LONG TAKES

04 Revisiting Apocalypse Now: Hollywood in a Time and Place of Philippine Martial Law
Christine Bauchwitz-Berger

22 Trans-ging Cosmopolitanism: Transnational Feminists and Transgressive Intimacies in Isabel Sandalo’s Légua France
Carlos M. Pascio W

36 We Choose Our Vessels: Keeping First-person Cinema in the Filipino Diaspora
Asan (Vin Alcain)

65 The Vietnam War in the Philippines: Interrogating the Film Location Selection of Oliver Stone’s Platoon
John Adrian Pinto

95 Displaced Diaspora and OFW Cinema
John Tawasil

102 The Philippine Film Animation Industry and Its History of Captivity
Richard Cartagena

121 Produced by: Jessica Soros-Poe (Re)Introducing Reesa Productions and Susan Roes, the Producer
Gershon C. Chua

200 Motor Grit Syn: Football, Inc. and the Music Video as Moving Image from 2000 to 2010
Marvin Woodro

SHORT TAKES

14 The Céline Archive
Remaking the Decolonial Feminist Documentary
José B. Capino

32 What Becomes of the Broken-Hearted? Diasporic Melancholia and Geographies of Care in Islands
Joseph Pua

47 And Also Yours...
Caroline Fisher & Miko Revereza’s El Cabo Dandi
Aaron E. Hunt

59 From the Edges to the Center: The Philippine-American Colonial Experience in Rakyateng: Anakgling Wilderess
Ceelik N. Basilo

88 A Rope, A Chain, A Knife: First Cuts for Filipina DH
Lara Asun

102 From the Modern Hero to Heroes of Their Own Lives: The Filipina Domestic Worker in Hong Kong
Purpul Isniano

135 Sergio Pelikula: A Journal
Lea P. Pangsab

167 Remedial Revolution
Asan Guerrero Alampac

TABLE OF CONTENTS

178 Filming Anawag: A Postmortem
Aly A. Arintap

220 On the Challenges of Building Filmmakers
Dan Pascio and Kenneth Lune

143 ANGELES
The Guilty Settler in Ardi Barbianomo’s: The Highest Peak
John Bengan

148 Of Drones, Walls, and Face Masks: Three Short Films of Glenn Balt
Daniel B. Capra

153 Regional Filmmakers in the Time of the Pandemic and Moving Forward
Diana Bangta

75 REACTION SHOTS
The Ethics of Empire and Haunting Takes from the Past
Nick Decampro

167 Rebak as Response: Art, Inventory, and Video
Cosyp Lumbo, Jr.

182 Bad News
Sarge Lacuesta

185 Retriving Brocka: A Review of Jose Capino’s Martial Law Melodrama Lino Brocka’s Cinema Politics
(University of California Press, 2020)
Lawrence Mar M. Santiago

197 Tracing the Testimony of the Politics of Art in Scenio Accessed
Danie Carlo Alyapit

TALKING HEADS

On Survival Mode: Film Production during the Pandemic
Donyx Olaya

ARCHIVE

51 Memories from the Making of a Forgotten War
Dario Dalena & Sari Dalena

79 Finding Elena
ARCHIVO 1984 & Wilfredo Pascual

171 Angkas RESBH & Eya Beldia

188 A Compassionate Lucidity: Recent Political Works by Filipino Students
Patrick F. Campos

EDITOR’S NOTE

The seventh volume of Pelikula is engaged in the labor of remembering.

The recent turn of events in this national election year evidences what happens when people do not remember their past. However, as we have also witnessed, this is no mere forgetfulness by some. Neither is it a matter of minor inaccuracies in recollecting events. We know that collective and individual memories are contested; structural challenges are before us. The systems we rely on to foster historical memory are broken. And political dynasties, well-oiled machinery, appealing invariably to our need and desire for national unity, are manipulating and manufacturing social memory through media and cultural production.

Historical memory is fundamental to shaping our social identities and imagining our future, but it is continually reshaped in the present political moment. It is to this task that Pelikula sets, marking in these pages the atrocities of the bloody regime that had just ended and leaving a document to help ensure that we will not forget. As our artists, photographers, and filmmakers have beared danger and trauma in the last six years, so we would not.

We also recognize that remembering is hard and forgetting is much easier to do. Thus, we prepare for the long battle ahead for the integrity of our historical memory. We look back to a deeper history, to the violence of empire and the broken systems it had left behind as its legacy, leaving many dead and many more scattered, lost we mistake that the struggles we face today are recent.

The volume also reiterates the subject of collective and individual memory, featuring a range of approaches to and performative writings expressing identity, place, mobility, and becoming in cinema studies. In this way, the volume explores the spatiality of memory and history, primarily mediated memory and history, either through critiques of films and moving-image works about the diaspora, migrant workers, and the displaced or through the reflections of scholars and critics who meditate upon their relationship with media.

We look to how cinema and moving images have anchored our remembrances. We write to present the art, and the processes and events of our current film culture as we move away from the pandemic years—about bubble productions that occasioned long hoped-for changes in industrial practices, online film festivals that brought films from the region to a broader audience, students engaged in fearless political filmmaking, and others.

Our cover, designed by Pin Torrente using artwork by Danilo Dalena, honors the memory of the departed that have been martyred and massacred by damnable regimes in history, recent and long ago. It also signifies our present disposition, as we are yet near the ground but no longer at rest and have taken off, geared up for what lies ahead. The colors invite our eyes to rest on the image, to linger in thought, but the movement is dynamic and beckons us to move, now.

Work on the journal is continuous but likewise faces many hurdles, so we look forward to our readers’ active support in the coming days. Finally, we thank the UP Diliman—Office for Initiatives in Culture and the Arts for extending help to complete this volume.

—Patrick F. Campos
June 2019. I am in the Philippines for a research trip working on my next book project. Taking full advantage of being "in-country," I decide to travel up to Baler, Aurora, one of the infamous shoot locations for Francis Ford Coppola’s *Apocalypse Now* (1979). I choose Baler over Pagsanjan Falls, another major shoot location, mainly because I am inspired by the Philippine indie film *Apocalypse Child* (2016). Directed by Mario Cornejo and co-written by Cornejo and Monster Jimenez, the film centers around ever-shifting love triangles between Ford, a surfer-philosopher and supposed love child of the American director, and his childhood best friend Rich, the son of the town’s former mayor and now a lawyer running for Philippine Senate. *Apocalypse Child* paints the Vietnam War film’s mark upon the sleepy beachside town as indelible. It piques my interest to see what remains of the canonical film and its production history.

I arrive in Baler as the sun is rising on June 13, 2019—the day after Philippine Independence Day. Thanks to an overnight deluxe Joy Bus that departs Cubao, a central transportation hub in Manila, the 4.5-hour trip is an extremely efficient alternative to the usual 8-9 hour local bus ride that others might take (and that we unfortunately end up stuck on during our return ride to Manila). Arriving at the Aurora bus terminal, we are immediately greeted by tricycle drivers ready to take us to our respective final destinations. Our bus mainly consists of vacationing Mañilenos and ex-pat travelers, therefore our tricycles all end up in the same resort/tourist area that lines the Sabang beachfront. Upon checking into our hotel, I realize my Taglish will not survive very long here. In this northern province of Luzon, a more formal Tagalog is being spoken, complete with “po sila.”

Upon waking up from an early morning nap, I am greeted by the unrelenting summer sun reflecting upon the beach’s white sand. Looking out onto Aurora Bay, I am struck by the ease of superimposing previous cinematic images—from both *Apocalypse* films—onto the landscape of this new place. Looking out of my hotel room balcony, it is easy to "see" the famous "Flight of the Valkyries" scene. Overlooking the beach and Bay, it is easy to "view" the landscape through the eyes of *Apocalypse Child*’s characters. These guest views from a second-floor balcony approximate the previous film’s vantage points, underscoring the relationship between film and tourism.

As Hollywood legend has it (and as Cornejo and Jimenez’s film plot echoes), Baler’s tourist-driven economy of surfing owes its beginnings to Coppola and his film crew. On the final day of our trip, we decide to avail of our hotel’s requisite surf lesson. A few minutes before 7 am, we spot an extraordinarily fit and tan Filipino local effortlessly performing pistol squats and pull-ups, his real age only given away by the wrinkles around his smiling eyes. Mang Rodel, we later find out, is a spry 52-year-old. Calculating his age, we ask him what he knows or remembers about the *Apocalypse Now* film shoot. When he was 15, Mang Rodel divulged, he worked as a janitor at the local elementary school that served as a storehouse for *Apocalypse Now*’s film equipment, props, and costuming. He remembers the production’s stock of full-size wooden surfboards, a factoid continuously cited by online bloggers and journalists. But he also remembers how the production crew left no surfboards behind. Contrary to Hollywood and internet lore, Mang Rodel informed us that surfing existed a good seven years before Coppola and his film crew’s arrival.1 It was a half Filipino/half Hawaiian surfer and Australians, such as Richie Cleaver (current owner of Baler’s Saltwater Lodge), that had brought surfboards and surfing to Baler, training locals such as Raul Tolentino to surf and leaving behind the surfboards that helped the cultural practice to proliferate. On the walls of Tolentino’s Kubli Bistro in Baler, visitors find black & white

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1. The 15-year-old Mang Rodel informed us that surfing existed a good seven years before Coppola and his film crew’s arrival. This was confirmed by an article published in *The Philippine Star* on March 21, 2020, "Surf’s Up: How Baler became a Mecca for Surfers." The article stated, "It was a half Filipino/half Hawaiian surfer and Australians, such as Richie Cleaver (current owner of Baler’s Saltwater Lodge), that had brought surfboards and surfing to Baler, training locals such as Raul Tolentino to surf and leaving behind the surfboards that helped the cultural practice to proliferate. On the walls of Tolentino’s Kubli Bistro in Baler, visitors find black & white photos of surfers along the coast.”
surfing photographs that pre-date *Apocalypse Now*’s production.

These photographs and Mang Rodel’s story now require that I imagine Baler differently. With my attention turned to the material realities of producing *Apocalypse Now*—the labor of creating its mimetic/onscreen representations—I want to think beyond and against Hollywood and Coppola’s narratives (and structures of feeling) about the film and instead toward local stories. Against what Coppola and his crew might want us to believe, Baler and, by extension, the Philippines were not terra nullius or mere landscape/obstacle. These places are more than merely backdrop or standing-in. Instead, they are vibrant places shimmering with their own lore, histories, and politics. Shot during a time of Philippine Martial Law, *Apocalypse Now*’s production history brings into relief the conditions of possibility for its making—US militarism, a long-standing Philippine film industry, and former President Ferdinand Marcos’s support of the film project. Attuned to these realities, a focus on the film’s production history directs our attention toward Marcos’s Martial Law practices and policies of military infrastructure, tourism development, refugee humanitarianism, and indigenous groups’ incorporation into the nation-state. With more first-person stories and narratives from Filipino artists, film production staff, and everyday people who worked on this now-canonical US film, with a sense of their feelings as laborers, locators, lookers-on, we might see the world of *Apocalypse Now* from their vantage points. Doing so, we reimagine this iconic film as one produced as much by the practices and realities of Marcosian martial rule as those of Hollywood.

This itinerant essay is my initial attempt to think through the approaches and frameworks through which *Apocalypse Now* has been studied and understood—Coppola and Hollywood as well as Asian American studies. From there, it considers what a framing of *Apocalypse Now* as a Martial Law production has to teach us not only about elements of life under Martial Law but also how we might approach the Philippines differently. In the end, we will return to Baler and meditate on how places—their facts and fictions—lead us to different methods in our ongoing study of Martial Law histories.

II. May 1979. Francis Ford Coppola famously declared at the Cannes Film Festival press conference for *Apocalypse Now*—“This wasn’t just a film about Vietnam. This was Vietnam.” Like the US military presence during the war, the film’s production was also “in a jungle, (there were) too many of us, too much money and too much equipment.” Coppola’s statement was made even more ironic because the film’s headquarters in Baler “had much of the ‘social realism’ of a small-scale military base... Housing some 700 foreigners, the enclave was guarded by Philippine constabulary troops against potential ‘trepasseeurs’—namely, NPA forces rumored to be in the region.” In the end, the film consisted of 238 days of principal shooting at a final cost of US $20 million (ironically, the same amount that the United States paid Spain in 1898 for the ‘transfer’ of the Philippines from one colonial set of hands to the next). Through “sustained metaphor” and “extra textual irony,” the Hollywood film’s production history and location shoot served as “the perfect allegory for the American quagmire.” Unlike what we might assume about the well-oiled machine of Hollywood, this film shot on location required much improvisation and thinking on its toes amidst conditions both uncontrollable and exploitative. akin to other “runaway productions” made in the Third World with a nation’s labor, land, and resources. *Apocalypse Now*’s production history invoked both long-standing colonial structures of feeling and imperial formations of wartime.

**Photo by author**


Mang Rodel and Gary Gabusan post-surf lesson (2019). Photo by author

**Photo by author**

View from second floor hotel balcony (or, in the words of Lourd de Veyra, “pasok Wagner”).
kitchen," the crew "lived on spaghetti mostly and, uh, salad." When Tavoularis states that he "didn't like the food," we might infer that he's speaking about local Filipino food but, most likely, is talking about the limited food options offered by the film's traveling chefs and kitchens. Along with the weather and food, the production crew figure the country's landscape as uncomfortable and inhospitable, a place where even imported canned goods became infested with local bugs—as "I opened up the can," Tavoularis recalls, "bugs came all crawling out of the can, all over my hand. How the bugs got in a can, canned goods, I don't know."

This depiction of the Philippine countryside as "a quagmire of heat, humidity, inhospitable terrain and strange, faceless natives," Gerald Sussman has argued, fits within the Hollywood tradition of "Third World settings, either as actual shooting sites or Hollywood movie lot facsimiles" that serve as "primitive or exotic backdrops for the heroic exploits of rugged American or European protagonists. Within this tradition, Americans become "victims" to the elements—of "an awkward, complex, or hazardous condition"—rather than agents of US imperial projects that "unself-consciously forced their entry, oblivious to the damaging results."10

After two years of editing and recovery from what the crew termed, "production hell," the Hollywood Vietnam War films won Coppola a Palme d'Or Award at the 1979 Cannes Film Festival, among other international awards, as well as two Academy Awards for Best Sound and Best Cinematography in 1980. It solidified Zoetrope Studios as a production company and Coppola as an auteur filmmaker vis a vis a "frontier mentality" that, as Jasmine Trice has written, narrates Coppola's cast and crew into the neocolonial power relations and visions of the war while simultaneously screening out memories of the film's making—those shared by the film's plot, casting, and production history. At the same time, Chong rightfully comments, the film's production "submerged(Coppola's) cast and crew into the neocolonial power relations of Southeast Asia that organized the Vietnam War as well."11 These relations are marked by "vampire capitalism," as the film and its makers drove to accumulate financial and cultural capital by extracting value from the labors of Filipino artists, local/everyday Filipinos, as well as Ifugao, Vietnamese, and Cambodian extras who worked on the film. Producer Gray Frederickson detailed it all over again when, in an oral history interview, he stated that local Filipinos benefited more from the production's presence than vice versa. The producer's comments are misinformed, to say the least, when we consider the uneven living and working conditions for American extras (housed in Baler Central Elementary School in relative comfort, paid $25-50/day) versus Vietnamese extras (housed in a large tent without toilet or washing facilities (paid $6.25/day) versus Filipino extras (paid $3/day). His comments ignore how the exploitation of Filipino manual and creative labor, military equipment, cultural translators, Ifugao tribal members and Southeast Asian refugees were the conditions of possibility for making their award-winning piece of prestige cinema.

For writer and critic Viet Nguyen, images from Vietnam War films such as Apocalypse Now "are evidence of not only Vietnamese suffering but also (the) power of the entire apparatus that delivers the images to us."12 He dubbs this apparatus the Vietnam War "memory industry" used to "produce representations of distant places" which later could be "exploited as a strategic resource." "Ready to capitalize on history by selling memory to consumers hooked on nostalgia," a memory industry apparatus into the Vietnam War attunes us to "how nations participate in this industry unequally." While the United States lost the actual war in Vietnam, it has won the war on the cultural front. Hollywood films about the US war in Vietnam, such as Apocalypse Now, function as "powerful screen memories," ones that center certain American narratives and visions of the war while simultaneously screening out Vietnamese, Filipinos, and other Southeast Asian memories of the war in the mainstream cultural imaginary. We might ask how the production of Apocalypse Now productions such as Eleanor Coppola's book Notes on the making of Apocalypse Now and co-directed documentary Hearts of Darkness—as well as critical and creative writing focused solely on the film's mistic realities (onscreen, narrative/plots, etc.)—such as Nguyen's own Nothing Ever Dies (2016)—also work to screen out memories of the film's making—those shared by the Filipino cast and crew, Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, and Ifugao tribal members.

