimeo. It is also worth mentioning that most of these old titles were virtually impossible to locate and watch before the pandemic.

### The Memorial Paths of Cinema's Temporality

#### Transience: Expiry

Most streaming platforms and online screening programs from the Philippines tend to limit the online life of their film roster. Non-curated platforms like Upstream<sup>20</sup> and KTX<sup>21</sup> make it evident from their website homepages that titles are only accessible for a certain period. This duration ranges from weeks to months. When content is paid for (pay-per-view), one gains a window, a certain number of days to stream it. Once partially streamed, another certain number of days is given to finish the whole thing. This window varies from one content to another. Missing the window or finishing the content consumes one's access to it.

Upstream, KTX, MOOV, and the FDCP Channel can be considered virtual theaters. These digital distribution platforms/exhibition spaces welcome online film programs and content even from external groups. For example, the 2020 editions of QCinema and the Metro Manila Film Festival held their online film festivals via Upstream.<sup>22</sup> Ahead of them August that year, the local forerunner of film festival relocation, Cinemalaya,<sup>23</sup> offered the usual festival run of one to three weeks through Vimeo. That year, festival participating films were accessible anytime within the festival period.



This 2021, Cinemalaya tweaked its format and added platforms with a month-long duration of pay-per-views through KTX, a festival pass on Vimeo, and free screenings on their website. A significant change in the festival was characterized by a varied window of access. Not all titles were available for the entire duration of the festival. Some were only purchasable and/or accessible on specific dates. This pattern was followed by Dakila's Active Vista International Human Rights Festival<sup>24</sup> through MOOV, while QCinema had theirs through KTX.

The Cultural Center of the Philippines, which awards the Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video<sup>25</sup> to alternative films, also launched a virtual channel showcasing the best entries for 2021. All films were accessible for free for a limited period. The same was exemplified by CinemaRehion and Tingin Southeast Asian Film Festival, which ran through Vimeo.<sup>26</sup>

The University of the Philippines Film Institute<sup>27</sup> (UPFI) also joined the online screening party. Curated online programs with varying durations and platforms were freely offered to the public via Facebook posts on its page. With the film program, recently, Cinematic Counter-Cartographies of Southeast Asia, the UPFI ventured into Vimeo.

Daang Dokyu Film Festival,<sup>28</sup> the 2020 celebration of documentaries in and from the Philippines, is no different, apart from having had its own streaming platform through its website. The length of the festival run was commendable, allowing for the access of many films assembled in six thematic programs. Daang Dokyu had an almost two-month run, and everything was free of charge.

In the 2020 edition of the Pista ng Pelikulang Pilipino, the FDCP Channel was designed to reference FDCP's videotheques. There were four virtual cinemas in a single platform, each with a different line-up of films in varying timeslots per day.<sup>29</sup> This time-slotted programming was repeated with this year's International Silent Film Festival Manila<sup>30</sup> (still in the FDCP Channel) without the concept of multiple virtual cinemas.

These schemes in the FDCP Channel were the closest simulation of traditional cinema arranged by a media delivery platform from the Philippines.

*Transience: Timeslot*

iWantTFC and Signal Play, the streaming platform extensions of their broadcast and cable companies, feature free live broadcasts from their respective TV channels on their websites.<sup>31</sup> Both platforms' series and movie contents, most of which require a premium subscription, are a scroll away from the live feeds. In addition, these two also house production outputs from other companies.

The ABS-CBN Film Restoration<sup>32</sup> is not necessarily a streaming platform. However, it does host premieres of its newly-



Daang Dokyu online announcement



A Southeast Asian film program by the UP Film Institute



Japanese Film Festival Plus Invitation



Munimuni live scores the opening Japanese film for the 15th International Silent Film Festival, at the newly reopened Manila Metropolitan Theater

restored Filipino films through its Facebook page. Afterward, these restored works are offered on KTX on a pay-per-view basis.

**Reorganizing Philippine Spaces**

There had been few independent efforts that attempted alternative on-site screenings. SM Cinemas announced the conversion of their parking lots into drive-in cinemas in 2020.<sup>33</sup> The Japan Foundation Manila took advantage of this development for the opening night of the 2020 Japanese Film Festival Plus: Online Festival.<sup>34</sup> However, in general, the drive-in cinema set-up did not establish patronage as it got suspended when COVID cases rose with the emergence of the virus' delta variant.

Elsewhere in 2020, QCinema explored invitational open-air screenings for their commencement activities with film viewings.

**A Post-Pandemic Possibility of Doing Cinema**

As I make the final revisions to this article, moviehouses had already resumed operations (with physical distancing) since COVID vaccines have been rolled out, and cases in the country dramatically declined. The 2021 edition of QCinema had just been launched online (KTX) and on-site (Gateway

Cinemas)—a repeat offering of the hybrid exhibition but with traditional cinema.

This is likely the future of relocated cinema. It is naïve to expect our acquired lifestyles during the pandemic to recede and succumb to the resurgence of “old normal” for the sake of nostalgia. We move forward. The pandemic made us redefine what life, work, faith, art, and relationships mean. We have grown to make connections and transactions from anywhere our internet connectivity can reach.

In addition, productions continued despite the necessary adjustments and the previous knowledge that streaming was the only option for exhibition and distribution. In a roundtable discussion<sup>35</sup> organized by Art Studies students under Professor Eloi Hernandez, director Antoinette Jadaone and actor Enchong Dee relayed that production conditions during the pandemic have, in certain areas, in terms of duration and lodging, become better. However, the downside was that the budget had been significantly cut down, and a sizeable portion of the resources was allocated for health and safety expenses.

Jadaone stated that streaming had brought incomparably less income than theatrical screenings. However, companies still consider it worthwhile to produce online content. New shows and movies premiering on local platforms have not entirely run out. Perhaps streaming remains suitable for business, thanks to the expanse of the internet's reach.



Streaming was and is here to stay. I submit that we are moments away from witnessing the fruition, if not the blossoming, of the hybrid exhibition: a lively concoction of media delivery and cinema environments.

**Icho Pascual** is a film program associate at the Film Center of the UP Film Institute. He is currently finishing his MA in Media Studies (Film), researching film festivals, the relocation of cinema, spectatorship, and imagined audiences.

**Endnotes**

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# SWIMMING UPSTREAM

How a Big Fish Still Swims in a Small Pond

Princess Kinoc



In November 2020, the Monteverde Group and Globe Studios partnered to create a new streaming platform birthed during the pandemic. It is called Upstream (often stylized as Upstream.ph), which utilizes two business models that currently exist in digital media: over-the-top media service (OTT) and pay-per-view (PPV). An OTT media service means viewers can watch movies and series via the internet and no longer through cable television, while PPV means viewers can select titles they want to watch, pay for, and access within a given timeframe.

The PPV model helps Upstream retain the exclusivity of a film or series, and customers can watch this up to two weeks after its official release. To prevent piracy, the titles that one can access through Upstream may only be viewed with a ticket valid for five days and a playback period of 24 hours. In addition, the titles are watermarked, making it possible for the company to track pirates.

However, unlike its counterparts that accept payments directly through a backend system, Upstream utilizes GMovies, the app one uses to create an account and download movies. That the streaming brand and the service access have different names causes confusion among consumers, however. Simply put, Upstream is the streaming platform's brand, while GMovies provides the infrastructure of the virtual cinema experience, from purchasing the ticket to watching the film.

When we look at Upstream's business model, two questions come to mind: one, do people nowadays who access content at the touch of their fingertips still care about theatrical release dates? Two: does having access to a film at the time of its official release imply that one must pay for the luxury of exclusivity? And what mode qualifies exclusivity?