"(Certain kinds of memories and memories are possible," Viet Nguyen notes, "because an industry of memory depends on, and creates, structures of feeling."13 Despite being invisible and immaterial, feelings "house us, shape us, let us see the world through its window." The white American structures of feeling associated with the Vietnam War—of the war's materiality, as well as its moral and ideological basis—allow the film's characters to deflect attention away from this violence, extrajudicial killings, and human rights violations. Beyond simply the national, however, this period must also be understood within the context of a global Cold War whereby Marcus's Marit War regime is one supported by the United States' ongoing neocolonial presence, Cold War policies, and special interests.14 By doing so, we can take a long view of 8th-century US imperial efforts and turn our attention to the long-standing effects of US war and colonialism within the archipelagic nation. The United States' bloody suppression of resistance by Filipinos, what has come to be known as the "Philippine-American War," Roland Tolentino writes, "became a precursor to the Vietnam War, the US using similar tactics and strategies in both cases."15 This first US war in Asia and its imperial aftermaths strengthened the country's military bases and presence in the archipelagic nation, an infrastructure that became active during its "hot" war in Vietnam (and the Southeast Asia region, more broadly). The United States and the Philippines' shared narrative of "fighting Communism" (and other terrorist elements) built up the perceived need for increased military/martial-military presence. Later, near the end of the war, their shared narrative of benevolence and humanitarianism, undercut by the long-standing US military presence and infrastructure built to support the United States' "war against communism" in the Philippines' countryside. The United States and the Philippines' "shared narrative of fighting Communism"—in turn built up the perception of needs for increased military/martial-military presence. Later, near the end of the war, their shared narrative of benevolence and humanitarianism, undercut by the long-standing US military presence and infrastructure built to support the United States' "war against communism" in the Philippines' countryside. Additionally, Marcos's Martial Law regime is one supported by the United States, as it was during the Vietnam War, it has won the war on the cultural front. Hollywood films about the US war in Vietnam, such as Apocalypse Now, function as "powerful screen memories," ones that center certain American narratives and visions of the war while simultaneously screening out Vietnamese, Filipinos, and other Southeast Asian memories of the war in the mainstream cultural imaginary. We might ask how the production of Apocalypse Now productions such as Eleanor Coppola's book Notes on the making of Apocalypse Now and co-directed documentary Hearts of Darkness—as well as critical and creative writing focused solely on the film's mistic realities (onscreen, narrative/plots, etc.)—such as Nguyen's own Nothing Ever Dies (2016)—also work to screen out memories of the film's making—those shared by the Filipino cast and crew, Vietnamese and Cambodian refugees, and Ifugao tribal members.

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especially Huey helicopters) and a local labor force with some level of English proficiency. After failing to secure shoot locations in Vietnam and Australia, various members of Coppola’s production crew turned to the Philippines as a potential site, knowing they could rely upon industry contacts made during previous film shoots and events. Casting and line producer Fred Ross knew, from working on three previous films made in the Philippines, that “you would always have problems and things you couldn’t count on there, and people would want money, and it was more unpredictable (as a base).” Yet, he also knew he could rely on invaluable in-country Philippine industry contacts. Trying and failing to enlist support from both the Department of National Defense in Washington and the Armed Forces of the Philippines HQ in Manila, including “military technical advisers, military escorts, aircraft (mostly Huey helicopters), ordinance (firearms, artillery, etc.), military vehicles and a radio communication system,” Frederickson was also able to tap into his transnational film industry network. Giovanny Volpi, whose family had founded the Venice Film Festival and was living in Manila in the 1970s, opened the door for Frederickson (and Coppola) to have dinner with President Marcos and his military aides at Malacatang Palace one night. This chance event led to a contract being signed on October 1, 1975, between the Philippines’ Department of National Defense (DND) and Coppola Cinema Seven. The president and the DND imposed no fee on the film production company for its use of military equipment, including 20 Huey helicopters, and military personnel. It only required that the helicopters be called back, at any time, in the government’s fight against its own country’s Communists and separatist rebels.

Philippine Martial Law set the conditions of possibility for Apocalypse Now’s production. The former president’s support of Coppola’s ‘anti-war’ Vietnam War film fell in line with his regime’s policies and platform of tourism development. Establishing the first-ever Philippine Department of Tourism in May 1973, Marcos aimed to project a “facade of normality” and to “further the image of the nation as a tourist paradise,” particularly “in the service of Apocalypse Now’s storyline, the Manila-based indie film continues to center its departure. Cornejo and Jimenez’s film has the potential to approach Apocalypse Now’s production history during a time of Cold War politics, Southeast Asian “hot wars,” and Marcosian policies and imaginaries directs our attention to the relationship between on-screen fictions and real-life truths. Within the magical time of Apocalypse Child, Baler becomes a place that has existed before the Hollywood film production’s arrival and that persists even after its departure. Cornejo and Jimenez’s film has the potential to help us expand our view of Baler as simply the backdrop or set location for a Hollywood film that “wasn’t just about Vietnam, it was Vietnam.” And yet, in a pivotal scene, early in the film, a large exhibit of Apocalypse Child archival materials—film production stills, photographs, and posters—set the scene for Chona’s recollections of the film’s effect on the town and of meeting the film’s director (and Ford’s supposed father). In the service of Apocalypse Child’s storyline, the Manila-based indie film continues to center Apocalypse Now and, by extension, Hollywood in this Philippine province’s history. Again, guided by Apocalypse Child’s representation of Baler, on that June 2019 trip, I take a tour of the province’s various historical locations with local tricycle driver Mang Ruel. We pass Reserva and Cemento Beach but also Ermita Hill, where Baler’s “founding families” survived an 18th-century tsunami, and the 700-year-old balear tree that tune us into the longer histories and otherworldliness of this place. The tour ride ends in the town’s plaza, at the Museo de Baler, where I intended to see for myself the Hollywood film’s archival remnants as featured in Cornejo and Jimenez’s indie film.

Chona and Serena walk through Apocalypse Now exhibit (Adaskinies, 2015)

In a similar fashion to how Jodi Kim has described the making sense of the film’s production, ones both poignant and at the margin). Instead, what emerges are different ways of ‘making sense’ of the film’s production, ones both poignant and unexpected. Approaching Apocalypse Now’s production history during a time of Cold War politics, Southeast Asian “hot wars,” and Marcosian policies and imaginaries directs our attention to Philippine Martial Law as ‘not only a historical period but also an epistemology and production of knowledge, and as such it exceeds and outlives its historical eventness.” In a similar fashion to how Jodi Kim has described the Cold War, Philippine Martial Law is, at once, “a structure of feeling, a knowledge project, a hermeneutics for interpreting developments.” As Apocalypse Now’s Philippine Martial Law production, we are reminded of the various participants involved in making the Marcosian imaginary and the various scales and registers on which it took place—not just the national but also local, translocal, settler-colonial, regional, and transnational. At the same time, by centering the stories of Che’s parents and others deemed “extra” to both cinematic and historical accounts, we, as scholars and artists, are instructed to re-think any preconceived narratives we might bring to our research and study.

IV. 1735, 1898, 1976: These three historical dates appear onscreen and open Apocalypse Child. Spoken by Fiona through voiceover, each of these dates indexes different historical moments—the precolonial, US colonial, and US Hollywood neocolonial—that have produced the “myths of Baler.” As myths, these stories toggle the line between historical and supernatural time, between fact and fiction. Throughout the film, we get a sense of Baler as a place and as one of the film’s main characters. Easily accessible by motorbike or foot, the ever-present beachfront anchors the film’s storylines. Along its coastlines, resorts and restaurants, like the one previously owned by Rich’s family, cater to tourists with American pancakes and breakfast specials. Barely paved dirt roads are pathways for motorized vehicles and pedestrians alike. Along these roads, Ford and Fiona’s “day trip” on his motorbike, visiting places such as the “old town underwater” and Reserva, areas secured by local families during tsunamis and other natural disasters. Walking through a forested area, Ford warns Fiona to “tabi tabi po,” paying respects to local dwende whose hill- homes one must not step on or otherwise be dealt their wrath through bad luck. Growing up in this island town, Ford shares childhood stories of abularyos (faith healers) and the mermaids he has encountered in the ocean. In the film, Baler is a place where the human and supernatural live side by side. Even Coppola’s Vietnam film becomes one of the many generators of folktales and myths for Baler, drawing our attention to the relationship between on-screen fictions and real-life truths. Within the magical time of Apocalypse Child, Baler becomes a place that has existed before the Hollywood film production’s arrival and that persists even after its departure. Cornejo and Jimenez’s film has the potential to help us expand our view of Baler as simply the backdrop or set location for a Hollywood film that “wasn’t just about Vietnam, it was Vietnam.” And yet, in a pivotal scene, early in the film, a large exhibit of Apocalypse Now archival materials—film production stills, photographs, and posters—set the scene for Chona’s recollections of the film’s effect on the town and of meeting the film’s director (and Ford’s supposed father). In the service of Apocalypse Child’s storyline, the Manila-based indie film continues to center Apocalypse Now and, by extension, Hollywood in this Philippine province’s history.

Acknowledgement

My thanks to Allan Panzalan Isaac for “gifting” me this formulation and his time and critical insights during the process of writing and revising this essay. Many thanks as well to Gary Gahbin, Courtney Garcia of the Coppola archives, Monster Jimenez and Mario Conrego, Marie Jamora and Ricardo Monteza for helping me make this writing possible. Salamat kaayo to Patrick Campos for the invitation to contribute which has prompted this first prompt foray back into my next book project, to the PELIKULA production team for their labor and support throughout this process.

Endnotes

1 Mang Rodel’s story is, of course, disputed by another local surfer, Kuya Edwin Namoro, who Cornejo and Jimenez interviewed during their research and preparation in filming Apocalypse Child. One of “the boys who learned how to surf on an Apocalypse New northbound,” Kuya Edwin’s version of the film’s production history and its effects upon the sleepy coastal town led the filmmakers to write on the film’s “Field Notes” blog (https://apocalypsechildfieldnotes.blogspot.com/)

“Here’s something real and true: There was no real surfing to speak of in Baler until the shoot of Apocalypse New.

Edwin told us that the fishermen get angry when he and his friends would surf well. They thought we were summoning the sea gods, and every net was blamed on Edwin and his friends, riding the waves, angering the merfolk. Eventually, Edwin and his friends became local legends, and tourism and surfing became the main source of income for Baler. Only then did the fishermen begrudgingly leave them alone.

So, if local legend is to be believed, Apocalypse New is the source of Philippine surf culture.

I cite this passage at length not as a means of arriving at a singular, unchangeable account to undermine Cornejo and Jimenez’s film’s emphasis on the “myths” of Baler—the stories that a place and its people might tell themselves, stories we might regard as historical but that are often unauthenticated, their power instead drawing from their ongoing emphasis on the “myths” of Baler—the stories that a place and its people might tell themselves, stories we might regard as historical but that are often unauthenticated, their power instead drawing from their ongoing

2 As this research is current and ongoing, I hope to interview and converse with the film’s Philippine-based production crew and staff who worked on Apocalypse New. If this is you, dear reader, or someone you know, please feel free to email me directly at cblancl giving you this information.

3 For more on “imperial formations,” see Ann Laura Stoler and Carolegrown.

4 For the book chapter version of this essay, I am also interested in examining the role of Baler (and its inhabitants) within the story. For the book chapter version of this essay, I am also interested in examining the movie and other cultural products that have emerged from this film’s shooting in Baler, and the ways in which these cultural products have been consumed and circulated in the Philippines and beyond.


In the early 1930s, Cecilia Montaire Navarro, a Filipina émigré who lived among farmworkers in Northern California was buried alive by the members of a Filipino religious-civic community as punishment for allegedly having an extramarital relationship with another Filipino. Newspapers all over the United States sponsored on the murder and, sometime later, Filipino manongs began scaring children with stories that she was haunting the area as a malignant spirit.

Celine Parreñas Shimizu, an accomplished Filipina American independent filmmaker and media scholar, revisits the horrific tragedy in *The Celine Archive* (2020). In the process, she devises a vital new paragon of decolonial feminist documentary filmmaking. For Walter Mignolo and Catherine Walsh, decoloniality entails not only a vigorous critique of Western modernity and the many contemporary guises of imperialism but also a complementary praxis that seeks to confront, transgress, and undo them.1 The *Celine Archive* works constantly on both elements of decoloniality, developing a bracing critique of the woman’s plight under empire while also reconfiguring documentary filmmaking practice in the service of progressive ends.

The critique that the film advances is multi-pronged. The first two prongs involve recuperating and representing marginalized figures who have been virtually erased from history. The third prong is an excoriation of the ideologies and practices that led to the oppression of women like Cecilia during their time. The cinematic vehicle for this three-pronged critique is similarly complex. First, the filmmaker draws on the resources of feminist documentary filmmaking, a subgenre of documentary which Julia Lesage defines in mainly political terms as “a cinematic genre congruent with...the [then] documentary...the spartan visual style of cinema verité and a soundtrack usually told in the subjects’ own words” and filled with “women's self-conscious, heightened, intellectual discussion of role and sexual politics.”2 Second, in reconstructing the gap-riddled story of Cecilia’s tragedy and gathering multiple perspectives about it, *The Celine Archive* utilizes a rich assemblage of audio-visual techniques associated with what Linda Williams and other scholars have been calling the “new documentary.”3 Williams attaches the term to the audio-visual dense and syncretic form of documentary that often embeds a self-conscious, postmodern questioning of truth claims.4

The Celine Archive
REMAKING THE DECOLONIAL FEMINIST DOCUMENTARY

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The Celine Archive
REMAKING THE DECOLONIAL FEMINIST DOCUMENTARY

A key essay from an earlier era of postcolonial feminist thought—Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?”—is especially useful in elucidating the film’s decolonial feminist retelling of Cecilia’s story. Spivak’s essay has figured previously in Parreñas Shimizu’s scholarship and its influence on *The Celine Archive* is almost palpable.5 Indeed, it is useful to imagine the film as an informal dialogue between the filmmaker and the essay, with the latter representing both Spivak’s work and the still-vital influence that postcolonial critique can play in the advancement of decolonial feminist documentary today. In *The Celine Archive* the filmmaker “buries the theory,” to to speak, making the film accessible to a wide viewership by steering clear of the academic jargon and semantic tenor found in many works of postcolonial critique. Still, she does not shy away from intellectual rigor, admirably resisting the temptation to adopt the popular models of true crime documentaries or sweeping historical nonfiction cinema that would have given *The Celine Archive* a wider path to public or network television at the expense of the multi-layered and deeply introspective approach the subject warrants.

Cecilia’s parents brought her and her siblings to Hawaii from the Philippines—newly acquired colonial possessions of the US at the time—when they immigrated to meet a demand for cheap agricultural labor. The family eventually moved to the West Coast and in her mid-teens Cecilia married a man who was many years her senior. During the Great Depression, as Filipinos and other foreign workers were being pushed out by heightened competition for employment and growing racial animus, life in the US became untenable for Cecilia and her family. She sent their children back to the Philippines to be cared for by relatives. Her husband, who was deteriorating from tuberculosis, followed later. Cecilia was wooed by another Filipino man or was perhaps involved in an amorous relationship with him—the film plainly states that there are competing theories of her supposed transgression, none more convincing than him—the film plainly states that there are competing theories of her supposed transgression, none more convincing than the others. Alone in Northern California, several hours away from her sisters in the Southern part of the state, Cecilia faced...
From the outset, Spivak’s essay foregrounds an honest accounting of the “historical role of the intellectual” that seeks to speak of or on behalf of the subaltern in some way. Many or are persons of color who, despite their marginalization vis-à-vis the relatively privileged class of “first world intellectual[s]." The film’s title—lest one forget—the documentary’s subject is her namesake—Cecilia was shown rummaging through files at the Filipino American National Historical Society’s (FANHS) branch in Stockton, California, an area once settled by many Filipinos and the location of Historic Manilatown in the northern part of the Golden State. This scene introduces one of the film’s principal narrative strands, what Antoinette Burton calls an “archive story,” a tale relating not only what brought the researcher to the archive and what they found there but also the story of the archive itself and how the knowledge located there is put to use. Parreñas Shimizu’s quest is a familiar one for historians of women and imperialism because their projects mainly involve plumbing the depths of the archive to retrieve what they describe as “arrested histories,” narratives “suspended from received historiography” due to the perceived insignificance of their subjects. The film’s title—lest one forget—foregrounds the central significance not only of Celine/Cecilia but the archive as well.

As it turns out, even an archive dedicated to Filipinx American history located close to where Cecilia died comes up short. It mostly holds newspaper clippings, most of which turn out to be comprised of dubious and sensationalist reportage. This archive is implicated in the onscreen presence of Alex Fabros, Jr. the co-author with his wife Katherine of a 1997 article in a Filipino American magazine that helped revive interest in Cecilia’s murder. He tells the story of how around two hundred students in his courses gathered documents about the incident, constituting an ad-hoc archive for the purpose of remedying US history’s virtual forgetting of Cecilia. That archive served as the basis for his pioneering account, a narrative that the film reveals to have been shaped by the gaps, errors, distortions, and tendentiousness of its journalistic sources.

At one point in the film, the “official” archive—that of the government—is invoked to bear witness to Cecilia’s life. Apparently, all it contributes is to say that she moved across California during a census year and that the cause of death listed on her death certificate was indeed unnatural as reported in the news. It should become apparent to viewers that Cecilia’s marginalization in her lifetime was reinforced by her lack of access to and participation in the spheres of socio-economic activities that would have allowed her life—rather than just her gruesome death—to leave more substantial impressions on the historical record. Late into the film, the crew follows members of the FANHS staff to storage lockers containing newly donated ephemera from the Caballeros de Dimas-Alang and the Maria Clara lodge, raising the possibility that it could supply further information about Cecilia. The camera shows that the collection had not even been processed and yet it is already evident from the objects in view—banners, manuals, ceremonial paraphernalia like resin masks—that the stories of an indigent immigrant woman who dwelled at the margins of the agricultural sector, even one who was killed by the members of the organization that owns the archive, are likely nonexistent as well.