Opposite page: Swimming Upstream Artwork. Courtesy of author

*A Girl and A Guy* (Erik Matti, Reality MM Studios, Regal Films, & Globe Studios, 2021) is the first Upstream Originals production later released on Netflix. Courtesy of Upstream

For example, a newly released title costs from P250 to P450 to watch via Upstream. Pre-pandemic cinema ticket prices cost about the same, but we were also paying for the theater experience, the convenience of a fully air-conditioned room, and the staff service.

Disney+ and Netflix, two global leaders in the streaming industry, are changing the game by investing in original productions and releasing them via their streaming platforms simultaneously with these productions' theatrical run. Disney+, though, charges an additional fee for new releases. Meanwhile, Netflix, as well as Amazon Prime, HBO Go/HBO Max, and their local counterparts, iWant and Vivamax, charges nothing except the standard subscription fee. The latter two local options and the advertisement-funded iFlix, launched in the country around the same time as Netflix, have attempted to promote more Filipino films, although their success in doing so has yet to be precisely measured.

It seems people nowadays don't mind whether a film is up to 90 days or even two years old as long as access to it is easy and affordable. In this regard, the business model Upstream currently utilizes may be considered a decade too late.

In particular, Netflix's business model has always been adaptive: they survive through continuous change. In the beginning, it was a website where people could rent movies and have them delivered to one's door, shifting the way people accessed a video rental service. However, when YouTube began to offer unlimited videos online, Netflix did not hesitate to adjust and soon introduced the idea that entertainment can be affordable at the comfort of one's own home even without a cable subscription and accessible at one's own time. Though it eventually produced its own content, it did not limit its catalog



Director Erik Matti and John Arcilla on the set of *On The Job: The Missing 8* (Erik Matti, Reality MM Studios & Globe Studios, 2021). Courtesy of HBO Go

to titles produced by big companies and did not consider the variety of content a threat to their production.

It appears that Netflix foresaw the diminishing return of the rental business, especially with the advent of piracy through illegal streaming platforms. Today, we can consider Netflix Originals a prime example of creative freedom as it dominates the global scene once conquered by big production companies and their penchant for formulaic plots. Netflix is winning in convenience and accessibility, which is why local options like iWant and Vivamax are following in its footsteps, although they stream more of their own productions and less of independently and foreign-produced features.

Where we may find Upstream in the arena of convenience and accessibility faltering, its significant advantage is in its programming. Unlike iWant and Vivamax, Upstream is not limited to showcasing titles from its parent companies' Reality MM Studios, Regal Entertainment, and Globe Studios. It shows titles from NBCUniversal, and through its retrospective programming, features films by the likes of Khavn dela Cruz and Hong Sang-soo and livestream events like the Pacquiao fight—content one cannot find altogether elsewhere. This openness to variety provides space not only for film and television shows but also for theater productions and a host of other original materials.

However, what downplays Upstream's objective of keeping cinema alive in the new normal is how costly it is to watch on

their platform. Though they are not alone in this, they are one of the biggest fish in this small pond of streaming sites in the country. Understandably, consumers are more easily attracted to the option of standard subscriptions. And although not quite as extensive as the libraries of TBA Play, Cignal Play, and the FDCP online channel combined, streaming platforms like Netflix, whose service is much cheaper, also have Filipino programming, sometimes even hosting films that Upstream premieres.

Upstream's programming feature is a romantic option. Netflix has the marketing capability to boost interest in Filipino titles, yet a growing audience base in the Philippines seems to prefer Korean titles more. Upstream might find its doom soon enough if it does not change its business model, not necessarily to the more popular subscription-based option but perhaps to a mix of strategies to help earn an income to produce and catalog more original content. In terms of giving more access to library titles, perhaps they could also incorporate an ad-based business model.

With all these being said, Upstream can still be more competitive. Imagine if independent companies with no means to showcase their productions could premiere their films on a platform like Upstream? The opportunity Upstream can offer the industry remains a massive potential and can dispel the idea, even in this pandemic, that Philippine Cinema is dying.



A B'laan born in Davao but raised in Bulacan, **Princess Kinoc** writes for the film blog *Film Police Reviews*, co-hosts the film podcast *Third World Cinema Club*, and contributes to other publications such as *New Durian Cinema*. She was the former marketing manager and strategist for Upstream.



# PRECARITY AND VISIONS OF SECURITY IN FILIPINO FILM WORK

Kaj Palanca



The choice to work in film in the Philippines is a choice to sacrifice the material security that comes with a “regular” job. For many in the local industry, to work in film is to lose access to valued benefits and affordances of “good” work, such as a stable source of income, reasonable working hours, and high levels of safety in unchanging work environment. For freelancers and other film workers working on temporary contracts, landing enough projects every month—and getting paid on time for these projects—is crucial for survival. Struggling to secure continuous employment in film leaves workers with no pause or opportunity for rest, in an endless cycle of insecurity and uncertainty.

Film production is rarely duly considered an arduous labor process: more typically, it is celebrated only for the product it creates, the legible cultural text projected as a spectacle on the screen. And filmic spectacle—which is usually attributed to one person’s miraculous genius—tends to overshadow the fact of filmmaking as *work*, as the joint labor of a collective making the world and wrestling with it.

Early on in this attempt to study film work for my undergraduate thesis in sociology, I understood how important it was to keep attentive both to individual, subjective experiences of film work and the structural determinants that shape and organize such experiences. Thus, my research concerns itself with how film workers grapple with that tension between the personal and the structural. I pay close attention to how film and audiovisual workers “construct their subjectivities in the face of [...] consolidations of media capital and reconfiguration of media work.”<sup>1</sup>

I began talking to film workers as key informants a little over a year into the pandemic. From these conversations with ten film workers of varying roles in the production process, a certain paradox emerges: the pandemic, a public health emergency, seems to have made film work a little *lighter*, even less precarious. Following guidelines set by the government for audiovisual productions, shooting hours are now capped at twelve to fourteen per day, whereas the pre-pandemic shoot day would typically last well into twenty hours or even more. In addition, more production companies now require the signing of notarized contracts, with stipulations to provide for the health insurance of workers and for the timely release of pay, formalizing the relationship between the hiring party and the film worker. And on set, health and safety protocols are put in place and ideally strictly observed to protect workers from the virus.

Of course, this is not to say the pandemic has magically resolved the issue of insecure work in Filipino film. On the contrary, it continues to be a serious threat to film workers and other vulnerable groups at the frontline, what with the government’s ill-conceived, botched militaristic response. And especially since the pandemic has greatly unsettled

tenure or the continuity of film jobs by limiting the number of productions that could roll and shoot on location, a stable livelihood in film work remains elusive. But importantly, the pandemic has also urged local producers to reconfigure how the film set as a workplace operates. This shift into the “new normal” mode of film production indicates that precarity need not define employment relations in film. Indeed, the current mode presages a more permanently secure film industry.

The conditions of precarity in which film workers are today steeped result from general preexisting conditions of employment in the Philippines. Local economies of informal work—including on-call entertainment workers such as bit players, utility workers, and other below-the-line crew—have been consistently expanding in recent decades, especially in urbanizing areas. As labor scholar Rene Ofreneo puts it, the common thrust of flexibilization or casualization is to put workers under short-term employment arrangements for employers to avoid the legal requirement of regularization and payment of benefits.<sup>2</sup> In film, the usual practice is to hire creatives and film workers as *project employees* with tenure only coterminous with the length of the project itself. Since producers outsource a majority of film jobs to suppliers or equipment rental companies, the employment relationship between any one production and a film worker is tenuous at best. More often, there is no employment relationship to speak of; film workers are left to fend for themselves, with no management to rely on or from whom to expect protection or incentives.

Previous page: On the set of a film production. Images courtesy of Petersen Vargas, except where noted

A production designer takes a quick break from the film set







An assistant director blocks a scene

artist, narrates how a production outfit tapered their rate of compensation midway through a shoot, justifying this by the lack of a contractual agreement between them. Since there is no contract, the hiring party is not obligated to pay the worker a fixed amount, regardless of what has previously been discussed verbally between them.

Others lament the overlong shooting day or unneeded pre-production meetings, for which the extra overtime hours are often uncompensated. Commitment to a project may last for a day or several months, even a year in some cases. For one, the scheduling of shoots is contingent on the availability of select people in the production, especially superiors such as the cast or the director. This deference to the schedule of superiors or actors constrains film workers from securing enough projects. The workers are left in that liminal state, unable to secure as many projects as would be favorable to them precisely because narrow group or individual interests determine the conduct of film production. It becomes impossible to be completely sure about the continuity of one's employment in a project. In these cases, film workers will have to involve themselves *sporadically* with a project without the certainty of an end.

Aside from job instability, the data yield two more distinct themes that may be central to studying precarity: *slippery socialities* and *the difficulty of bureaucracy*.

The absence of a clear and definite employer-employee relation in film work perhaps expresses itself most saliently in accounts of tricky experiences with superiors and peers. All of the film workers I talked to share accounts of difficult superiors, in the presence of whom it becomes challenging to maintain one's creative discretion. Two of them recount being physically or verbally abused by directors.



A worker from the camera department fixes a lighting setup on the roof of a house. Courtesy of author

Despite how impractical it may seem to stabilize film work as a livelihood, many film workers have no better choice; the skills they have acquired or developed in their audiovisual production work are so particular and specialized as to be practically useless in any other field. Audiovisual workers, then, would rather endure and learn to adapt to the precarity of their working field than have to start all over again. Dealing with the precarity of film work itself has become a craft of its own, a testament to one's *diskarte* or resourcefulness. Film workers have always just had to cope with the realities of the industry. But as recent events have shown, the industry is not a hard, immovable thing: it bends under pressure. Perhaps it is this very flexibility of film work, the deceptive *contingency* of it, that workers may use to their advantage to stabilize their working conditions for the long run, for the greater majority.

What follows is a brief presentation and analysis of findings from my in-depth interviews with ten film workers conducted through online audio and video calls. Unfortunately, as much as I wanted to, I could not have done fieldwork on a film set because of the current public health situation. I have chosen to keep the subjects anonymous, referring to them only by their primary work role or the film production department to which they belong.

*Precarity as Uncertainty and Dependence*

It is helpful to ask what constitutes precarity to understand how film workers make sense of their precarious working conditions. Feelings of insecurity about job tenure, or the length or continuity of employment, and job status—as determined by the quality of valued job features such as pay, hours, and benefits—constitute the first important dimension, in this study identified as *job instability*.

Such is evident, for example, in how film workers explain the irregularity of their tenure or in how they articulate experiences of insufficient compensation and long working hours—such as when one of the respondents, a make-up

For example, a live sound recordist recounts being fired from the set of a film by a respected arthouse director after he (the recordist) put in constructive comments about the continuity of scenes in the film. In this case, his employment was cut short by the director's kneejerk irritation.

In another shoot, the same sound recordist narrates a near-death experience as he and a few other below-the-line workers were left stranded on a mountain location as a raging storm approached the area. Their superiors chose to evacuate the key staff first over the below-the-line workers, leaving the latter in the terrain for a few more hours. Because natural locations and events are difficult to control or predict—a shoot in the countryside for example may not have access to real-time weather forecasts—workers are sometimes put in such life-threatening situations.

Still, another film worker from the art department expresses a basic dependence on his superior, a production designer, for livelihood: “Our lives depend on him [the production designer]. Our work, our source of income. If he stops, our lives also stop.”

A director talks of a feeling of tension as he was determining his friends' talent fees for a personal project—working on a small budget from a festival grant, he and his producers had no choice but to pay these filmmakers a minimal fee, even if they wanted to pay them better. Film workers must not only secure their work; they are also ever on the way to capturing true stability in relationships with superiors and peers.

Film workers also express frustration with the density and unknowability of the bureaucratic processes of public and corporate offices. They have to wait weeks, sometimes even months, to receive their payment in mainstream productions. Moreover, during the pandemic, especially since work agreements are increasingly being formalized, many productions now require that workers possess an official receipt as proof of clearance of the tax liabilities of both production and worker. In this case, the possibility of securing employment is directly hampered by the cost and challenge of bureaucratic processes.

These three themes—job instability, slippery socialities, and the difficulty of bureaucracy—all suggest that precarity is experienced as a pressing need to *depend*. Film workers depend on the legal protection of contracts to settle their terms of work. They depend on the favorable temperament of superiors and peers to execute good work—they have to adjust, for example, to the schedules of superiors such as actors and producers to lock and secure their tenure. Which superiors one must answer to depends on the project one has secured; if identified, film workers must depend on superiors to pay them right and keep them employed. A worker, indeed, articulates this dependence on his immediate superior as a



A film crew prepares for a big scene by the seaside. Courtesy of author

dependence for basic survival. And they must depend on the ease and efficiency of bureaucratic processes to be employed as a *legitimate* worker or to reap the rewards of a film job, such as their wages.

All such dependence highlights precarity as the “contingency of the employment relation itself.”<sup>3</sup> This employment relation is not only of contingency as in uncertainty of circumstance—they never know the scope of their work; much is superfluous—but also of *contingency as dependence*.

Relations of contingency are relations of dependence. Film work is by nature itinerant: the film workplace shifts now and then, from one shoot location to another, and every new project means a different set of co-workers. Moreover, the film worker never knows what will happen on any given shoot day: will the weather, for example, even permit the shoot? In such an informal industry, film workers are always held captive by that basic unknowability—coupled with an evasiveness of superiors. At once, they must be answerable to no one and everyone, lest they risk losing their job.

I argue that film work must adequately be considered *contingent work*, interrogating first the uncertainty of circumstances to which film workers are ordinarily subject and then the complex relations of dependence in which film workers find themselves enmeshed. Precarious film work is precarious because workers are stuck in ever-uncertain working conditions that strip them of choice, forcing them into states of dependence as they struggle to secure a lasting attachment to any particular employer.





Young directors consider the scene setup in the monitor

### *Friendship as a Moment of Passage*

Through practices of sociality, especially in the form of workplace friendships that challenge and resist unfavorable work arrangements, workers first sense the bare possibility of achieving conditions of security in their work environment. In other words, one worker alone cannot conceivably defeat or overcome precarity. To achieve some success at this, film workers must recognize themselves as a collective.

For instance: tired from their hired work for larger corporate productions, film workers test out and practice non-precious work in smaller independent productions with friends. It is precisely the demonstration and organization of friendships such as these that allow and facilitate “human thriving in workplace contexts.”<sup>4</sup>

Through strategies of initiative and sociality, film workers cope with precarity and resist its worse effects. From our conversations, it appears that the passage from personal discretion and initiative towards collective action is most meaningful in the route towards genuine security in film work. This moment of passage from initiative to sociality may be meaningfully described as a moment of *friendship* at work.

The personalistic, private focus of most friendships may evolve to become a voluntary act of strengthening workplace relationships among superiors and peers.

A producer’s concern for his workers in a project that got delayed because of the pandemic later crystallizes into a

Precarious film work is precarious because workers are stuck in ever-uncertain working conditions that strip them of choice, forcing them into states of dependence as they struggle to secure a lasting attachment to any particular employer

group initiative that would collect more than a million pesos in donations to distribute them to hundreds of below-the-line film workers.<sup>5</sup> Lockdown Cinema Club consists of a network of film practitioners and students who volunteered their skills in public relations and events planning to mount the aid-distribution program for below-the-line film workers. This stopgap measure to alleviate hunger in times of crisis suggests an alternative grounded model to slow, inefficient dole-out programs by the government.