Reflecting on her essay over two decades since its publication, Spivak relates a common misunderstanding of the rhetorical question that serves as its title. Spivak averts she did not mean that subalterns “couldn’t speak,” only they did not succeed in “being heard,” because there were simply “no institutions through which they could make whatever they want[e]d to say count.” The documentary’s tour of various archives dramatizes the notion that so much of Cecilia’s life story did indeed go unheard by the institutions that surrounded her.

The documentary makes the most of the few extant traces of Cecilia’s story that she had some hand in authoring or that belong to her family. These include a handful of old photographs showing Cecilia, some of her family members, and what appears to be the ramshackle dwelling made of scrap wood and metal where she or her kin may have lived at some point. Though she did not take those photos, the fact that she posed for some of them means that she played a role in shaping their content. As for the photos that were not of her, one might say that her family had kept them all these years partly on her behalf, to keep the memory of the world in which she lived from fading. However, instead of lingering on, reusing, and fetishizing photographs as Ken Burns does in his historical documentaries, The Celine Archive presents these objects as fragments in a very incomplete assemble, no different from the shards comprising the fractured narrative of Cecilia’s life. To use a different metaphor, one might say that in relation to the totality of the documentary material within the film, the photographs appear as tiny islands surrounded by far larger bodies of content produced by others, separated by time and space from the elusive historical subject.

The paucity of primary sources on Cecilia—which is to say, actuality footage, more archival pictures, and the like—is not without potential disadvantages because most viewers of nonfiction cinema have been trained to expect such elements of historical documentaries and to equate them with facticity. The Celine Archive addresses this potential credibility gap by summoning testimonies from archivists, historical witnesses (such as a descendant of members of the Maria Clara lodge), and leading academics. The film also bears the risk of transcendental truth found only in art by incorporating a poem about Cecilia from Jean Vengaya. Only Filipinos and Filipinas are enlisted in all these roles of witnessing, making clear not only that they are the story’s privileged tellers but also that the film, in keeping with a decolonial approach, rejects the prerogative of telling history that the white-dominated establishment has arrogated to itself for far too long.
Through the stylistic features of new documentary, the film creates dynamic interchanges involving competing perspectives, alternations between evidence and speculation, and shifts between strong emotions and professorial discourse. Departing from the stylistic conservativeness of many historical documentaries, the film makes ample use of the lush audiovisual style, creative mise-en-scène, computer graphics, episodic structure, multiple narrators, and the contrived use of B-roll footage associated with new documentaries such as Errol Morris’s 1988 procedural The Thin Blue Line (though notably without the dramatic re-enactments).

To cite some examples, the film uses computer graphics to reproduce the sensational titles of newspaper articles about Cecilia’s death along with the names of the publications and the dates they appeared. The headlines and journalistic accounts are replete with racist portrayals of Filipino Americans, playing on colonialist tropes of native savagery and memorably describing Cecilia’s extrajudicial killing as an act of “jungle justice.” Pareho Shimizu juxtaposes the images with interviews that use critical race theory, postcolonial critique, and feminist thought to illuminate the roles that yellow journalism and “yellow peril” (anti-Asian) discourse played in Cecilia’s ordeal. The film offers these words as a damning archive that paradoxically captured some of the truth of Cecilia’s oppression while also peddling lies and half-truths in the service of racism. The documentary trains the viewer to read these words against the grain, cuing viewers to apply the same critical procedure for every subsequent instance in which the film cuts between newscaster headlines and other (more reliable) documentary material. Here the decolonial feminist documentary imprints what might be described as a decolonial hermeneutics of suspicion within mise-en-scène and editing.

In the midst of this polyvocal discussion and stylistic richness, the film complices not only the received narrative of Cecilia’s tragedy but also the relationship between the author and the subaltern woman. The film’s interviewees introduce several unexpected twists, including the suggestion that Cecilia’s assailants pounced on her not only for her ostensible infidelity to her husband but because she previously stood up for a white woman who was abused by a Filipino man. The progressive complicity of the narrative does not, however, build up to an impression of the filmmaker (and, by extension, the viewer) mastering the facts. Rather, the documentary continues to thematize the relative emptiness of the archive while persisting as best as it can in recovering Cecilia’s story both from sources that are shown as transparently unreliable (such as the yellow journalism, defamatory gossip, and popular myths surrounding the tragedy). In the recording, the sisters draw on memories of a lifetime as well as their final meeting with Cecilia two weeks before her killing. By showing Cecilia’s descendants listening to the tape with Washington Film expressly depicting the recording as yet another object that, like the documentary itself, is several times removed from history and profoundly impacted by the forces of archival decay: Cordova’s revelation about the motivation behind the sisters’ account—that is, to debunk falsehoods—has the unanticipated effect of reinforcing the idea that their narrative, though offered earnestly, is not entirely unimpeachable.

It is worth noting that the spareness of the filming and editing of this sequence gives it emphasis by separating it from the audio-visual layered portions of the film. Williams observes similar passages in other new documentaries, when “privileged moments of [cinema] verité” allow viewers to “see the power of the past not simply by dramatizing its remaking it...but finally by finding its traces, in repetitions and resistances, in the present.” Without denying the notion that the truth about a traumatic past (such as Cecilia’s) is “with what voice-consciousness can the subaltern speak?”20 The ultimate answer must be that if the subject in question was truly subaltern then, despite the decolonial feminist documentarist’s best efforts and intentions, viewers cannot truly access that originary voice-consciousness. In trying to channel the subaltern’s voice, the documentary filmmaker would risk committing the folly Spivak has described as that of “the first-world intellectual masquarding as the absent nonrepresente who lets the oppressed speak for themselves.”21 Nevertheless, even as Spivak identifies the pitfalls of the well-intentioned “politics of the oppressed,” she acknowledges the desire to engage in what she calls “counterhegemonic ideological production” in response to the historical silencing of the subalterns.

Jacques Derrida, who influenced Spivak and whose influence in the Anglo-American world Spivak expanded through her pioneering, widely used translation of his monograph Of Grammatology, writes in Archive Fever: A Series of [= of] an archival drive that, in contrast with the mnemonic function of the archival, he associates with “the violence of forgetting...and superrepression (suppression and repression).”23 If archival forces have largely seized upon Cecilia’s existence, what (desperate) measures can the decolonial feminist documentary take to recuperate even the faintest echoes of the subaltern’s effaced voice-consciousness? In The Celine Archive, even the faintest echoes of Cecilia’s voice-consciousness are shown to be ultimately inaccessible. The closest that the documentary gets to a witness’ testimony are the voices of Cecilia’s relatives. Their voices are summoned forth in a profoundly moving segment of the documentary at the Seattle area branch of FANHS as Dr. Dorothy Cordova, who with her late husband Fred were the pioneering scholars and archivists of the Filipino American experience, plays for Cecilia’s daughter Lucia and granddaughter Tootsie surviving fragments of an interview Fred recorded with Cecilia’s sisters several decades ago. As Cordova movingly tells it, the two women, then already in their 80s, traveled to Washington Film expressly to depict the recording as yet another object that, like the documentary itself, is several times removed from history and profoundly impacted by the forces of archival decay: Cordova’s revelation about the motivation behind the sisters’ account—that is, to debunk falsehoods—has the unanticipated effect of reinforcing the idea that their narrative, though offered earnestly, is not entirely unimpeachable.

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Early in the documentary, the filmmaker, her sister (fellow academic) Rhace Parratés, Fabros the author of the pioneering article, and Cecilia’s grandson Henie Navarro make their way to a grassy area somewhere in Jersey Island in Northern California. After traveling by water and along desolate paths they gleily reach a spot where, by Fabros’s estimation, Cecilia was buried alive. Though it is never verbalized and even in the absence of technology that could have confirmed that a burial and disinterment had indeed happened there, the film presents the spot as another kind of archive relevant to Cecilia’s story. The location is not only “archival” because it is potentially the repository of human remains—as artifacts but also because, to repurpose Anne Cvetkovich’s evocative phrase, it comprises an “archive of feelings.”24 For the filmmaker and other present-day mourners on this site, the gaze grantsfasta testimony to the reality of the crime while also activating such sentiments as rage, grief, and melancholia among those who contemplate its significance. Ann Laura Stoler’s notion of archives as encompassing “collages of memory” rather than just repositories of documents is germane here as well, for it captures how the presumed burial site functions as an archive not just of emotions but remembering (both real and prosthetic).25 In this scene, the filmmaker returns to utilizing the sparsest means—the unimpeachable evidence of a re-exhumation test that the documentary suggests are very real contestations between hard evidence and an equally potent though oft-devalued subjective truth, between painful remembrance and a racist and chauvinist society’s practiced forgetting.

Much later in the film, the motif of burial site—as archive returns as Cecilia’s grandson takes the filmmaker to the spot where he has placed a headstone for Cecilia in what used to be the site of unmarked graves. Henie relates that some time ago, decades after the murder, his mother helped him find the spot where she believed Cecilia’s remains were reinterred. As in the scene at the presumed murder site, the geography is shaly and the repository in question may well contain someone else’s remains.

It is useful to recall that Spivak’s essay also ruminates on the meanings assigned to the bodies of fallen women, specifically women subjected to the practice of widow sacrifice in India and, closer to Spivak’s experiences, the corpse of her grandmother’s sister, a woman who was part of a group fighting for India’s independence in the 1920s. The latter woman took up her own life because she was convinced that political assassination was assigned to commit. She timed her suicide to occur during her menstruation so that no one could say that she was driven to suicide by a pregnancy from illicit sexual relations.26 In the face of the rhetorical question serving as the title of her essay and in reference to the deceased women she invokes, Spivak clarifies that subalterns did resist their silencing by the forces of patriarchy, imperialism, and class politics, among others. Indeed, so fervent was this determination to be heard against the odds that, as Spivak puts it, the relationship between the submissive and the subject was to “make her body speak, even unto death.”27 As the documentary has been helping us understand all along through its narrative of scant archives and an epistemology that acknowledges the limits of decolonial endeavors, and as the film is brought to a close with a final instantiation of an archive, the very uncertainty of Cecilia’s body’s location is also yet another damning indicator of her programmed erasure as a subaltern woman. With no immediate prospects for DNA analysis, she remains a subject who would likely be deemed too insignificant by the authorities to spend time on. Spivak writes: “If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.”28 Perhaps if Cecilia was a community or labor leader she would be considered worthy of help from forensic anthropologists. On the flipside, a negative or inconclusive DNA test might risk unmasking Cecilia from a space where she has been emplaced and is lovingly remembered by family. Just as the subaltern woman is a “consciousness we cannot grasp,” the material traces
of her body remain profoundly elusive.32

Mignolo and Walsh remind us that “enacting resurgences and re-existence of devalued and demonized praxis of living” is another “fundamental task of decoloniality.”33 They define “resurgence” as “renewal, restoration, revival or parallel by showing the funeral attendees doing push-ups and

dance steps for Cecilia. For Mignolo and Walsh, resurgence and re-existence are fitting responses to the “naturalization of death” that coloniality engenders.”34 In the film, the breath of life in yoga, dancing, and everyday existence functions as a simple but powerful metaphor for the modes of thriving associated with decolonial resurgence and re-existence. Apart from anchoring life, the mindful breathing, aerobic exercise, and silliness comprise modes of what Paul Gilroy calls a park.

As the film winds down, it returns to footage of Celine doing yoga and then, in a post-title sequence, draws a parallel by showing the funeral attendees doing push-ups and dance steps for Cecilia. For Mignolo and Walsh, resurgence and re-existence are fitting responses to the “naturalization of death” that coloniality engenders.”34 In the film, the breath of life in yoga, dancing, and everyday existence functions as a simple but powerful metaphor for the modes of thriving associated with decolonial resurgence and re-existence. Apart from anchoring life, the mindful breathing, aerobic exercise, and silliness comprise modes of what Paul Gilroy calls a park.

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Gaslighting

In one of the most poignant scenes in Isabel Sandoval’s *Lingua Franca* (2019), the audience watches the protagonist, Olivia (Sandoval), absentmindedly watching the late-night news about former US President Donald Trump. With the camera closing in on her harangued face, the viewers can only hear Trump’s voice booming from the screen, dispersing his staple anti-immigration rhetoric and inflaming the crowd of racist Americans attending his political rallies. The voice and the speech have become familiar throughout the world, but especially for Olivia. She is particularly vulnerable to the kind of violence that these words engender in her everyday life. Olivia, after all, is an undocumented immigrant in New York, making her the target of such hate speech.

This scene also illustrates another form of violence because a few moments later, Olivia’s lover, Alex (Eamon Farren), quietly sits beside her on the couch. The audience has just witnessed her wander around the streets of her neighborhood. She was cowering in fear because of possible surveillance and capture by the Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agents. She has also just lost her passport, the only document that, while still viciously deadnaming her, remains to be her only ticket to gain citizenship in the country. Unbeknownst to her—yet something the audience already knows—it was the man beside her who hid her passport out of gay panic from the discovery of Olivia’s transness. When Olivia tells him that her passport is missing, Alex creates an elaborate ruse about a house break-in and that the thieves may have stolen her passport. Alex sits with Olivia on the sofa, but he cannot seem to comfort her even as he lingers at the edge of the frame. The audience sees Olivia’s face, swallowed in the darkness and only visible in the faint glow of the TV’s blue light, simmering in palpable fear, exhaustion, and helplessness.

This particular sequence signals two levels of gaslighting: the structural violence of undocumentedness that renders the life of illegal immigrants like Olivia vulnerable and disposable, and the more intimate violence perpetrated by a straight, cisgender lover that disavows her trans identity in the hopes of pursuing the fantasy of a heteropatriarchal American dream. Sandoval’s camerawork here, however, makes this scene particularly powerful because our gaze as a viewer is being veered away from the violent image of Trump-era politics. The camera instead directs our attention to the effects of this disembodied hate speech on the body of an undocumented immigrant. This scene also refuses the false comforts of sentimentality as the audience is now fully aware, witnessing how insidious this fantasy of heteronormative romance is to a victimized, traumatized body of a trans woman.

Here, the cinematic politics of trans visibility counters both the structural surveillance and intimate violence that intensify the intersecting precarities of an undocumented transgender woman. *Lingua Franca* attempts to cultivate this kind of gaze by reversing what is framed on the screen and where the film points our focus. The film demands its audience to feel what Olivia is feeling and to inhabit the space of the disavowed to compel us to imagine what it must have felt to be gaslighted yet still push on to survive and feel at home despite being gaslit. The film portrays the emotional complexity of an undocumented immigrant transgender woman in America to think through what it might mean for her abject body to belong in a supposedly multicultural but, in fact, increasingly hostile society. As Sandoval asserts in a *Variety* interview, her film “invites the audience to look beyond the markers of Olivia” and “put themselves in her shoes.” Through this trans cinematic gaze, the film makes its audience reflect on notions of cosmopolitanism by cultivating a more capacious way of looking at and understanding what our society sees as queer, transgressive, and utterly Other or stranger, a gaze capable of empathizing with and embracing difference and marginality.

This paper explores the intersections of transgender migration, alternative citizenship, and cosmopolitanism through the lens of trans theory. By analyzing Isabel Sandoval’s *Lingua Franca*, this article first discusses the portrayal of the vulnerabilities of undocumented and trans-immigrant lives in
Trump-era America. From there, I examine how Olivia carves her way out of her struggles to disrupt and challenge notions of cosmopolitanism that are bound not just by class and racial divides but also by dominant hetero- and cisnormative discourses on citizenship and belonging. My analysis deploys Susan Stryker, Paisley Currah, and Lisa Jean Moon’s notion of trans-ing as “a practice that assembles gender into contingent structures of association with other attributes of bodily being, and that allows for their reassembly. Trans-ing can function as a disciplinary tool, an escape vector, a line of flight, or pathway toward liberation.” In my reading of the film, I argue that Sandoval trans-erizes cosmopolitanism by rethinking notions of sexual and intimate citizenship along the lines of ethics of care that expands what belonging in the world might mean from the perspective of those in the fringes of intersecting hierarchies of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

The Trans in Transnational

Isabel Sandoval’s body of work attests to the many ways she looks into women and transwomen’s struggles amid the turbulent political regimes in both her origin country, the Philippines, and her host country, America. Her films have been featured in local and international film festivals, where she gained recognition and accolades as a filmmaker. Her first two films, Sottoitva (2011) and Aparisyon (2012), both set in the Philippines, are featured in the collection of the Criterion Channel, an independent streaming service under the banner of World Cinema. Her third full feature, Lingua Franca, has been recently acquired by Array, a distribution company run by the renowned American filmmaker Ava DuVernay, and is also streaming on Netflix.

A look into Sandoval’s body of work as a trans auteur reveals how she rethinks the various stakes of sexual and intimate citizenship of women and transwomen in both national and transnational settings. Her first film, Sottoitva (2011), which she wrote, directed, and acted on, portrays the life of a transwoman sex worker who comes home to her province to find a new lease on life, only to be embroiled in her hometown’s violent local politics. Set in Cebu, where Sandoval originally hails from, the political thriller centers on how the protagonist’s quiet life mothering a child of a friend who works overseas and is overturned after she becomes entangled with the political thriller centers on how the protagonist’s quiet life mothering a child of a friend who works overseas and is overturned after she becomes entangled with the political thriller centers on how the protagonist’s quiet life mothering a child of a friend who works overseas and is overturned after she becomes entangled with her political thriller centers on how the protagonist’s quiet life mothering a child of a friend who works overseas and is overturned after she becomes entangled with the political thriller centers on how the protagonist’s quiet life mothering a child of a friend who works overseas and is overturned after she becomes entangled with the political thriller centers on how the protagonist’s quiet life mothering a child of a friend who works overseas and is overturned after she becomes entangled with. Her vulnerability as an immigrant transwoman comes from the fact that she is still undocumented, even though she has been working in New York as a caregiver for several years. The 10-minute short film performs a trans-ing of Carlos Bulosan’s America in the Heart by portraying an erotic tale of a woman, a Filipino farmhand during the Great Depression, as she playfully confesses her most intimate thoughts to her lover. In this erotic short film, the woman reveals, through sensuous and almost poetic confessionary, the various sexual fantasies she imagines doing with her white American boyfriend to mark their intimate romance, which would be deemed subversive during a time when interstitial relationships are forbidden in California. The short film re-envision the history of racial violence to bring forth alternative futures: where a woman of color dreams of love set free from boundaries of class, race, gender, and sexuality as she and her lover are transported from the confession box to memories and visions of multiple women across time and space, and back to the earth that both of them are tilling, lying on the ground while looking at the open-ended skies glittered by Fourth of July fireworks.