Some smaller initiatives attest to the power of collective action even at the everyday, interactional level. A group of set men once realized they were “not a company” and therefore had no automatic access to fringe benefits like employees in corporate jobs—and so they moved to pool enough money among themselves to apply for insurance and social security

benefits. A gaffer who also owns a lighting equipment rental company makes sure to protect his workers first. When the pandemic hit and all live shoots were canceled, he knew he needed to shell out money from his own savings for the workers to secure basic necessities such as food and medicine for their families. In any case, he and the workers live in the same neighborhood and provide for each other in times of need.

Sometimes, however, mere friendship and a motive of care for others may prove insufficient. When a team of assistant editors felt they were drowning in an endless stream of deadlines, they took the initiative and prepared a document to present to their superiors, with points to improve their work process and help each other out. But their superiors only dismissed this proposal and kept to the usual toxic routine at the post-production house, prompting the assistant editors to leave the job and find better work elsewhere.

Other workers would rather keep separate their workplace friendships from their friendships outside of work. While working with friends on smaller projects may be enjoyable, some other productions require a cold efficiency from workers—that is, they demand that people operate as *co-workers* rather than as friends. So, a writer-director and a producer say they would rather not befriend their workmates on set. For them, getting attached emotionally to workmates as friends only complicates the job at hand.

While it may nudge workers to sense a collective around them, friendship is itself often unstable and incomplete, and therefore cannot be a final solution to precarity. Friendship is usually first spawned in that movement from personal initiative to collective action. At that point, it may be considered an informal, provisional attempt at organizing; as such, it is still highly vulnerable to being dismissed by those with more power or leverage in the industry. Even when a group of friends succeeds in negotiating some terms with immediate superiors, their “win” may leave out those outside the friend group, who nevertheless would benefit greatly from any additional measure of job security.

Thus, informal efforts that begin among friends must eventually be prolonged and institutionalized by forming truly inclusive work associations, such as unions or professional guilds. Unions, especially, may carve out that ideal democratic space in which organized workers represent their genuine interests and collectively bargain with production companies for better working conditions.

For them to work, current existing professional guilds must remain professional. For one, they should be more dedicated to the democratic cause of the guild by practicing diligent self-regulation and keeping to a regular routine of consultations with their members. They must be more

inclusive of *all* film workers in that specific profession, especially those younger and with less experience, who need the most protection from exploitation. As they are now, most professional guilds consist of members who do not recognize each other as peers who wish to emerge together from a state of job insecurity. It may do them well to return to ways of friendship and recognize friendship as a *voluntary* act of strengthening relationships in the workplace.

All instances of collective action against precarity begin with reflexivity, the acute recognition that the current order of things at work is not sustainable. Specifically, film workers recognize the need to negotiate the lack of an employer-employee relationship in their work. They recognize that such lack of attachment makes work more insecure by unsettling job tenure; without a formal employment relationship, for example, employers may exercise their right to terminate ongoing employment at short notice. The lack of attachment to an employer also leaves the laborer without the guidance and oversight of management. It is collective action that begins to fill in this lack of a formal attachment by enabling the identification of a hiring party or production company with which workers may collectively bargain for their benefit.

### *Real Possibilities of Security*

The shift to the “new normal” mode of production shows that it is possible to address and rectify some of the more unfavorable working conditions on the film set, such as overlong, uncompensated hours. It took a health crisis as massive as the pandemic for the government to push and implement measures for a safer film workplace. Several acts have recently been implemented and approved in Congress to ensure the occupational health and safety of audiovisual production workers in the Philippines, such as the “Eddie Garcia Act,” named after the revered actor—following Garcia’s untimely death on set, the act mandates the government to oversee film, television, and radio productions to prevent or eliminate potential hazards.<sup>6</sup> Another relevant act is the “Freelance Workers Protection Act,” which mandates the

It is collective action that begins to fill in this lack of a formal attachment by enabling the identification of a hiring party or production company with which workers may collectively bargain for their benefit.



## It is through organizing that mere visions of security may become a substantial reality.

execution of a formal contract between freelancer and employer.<sup>7</sup> More and more production companies now provide workers and suppliers with a formal contract that includes stipulations for workers' rights to the timely release of pay, reasonable working hours, and insurance and benefits.

While the industry is far from reaching lasting security for all film workers, these recent developments in legislation bring to light the unique conditions in film and other forms of audiovisual production that subject workers to varying forms of insecurity. The shift to this new mode, albeit imperfect, exposes just what is wrong with the "old" normal. When the pandemic subsides, it would be in film workers' best interest for industry leaders to learn from the experience and retain all the good practices.

This small study argues that conditions of precarity must be addressed as a problem of contingent work experienced collectively. Its full resolution could then only be achieved by workers collectively, through friendship and solidarity. As an example, workers could together lobby for the passage of protective labor laws such as the "Freelance Workers Protection Act." Even better, they could identify

industry leaders and collectively bargain with them, a practice that "creates 'quasi-proprietary rights' and promises significant degrees of social protection and security."<sup>8</sup> It is good to be reminded that workers' collective power "[derives] largely from their capacity collectively to withhold their labor from employers by striking."<sup>9</sup> See, for instance, how the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees (IATSE) in the United States and Canada is mounting protests and collectively bargaining with producers and studios in 2021 to reach "an agreement that addresses core issues, such as reasonable rest periods, meal breaks, and a living wage for those on the bottom of the wage scale."<sup>10</sup> In the Philippines, it is all the more urgent to mobilize film workers, to raise their consciousness about the precarity of their work—in order that they may begin to set the conditions of possibility for the formation of truly inclusive work associations.

Workers must recognize the need to represent their interests collectively in democratic spaces. By collective action, workers could demand that industry leaders and government officials finally work to implement security measures. It is through organizing that mere visions of security may become a substantial reality.

**Kaj Palanca** is a writer, researcher, and filmmaker. At sixteen, he co-wrote and co-directed the short film *Contestant #4*, which won the Audience Choice Award at the 2016 QCinema International Film Festival and the Best Film Award at the first Shanghai Queer Film Festival. Currently, he is working on his next two short films, "Henry" and "Extra Festive." He graduated magna cum laude with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Sociology from the University of the Philippines Diliman.

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# PEDAGOGY OF CINEMA

## Teaching Film Production during the Pandemic

Chrissy Cruz Ustaris



In one of the world's longest lockdowns since the COVID-19 pandemic started early in 2020, the Philippines continues to impose community restrictions on social interactions and access to public spaces. The Filipinos have yet to see a sign of hope when stringent limitations will be lifted. The government's bungled pandemic response has resulted in widespread hunger and unemployment, plunging the nation into an ever-worsening economic and health crisis.

One of the fields most painfully hit by the lockdown is education. Face-to-face classes have been suspended since March 2020, causing an education crisis as well, where students and teachers alike have been forced to adapt to remote and online learning. People have grappled with how both learning and teaching can occur amid inadequate access to gadgets and the internet, digital illiteracy, poor learning environment, the mental stress of long periods of confinement in the home, and the lack of healthy social interactions. All these are compounded by the daily battle to survive COVID and the sense of dread, as death due to the virus has become increasingly palpable, taking away people we know. There is a general malaise felt in the raging pandemic.

Switching to online classes is not simply transferring the activities of a physical classroom to a virtual setting. So much in the interaction is lost in the online set up like body language, social cues, and the human energy that emanates inside a classroom.