In many ways, both of these works converge with Lingua Franca, a film about Olivia, an undocumented transwoman who works as a caregiver for an aging Russian-Jewish woman named Olga (Lynn Cohen). Set in Brighton, New York, the film shows the plight of Olivia, who is working on securing a green card by paying to marry a white American man, Matthew (Leif Steinert), to legalize her stay in the US. As her prospects for an arranged marriage with her fake fiancé fall apart, she then becomes close to Olga’s impulsive grandson, Alex, who just came out of rehab and is trying to turn a new leaf. Their intimacy then develops into romance, even though Alex does not yet know that she is a transwoman. Alex’s discovery of her transness compels him to hide her passport, only to decide later on to continue the relationship and promise Olivia marriage and a life of domestic bliss. Olivia will then have to decide if the life that Alex offers is the kind of life that she wants for herself and whether the fantasy of white picker that has come true is the kind of society and belonging that she aspires to and works for in America.

Just like her other films, Lingua Franca rechoes the things that Sandoval has been ruminating on regarding the role of sexuality and her transness in thinking about ideas of belonging. Even though the film carries political overtones of xenophobia and transphobia in Trump America, “this is not filmmaking for a megaphone.” Instead, the filmmaker chose to quietly enter into and dwell within the complex emotional life of Olivia as she navigates the dangers and limited choices she has as an immigrant transwoman. While the protagonist is very much structurally excluded, she actively rewrites her own story by forging intimate bonds and creating possible lifeworlds through her body and labor. This “drama of interiority” ultimately portrays the many ways sexuality and intimacy redraw the larger theme of belonging in the world through alternative visions and practices of citizenship.

Olivia, a cinematic trans heroine, and Sandoval, a trans auteur, both represent what trans scholars and activists in the Philippines call transPinays. These transPinays are transnational as these diasporic subjects were able to cross geographic borders in as much as they have already crossed gender and sexual identities. The trans in transPinay and transnational here becomes a productive conceptual prefix that destabilizes the boundedness of gender and nationality. As Stryker, Currah, and Moore note, the “trans” can be deployed to “delimit and contain the relationship of ‘trans-’ conceptual operations to ‘-gender’ statuses and practices in a way” that “links the questions of space and movement that the term implies to other critical crossings of categorical territories.”

Following this provocation of rethinking the trans in transnationalism, I read Lingua Franca’s attempts to represent the transnationalism of transPinays, particularly of Sandoval as a trans immigrant auteur and Olivia as an undocumented trans immigrant, and articulate how their transness intertwines with the film’s broader context. This film problematizes the ways sexual citizenship enlarges the practice of cosmopolitanism by portraying how trans and undocumented immigrants navigate and challenge the exclusionary policies of mainstream models of citizenship that structure their precarities in America. I then study Olivia’s enactments of intimate citizenship by examining the affective relationships she forges through her labor, her biological and non-biological families and within her diasporic trans community. Her work as a breadwinner to her mother back in her country, as a caregiver to her aging employer, as a sister to her fellow transPinays in New York, and even further to Alex highlights the ways of intimate citizenship that embraces more inclusive modes of hospitality and democracy to transform ideas on belonging and cosmopolitanism.

Undocumented and Unwelcomed

Lingua Franca challenges what Aten Aizura claims as America’s posturing of “transgender exceptionalism,” which describes how the empire projects itself to be a progressive multicultural and cosmopolitan superpower that serves as “a beacon of liberal freedom where sexual and gender minorities can find better acceptance than in other parts of the world.” Transgender exceptionalism even happens whenever the US state instrumentalizes its acceptance and welcome of diasporic trans bodies, particularly of trans asylum seekers/refugees, to buff up the “nationalist logic in which the nation fantasizes its own superiority, tolerance, and exceptionality in relation to transnational others.” However, it is also important to note that both transPinays are transnational as these diasporic subjects were able to cross geographic borders in as much as they have already crossed gender and sexual identities. The trans in transPinay and transnational here becomes a productive conceptual prefix that destabilizes the boundedness of gender and nationality. As Stryker, Currah, and Moore note, the “trans” can be deployed to “delimit and contain the relationship of ‘trans-’ conceptual operations to ‘-gender’ statuses and practices in a way” that “links the questions of space and movement that the term implies to other critical crossings of categorical territories.”

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Olivea, however, is proof that the vulnerability of trans diasporic subjects persists even if they have settled in the US. Her vulnerability as an immigrant transwoman comes from the fact that she is still undocumented, even though she has been working in New York as a caregiver for several years. The film shows, for example, Olivia walking on the empty streets of Brighton, constantly looking over her shoulder even though no one is following her. The camera here acts like a stalker, trailing and following Olivia as the police sirens blast in the background.
The dread from her illegality is also disruptive, interrupting the protagonist's ephemeral moments of comfort and safety. Her paranoia can be seen in a sequence when Olivia is enjoying the company of Alex as they stroll around the little Filipino enclave near their area, happily sharing with her ward's son her culture and even her routines in the city. This brief interlude of joy is immediately broken off as Olivia suddenly becomes paralyzed with shock as she witnesses a Filipino publicly arrested by ICE agents.

Sandoval further demonstrates how pervasive Olivia's anxiety and fear from surveillance and capture is, to the extent that the paranoia follows her even in her most mundane and everyday moments in the city. In one of the film's most innocuous sequences, Olivia is shown walking around her neighborhood in broad daylight for her daily errands as Trump's voice trumpeting his racist immigration policies can be heard non-diegetically in the background. The scene ends with Olivia inside a café, talking over the phone to her fake fiancé, telling him that their green card marriage will not push through.

To think of these experiences as precarity structured by Olivia's undocumented and not her transness would be to ignore the connections to heteronormativity, sexuality, and immigration. As Eithne Luibhéid and Karma Chávez claim, “vulnerability does not affect all migrants equally and immigration. As Eithne Luibhéid and Karma Chávez by Olivia's undocumentation and not her transness would be heard non-diegetically in the background. The scene ends with Olivia inside a café, talking over the phone to her fake fiancé, telling him that their green card marriage will not push through.

Beyond the legal violence, what Sandoval explores in these scenes is the emotional and psychological pitfalls of deadnaming, legitimized by immigration structures of both the country of their origin and their country of settlement. As Mikee Inton-Campbell observes: “this absence of a gender recognition law in the Philippines keeps trans people in a state of constant precarity—because our documents do not match our gender expression, our identities are questioned every time we deal with institutions that require legal documents. Dysphoria can also be triggered or exacerbated in trans people who suffer from this mental condition.”

Olivia's struggles expose how the US government fails immigrant transwomen like her based on the state's rejection of their claims for sexual citizenship. It reveals the exclusionary conditions that render trans lives exploitable and disposable based on the repudiation of her sexual rights that make an impact on her status and her well-being abroad. This refusal to accept their sexual citizenship comes from how undocumented transwomen like Olivia suffers from state processes that, according to Eithne Luibhéid, “racializes and (hetero)gender them in ways that condition their possibilities within labor markets, the welfare state, and citizenship norms.” Perhaps, what is cruel in the particular kind of precarity that Olivia experiences is not absolute exclusion, as she can still find work and stay in New York despite being undocumented, but the fact that she has to face the everyday threat of being caught by immigration police. As a crucial part of the mechanisms of migrant and trans illegalities, the US state deploys the prospect of detention and deportation to ensure that transwomen like Olivia become more vulnerable and exploitable as laboring bodies.

Even though they are unable to acquire or retain legal papers, they are still not deported because of the state's differential inclusion, which "describes how inclusion in a sphere, society, institution, or institution can involve various degrees of subordination, rule, discrimination, racism, disenfranchisement, exploitation and segmentation." Olivia is still differentially included as she can access work and gain income, albeit informally. However, being marked as deportable heightens her precarity as her body becomes flexible to the discriminatory labor market even as she has to face the risks and dangers of capture and expulsion. Despite her deportability, Olivia uses the narrow cracks in the system not just to survive but push open the very little space afforded to her. Although the state denies her sexual citizenship, she can practice an intimate form of citizenship through the relationships she builds in her bid to belong in the host society.

From Passing to Belonging

In many scenes in the film, Olivia's performance of finding belonging is through walking: walking nonchalantly, as if she is at home in the place she is inhabiting and passing through. In this everyday ritual, she tries to perform as a citizen, as somebody who belongs on the grounds and streets that she walks on so that she will not stand out and remain publicly undetectable to state surveillance that might mark her as a foreigner, an undocumented alien. In short, she tries to pass as a citizen.

Lingua Franca does not precisely show and problematize the politics of gendered passing in Olivia's struggle as a transwoman. As the filmmaker says, Olivia depicts “a very particular kind of transness” because she does not struggle to prove her womanhood: “She just is.” However, her performance of transfemininity is connected to her performance to pass as a citizen. In problematizing passing as modes of feeling at home both in one's body and in one's mobility and diaspora, Nael Bhanji observes that “in many trans communities, the pressure to pass, to blend into the mainstream, can be intense. The push from pre-pto post-op, from transitioning to transitioning, from transgressive to transfixed, results in the transcend forever rushing onwards to find the space beyond 'the promise of home on the other side' and the possibility of being at home in one's skin.”

The quest to feel at home in claiming one's own body and place connects the struggles of an undocumented trans woman to finding belonging amid the structural forces of geographical and gendered borders that both police “spaces where those who do not ‘belong’ are separated from those who do.”

In Olivia's attempt to pass as a citizen, she tries to go through the routines of mainstream citizenship rites, particularly in marrying Matthew to secure a green card. The film shows the protagonist's attempts to complete the installments to her fiancé for their paid arrangement, on top of remitting most of her salary to her mother back home.

This sequence signals the heroine's awareness of her performance of passing as a citizen. She subscribes while still consciously satirizing the rhetoric and rites of passage afforded by a hetero- and cisnormative state. She reiterates but also parodies the pronouncements of a heteropatriarchal state that legitimizes marriage rituals even as she knows that she has to pay for and play with the ritual to gain access to citizenship. This awareness of marriage as a performance of citizen-passing runs through the film, showing how Olivia is conscious of how fragile this route to citizenship is, no matter how invested she is in this gateway to belonging. In another scene, Olivia sits alone in a café, listening to Matthew backing out from their arranged marriage over the phone. With her plans in disarray,
she meets with Trixie, and their conversation reveals that this is the protagonist’s second failed green card marriage. Olivia responds with “always a bridesmaid,” poking fun at her own situation while also revealing how conscious she is about the limits of her act to pass as a citizen through green card marriage.

If fake marriage is untenable, then perhaps a promise of an authentic one, buoyed by genuine feelings of love, might be just the thing for her. Just as the protagonist’s green card marriage plan fails, Olivia becomes close to Alex, her elder ward’s prodigal grandson, who is on his way to embark on a new life, fresh and hopeful. She tries to teach him how to take care of Olga, which leads to the two sleeping together. At the height of their romance, however, Alex discovers Olivia’s transness after his friend sees her passport bearing her past male identity. Confused and fearing that he must confront Olivia, Alex hides her passport as she tries to teach him how to take care of Olga, which leads to the limits of her act to pass as a citizen through green card marriage.

Bargaining his promise of a happy-ever-after for Olivia’s forgiveness, telling her none of what he did matters if she agrees to marry him. But Olivia seems to have already made peace with her choice. The camera frames this quiet confrontation through a play of perspectives through the motel mirrors. The scene is framed like a triptych, with the folding mirror framing the couple as if they are looking in different directions in the room, even if they are, in fact, just looking at each other. Olivia stares at her crying lover blankly, expressing her refusal to fall into Alex’s promises through a withdrawn look on her face.

Olivia’s decision attests to the protagonist’s understanding of her own body and her own claims to belonging. She turns down a prospect of citizenship that never really allows her to be at home in her own space and her own skin. As Christian Benitez observes, “what seems to be a plain rejection might as well be construed as a devoted confession: that for Olivia, the body—her body—cannot be left to owe to anyone; or that perhaps, her desires resist having anything to do with the duress inflicted by institutions, as well as their vocabularies.” She renounces the heterosexual, middle-class fantasy that, for her, only passes for; but never truly means, belonging. In this way, Olivia enacts her version of intimate citizenship, with this refusal as a sign of agency, her “right to choose what to do with her life, body, identity, feelings, and relationships.”

Transgressive intimacies

If the promise of truly belongling in America is not in the realm of romance with a straight man, Olivia finds this in the many intimacies and emotional bonds she forges with other women in her life. Here, it is essential to examine the emotional relationships that the protagonist creates, sustains, and nurtures to understand how she stakes her claim to her place in the world through her body and labor of care.

Right at the film’s start, the audience is introduced to the protagonist’s role as somebody who dispenses care for two women: her mother back home and Olga, her ward in Brighton. The film opens with Olivia waking to a phone call in the wee hours of the night. As she moves around her dark bedroom talking to her mother back in the Philippines, the camera pans outside the streets, showing the closed train station and empty streets, as the audience listens to Olivia’s exhausted voice listening to her mother’s stories about their hometown in Cebu and her requests for the next remittance to come through earlier. This sequence is quickly followed by the scene the next morning, depicting a lost and confused aging woman inside a narrow kitchen, calling for a woman because she feels like she is in a stranger’s house. On the other end of the phone call, Olivia talks to Olga and guides her out of her disorientation.

Both of these scenes portray Olivia navigating and connecting two realms of caregiving: one back home as a breadwinner to her mother and the other in Brighton as a caregiver to her geriatric ward. In dominant scholarship about transnational care work, Olivia is positioned as a central figure in the global care chain, where women from the Third World migrate to take on care work for First World women while other women in the Third World take care of their left-behind families. However, framing this transnational flow of care work only as a globalized chain of resources, capital, and labor between women of Global North and South only “essentializes care work as solely a feminized realm,” which leads to “the reproduction of particular notions of the masculine family and degraded nation-state.” While normative notions of gender and sexuality that produce depictions of Filipina migrant women as displaced caretakers and mothering workers nearly fits within the analytics of unequal distribution in the transnational flow of care labor, they also tend to uphold problematic ideas of maternal sacrifice for their home and homeland based on heteronormativity and biological determinism. As Martin Manalansan points out, such understanding of the labor of care constrained within the heteronormative continuity from “the naturalized and normalized conceptions of motherhood, domesticity, child care, and reproduction” back home to the transnational care work they render abroad usually excludes the struggles and narratives of diasporic queer and trans bodies involved in this line of work.

Beyond challenging the heterosexual ideologies that sustain care work, it is also crucial to expand the idea of the value of the labor of care beyond the capitalist order of uneven flow of resources and capital in the global care chain. Feminist scholars of ethics of care have broadened the notion of care beyond its transnational organization not only as privatized labor within the global migration regimes but also as an essential resource for interdependence and altruism that human societies need to cultivate. While critiquing the commodification of care and its denigration as a form of informal or supplementary labor, many of ethnographic studies propose care as a basis for “ethical and political behavior that addresses inequalities” by recognizing and cultivating people’s need to render and receive care “beyond the realm of their home and their intimate others.” In this sense, care, whether paid labor or unpaid obligation, is conceptualized not only as essential labor of social reproduction but also as an ethical responsibility for others.

These queer and feminist interventions on the labor and ethics of care are central in understanding how Olivia performs transgressive intimacies in her care work as her practice of intimate citizenship. How does a transwoman reconfigure these hetero- and cisnormative notions of labor of care? Has Olivia in Love, Panama, trans-care? Here, it is crucial to analyze how Olivia challenges the hetero- and cisnormativity attached to the labor of care she dispenses both to her mother back home and to Olga in her newfound home.

The film establishes the closeness of the caregiver and her ward, to the point that Olga treats Olivia like her own granddaughter. The aging woman depends on her caregiver for everything, and it is, in fact, Olivia who teaches Alex how to take care of her grandmother. In many ways, Olivia is more like a family to Olga than her own family. One passing scene shows a screen split into two, framed by the apartment’s walls and open doors, with Olga’s grandchildren on the right, silently looking over their phones while Olivia diligently attends to their grandmother’s needs in Olga’s room.

It is necessary to understand that the exchange of care and attention between the caregiver and her elderly ward is never just one-way. Olivia’s deep connection to Olga allows

Dream home: In a motel room, Alex shares with Olivia, the kind of family he envisioned for them
with Olga illustrates how family can be unmoored away from home and how important her fellow diasporic trans sisters are to her. The protagonist assures her mother that she is okay before dawn, as Olivia’s voicemail plays in the background, telling her mother not to worry as she has already found a new job and a new way of securing a green card. In her native tongue, the protagonist assures her mother that she is okay before punctuating it with a sense of grounded optimism for the future: “We’ll make it eventually.” Olivia’s closing line is an opening up to the possibility of finally finding her place in this city, as her words echo in its open roads and empty train stations. She invokes here the promise of “making it,” a sense of belonging that depends on her own making, just as she has been doing for the past years despite her very precarious circumstances. This belonging is sustained by a sense of community shaped by a transgressive practice of care and intimacy, with the labor of care coming from the support of the people she genuinely cares for and who have reciprocated her care and attention.