This article looks into how film production classes have been conducted during the pandemic. Writings since 2020 have predominantly tackled film exhibition through online streaming and professional filmmaking practices during the pandemic. Not much has been said about how students and teachers are faring in film schools. Film teachers were

interviewed to gain insight into their thoughts and experiences on teaching production courses.

### Film Production in the Time of COVID

The entire process of translating a concept to film lies in preproduction, production, and postproduction phases. Each phase is further broken down into steps, including storyboard, lighting, shot composition, production design, editing, and directing. Moreover, film production is collaborative. A film is created through the combined efforts of individuals undertaking different roles, performing myriad tasks to realize a shared vision.

Part of the realities teachers face in film production courses is the limitations that the health crisis has imposed on the students. Schools have been strict on not allowing production outdoors and restricting shoots inside the students' homes. Another prevalent issue is that students lack the film production equipment needed, which they could access through the school or their classmates under ordinary circumstances. A factor that has aggravated these limitations is the confinement indoors that has placed a mental strain on students, affecting their motivation and creativity.

These have driven filmmaker Sari Dalena, who teaches at the UP Film Institute, to adjust her usual requirements. "During the pandemic, I had to shift from expecting them to deliver a specified output, that is, a short film, to focusing on what the students can do and what they want to do. This resulted in various outputs not limited to a film like scripts and storyboards. There was even a student who submitted a performance with a reading. Thus, the student outputs expanded.

"There was a good harvest of dance films. They choreographed the performances themselves. Students staying in the provinces, where cases are fewer, were very bold and wanted to shoot on location. I didn't allow them. I sent them a link by New York Ballet which showed dancers performing inside the bathtub to show that they can still dance indoors. But those in the provinces were persistent, telling me they would be shooting by the river near their home and that the place was practically deserted. I kept reminding them to be careful.

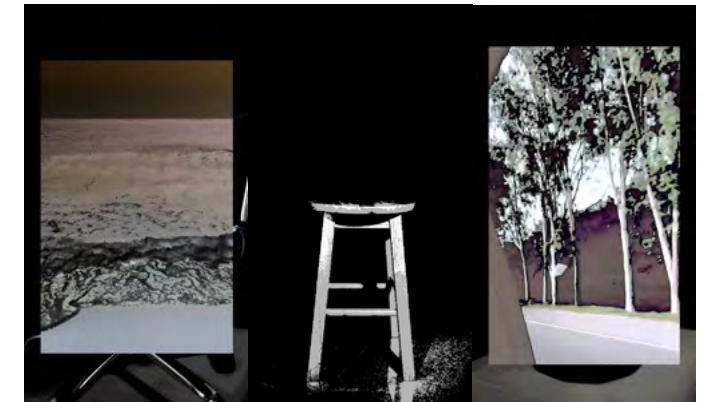
"I thought about half of the students were going to stop shooting because UPFI was very strict in its production guidelines. I was surprised that all of them were still able to shoot. I put my trust that the students would abide by the protocols we released.

"Some of the students were still collaborating with each other. After one did the shoot, she would pass on the files to another student for editing. Moreover, the students' family members acted in their films – their mom, dad, siblings, aunts, etcetera. The projects became very intimate. That's one solution to the limitations of production that came out in the films produced: the presence of family in their films."

Filmmaker Keith Sicat teaches production courses in iAcademy's multimedia arts program. "I start with the basics. What do they have? What can they do? Smartphones and webcams are still plenty to work with; they're still cameras. Do they have Powerpoint? Can they tell a story in 15 to 20 slides? And they were able to do it! If they have editing software, that's an even bigger help. For example, the experimental film *Babae Lalake*, a commentary on gender-based discrimination, is a film with just text, sound, and rhythm—not a single image was captured, yet it's a film!

"Even Sari [Dalena, Keith's spouse and creative partner] and I could not produce a film at this time. How much more these kids? Some have never even done production, so I did not expect that anyone would finish anything. But then I realized that we couldn't underestimate them because they can be pretty clever and resourceful. As a creative person, you're wired to solve problems. Most creative people, even if they don't have the means, find a way. The students just needed some space, and it helps not to pressure them with deadlines. It doesn't matter when they hand it in; the deadlines are suggestions more for their pacing than anything. So compassion is key. Many of the students are going through traumatic times, and we have to be sensitive to that.

"The most powerful films in this batch are the documentaries. For those struggling to come up with a film concept due to the limitations, I suggested they document



*Silya* (Maki Makilan, 2021), UP Film Institute



*Madre* (Elcan Romaguerra, 2021), UP Film Institute

Previous page: (Above) *Balota* (Brijette San Jose, 2021) from iAcademy, (below) *Conversations of A One Man* (Keiko Carasig, 2021) from UP Film Institute. All images from student works courtesy of respective film professors, as indicated

*Burwan ng Dalawa* (Directed by Jan Christian Garcia, 2021), UP Film Institute.







*Ilusyonada* (Andre Punzalan, 2021), iAcademy



*Façade* (Abigail Jose, 2021), iAcademy

what they're going through during the pandemic; and do this task, if not for them, for everyone else in the future. I saw how this instruction bore fruit. It helped give them an outlet for whatever they were feeling. The enormity of the situation is overwhelming, but it was contained by framing it in a short personal documentary, and it helped them cope. There are the big lessons here: first, embracing the limitations, and second, using the art of cinema to help cope with the pandemic.

“What surprised me was there was a bit of social awakening in the films produced. It's as if because of the injustices taking place and this horrible and frightening absurdity that we found ourselves in, the students have learned to broaden their view on things and address these concerns in their work. This year, entries in iAcademy's Ground Glass Film Festival dealt with political issues, mental health, gender discrimination, and various problems faced in this pandemic, among other matters affecting our society.

“Even the students themselves were surprised by the direction their films took. When you're that age, art-making could simply be about escapism. Instead, however, they

became reflective of the reality we're in now. That's something unexpected but wonderful.”

Director Kris Villarino teaches film courses to students majoring in Cinema under the Fine Arts program of the University of San Carlos in Cebu City. He relates: “I adjusted the syllabus when I realized that for the time being, there are things in it that won't work given the setup. I also adapted to the students' needs, like providing them with basic plotlines when they struggled to develop stories for the production requirement. I recorded my live demos for those who have a weak internet signal. I also provided an audio recording like a podcast, so students can still access it with the really bad signal. You have to find ways to reach them.

“Although collaboration has been challenging for the students, it's still possible. For the subject Cinematography, I asked them to form groups of two or three. Students shoot their parts from their own homes, with one of them as director, instructing the others what to do via a video call. They still need to follow the basic rules like the 180-degree rule to shoot their side of the scene correctly. The shots are edited to make it look like the scenes were shot in the same location.



*Si Ketchup at si Mayonnaise* (Jannah Jumamil, 2021), University of San Carlos



*Quarantine Stories* (Kester Bennett Hamoy, 2020), University of San Carlos

“The students also did DIY lighting. Not all of them could buy lights for production, so some improvised using lightbulbs in Chinese lanterns. What's important is they understand why certain lights are positioned in a particular way or how to achieve a type of illumination.

“Before the arrival of the delta variant in the Philippines, restrictions were gradually relaxed. The students were in high spirits. They helped each other shoot their films. The films were brighter, and exterior shots were dominant in the outputs. One could feel the outdoors from their films.

“We should take it easy on them because, during this pandemic, we don't know what they're going through. Nevertheless, we shouldn't stop helping them achieve something just because they're in their homes. My realization is that we need to teach them to learn by themselves. Of course, we will guide them, point them in the right direction, trust that they are capable and resilient enough, that they can learn even during this challenging situation we're all facing.”