Through Olivia, the film shows the transformative figure of a trans diasporic figure who “index[es] a paradoxical positionality that is neither here nor there but in-between and in-process” while also “epitomizing a kind of situated cosmopolitanism.”39 By looking at the complexities of Olivia’s struggles and her agency, the film showcases how an undocumented trans woman of color deconstructs mainstream ideas of citizenship and enacts new ways of imagining belonging unhinged from heteronormative ideas of the labor of care, family, and citizenship. Through intimate citizenship, Olivia could find family and practice alternative modes of caring and community that challenge hetero- and cisnormative ideologies of belonging. Through her transgressive intimacies, the protagonist “not only crosses over borders of identity but also highlights and challenges their geographical determinism, the primacy of a Western view of selfhood, citizenship, and jurisdiction, and the global political and economic regimes that emerge from that primacy.”

Finally, Lingua Franca also illustrates that the term “trans” can be expanded to interrogate ideas of cosmopolitanism critically. In the process of trans-ing cosmopolitanism, as seen in the film, the “trans” can be deployed “not only as a critical optic, practice, or way of reading the texts, bodies, and individuals that operate outside and beyond the (gendered) regime of justice and state citizenship. It can also be a crucial tool for addressing the complexity of who counts as a civic subject or citizen worldwide, and for developing new habits of reading global justice.”40 And perhaps, Olivia’s words of eventually “making it” attest to a powerful trans futurity: a horizon of potentialities that the intersectionality that trans-ing can bring to what belonging to the world and its universal ideals of global justice and democracy can mean, especially for those who reside at the margins of class, race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality.

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Endnotes

1 Camile Hoot, "Immigration and Transgender Issues Fuel Isabel Sandoval's Drama Lingua Franca," Variety, August 26, 2020, variety.com/2020/08/lingua-sandoval-lingua-franca-1234779951/.

2 Here, I am particularly repurposing Halberstam’s idea of ‘cinematic trans gaze’ that is embedded not in films with a trans subject but that is still ‘committed to seducing the straight gaze’ but rather in cinematic texts that are ‘thoroughly committed to the transgender look, and it opens up formally and thematically a new mode of envisioning gender mobility’ (79). Further, she explains that this kind of cinematic trans gaze is important in ‘truly independent productions within which gender ambiguity is not a trope or device but part of the production of new forms of heroism, vulnerability, visibility, and embodiment’ (80).


6 Defined by Leung as “trans-identified filmmakers—whose works are committed not only to telling stories mean-sincerely consciously for a trans or trans-literates audience but also to aesthetic and genre experimentation” (87). Helen Hoik-on Leung, Film, Island Cinema: Transgender Cinema 15 Years, no. 1-2 (2010): 2.


20 Nguyen, Zawojetz, and Tronto, “Beyond the Global Care Chain: Boundaries, Institutions and Ethics of Care,” 201.


24 Ibid., 97.


28 Ibid., 239.
Filmmaker Martin Edralin’s *Islands* (2021) screened at the 2021 edition of South by Southwest in March via streaming due to the pandemic. Inoko Kang, writing for *The Hollywood Reporter*, ended her film review with the line: “No man has to be an island, no matter how adrift he may feel.”

If islands are generally viewed as lusohemispheric outcrops in oceans, *Islands* touches on isolation and solitude in a sea of unfamiliarity. Instead of actual subcontinental lands, the islands in *Islands* tell the stories of the lives of diasporic individuals living in a foreign territory and their (re)construction of familiar home spaces. The film centers on one man’s alienation from the social world he inhabits and calls home and how he comes to grips with personal losses and keeps moving.

Though the putative island symbolizes isolation and being cut off from the social world, *Islands* is also about forging connections and charting one’s cartographic line in a vast ocean of disparate bodies, connected yet also alone. Or in the context of migrant families: “like being home and abroad at the same time; simultaneously foreign and native.”

*Islands* is about a Filipino family in the diaspora in pre-pandemic Toronto. While the film is ostensibly a full-length family drama, Edralin peppers the narrative with offbeat humor. As with most films featuring a cast of non-professional actors playing principal and supporting roles, *Islands* appears like a well-photographed home movie: vivid, awkward, funny, off-kilter. I call it an exilic mumblecore. Edralin calls his film: *Islands*. The unity is submarine breathing air, our problem is how to study the fragments/whole.

The film is the directorial debut of Martin Edralin, a Toronto-based Filipino-Canadian filmmaker. Edralin was born in the Philippines but raised in Canada. He directed and helmed short films. One of these shorts is *Hole* (2014)—about a differently-abled man seeking intimacy—which received critical attention. *Islands* was originally set to be filmed in the Philippines, but the funding Edralin obtained necessitated that his project be filmed in Canada. Although he visited the archipelago home base of his parents a few times, Edralin admitted that he does not really know how to live in the Philippines, yet his idiomatic understanding of Filipino life in Toronto allowed him a front-seat experience. In an interview in 2021, he stated: 

*For Islands we could really color it with the houses we know and the family relationships. It all feels so natural. Even though I was on set, when I watched the movie for the first time I could smell the food in the scenes.*

In another interview, Edralin stated emphatically that to him, *Islands* firmly locates itself as a Canadian film even if the language is mostly in Filipino. In the current debate that escalated into a culture war over a catch-all identity-based concept of Filipinos—simultaneously a signifier and a signified—it is important to situate those who interrogate it, what parameters and conditions of possibility ground Filipino-ness, as well as the geographical space that is considered their lived-in spaces. In the case of *Islands*, the national origin of the film, when viewed by non-Filipinos, can be a less vexing debate if “the narrative assists in the construction (and perpetuation) of the ontologically authentic.” But that is only one part of the conversation in the ocean of possibilities that relate to various ideas of nation and identities.

The Moral Geographies of Caring

Joshua becomes the de facto care-giver of Reynaldo by assuming his mother’s role—a role that scholars call reciprocity of care. This form of “giving back” accentuates the parent-child relationalities where it is the child who looks after the aging parents. Edralin, in an interview, said:

In many Asian cultures, we [younger generations] take on the responsibility of taking care of our parents. We don’t put them in seniors’ homes. And that’s harder to balance with the independence and pace of life in the West.

In *Islands*, Marisol’s arrival in Toronto sets the stage for Joshua to re-map his lifeworld and reassign the work involved in caring for Marisol. In another interview, Edralin stated emphatically that to him, *Islands* firmly locates itself as a Canadian film even if the language is mostly in Filipino. In the current debate that escalated into a culture war over a catch-all identity-based concept of Filipinos—simultaneously a signifier and a signified—it is important to situate those who interrogate it, what parameters and conditions of possibility ground Filipino-ness, as well as the geographical space that is considered their lived-in spaces. In the case of *Islands*, the national origin of the film, when viewed by non-Filipinos, can be a less vexing debate if “the narrative assists in the construction (and perpetuation) of the ontologically authentic.” But that is only one part of the conversation in the ocean of possibilities that relate to various ideas of nation and identities.
Isolation and Connection

Feminist geographer Victoria Lawson argued: “Instead of Radical Geography, How About Caring?” This can be argued that in caring, ethics, where caring is seen not merely as an activity but as a relational connection to others. It is premised on mutual obligations and relations of trust. In Joshua’s case, the ethics of care for his father—a father in diaspora—allows him to perform family-related duties of reciprocal care that underscore complex relations of emotion and welfare. Or, as Popke elaborates on this care-centered approach: “[It] stands opposed to the autonomous rational subject of individual rights and responsibilities.” Joshua sees a kindredness to Marisol’s affective and embodied care-giving towards his father. Joshua also indulges in fantasies of being romantically taken care of by Marisol, hoping that her invisible and informal approach to caring can be affectively transferred to him. A feminist subtext can be argued that in Island, caring is reserved—even expected—for women instead of it being a mutual subtext can be argued that in caring is reserved—

While the film’s title is arguably both a homage to the Philippine archipelago’s numerous islands, it also refers to the seemingly lonely and isolated lives in diaspora of Joshua and Marisol that resemble an island. Islands as outcrops of a lithosphere or as pieces of land surrounded by water were always thought of as symbolizing entities bereft of connection, alone, and presumed as lonely. The story of Joshua as an island living in Toronto with his aging parents at the start of the film revolves around the frequent routine and mundane rituals executed without emotion, verve, or zest for life. Working as a janitor, his already introverted life finds a job that limits communication, working silently and efficiently, dodging forms of sociality. He is someone out of place in any given space. As though submerged in his own world, Joshua nevertheless expresses himself through his loneliness, and isolation become even more magnified. Out of familial duty and respect for his father, Joshua initially takes care of his remaining parent. Although he has a brother married to a white woman, Joshua’s circle of friends is not wide—he is merely an extension of his family. When Marisol enters the scene midway through the film’s narrative, the lonely Joshua becomes infatuated with her. When he tentatively proposes a romantic liaison, Marisol gently rebuffs him. Broken-hearted, he retreats to his impenetrable shell once more, only to be shaken from it when his father eventually passes on. With Marisol’s exit in search of a meaningful life and to chart her own journey, Joshua’s islandness is complete with both his parents gone.

At this juncture in Island, Joshua’s decision to move on with his life by participating in forms of socialities that his parents used to engage in indicates his renewed vigor to connect with the Filipino community in Toronto. His umbilical cord is cut along with the passing of his parents, yet this lacuna that severis his familial ties also emboldens him to venture on his own, no longer as an extension of his now-defunct family. The final scene shows him in a dance class his parents frequented. Dancing out of sync to the beat of the music, Joshua’s awkward attempt to flow with the tide and in effect experience life without his parents fails him. What Brathwaite has said that “unity is sub-marine.” In this instance, his alone- ness belies the floundering connections he is forging with fellow Filipino migrants that do not require superficial niceties to ensure interconnectedness.

Tidalectics resists the Western propensity to synthesize and create linear stories to discipline knowledge and information. Through Brathwaite’s poems, tides are cyclical, with continual movement and the “complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots.”

While it may be disingenuous to diuspose of a joyful ending for the broken-hearted Joshua in Islands, the implied conviviality in the narrative’s last frames nonetheless teases and resists tying the storyline neatly for the needed catharsis of the film’s audience. Islands offered no statements, only questions. What becomes of the broken-hearted? What new avenues of caring opened up for Joshua after witnessing Marisol’s caring? Is Island still a useful signifier to describe Joshua now that he finds possibilities for intersection in an archipelago of similarly situated Filipinos in diaspora?

Like Joshua in Islands, what is ultimately a subversive counter-narrative is Joshua’s “sub-marine” connections that are not visible, like island outcrops in the ocean, but entangled below the surface that eludes “scientific” factuality about how islands are seen. Pijuan writer Epeli Hau’ofa articulated a “sea of islands” rather than the common notion of separate and stand-alone islands. In his conception, Hau’ofa recuperates a non-Western view of islands not from the perspective of land outcrops in the water but as sea, bringing various islands together. Much like Joshua and the multidimensional islands now floating within his Toronto home space.

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We all receive care, and throughout our lives, many of us will also give care…[Care is society’s work in the sense that care is absolutely central to our individual and collective survival.] 14

Isolation and Connection

In discussing the topo-cartographies of islands, I draw from the works of Kaman Brathwaite—a Caribbean poet from Barbados—especially the recuperation of tidal dialectics (or tidalectics) in elucidating the island become-ings and, in the case of Islands, of Joshua and his post-romantic entanglements. Tidalectics resists the Western propensity to synthesize and create linear stories to discipline knowledge and information. Through Brathwaite’s poems, tides are cyclical, with continual movement and the “complex and shifting entanglement between sea and land, diaspora and indigeneity, and routes and roots.”

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Endnotes


9 Grace Han, “Interview with Martin Edralin: [Islands] is a Canadian movie to me;” Asian Movie Pulse, March 17, 2021, accessed on September 27, 2022, asianmoviepulse.com/2021/03/interview-with-martin-edralin-create-islands/.


13 Brathwaite, 1.

14 Hau’ofa, Our Sea of Islands, 148.
One day, almost two decades ago, I watched Kidlat Tahimik’s Mababangong Bangungot (Perfumed Nightmare, 1977), for the first time. It was in a cold basement classroom in Plaridel Hall at the University of the Philippines. I was a young, twenty-something film student then, and though I loved the film and was mesmerized by the idea of a flying jeepney that went across Europe, I did not fully comprehend it at first. I found the film fun and funny because of the disjointed, ironic juxtaposition of imagery with a voiceover narrating what was happening from Tahimik’s perspective. Back in Tahimik’s time, there were two different sets of equipment for film and sound, and both were costly to rent. So he shot his footage in cheaper 16mm film without sound and did the voiceover later in the post. But what started as a logistical limitation became a style aesthetic that freed him from the burden of narrative. He shot whatever he could and edited them with a voiceover to construct a story afterward. He chose his vehicle, and he crossed that bridge.

I did not realize then that Tahimik was also using the jeepney as a metaphor for a type of filmmaking that would figure in my life so strongly later as I moved across the world and crossed many bridges through the years. Along the way, I have watched and rewatched Mababangong Bangungot countless times. Each viewing brought me ever closer to Tahimik’s character in the film, the everyman who left his tiny village and crossed oceans and continents to find his fortune. Like the iconic jeepney in his film, Tahimik’s film was a patchwork of self-shot found footage and a mishmash of different production techniques, brought together in a cohesive storyline loosely based on his own experiences.1 Like him, I chose my vehicle. As I made my way through life as a migrant Filipino, I made films with whatever scraps of footage I could find. However, I discovered that I was not alone. As I made my found-footage films, submitted them, and participated in Filipino and Asian American film festivals across the US continent, I realized that many Filipino and Filipino American filmmakers have also chosen a similar mode of filmmaking. Though Tahimik did not necessarily inspire them, nor were they exposed to each other’s films before submitting these works to film festivals, for some reason, this certain mode of filmmaking was not only practical but also resonated aesthetically with filmmakers in the Filipino diaspora. Tahimik did, and sharing their own subjectivities from their points of view. This celebration is important, especially in the context of the Filipino diaspora, a worldwide, amorphous abstraction that is recursive and generative as Filipinos stay in motion. Haraway suggests there is no fixed way of perceiving anything, even home.

Filmmaker Alisa Lebow calls this kind of cinema the “first-person film,” which, according to her, is first and foremost about a mode of address: “these films ‘speak’ from the articulated point of view of the filmmaker who readily acknowledges her subjective position.” Our points of view change across time and space. As Haraway argues, “Only partial perspective promises objective vision. All Western cultural narratives about objectivity are allegories of the ideologies governing the relations of what we call mind and body, distance and responsibility.” As Filipinos and Filipino filmmakers move...
across time and space, they push back against the concept of a monolithic, nation-bound Filipino identity and instead celebrate the plurality of Filipino experience and their ingenuity (or, as Tahimik says, “indio-genius” in making new vehicles out of scraps from both their homeland and their adopted lands). First-person filmmakers in the diaspora bring autobiographical and found footage together into a coherent narrative, often through a voiceover spoken in the first person, developing their unique style of filmmaking that is self-reflexive, aware that their own truths about Filipino identity may not be the same one as that of others, but are nevertheless worth sharing. These are our own truths about Filipino experience and their ingenuity and colonization and rebuilt into a modern conveyance to take Filipinos wherever they needed to be. In the process, they have been embellished with colorful decorations reflecting the proud drivers’ personalities. Although impractical and extravagant, these decorations were nevertheless integral to the vehicle’s transformation into a celebration of life and perseverance. When they got old, they were scrapped and retooled to give life to the next generation of vehicles.

Tahimik made his film at the height of the Marcos dictatorship, in the middle of his trials in Europe; and Tahimik’s everyman in search of the American dream paralleled the massive wave of emigration at the time due to both political and economic reasons. However, after the peaceful People Power Revolution toppled the Marcoses in February 1986, would these expatriates come back to help rebuild the nation? Born into a low-income family in the Visayas, Nick Deocampo moved to Manila in the 1980s to teach film. He and his students used Super-8mm film to make underground documentaries and experimental films that explore what it truly meant to live in the Philippines under Martial Law. One of these films, Revolution Happen Like Refrains in a Song (1987), was a documentation of the People Power Revolution and its aftermath. Through the film, Deocampo asked: “Did the revolution change people’s lives? One year after the revolution, I visited the past to find out that life was not like movies with happy endings.” With the revolution being incomplete, the impetus to continue documenting his own life and the lives of others goes on.

His contributions to documenting and supporting the nationalist project allowed him to go abroad and meet with filmmakers and film scholars from other countries who were also involved in the Third Cinema movement, a chapter in his life that he also documented in his film:

With what records I had of the once forbidden images of the realities in our country and a modest coverage of the revolution in my Super-8 films, I saw myself traveling to other countries. A spirit of freedom followed me in Berlin, Paris, Frankfurt, and other European cities… I stood tall among legendary people: Fernando Birri, father of the new Latin American cinema, Laura Mulvey of Great Britain, B. Ruby Rich of America… But being away from home made me alienated. Sitting in Berlin to feel the sun was different from sitting in Manila, enjoying the same sun. In Paris, I could not look at every rue and alley without remembering Manila, its narrow streets and tight passageways. It was hard to forget that which one had learned to understand and have loved so much. It was not just the place that was hard to get, it was also the people. I look at faces here; they were cordial, friendly, but they didn’t have meaning. A smile could be any smile; a look, any look. I longed for the warmth of Manila…

We see through Deocampo that the diaspora is not just pulling away from the motherland. Through his experience abroad, Deocampo felt Rizal’s “specter of comparisons.” He was abroad, yet Manila and the Philippines were still in his heart. Indeed, the affective impact of nationalism may be felt more strongly when one is away, and experiencing the diaspora may amplify one’s feelings toward one’s homeland. Deocampo would become an academic of Philippine independent cinema and remains in Manila to this day. This was his vehicle, and he crossed that bridge.