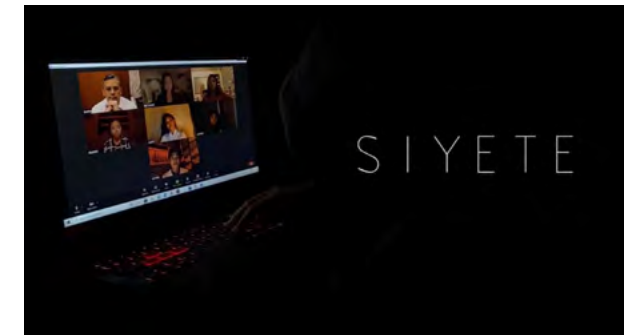
Documentarist Kristoffer Brugada teaches production courses in the Communication Arts program of De La Salle University-Manila. According to him, “The shift of classes to the online mode presented a great deal of problems on how teaching and learning can happen. It's very tiring to sit down to talk to faceless squares with just names, but you can't require the students to turn on their cameras due to privacy or connection issues. That's how it is for now. If the interaction is affected, how much more the teaching? No matter how you want to teach everything, the limitations are preventing you from doing so; it's frustrating. And it's not the students who are causing the frustration, no. In the context of our current societal situation, exacerbated by the ineptitude of our government, we are all experiencing heightened stress levels.

“To cope with what's happening, it's understanding that all of us are suffering. When you understand the students' situation from their POV and acknowledge that we are suffering, you learn to adjust to the situation because you know what we are all going through. For instance, helping them find ways to address the lack of film equipment and teaching them practical techniques, like utilizing house lamps for lighting, using white cloth as an alternative filter, or using house rugs to create a tracking shot. As a teacher, you think of ways to best help your students and continuously come up with unorthodox approaches so that learning can still take place.

“When the pandemic hit in March 2020, my students were already preparing for their final projects. Because we weren't allowed to go out, we had to think of concepts that could be shot indoors. I suggested that they come up with ideas that can be shot from their homes or think of a storyline with one character that can be portrayed by different actors, similar to what happened in the production of the film *The*



*Skin Crawler* (Adia Lim and Matthew Lumagbas, 2020), De La Salle University Manila



*Siyete* (Eron Auditor and Kristine Barbosa, 2021), De La Salle University Manila

*Imaginarium of Doctor Parnassus* (2009). When Heath Ledger died, the director, Terry Gilliam, cast different actors to portray the various transformations of Ledger's character. A group produced the short film *Skin Crawler*, which was about body dysmorphia. This was featured in Quarantimes: Short Films from the Regions on Facebook, an online screening held in May 2020, and the student directors were invited to talk about the film. What they did was, each group member shot a sequence from their individual houses, uploaded the shots on Google Drive, and combined these scenes during postproduction. The North Luzon Cinema Guild acknowledged that DLSU was able to produce the first batch of films during the lockdown.

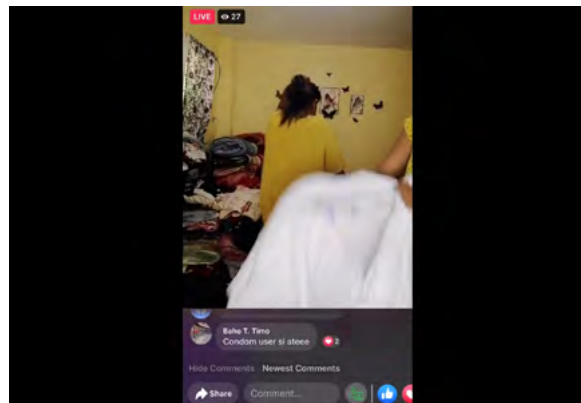
“Another kind of adaptation that students did was filming Zoom conversations. I advised them not to record the scenes using the Zoom application because the connection delays and other interruptions would significantly affect the aesthetics of the film. Instead, they should separately shoot, as if in a set, and edit the shots to look like a Zoom meeting. As a result, a group produced the short film *Siyete*, which utilized the Zoom aesthetic.

“Meanwhile, in my documentary class, some students would deliver the camera to the subjects and ask them to film themselves, then they would meet online, and they would





*Jonab Taas* (Toni Canete, 2021), UP Film Institute



*Mine, Yours, SSD-Bubay Live Seller* (John Batislaong, 2021), UP Film Institute



*From the Bamboo Stalks* (Miguel Lorenzo Peralta, 2021), UP Film Institute

instruct the subjects on how to set up the equipment. For instance, a student was doing a story on the war on drugs. She sent her GoPro camera to the interviewee and directed the subject from a call. It makes production possible even if the production team isn't able to get together. It's online directing.

“One of the pleasant surprises on creativity in film production given the pandemic limitations was on the aspect of lighting. The students looked for ways to create good lighting. The film *Siyete* used red lighting in some portions, and it worked. Since they couldn't borrow light filters from the university's tech lab, I guess they used cellophane. Considering it's their first production in the course Basic Video Production, I was happy that they found the means to create a decent output. They put much time and effort in their creation. Given the situation, these students did well in pushing themselves to create because it's so hard to do that now.

“Filmmaking is still evolving. It's a young art form. It's adjusting to the times and the technology of that time, as past generations had done, transitioning from silent films to sound. Although the pandemic has forced us to adapt and film is ever-evolving, the most salient practices will remain.”

Documentarist Adjani Arumpac, who teaches at the UP Film Institute, shares how her parameters for documentary filmmaking adapted to the health crisis: “I shifted to a production that can be done online, one that uses materials from the internet such as screencaps, downloaded photos and videos, news headlines and content, etcetera. Inspired by Lev Manovich's essay on the database as a genre,<sup>1</sup> I call this approach “database documentary”—using data they find online and then putting these in a Google Drive so they can share and discuss to the whole class and me what they've documented. Offline, they can augment these with documentation of their daily lives and their personal archival footage. This was during the first semester of the Academic Year 2020–2021.

“Good documentary concepts emerged from this method. These include a montage of news clips culled online showing social injustices in the time of quarantine; an experimental visual essay that drew inspiration from the controversial Manila Bay white sand fiasco, expounding on the idea of a ‘crumbling democracy’ under the Duterte administration through the use of sand-like imagery: ash, crystal meth, soil; discrimination of female gamers using the female student's game streaming footage and online interactions in the gaming community; and the story of dancers who lost their livelihood during the lockdown, with photo and video materials and interviews presented through an Instagram account. I was so excited!

“However, when the destructive super typhoon Rolly hit in November 2020, I decided to end the sem early. The general sentiment changed from there. Instead, I asked the

students to write down how they thought they could have finished their documentaries. Based on this final essay and the documentation they have uploaded so far, I graded in their respective shared Google Drives. Documentary is a representation of realities. The absence of production is the documentation of realities itself.

“During the second semester of the Academic Year 2020–2021, my students were finally able to produce and finish their documentaries. This time, I no longer specified that they should strictly comply with the database documentary methods. Instead, I told them to use whatever was available and to work with and maximize those limitations. A few still worked with materials gathered online, but most opted to document their daily lives at home. When given a chance, they'll go for what's human, what's tangible. So that says a lot.

“Some of the best works from my documentary class are the following: One is a poetic video essay using archival footage of the repeated flooding in the student's home in Marikina. *From the Bamboo Stalks* chips away at the concept of Filipino resiliency while referencing Greek mythology, Nick Joaquin, Gemino Abad, and more. Visually, it is a montage of the documentation of the flooding in their area prior to and during the pandemic. The filmmaker describes it as ‘a reflexive inquiry of resilience and accountability, while attempting to salvage what was lost to both water and time.’

“*docx* by Reina Robeniol is a documentary about a family of doctors. My student is the only one in the family in the field of arts. Her parents are doctors, while her brother and sister are both in medical school. Both light and heavy, we see how the medical students are currently making do with the online classes. The siblings practiced on each other since they did not have other bodies to practice on. In the end, the sister studying to become a doctor echoed the Hippocratic Oath, something that you know has much gravity during the pandemic when so many health-worker frontliners have perished.

“One more notable work is a documentary on young women recalling painful memories of having their bodies strictly controlled by their grandmother. *Jonab Taas* by Toni Cañete is an interview with the student's cousins. Conversations in Bisaya tell about the female body, control, family, and the thin line between love and abuse. It's about how age-old notions of beauty police women's bodies. Utilizing only the audio of the interviews in her documentary, the student juxtaposed various wonderful ways of visualizing their stories, such as the projection of bodies from classical art paintings on the bodies of her cousins.

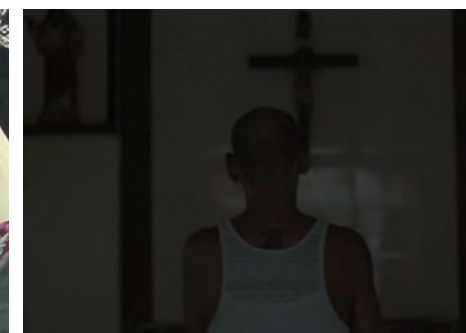
“Another good documentary is about the student's family surviving COVID together. Such an experience is a heavy topic to deal with, but the refreshing element in this film is humor. *Off Limits* by Dan Mackenzie Esquible demonstrates how people choose to live despite the odds.

“Finally, another documentary worth mentioning is *Mine, Yours, SSD – Bubay Live-Seller* by John Batislaong. It's a montage of Facebook live-selling events inspired by the student's mother's pandemic activities. The short documentary deceptively seems like a simple project. But what he did was download and screencap live-selling events that went on for hours. He patiently scoured through all of these materials for details to include in his documentary that critiqued the government's threat to tax online sellers during a time when people are venturing into online selling precisely because of the government's prolonged lockdown that has rendered them jobless. It ended with a raid by the NBI captured in one live-selling event. I see it as a new kind of direct cinema, where the observational activity is done by documenting and archiving these online events.

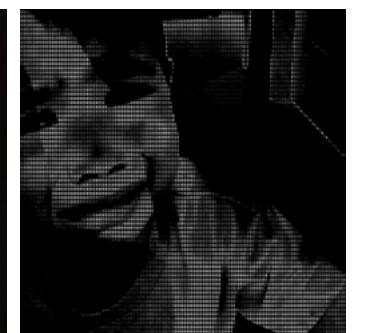
“The fundamentals in making documentaries, whether pre-pandemic or pandemic, are still the same—it's always the preoccupation of documentarists to find ways to visualize the data they were able to gather. You cannot just have a wall-



*Ediana* (Grace Roscia Estuesta, 2021), Far Eastern University Manila



*Divia, Divine?* (Francis Tavas, 2021), Far Eastern University Manila



*Ang Kawing sa Sampayan ng Tagapagtanggap* (Lilian Gomes and Sophia Casasola, 2021), Far Eastern University Manila



to-wall sit-down interview, for one. Visualizing at this time is mostly dependent on what is available and accessible. Due to productions made predominantly inside the home, I've observed the visibility of the family and the everyday, instead of pre-pandemic topics that tended to be more about societal spectacle. This pandemic has been an exercise in seeing value in the small stories that usually go unnoticed, and that, for me, is a very good development."

Filmmaker Seymour Sanchez teaches in the Communication program of the Far Eastern University-Manila and the Digital Filmmaking course in the De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde Manila. He shares: "I gave the FEU students the freedom to choose their concepts for their documentaries. I did not impose that they should be COVID-related, but still, some films dealt with it. For example, a student documented herself for two weeks when she got infected with the coronavirus; there's also a documentary on a community pantry organizer; one is a film on the comparison between a vendor in Baclaran, whose sales have declined due to the pandemic, and that of an online seller; and one on online 'sabong' (cockfight).

"As for Benilde, in the time of classes with physical engagement, students would often get friends to appear in their films. During the pandemic, the restrictions in shooting outdoors have forced them to adapt by including those immediately available to them, whether it's their mother or sister. So it's the family members that are acting in their films. Moreover, some of the students themselves have been appearing in their films. At times, they would even play all the characters in it, so one actor performed multiple roles such that in the film, they'll be seen in a conversation with themselves. This has helped me get to know the students and see their faces and surroundings through their film productions. In online classes, you don't usually see their faces since their cameras are turned off most of the time. Their films have made it possible to associate a face with a name.

"There's also a different kind of collaboration that emerged during the pandemic. Although the production team is not able to get together physically, coordination still takes place, with the actor as the focal point: the PD brings the costumes, props, and other production design elements to the actor, the cinematographer provides the camera, then the director does remote directing through a call. Additionally, the actor also becomes the camera operator, another new feature of filmmaking during the pandemic. And although not something totally new in film production, Google Drive has been maximized for postproduction as a repository of shots to be retrieved by the film editor.

"I observed that positive stories were prevalent during the pandemic. One factor could be that some students who lived alone were reunited with their families during the school year. It could also be that the lack of lighting equipment had



Film Adaptation of *Ang Ikaklit Sa Aming Hardin*, children's story by Bernadette Villanueva Neri (Giulia Saavedra, 2020), De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde Manila



Film Adaptation of *Dead Stars*, short story by Paz Marquez Benitez (Francis Gatuslao, 2020), De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde Manila



Film adaptation of *Trabedyang Isang Birhen*, poem by Genevieve Asenjo (Stephany Liza Sales, 2020), De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde Manila



*P.S. I Will Never Forget You* (Anne Valmeo, 2021), De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde Manila



*Trumpo* (David Collado, 2021), De La Salle-College of Saint Benilde Manila

necessitated most productions to utilize natural lighting. Thus, a brighter aesthetic fleshed out positive themes.

"An aspect I saw where students struggled was in making shots taken in different locations appear even. Some films were intended to appear as having a single setting with multiple characters. Students have to shoot in their own homes and combine these shots for the final output. It was a challenge to get that look of a single location. And even if they remedied it through monochrome or black-and-white color grading, the details like doorknobs or wall texture still give it away.

"One of the ways that students adapted to the limitations was by shifting their productions to documentary and experimental films. Traditionally, they would go for narrative films. However, they began to recognize that these two modes became better alternatives than narrative during the pandemic. This crisis has made them open to exploring these options to tell their stories. Some of these experimental films from Benilde even won in the recent CCP Gawad Alternatibo."

Rianne Hill Soriano is also a filmmaker and a film teacher in Benilde. She explained how strict the school was on shooting protocols like requiring the students to get swab tests, having a safety officer present during the production, signing a waiver for the school, and having it notarized. The notarization used to be required even for indoor shoots until the requirement was relaxed. She taught an experimental film course, wherein she specified to the students that they should only use found footage. "My objective was to remove the shooting component, reducing both the burden of paperwork for students and the risk of them getting exposed to the virus. I had them submit the footage in Google Drive, which I monitored through the metadata and the file dates of these videos.

"The films were generally dark. There was hopelessness and sadness you could feel, perhaps because there's this collective experience that we are all going through. There

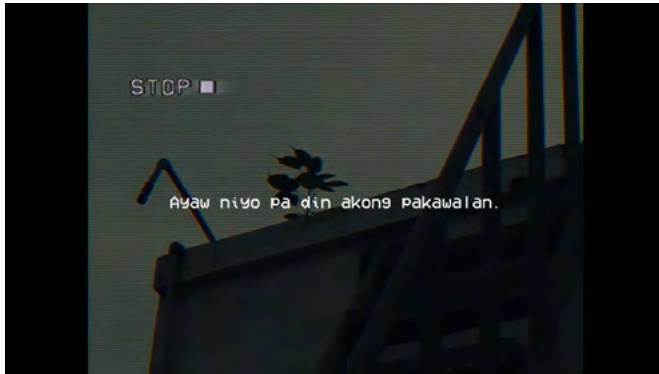
was one film that dealt with the nostalgia of the past. It was all bright and colorful, but there was something dismal to it. There was a bleakness that reflected our situation.