Marlon Fuentes was born and grew up in Manila during the Marcos regime. He lost his father at a young age and witnessed a close friend being murdered by the military during an anti-Marcos demonstration. He moved to Philadelphia in 1975 to study film and video and is now a visual artist based in Los Angeles. He says that making art is a way to deal with the constant state of being stuck in two cultures: a Philippine motherland that was fading from his memory and a new American home where the mundaneness of raising a family has become more real and tangible. In Bontok Eulogy (1995), he uses colonial film footage to trace the Filipino diasporic genealogy way back to a flashpoint in the colonial history of the Philippines: the St. Louis World’s Fair, when the Americans brought hundreds of indigenous Filipinos to Missouri to exhibit their new subjects. Utilizing archival footage he got from the Library of Congress, he turns the colonial gaze of the ethnographic film over its head by layering over it the narration of his fictional grandfather named Markod of the Bontok people. At the same time, he utilizes first-person filmmaking techniques to question the myth of objectivity.

Filipino nationalism, based upon an interaction with America, buys into the myth of objectivity, that Filipino history runs progressively across “empty, homogenous time.” It sees a seemingly objective “Philippine picture,” thinking (as the Americans did) that the nation can be quantified, measured, and contained within the frame of the image. Diasporic Filipinos, however, acquire the chance and privilege to look behind the curtain (or behind the camera?), seeing the Philippines from the American perspective and America from a Filipino perspective. This double-vision, or the specter of comparison, can simply regress into nostalgia, as Fuentes seemed to do at the beginning of the film. But it can ultimately be redemptive. One sees the artifice of the image, the single-mindedness of the “world picture.” Image is only as powerful as one imagines it to be. Hence, we can play with the image, and make fun of it through the story, as Fuentes did. In reality, Fuentes never had a grandfather named Markod. In a fabricated interview with Fuentes, he claims that:

As a filmmaker who wanted to explore history in a personal way, I found ethnographic film presented a stylized and codified syntax that in certain ways preempted content. I wanted to participate in the discourse of ethnographic representation by using and appropriating the idea of the “native filmmaker” … My goal was to create a story from the bits of information I could unearth here in the United States, without going back to the Philippines… Thus, I consciously confined myself to the materials available in archival sources such as the Library of Congress and the Smithsonian. Fortunately, some interesting “salvage footage” existed in these archives.

Some may classify Bontok Eulogy as a mockumentary, but this seems too simplistic a label. “Self-reflexive film” might be a more apt title. Certainly, the images presented in the film are undoctored and authentic. Certainly, the St. Louis Exposition happened, and a thousand Filipinos were exploited. However, by revealing the artifice and constructedness of the narrative surrounding the images,
Fuentes points out the very constructedness of the American image of the Philippines. By showcasing a “truth-claim” that is false (i.e., Marked was my grandfather, and he participated in the World’s Fair), he also reveals the falseness of American history’s “truth claims” and the fragility of historiography. As Fuentes says in his imaginary interview, “History is really an art of memory. The gaps and ellipses are just as important as the materials we have in our hands.” By deconstructing the ethnographic film, he questions the myth of authenticity and lays the groundwork for a diasporic genealogy passed down from his fictional ancestors to future generations. This was his vehicle, and he crossed that bridge.

Birthed by the digital revolution, the Philippine New Wave was a jubilant cry for artistic freedom. Filmmaking was no longer the realm of mainstream studios with the budget to produce films. By this time, I was already a film student. We could make films about what we want, not about what is marketable. The smaller and lighter digital cameras meant we could bring them anywhere and shoot anything while escaping the bureaucratic red tape of location permits and consent forms. Guerrilla filmmaking was utilized not only as a style but as a philosophy. And yet, it also had echoes of previous technological revolutions: DeScampos’ underground Super-8 films and Tabiniks’ 16mm films before that.

In his own words, John Torres was a sheltered and spoiled kid who had a rude awakening during the Asian financial crisis when his family went deep into debt. He struggled to cope with what was happening and found solace in shooting footage with his family’s small video camera. Other indie filmmakers discovered him at an independent film festival called MovFest. Together, they collaborated and helped each other with their projects. Torres was invited to a small Asian festival in Berlin in 2005, where he filmed everyone and everything to create Todo Todo Teros (2006).

Combining found footage in Berlin with those in Manila, he constructs a loose narrative of a border-crossing, two-timing filmmaker-turned-terrorist. Torres documents a time in his life when he was in a committed relationship with someone back in the Philippines, but upon arrival in Berlin, he fell in love with his handler and tour guide. His liaison becomes a metaphor for the diasporic Filipino’s in-betweenness, uncertain whether to stay loyal to the homeland or move on and adapt to their new country. In an interview, Torres states that:

I was being drawn [to] an outsider, and I believed that I was really committed to this person. But then I saw how I acted behind the camera. As you see, as you could hear, my voice was being very intimate with the subject, with the person in front of the camera. Terrorism and Eros, terrorism and love: how you become a terrorist with the people you love.13

This was, of course, the world after 9/11. The War on Terror and increased border surveillance restricted the global movement of Filipinos. In a way, Torres also saw this new generation of guerrilla filmmakers as freedom fighters disrupting the status quo. In the same interview:

Even just having mostly a Filipino audience [at the screening], I think it’s really, really good for me, especially in that they’re living here, outside the country. It’s a big chance for me to tell them how things are going in the country, even if it’s just on the surface a love story. It talks about a lot of things political, economic, social.14

Among other films, I screened Todo Todo Teros at the inaugural edition of the Diwa Filipino Film Showcase of Seattle in 2014. Although I had migrated to the US in 2007, I had only recently moved to Seattle and was still navigating my way in the city and finding my community. A friend connected me with the Filipino Cultural Heritage Society of Washington, the organizers of the annual Philippine Pagdiriwang at the Seattle Center, and pitched my idea of having a film component to their festival. Since then, we have featured films that celebrate the Filipino spirit wherever it resides, and I have met like-minded filmmakers who have also shot in the first person.

Fernando Dalayon made Manila Road (2017) to recapture the spirit of one of the longest-established Filipino communities in Canada. Using family film footage, animation, and interviews, he retells his family’s migration journey. Unlike DeScampos, who could not see Manila in the ruins and alleyways he walked on, Dalayon and his family made their new home their own. For them, Manila is not just a city in the Philippines; it is a road in Winnipeg, Manitoba, a pathway that, according to Dalayon, represents their rich legacy in Winnipeg, but also one that can bring them back to the Philippine when they want.

Gail Gutierrez also retraces her mother’s path to the US as a nurse in Sampaguita Love (2017). Capturing her daily interactions with her mom at home by video, she also joins her mother in her reunion with her former classmates. Interspersed in her loose narrative are double-exposure shots on 16mm BW film and hand-processed. One image, for example, shows the ocean in San Diego as filmed through a camera obscura, superimposed with the portrait of Gutierrez’s mom in nursing school back in the Philippines. By juxtaposing two found images sourced and located from opposite ends of the ocean, Gutierrez maps out an occupational genealogy, retracing the paths of nurses back to the colonial encounter and the need for cheap migrant labor both during US colonialism and after in the US’ firm neocolonial grip on the independent Philippines. At the same time, by showing these very personal and touching moments with her mother, Gutierrez also proves their agency and capability to make the most out of difficult circumstances.

Some filmmakers have also mapped out queer genealogies. Through In This Family (2018), Drama del Rosario shares his painful experience of being outed to his conservative family when he was still living with them back in the Philippines. According to del Rosario, it was only ten years after the incident, when he finally moved to the US alone in 2017, that he was finally able to openly talk about the trauma of being queer: “the physical distance made it easier to speak—let alone revisit the actual audio recordings of my parents yelling at me.” However, in It Runs in the Family (2018), Joella Cabalu travels with her brother Jay from Canada to the US to discover what a queer Filipino identity could mean. Ultimately,
when they return to the Philippines (where they were born but did not grow up), they realize that queerness is not a purely Western construct. “Baka’ does not necessarily translate to English. Ultimately, they find comfort in being who they are, following the beliefs they want to follow, and forming family wherever they can. Queerness is about being yourself, however you want that to look.

In this respect, I think that the label “Filipina,” a neologism inspired by the queer Latino movement, can be a good way to describe the queerness of being situated within the Filipino diaspora, controversial as that idea may seem. Neither “authentically” Filipino nor hyphenated immigrant (i.e., Filipino American), being in the diaspora is a queer positionality. This queerness is also expressed in R.J. Lozada’s *Distance Between* (2014), reimaging what being a father means when he gets an opportunity to be a sperm donor to a lesbian couple. He ponderes what being an absentee father is and ruminates on his relationship with his father, a seaman who was sporadically there when he was growing up. Did growing up in the diaspora mean experiencing these “alternative” family dynamics? Recalling simple Tagalog words that sound unnatural in his mouth, he nevertheless repeats them as a way to carry over his memories of his father from himself and then to his unborn child, projecting this queer, diasporic genealogy to the future.

When asked what the title of her 2017 film was referring to, filmmaker Zorinah Juan said, “The Second Province signifies placing roots in a home that is not your first... It is a feeling of belonging to both and neither at the same time. The ever-present knowledge that I am not of one province but two, never quite able to settle on which one is first in my bones.” Aleia Garcia’s *Spring by the Sea* (2019) encapsulates this perfectly. The duality of these domestic spaces counterpoints the domesticity of the family footage she captures: Garcia calls both the Philippines and Saudi Arabia her home. In her camera, flying back and forth across the Indian Ocean is as mundane as riding a Jeepney to work. She is attached to both places even as she never truly fits in either. Nevertheless, this constant movement also reveals the precarity of being Filipino in the diaspora.

In *We Data Plan* (2019), Miko Revereza captures the constant anxiety and tension of being an undocumented immigrant. Shot almost entirely onboard a transcontinental train from Los Angeles to New York, we feel the lack of private spaces—places to call home, or tahanan, literally a place to stop and rest from one’s travels—Revereza eats and sleeps onboard the train, documenting his life through his mobile phone as a way to counter the constant state surveillance he faces all the time.

The pandemic further highlighted the precarity of being Filipino in America, where a considerable percentage of the population work in the healthcare industry, and Filipino nurses are assigned to the most dangerous and laborious positions. In *Back to Work* (2020), Alexander Catedral shares a moment in time when his household (most of which worked in healthcare) contracted COVID-19, and they had to impose public health safety procedures into their private home. They found ways to connect with each other and care for each other despite everything, and once they had all recovered, there was nothing else to do but to go back to work.

Frances Grace Mortel also meditated upon this perseverance and the simple power to push forward through affective labor in her powerful, poetic short film, *Dear Nanay* (2021). Remembering her grandmother, who sewed, mended, and washed clothes for a living, she spins a yarn that connects her to her grandmother back home from where she is now in the United States. Capturing herself in a fetal position, floating in space/no-space, Mortel is swaddled by her nanay’s labor of love, the clothes she worked hard on, being transported in between the two spaces through osmosis, through an umbilical cord of memories; a touching statement on translocal matrilineality and the affective work that mothers perform whether in the diaspora or not.

Drawing upon first-person cinema from the Philippines and the diaspora in 2014, I started my own project of inviting some of my friends and fellow former iskolar ng bayan (state scholars) to share their stories of moving elsewhere in the world. I sent them my camera, a small, handheld, consumer-level video camera, by courier and invited them to capture whatever they wanted about their life. Dubbed *Enrique de Malaca* (inspired by Kidlat Tahimik’s own forever film project *Memories of Overdevelopment/Balikbayan #1*), our camera traveled across six countries and circumnavigated the world. Instead of a voyage of colonial discovery, it became a voyage of reclamation, recovery, and reconnection. During the pandemic, in the middle of my social isolation, I finished editing all our footage and premiered our film, *Kung Saan Man Tayo* (Wherever You May Be), in 2021, the 500th anniversary of Magellan’s circumnavigation of the world. The film itself is quite amateurish and DIY; I did not have the budget to travel around the world to capture my friends’ stories, and not all of them had a background in filmmaking. Nevertheless, as we screen it across the world, we hope it inspires other people (especially those in the Filipino diaspora) to tell their own stories.

I believe this multitude of films, this multitude of voices, is essential. These tiny realities map filmmakers’ subjective spaces and “situated knowledge” within the Filipino diaspora when taken individually. However, analyzed together and in conversation, they become a visual archive of diasporic Filipino experience that looks beyond nation and state to describe the multi-faceted nature of “transcendent” Filipininx more completely.

**Frances Grace Mortel**

Dear Nanay (2021)

Mortel contemplates her grandmother’s labor as she herself embarks on her own journey. From *Dear Nanay* (France Grace Mortel, 2021)
The diaspora is a conceptual territory. It occupies no space and yet encompasses every space. It has no sovereignty except over its body. It does not reside in an empty, homogenous time but lives in an unevenly dense, heterogeneous time. Moreover, diasporic history is a history where the question of authenticity no longer matters as much. It is the power to construct a story with the little resources you have. It is the power to share your voice with a disembodied community. It is the power to stand up and declare: we choose our vehicles, and we can cross all bridges.

Adrian Ellis Alarilla is a Ph.D. candidate in History at the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, studying Filipino migration and focusing on kinship networks and genealogies of movement in the US empire and the Filipino nation. His films parallel his research interests, as he uses the personal documentary genre to reflect on and process the contemporary experience of Filipino migration. His works have been shown in the US, Canada, Mexico, Cambodia, and the Philippines.
In their playful, architectural essay film *El Lado Quieto* (The Still Side, 2021), Carolina Fusilier and Mikio Revereza tell a story through images of forsaken tourist structures in Acapulco. Droly rechristened “Capaluco,” the resort city appears just slightly altered. For instance, the co-directors film an actual abandoned zoo in Acapulco but fabricate still operable loudspeakers that blast promotional messages on a loop: “Kaporo Zoo is the home of the animals, and also yours,” the unaffected voice once promised tourists consensus consumption of extraterrestrial animals. Then, through voiceover narration, Revereza and Fusilier introduce a syokoy character, who was sucked into a strong current on the Manila Galloon trade route and spat onto its opposite end in Capaluco (as the galleons once traveled back-and-forth between Manila and the port at Acapulco).

Out of water, the merman loses his scales, and looping audio advertisements romance him to fantasies of the perfect vacation, and the perfect human beach body to spend it in. “And also yours”—the syokoy believes it, as tourists believe “Capaluco,” the resort city appears just slightly altered. For instance, the co-directors film an actual abandoned zoo in Acapulco through. Instead, the camera assumes his perspective, designed the sound, while Fusilier animated the indubitable cinematography of slowly rotting structures.

The reduction of an animal’s habitat into a zoo, or human tourism—serves as a damning metaphor for tourism—the broader reduction of land into resort property, of a people’s way of life into a petting zoo for outsiders.

We never see or hear the syokoy, the outsider we see Capaluco through. Instead, the camera assumes his perspective, occasionally mimicking his lumbering walk and curious gaze. At most, we see what a shadow that could be as much as his a tree. As the loudspeakers provide the syokoy context, Revereza provides the viewer exposition in voiceover, as if improvising the storyline as the film plays. Without this exposition, viewers might broadly approximate the camera’s gaze as an outsider looking in and may not make out the otherworldly creature in the film’s ambiguous shadows. The narration becomes a two-sided conversation when Fusilier enters the voiceover.

Their conversations remain loose, observations apparently two-sided conversation when Fusilier enters the voiceover. The reduction of an animal’s habitat into a zoo, or human

In my viewing experience, it is rare that a film that, in content and/or form, rebukes colonialism also makes a point of transcending it through its production economy. In an extreme example, *Apocalypse Now* exploited Philippine labor (Filipinos receiving worse pay and living conditions than Vietnamese, and American extras/workers), abused the land, and made complicit deals with Ferdinand Marcos’s military to make—ostensibly—an epic critique of the American empire. According to Gerald Susman’s “Bulls in the Indo (China Shop),” in which he provides his first-hand account of the set, the movie crew’s presence in Baler dislocated the local economy. Traditionally based around the Municipio, church, and public plaza, the marketplace gravitated towards the Apocalypse headquarters, near the makeshift heliport built on top of the Central School’s playground. Ultimately, the production caused severe food shortages for locals and severe inflation, tripling the price of beef, for instance. This ravenous mode of production nullifies, even renders hypocritical, Apocalypse Now’s (1979) indictment of American Empire. On the other hand, Fusilier and Revereza considerably small footprint in Acapulco never belies its position on the means of production that enable such unnatural outgrowths as tourism.

*El Lado Quieto* stimulated reactive thoughts in me throughout its 70-minute running time, despite entirely comprising landscapes and interiors that traditionally function as breaks from the primary action. The co-directors’ unpopulated hotels, museums, waterparks, restaurants, framed in both close, abstract details and long-range architectural considerations, are increasingly rich with subtext, and Fusilier and Revereza’s periodic, open conversations encouraged me to brainstorm with them rather than wander off into unrelated thoughts. In a way, they create the shared space the resorts purport to be. The speakers announce Capaluco as “the only all-inclusive island in the world.” But tourism has historically enriched land developers and corporations like the Inter-American Development Bank and World Bank by reducing local cultures to their profitable attributes and removing native communities from the incoming revenue stream.

One structure may encapsulate the decline of Acapulco’s tourism industry: Arturo Duranzo Moreno’s opulent palace, modeled after the Parthenon. Fusilier and Revereza effectively pass this now long-abandoned mansion for a museum. Greco-Roman paintings and sculptures depict Satanic worship inside the hornet’s nest and across the yard. The syokoy waddles through the elaborate columns, absorbing human likenesses through decapitated statues and defaced murals; A painted man appears castrated by the way the canvas has peeled across his lower body, and another loudspeaker announces a sound program called “The Myth of Europe” will play momentarily in another room. Fusilier and Revereza choose not to engage with the actual story behind the imitation Parthenon home, perhaps to imitate the syokoy’s ignorance or to retain the human fairy tale the creature has, by this point in the film, fully committed himself to.

The homeowner, Moreno, had another name—“El Negro.” A police chief who ran a billion-dollar criminal empire, he fled the country (perhaps through the house’s many escape tunnels) when his friend, Mexican President José López Portillo, left office and thus no longer had the power to protect him. Before this, with money earned from drug and sex trafficking, among other things, he threw decadent parties at his palace, where he kept pet tigers, to whom he is rumored to have fed his enemies. This history speaks to the drug-related violence that plagues Acapulco to this day and blights the tranquil illusion that once sustained its hospitality industry. Fusilier and Revereza
omitting all this because, in their Capaluco, the resulting decline of capitalism and tourism has already passed—the syokoy’s fantasy displaces no one, bastardizes no original lay of the land.

When I talked with Revereza last year, I asked him if he had filmed any interviews on his three-day Amtrak ride in *No Data Plan* but decided to cut them out; in that film, his camera looks at everything but people’s faces. He told me he did film interviews but felt sensitive about the interviewees’ privacy. A lot of the people who ride Amtrak, he told me, “have a lot of reasons for not flying instead. I overhear their stories, and a lot of them are heartbreaking. Opening myself up to their stories would have required more commitment from me, and a lot of them are heartbreaking. I wonder if we’d ever feel like more than tourists in the Philippines.

When we talked last year, Revereza said something to me in passing that I often still think about. I had told him my predicament—I thought I’d finally found my blood relatives in the Philippines and had been talking and bonding with them for months. Here, finally, was our “real” attachment to our homeland. I haven’t decided whether or not the dream of an imagined, shared home could not come at someone else’s expense.

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Aaron E. Hunt is a New York City-based filmmaker, a cameraperson in doc/narrative production, the Vice President of the distributor Dedza Films, and a writer with bylines in publications such as *Film Comment, Sight & Sound, American Cinematographer, Rapper*, and CNN Philippines.

Endnotes


2. Ibid.


4. Mike Revereza, interviewed by Aaron E. Hunt, Zoom interview, July 1, 2021, transcript courtesy of Aaron E. Hunt, quoted with permission.

“We were at the heart of the Muslim country,
In the jungle, in the village,
At the foot of the mountain
Filled with angry spirits
It was crazy.
There were too many of us,
Yet, with so little money;
and so, little by little, we went insane.
I think you can see it in the film....
You can see the photography going
a little crazy.
and the director and the actors
going a little crazy.
After a while, I realized I was a little
frightened,
The film was making itself;
The spirits of the mountain were making the film.”

Filming the Bud Dajo Massacre in Jolo, Sulu
March 16-31, 1999
(counter-quotes from Hearts of Darkness)
And so opens Black Maria’s Diary, more commonly known as Sari Lluch Dalena’s personal account of the grueling yet ultimately fulfilling experience of shooting in Jolo. People believed she and her group had gone mad by filming in the militia-ridden mountains down south, where the Abu Sayyaf, Moro National Liberation Front, and the government forces waged endless battles, that it was sheer foolhardiness and suicide. But a story had to be told, and it could not be told any other way.

While in Jolo, Sari kept a diary using the nom de guerre ‘Black Maria.’ She can no longer locate her journal. But here are surviving excerpts from Black Maria’s Diary, taken from the entries “Grace Under Pressure” and “Rain of Bullets.”

“Our coming to Jolo proved to be a mixed blessing to the village and the Marines. I paid a courtesy call to the Marine Detachment… a major disappointment as the Colonel proved uncooperative. He firmly rejected our request to shoot and told us that we were out of our minds to even come to Jolo. We were directly told (or ordered) to pack up, go back to Manila, and postpone our shoot for the last week of April. My temperature rose, and I could feel my neck burning hot as I stared eyeball to eyeball with the Colonel. I was furious, but I decided to remain calm… it was a logistical nightmare to cancel my shoot. I told him, let us reason together. He readily suggested that there should be no blasting or explosions… for it would disturb the peace and order in the community. I reasoned that we had already won the community’s support and (they had) already (been) informed of the blasting sequences… If I deleted the blasting scenes, it would be too critical. The madness was stirring.

“So, I took the fastest boat to Zamboanga… to get the permission from the SouthCom Commander… The General and Colonel were very accommodating. I was able to explain clearly the details of the scenes, the urgency of the project, and assured them of the support given to us by the local officials, PNP, MNLF, and the very community of Jolo. They made several inquiries… regarding the situation in Patikul… they received positive feedback… it was possible for us to shoot.

“While I was away, a small typhoon blew in on Jolo. The winds were so powerful that the typhoon cut the power. Our production assistant remembered waking up in the grip of a surreal nightmare, dreading the sound of the crackling roof. After two minutes, he realized the crazy noise was rapid gunfire shooting against the typhoon. All of Jolo seemed to fire their machine guns and armalites at midnight to drive the rain away as part of their tradition. Our PA, soaking wet, made his way to the second floor where the rest of the film crew were sleeping.”

“‘I cried cut’ to end it, and everyone drowsily roused from a half-slumber,” Black Maria writes. “Some stretched and asked for drinking water, as the rest of the spectators… clapped and cheered. But something was terribly wrong. The moment she had feared finally arrived: my film’s first big physical (or supernatural) disaster.”
The women playing the bridesmaids suddenly collapsed. They were quickly revived, but Karsum, the girl who plays the bride, would not awaken. The village Imam was summoned. A spoon was used to pry her mouth open to give her water, which she coughed up. Then suddenly, she opened her eyes.

“Parang ahas ([her eyes were] like a snake’s).”

A classic case of possession followed: the girl screamed and writhed and exhibited the strength of ten men. Then she gave instructions that only the women could touch her. So, Sari and some other women carried her out into the rain to a hut where she was laid on the floor.

“Ang bahay ko, ang dumi-dumi, walang pagkain” (my house is so dirty, and we have no food).”

Then she announced that it was time for her to leave and that no one should block her way. Sari and the rest cleared the path to the door, and as quickly as it started, Karsum was back again.

Less than fifteen minutes later, the actors, who play the role of warriors, started collapsing. Fortunately, they quickly came round, too. The speculation was: Karsum was possessed by the spirit of Dayang-Dayang, a noblewoman, while the men—who traced their lineage back to the actual warriors who fought in the war—were possessed by the very warriors they were playing.

The next day was devoted to prayer. The crew visited and cleaned the gravesites. True enough, they discovered that Dayang-Dayang’s grave was neglected.

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“Gumanda ‘yong araw, so it was a sign na OK na” (The day brightened, so we took it as a good sign).”

As she indicates in her poem: “At a point, hindi na kami ang nagshoo-shooting. And nagshoo-shooting ‘yong mga spirits” (We weren’t the ones shooting the film anymore. It was the spirits doing the work).

It was more than a mystical experience—it was a lesson that made everyone realize territorial, religious, and artistic respect. Those possessed felt privileged to be singled out by their ancestor; hard-core Christians opened to the wisdom of the Imam; and nary a camera rolled to capture the extraordinary event. Even the actors felt they accomplished something truly meaningful in connection to their people’s history.

I still remember when my father Danilo Dalena painted Asong Simbahan (1984), which frames a sleeping dog, her legs sticking up in the air, inside the church. It became my favorite painting of his, so ten years later, it inspired my first short film of the same title, Asong Simbahan (1994).

Using ink, pastel, and watercolor, my father made beautiful hand-painted drawings on paper that served as the storyboards for my short film based on his painting. Unlike the usual storyboards, they were small, exquisite paintings.

When it was time to make my first documentary, Memories of a Forgotten War (2001), which I made with Camilla Griggers, about the Philippine-American War of 1899, he returned to the drawing board. He turned expressive when creating the imagery of rituals and massacres with painterly essence.
My father had an eye for detail, from the indigo-tinted feet and hands of the women in the Battle of Batac scene to the monochromatic palette of the Moro warriors with their kris to women and children massacred in a volcanic crater in the Bud Dajo scene.

My cinematographers and I admired his artworks. We pondered the gorgeous compositions: how do we translate such paintings into three dimensions and capture them on celluloid?

Danilo Dalena is one of the Philippines’ foremost expressionists. He made his mark in the early 1970s with his caustic political cartoons and illustrations for the Free Press and Asia-Philippines Leader, which raised the standard of editorial art in the country. When he returned to his hometown in Pakil, Laguna, he found artistic inspiration in folk culture and festivities. Through his art, he draws attention to what is often considered peripheral and ordinary in our society and makes them central and extraordinary.

Sari Dalena, an independent filmmaker, holds an MFA in Film Production from New York University. She has received the Fulbright-Hayes scholarship, the 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. Her notable films, which have been screened at various national and international film festivals, include Memories of a Forgotten War (2003), Rigodon (2005), Ka Oryang (2011), The Guerrilla is a Poet (2013), and Dahling Nick (2015). She is a professor and former director at the University of the Philippines Film Institute.

The Philippine-American Colonial Experience of the Aftermath in Balangiga: Howling Wilderness

CECILLE N. BAEHELLO
The order was to kill and burn—to raze everything to the ground, leaving no prisoners, to spare no one over the age of ten in the land of Balangiga, Samar, and turn it into a howling wilderness. Kimberly Alido asserts that this order was a retaliation to the attack launched by the Filipino natives against the American soldiers in September 1901.1 General Jacob Smith, responsible for the kill and burn order, was clear in his intentions of leaving no prisoners and that having more people killed would better please him. This order made him infamous, David L. Fritz states, landing him eventually in martial court in 1902.2 However, he was tried not for murder or war crimes but due to his “conduct to the prejudice of good order and military discipline.”

The Balangiga massacre is one of the many events in Philippine history that clearly illustrates the violence of American colonization and the atrocities that made up their occupation of the islands. It went against the benevolent assimilation policy of the United States as proclaimed by US president William McKinley in 1898.3 The Balangiga bells also commemorate this historical event, the church bells the Americans took as war trophies following the attack launched by the natives against the American soldiers. These bells, particularly for the residents of the Eastern Samar town, serve as a memorial of the Filipino resistance against American colonization. Back in Balangiga, it took 117 years before they were finally returned, as reported by Xave Gregorio.5

According to Robert Welch, many accounts have been written about the Balangiga massacre but many facts, notably the numbers, remain up for debate.6 Along with the events of the Philippine-American war, what happened in Balangiga is a point in history that needs to be recovered for it to be indicted. Khavn De La Cruz’s Balangiga: Howling Wilderness (2017) is an attempt to present the war and violence of colonialism by focusing on the edges of the colonial experience instead of its center. In this way, it brings the event closer to its intended audience: the Filipinos of the present that must be reminded of a past to make more sense of its implications today.

The Howling Wilderness

Bob Couttie, in his work Hang the Dogs, narrates how on September 28, 1901, Filipino natives ambushed members of Company C of the 9th US Infantry Regiment while having breakfast, having no clue at all of what was coming to them.4 This calculated attack resulted in 48 dead and 22 injured out of the unit’s 78 soldiers.

The ambush triggered a counter-attack—a retaliation that sheds light on how the American soldiers carried out their duties in the country: filled with contradictions, intent on undermining the resistance of Filipino natives. These characteristics of the Americans’ “duties” are seen in documents that downplayed the force of the Filipino natives which is discussed by John M. Gates,’ also indicating why the attack against Company C launched by the natives was met with the kill and burn order. The Americans considered this attack their “worst single defeat” in the Philippine-American War.4

The film Balangiga captures the aftermath of the Balangiga massacre through the eyes of a child. By having a ten-year-old boy as its main character, the film is able to present colonial violence through a lens that tries to make sense of an unimaginable tragedy with such a limited understanding of what truly happened. Nevertheless, the film challenges this limitation as it does not shy away from showing how a child is transformed by the violence of war and everything that comes with it.

The film opens with a context-building sequence. It situates the characters and the viewers in the historical period of the film. It then proceeds to explore the Philippine-American colonial experience through the consciousness of the boy Kulas, who travels with his grandfather and, later, a much younger boy he adopts and names Bola, in the countryside to avoid the Americans. Throughout the film, the “howling wilderness” is felt in the desolate landscape of Balangiga and the barren pathways traversed by the characters, emphasizing General Smith’s savage order of sparing no one.

Presenting the edges also comes geographically. Kulas’ grandfather tells him they must follow the interior trails. They need to avoid the main roads, which are occupied by Americans. Taking the inner paths makes it more difficult for them to see and reach their destination, but this is their advantage. Along these edges, they can assume to be safe, for this is their land, a land they know, which the Americans do not.

The film also makes it a point to mention how the presence of Americans affected the living conditions of the Filipinos—how it became hard for natives to grow crops and how they were left with barely anything to eat. This situation is also seen during the characters’ journey: they ration their food and how Kulas meets an aging couple with barely any food. The American occupation has made it challenging to meet even the bare minimum.

The characters pass by ruins and dead bodies strewn along their trails throughout the film. Even in his dreams, Kulas sees images of burning houses and shacks, dreams interspersed with his waking nightmare. This imagery gives an idea of the lingering aftermath that the film presents and that the world after the massacre is not just an aftermath—it continues. As long as the Americans remain, this situation in ruins will not go away.

The dead bodies of Filipino natives they encounter along the way remind them that the war persists and trauma lingers. They had escaped the tragedy only to continue trying to escape a living horror in pursuit of survival, which seems futile. As the viewer is taken by the film along the characters’ journey, they are made to experience what the howling wilderness means and the emptiness it has left behind.

Innocence and War

Through the lens of a child, the experience of war is magnified. As Kulas tries to make sense of what is happening around him, he is made to represent the Filipino native—clad in blue and red, symbolic colors of the country. Kulas is the image of the colonial Filipino, and this image becomes more virulent as the film progresses and his character comes to terms with what is happening around him. The audience does not see how Kulas reacts to the massacre as it was happening, a massacre that takes his father’s life as well as those of everyone else they know in their neighborhood. It is his journey in our shared aftermath that the viewers witnesses.

The film opens with a dream sequence of a flying carabao, which evokes a combination of the child’s innocence and the war’s violence. Kulas’s disposition as a child is emphasized in the film by including his dream sequences filled with colors, surreal images, his beloved pet, his mother. Primarily, Kulas’s dreams are a refuge detached from his waking life. In his dreams, he can do more than just try and survive and keep living. These dreams are punctuated with his waking up to images of dead animals and people—a harsh reminder that this is the reality he must face.

As the film progresses and as the journey of Kulas deepens, the film presents how Kulas becomes acquainted with the violence brought by American colonialism. His dreams become darker. The image of burning houses where he saved Bola remains in his subconscious and eventually reappears. He dreams of his family hiding from something he cannot see, and the film makes it a point to make it feel overwhelming as if to say that this is fear at its sharpest with how it plays with light and darkness coupled with the unsettling sound of the surroundings.

Aside from Kulas, his grandfather, and Bola, the film presents another character—a lone American soldier who comes across the protagonists and proceeds to bound them. The soldier represents American colonization by embodying a dominating and violent force. In the entirety of the film, this character is the only direct representative of the presence of American soldiers.

Standing tall next to Kulas and Bola, the American soldier appears dominant while, by extension, emphasizing the inferiority of the Filipino (as) children. This juxtaposition recalls how American colonizers reinforced the image of the Filipino native as the little brown brother—one who needs the big civilized American man to live and survive.
The viewers do not see actual attacks done by the Americans on the Filipino natives. Still, as this soldier threatens Kulas and Bola, steals their food, and kills Melchora, their pet carabao, the film magnifies how this single soldier can substitute for the entirety of the American soldiers’ atrocities.

As Kulas faces the American soldier, the boy wrestles with the presence of the aggressor, a threat to his life—an aggressor who, even in the ruins of the aftermath, is still taking advantage of what is left behind. This face-off instills in him a raw and visible rage.

The American soldier is last seen in the film being attacked by the Filipinos, with Kulas and Bola looking on. This scene serves as a reimagining of the initial attack launched by the natives on the American soldiers. It could also be seen as a materialization of Kulas’s own anger and contempt for the American soldier who had taken advantage of him and Bola. As he watches the Filipinos attack the American, he stands firm, unmovable, weathered from what he had been made to go through to keep on living.

The Edges of the Colonial Experience

Balangiga presents to its audience the edges of the Philippine-American colonial experience. The audience is not made to see the tragedy; Balangiga makes the viewer piece together the unseen parts of the tragedy. This strategy captures the American colonial experience from a different perspective, as if surviving in the country’s national consciousness in fragments rather than in one straightforward narrative. The film carefully treads along the edges of the massacre, not because it wants to cover something up but because it wants to show something beyond the most obvious.