"When the lockdown was announced, suddenly everything had to be done online. I remember a time when teachers used manila paper, cartolina, blackboard and chalk, and the whiteboard. Then came the projector, screen-mirroring programs, and presentation software. At present, with the full-online setup, we have no choice but to adapt to digital technology. I'm lucky because I'm knowledgeable and adept at this. But not all teachers, especially some seniors who are only used to the traditional lecture style that thrived in face-to-face interactions, have the acumen to efficiently deliver instruction online. And that presents a problem. If you're not updated in digital technology, you will find it challenging to engage a fair share of students who grew up as digital natives and should now sit through virtual platforms for all of their subjects every class day," Soriano said.

The health crisis has made it necessary for the Digital Filmmaking program of Mapua University to change its thesis requirement of a short film to accommodate other options such as a screenplay or scholarly work. "There have been many adjustments to make it easier for students in terms of production. Prior to this crisis, we required original footage, especially for narrative works. Since then, I have allowed students to include personal archival footage in their productions," according to program head David Corpuz. "Before the pandemic, students would adjust to the concept to make it happen. But right now, the main consideration is what's available to them and what they can deliver, and the concept flows from there.

"Film topics are political issues and mental health problems. Understandably, there are many COVID-related concepts, such as those centered on online shopping and





*Alpas* (Pongs Boncales, 2020), Mapúa University



*Laot sa Lungsod* (Aliyah Balderama, 2021), Mapúa University

delivery personnel services. It's the sign of the times since these define our current experience. We can't blame the students for having the same concepts and storylines. What we can do as educators is encourage them to come up with ways of telling these stories, such as pushing them to do horror or comedy or even taking on a feminist perspective. This gives a fresh take on the state of affairs we're facing.

"How students have adapted to the situation is what makes the local culture of film production thrive during the pandemic. If you put all student films together, these works plus regional films currently account for the bulk of film productions. The absence of moviegoing has been replaced by online film festivals, with entries mostly coming from schools. All these constraints on space, mobility, actors, technology, have affected the kinds of stories they tell. It is the limitations that have made students think outside the box. The mere fact that the culture of production is continuing means creativity is alive!"

### What The Future Holds

As of this writing, the pandemic is still happening, and there is no clear indication of when things will get better. As people have been dealing with the uncertainty of the future, we continue to hope that this will end soon. People have struggled to cope and reconfigured their lives around it. It is difficult to have optimism, but at the same time, we cannot let fear have the upper hand.

Brugada opines: "I'm a bit worried because this will affect future productions. It's good that students were trained to produce films during the pandemic, but some aspects are best learned in a face-to-face setup. The silver lining in teaching during the pandemic is pushing yourself to be more creative. Experiencing this crisis is, to an extent, like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the virus can kill you, but on the

other hand, the challenges force you to adapt. Once this is all done, in the next five years, as they say, you at least have an idea how to work things around when you are limited, when everything is limited."

Dalena adds: "We have been espousing the OBE or outcomes-based education. During this pandemic, what has become important to me is the process more than the outcome. The outcome had to be discussed with the students individually since it can't be the same for everybody. The situation has called for a shift of the process from teacher-centered to that which is student-centered."

"Teaching film production in the middle of the pandemic goes beyond technical, aesthetic, collaborative nature of filmmaking. It is to encourage students to enhance certain values and skills through independent work and projects, such as self-reliance, exploring personal interests, and rising to challenges in innovative ways."

Soriano shares: "It's been over a year, and I've gotten used to this online mode of instruction, but I can't wait to get back to how things used to be. Filmmaking is a collaborative medium. I don't think films will thrive in this setup. The pandemic can create another sort of film movement, but there's an energy that's missing, which comes from the dynamism of social interaction. Human beings are wired to interact with one another, being social beings. However, given our current state of affairs, we have no choice but to strive, survive, and hopefully, eventually, bounce back and thrive in this industry we dedicated our lives to."

For Sanchez: "One 'good' thing that came out of this is that people are more accessible for online talks. It had been a challenge to schedule several guests for a single program, for instance, in the school auditorium. That was the ideal arrangement then. It was efficient since you gathered the speakers in one venue where many students would be attending at a designated time. For now, we've done away with

logistical issues. I could invite just one speaker, even for smaller groups like one class. It's no longer as difficult to invite guest speakers because there's no need to travel and be physically present in the venue. Zoom makes it happen. But then again, everything else that concerns teaching film production and production itself is still best carried out in the physical setting. Nothing could be better."

Corpuz states: "What we're experiencing now has shown us that teaching production classes online is possible. This can still be done when we return to face-to-face classes, like blended classes, but more for the lecture courses. One good thing that came out of this is that people have become more disciplined in coming on time, and hopefully, that will be carried over when going back to the physical setup. Although, there's the reality of commuting in traffic that has to be dealt with."

Villarino adds: "We need to continue film education even at this time because it is our students who will tell our stories in the future. Right now, we may be tired of COVID stories, but at some point, we will probably be comfortable again watching films about the pandemic. Our students, who are in the thick of it, will be the ones to tell these stories. Our part as their teachers is to make sure that they will tell them well when they tell those stories."

Arumpac opines: "Every stop-gap measure that we as teachers have done so far is already substantial in changing how we do filmmaking. By stop-gaps, I mean we're working with the limitations imposed by the situation. How we make films during this health crisis informs us that it is possible. It can no longer be set aside because there's empirical evidence that it can be done. This will help change the traditional thinking of what cinema is. It's just a matter of pursuing it in earnest, polishing it, and critically understanding what it is in its context and not always in comparison with what came before. This is why I choose to work on documentaries—its

malleability is not only in form but in the creative mindset that as stories change throughout time, the ways of seeing and telling those stories should change as well. To see creative production in this way is a matter of survival and relevance. The documentarist/filmmaker/creative should adapt to successfully communicate to and connect with an audience that has constantly been changing, adapting to, and conditioned by dominant modes of communication of her time. The situation calls for us to flow with the times."

According to Sicat: "Art is constantly evolving, and with it, learning and teaching methods as well. I have learned as much, if not more, from my students' ability to create their films these last 560-plus days of lockdown. It has proven just how resourceful and creative artists of any age can be and the importance of safety and care that we must take with our collaborators."

"One takeaway has been to understand that each student has different resources at their disposal, and as an educator, you have to be more open to customizing their creative assessments to ones that are within their means. This is why they received options for their final projects; they could create a 'still frame film' made up of slides, a short film (live-action or animated), or a personal documentary, which could accommodate other forms like animation. All were equally valid outputs and have opened my mind about the possibilities of cinema as a practice."

"It's my sincere hope that this batch of young filmmakers can help change the industry, not just in the exciting creative outputs that have begun to evolve from this experience but help the process behind the scenes where the well-being of your team is paramount. If we come out of this with a caring environment rather than the mercenary one we've been shackled to for a century, we can count that among the gains from this experience."

**Chrissy Cruz Ustaris** is a documentary filmmaker and a lecturer in the Department of Communication at the Far Eastern University-Manila. She received her MA in Media Studies (Film) at the UP Film Institute and is currently pursuing her PhD in Philippine Studies, Tri-College, UP Diliman.

### Endnotes

- 1 Manovich, L. Database as a genre of new media. *AI & Soc* 14, 176–183 (2000). <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF01205448>