By presenting the edges of a point in history that needs revisiting for lack of primary and archival evidence, the film turns the singular story, the journey of Kulas, his grandfather, and Bola, into one that encapsulates the Philippine-American colonial experience. Their journey stands for the journey many Filipinos took during the Philippine-American War: toward survival and the hope of freedom.

The film makes it a point to not directly point the viewer to the atrocities done by the American soldiers against the Filipino natives; what it does is ensure the viewer of the aggressors’ presence—how it is always there. One feels this in the echoing gunshots in the middle of Kulas and his grandfather’s journey. What is heard is not directly seen. The film offers the idea that what Kulas and his grandfather escaped from may be a singular event, but it persists, and their escape does not mean they have already survived.

By leading the viewer to the edges, the film paves a trail toward a renewed understanding of the Philippine-American colonial experience. This observation is also to say that the Balangiga massacre is not isolated and that these violent attacks, especially their lingering aftermaths, define the Philippine-American War.

Kulas’s making sense of what is happening around him forges the process of world-building based on the reality he grasps as a ten-year-old boy amidst a war that has taken everything away from him. The film does not shy away from showing how this boy becomes filled with rage, sadness, frustration—an apparent breaking away from the conventional expectations of how children should act, feel, or think in a safer world.

A Forgotten War

Many refer to the Philippine-American War as a forgotten war. The conversation regarding the Philippine-American War, even at present, is limited. Ileto says that this situation is because the remembrance of the war goes against the idea of the Philippine-American friendship embedded in the Filipino consciousness, which is premised on kinship. The artificial sense of friendship between the Philippines and the United States reinforces the act of forgetting. The “benevolent assimilation” is an empty proclamation that masked the violence that American colonialism was built upon.

The Americans considered Balangiga as one of the last two rebel strongholds of the Philippine “insurgency.” Perhaps, the United States assumed that occupying the Philippines would be met with no resistance, but the natives proved this otherwise. Thus, the Balangiga massacre captures the atrocities the Americans have done to the country and its people and the Filipinos’ resistance even unto death.

What Balangiga ultimately achieves in narrating the story of Kulas is emphasizing how the war must be remembered and how its afterlives linger—how war goes beyond physical encounters and direct attacks. Balangiga depicts the surrounding details, implications, and what we often choose to disregard or forget, maybe out of fear of accepting what it could mean. There is more to what is already known, the film suggests. The journey of two children and a grandfather as they try to escape death from the American soldiers is not a heartwarming or inspiring story. It is harsh or inspiring in what war looks like beyond the physical encounters and direct attacks: people left behind, lost, hungry, perpetually escaping from the inescapable.

The persistence of the Philippine-American War’s aftermath went beyond official dates decided and declared by the United States. Its effects are not only represented in the burned houses and dead bodies encountered by the characters in the film; it is in every journey a Filipino native has taken in pursuit of escaping the violence and indelible effects of colonization. Balangiga serves as a memorial—an indictment of sorts.

The attempts to recover the bells of Balangiga have a long history. One of these bells was struck to mark the launch of the attack against Company C. The bells, taken away by the Americans as war trophies, were returned to the country only on December 11, 2018. This return marked the recovery of an essential fragment of our colonial past—an object that can help reclaim the memory of the atrocities and our resistance and survival.

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Endnotes

3 See William McKean, Benevolent Assimilation: Proclamations (Washington, DC, 1898).
11 Gregorio, “How Balangiga Bells Were Given Back to PH.”
Hollywood and Vietnam

According to John Hellman, the American experience in Vietnam destroyed facets of American exceptionalism as it carved a colossal stain in its national history and legacy. Unlike previous wars, the encounter in Vietnam damaged the credibility and political reputation of the United States. With the United States’ questionable objectives and overwhelming deployment of armed forces in Asia, the American public was divided by the Vietnam experience. The so-called Vietnam war birthed an internal conflict called the Vietnam syndrome, which Marvin Kalb defined as the “fundamental reluctance to commit American military power anywhere in the world, unless it is absolutely necessary to protect the national interests of the country.” This war exposed the U.S.’s weakness during the Cold War’s most critical junctures.

Only a handful of films were produced during the actual conflict that tackled the Vietnam experience. The only Hollywood fictional film that addressed the U.S. involvement in Vietnam was The Green Berets (1968), an “ultra-right-wing fantasy” as characterized by Douglas Kellner. The John Wayne starrer, despite its colossal box office score, was heavily criticized for being “propaganda,” a “cruel and dishonest” depiction of the Vietnam experience, justifying the U.S.’s ambitious foreign policy and ambiguous military advancement. Other films of the period, such as M*A*S*H (1970), Catch-22 (1970), Soldier Blue (1970), and Johnny Got His Gun (1971), only dealt with the war indirectly.

After the United States’ defeat in Saigon in 1975, numerous films were produced about the war. The early films turned to the “returning vet” theme. In their study of American political films, Ryan and Kellner write that most of these films featured the narrative of veterans who have become violent, alienated, confused, and wounded because of the war. “The post-traumatic stories, as seen in films like Black Sunday (1977), Who’ll Stop the Rain (1978), and Coming Home (1977), were apparent attacks on the U.S. intervention in Vietnam, as they narrate the damaging physical and mental impact of war on American soldiers. They question their nation’s militarism, echoing antiwar sentiments. However, they also served as the ground for a new political cinematic approach, a restructuring of American ideas onscreen. Such narratives became the “psychological basis upon which post-Vietnam Americans are enlisted into the new militarism,” signaling “a source of resentment.”

This motif of the returning vet pervaded the 1970s Vietnam war films until new themes appeared from the late 1970s onward. Richard Slotkin argues that this new era’s films were neoconservative, seeking to “revivify the American war imaginary” and “re-imagine the scenarios of cinematic heroism in the light of post-Vietnam disillusion.” Simultaneously, the Vietnam syndrome also drastically disappeared during the period, making the US venture its return to the international political and military sphere. The apparent return of the United States to the “jungles” of Vietnam can be seen in the films The Deer Hunter (1978), Apocalypse Now (1979), Platoon, Full Metal Jacket (1987), and the Rambo series (1982, 1985, 1988).

Platoon in the Philippines

Directed by Oliver Stone, who is also known for his provocative historical films, Platoon focuses on the story of a young man, Chris Taylor (Charlie Sheen), who enlisted for military duties in Vietnam. On the battlefield, Taylor discovers the horrors of war, which gradually destroys his sanity. The film was acclaimed for its exceptional rendition of the Vietnam experience, emphasizing the layers of relational struggles, moral dilemmas, and internal conflicts that the characters face throughout the war. Platoon is often considered the cinematic pinnacle of Stone’s filmography, paving the way for his rise as a respected director in Hollywood. The film is the first part of his Vietnam war trilogy followed by Born on the Fourth of July (1989) and the deemed pro-Vietnamese Heaven and Earth (1993). However, as John Kleinen claims, Platoon was not the first film Stone created about Vietnam, as he earlier made a short film titled Last Year in Vietnam (1971) in the film class of Martin Scorsese.

After the Vietnamese government rejected Stone’s request to film in Vietnam because of the possible problematic portrayal of their native troops, the Philippines became the primary filming location for Platoon. Platoon was mainly shot in Manila, Cavite, and Laguna. As presented in the documentary Platoon: Brothers in Arms (2018), intensive military training was commissioned before filming began, led by Vietnam war veteran Dale Dye. It placed the actors in a simulacrum of the Vietnamese experience as they toured through the jungles of the Philippines, living as deployed military men.

A parallel spectacle attends the production of Platoon. Filming started in February 1986, as the EDSA Revolution that overthrew the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos was happening. In his autobiography, Stone narrates that the production of Platoon was nearly halted because of the political unrest. Some actors decided to leave due to the looming danger. Despite the complications, the film continued its production for seven weeks with a budget of $6 million, as written in the encyclopedia about Oliver Stone. In an interview with Rappler, Jun Juhan, the local film coordinator, shared his production experience:

It was a very tough shoot, made even more complicated when it was being done right in the middle of the EDSA Revolution. We had to delay the start of filming for about a week. Luckily, after Marcos left, I was able to talk to General Fidel Ramos. He allowed us to proceed with the filming in spite of the fact that my DND (Department of National Defense) contract and approval were with the past regime… I can only say that if Ramos did not say yes, Platoon would have never been made, and Oliver would not have been Oliver.
Platoon was released in December of the same year. It received positive reviews from critics and the public and numerous awards, including four Academy Awards for Best Picture, Best Director for Stone, Best Sound, and Best Film Editing. The film grossed almost $140 million at the box office. It was eventually included in the American Film Institute’s 100 YEARS…100 MOVIES list and selected for being culturally, historically, and aesthetically significant and worthy of film preservation by the National Film Registry of the Library of Congress. It also influenced the war genre and paved the way for other Vietnam War films, including Hanoi Hilton (1987), Gardens of Stone (1987), and Full Metal Jacket (1987).  

Platoon was renowned for its excellent simulacrum of the Vietnam War experience, particularly its depiction of war realism. The realistic approach to the film’s story is credited to Stone’s experience in Vietnam. This approach was integral as it forms part of Stone’s motive in pushing for the progressive, countercultural, and antiwar agenda of Platoon. Stone presented his socio-political critique through his Manichaeism characterization of Staff Sergeant Bob Barnes (Tom Berenger) and Sergeant Elias Gordon (Willem Dafoe), as well as Taylor, his onscreen alter ego. With the creative and antiwar agenda of Platoon, Stone was renowned for its excellent simulacrum of the Vietnam War experience, particularly its depiction of war realism.

Flirting with Orientalism  

Political and cultural complexities emerge in selecting the Philippines as the film’s location. Hollywood has a long history of using foreign landscapes as locations for its films and apparently considers the Philippines and Vietnam as similar or identical geographic and cinematic Vietnam. Platoon is set in the Philippines, as the film’s location is chosen to represent Vietnam in the film’s story. However, despite these critical assertions, Oliver Stone notes that Stone was “a filmmaker yet to gain the any real status within an industry” that focuses solely on commercial success, making him shape the film “in such a way as to avoid alienating certain, particularly conservative, audience demographics,” consequently aligning himself and his film with the traditional conventions of Hollywood.

Despite its antiwar themes, Platoon’s simultaneous AuthService and plot betrays an imperialist nostalgia for-US Philippine films, Leong Yew notes that the tropical country became a constant location for “war films, jungle horror, exploitation, and women-in-captivity films” made for the American market, such as those directed by Filipino directors like Cirio H. Santiago, Gerardo de Leon, and Eddie Romero, in creative acts that may be deemed as forms of self-exoticization. The American industrial utilization of the Philippines as a filming location continued in the following decades, eventually in bigger films, such as The Year of Living Dangerously (1992), Brokedown Palace (1999), Thirteen Days (2000), The Bourne Legacy (2012), and numerous Vietnam War films.

Many of these films are supposed to stand in for other Southeast Asian countries—for example, The Year of Living Dangerously and Brokedown Palace are set in Thailand, while Apocalypse Now, The Boys in Company C (1978), Missing in Action (1984), Platoon, and Born on the Fourth of July, in Vietnam—and some cases, Latin American countries like Cuba, as with Thirteen Days. The films are shot somewhere other than where they are set narratively, in places Western audiences would fail to recognize or distinguish the difference. This practice discloses the homogenizing treatment of the American film industry toward countries that form part of the Third World. Thus, in these films, the Philippines is visible yet also entirely invisible.

This tendency is part of a long-held Orientalist tradition. Relying on the “imaginative geography” of the West, Said argues how the East/Orient is described as “an enclosed space” that is distant yet affixed from the West and whose “role…is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate.” Such imperialist imaginations and colonizing processes homogenize “other” cultures and histories, including their geographies and environments. Thus, it is a way of seeing and not seeing the Philippines, figuring its absence onscreen. Its presence is rendered only as a backdrop while it plays a minimal role, in most cases none, in the film’s narratives.

The Hollywood industrial use of foreign landscapes, such as the Philippines, as cinematic material parallels the US colonial annexation and absorption of foreign lands in their territory, history, and visual culture. The choice of the Philippines as the filming location of Platoon registers an imperial attitude in the industrial disregard for the unique histories and cultures of the Philippines and Vietnam, histories, and cultures that the United States altered through colonization and intervention. It loosely yet forcefully ignores and depoliticizes their fierce anti-colonial national struggles and instead bleeds them out for cinematic enjoyment and entertainment.

Similar to Ellen Strain’s contestation of spaces and tourist gaze, this exoticization and Othering involves “a negotiation of boundaries in order to bolster a sense of self” of the West. In relation, Wendy Gan posits that “the exotic comes to seem less a space of possibility than one of impossibility.” The imperialism conducted in the transitioning centuries of the nineteenth to twentieth reduced that “elsewhere space of the Other” as “rampant imperialism [absor[ing]] the Other into the body of the [Western Self] and thereby effacing the very ground of exoticism.” This Obfuscation is rehearsed in the conceptual and screens the colonization of the Philippines-as-location in Platoon.

Moreover, the decision to take the Philippines-as-Vietnam unwittingly recalls the United States’s colonizing self, prioritizing exoticization, and taking for granted cultural superiority. The decision also summons the memory of early films about the Philippines. The cinematic schemes and techniques used in early American films set in the Philippines are reactivated, functioning similarly to sustain imperialist motives. Hence, Platoon assumes the role of an accessory that supplies the longing for American imperialism.

Abjection of Identities

Despite its antiraw themes, Platoon’s simultaneously deliberate, unwitting, and double-faced vision of the Philippines-as-Vietnam betrays an imperialist nostalgia that assumes American superiority. As Taylor describes his war experience in the film, “We did not fight the enemy, we fought ourselves.” In other words, in Platoon, subjective narratives wrestle not only with the imperial self, not the Filipinos or the Vietnamese. This reading agrees with what many analyses assert about Vietnam War films. According to Marita Sturken, such narratives have “the impact of erasing the war of and with the Vietnamese, not only the terrible numbers of their dead but the story of the skilled Vietnamese army and
guerrillas that ultimately defeated the United States.” This limited and personalistic framing of the Vietnam experience reveals Hollywood’s complicated approach to the narratives surrounding the war.

This prioritization of the one-sided thematic exposition of the American military’s personal experiences disturbs anxieties about the power of representations in the film. Other than the limits of narrativity, the politics of film space also play a vital role in illustrating power. Central dispositions on the film screen connote dominance. In the entirety of Platoon, the consumption of American military men of the film space is consistent. The camera prioritizes the display of American bodies, while the Vietnamese remain invisible and, in some instances, appear only as shadows. Worse, Renny Christopher avers: “The NVA are portrayed as a ghostly, invisible and, in some instances, appear only as shadows. Worse, the consumption of American military dispositions on the film screen connote dominance. In the war, as Kleinen observes, “the enemy (Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army [or NVA]) remains hidden for most” and “exists just off camera, hidden by jungle, as fleeting shadows, or corpses.” This assumes the constructed hierarchy that makes the Other—in this case, the Vietnamese—removed from the screen, spatially evicted, rendered out of sight, no different from the erasure of Filipinos in early American films shot in the Philippines. Similar with Patrick Campos’ assertion in his study of memory, film, and history, the absence on the screen complicates the troubled history of the Vietnam War as it erases the struggle and victory of the Vietnamese and consequently rewrites the narrative that benefits the United States in the same vein that it forgets the Philippine-American war.

**Spatial Colonization**

Throughout the film, the Vietnamese were rendered as invisible, only presented as shadows, difficult to see in the film space. Screenshot from Oliver Stone’s Platoon (Orion Pictures, 1986)

The Filipinos are present in the [films] while being absent physically. Their absence presents a function in the creation of fiction while also reinforcing the imperialist motivation that is reason for their creation: depicting Filipinos as enemies to be conquered. As Filipino independence fighters are vanquished… the imperialist imaginary—and cinematic desire—become fulfilled: American soldiers colonize the screen and declare victory. This is how “history” became written on screen—through the imagination of one American (White), who by his act of filming, history also became encoded on celluloid.

The use of film space in Platoon is reminiscent, perpetuating the colonial imperatives of the United States in a different context yet with similar motives but more insidiously veiled as with antwort sentiments. It stipulates the command of the United States on spatial power relations as it simulates the abjection of other histories and cultures. As Rolando Tolentino opines in his articulation of film space in early American films, Platoon underscores the “masculine imperialist dominance” of the United States as it exposes the feminized positioning of the Filipinos and Vietnam.

This utilization of film space for power relates to the idea of the racialization of space. It is argued that colonization coincided with the development of cinema. Deocampo posits that “early American cinema and US imperialism are inextricably bound together.” Since its early years of colonization, the United States has taken advantage of cinema, utilizing its power to render its cultural superiority and the inferiority of its colonized territories like the Philippines. Early films have capitalized on racial ideology. As discussed by Mark Rice in his book on American imperialism and visuality, these films depict the “savage” bodies of the natives in “ethnographic” films and photographs such as those by Dean Worcester, subsequently creating what Nerissa Balce terms the US imperial archive. Unlike most Vietnam War films, Platoon seems to shift away from the racialization of the Vietnamese. However, in the film, as Kleinen observes, “the enemy (Viet Cong and the North Vietnamese Army [or NVA]) remains hidden for most” and “exists just off camera, hidden by jungle, as fleeting shadows, or corpses.” This assumes the constructed hierarchy that makes the Other—in this case, the Vietnamese—removed from the screen, spatially evicted, rendered out of sight, no different from the erasure of Filipinos in early American films shot in the Philippines. Similar with Patrick Campos’ assertion in his study of memory, film, and history, the absence on the screen complicates the troubled history of the Vietnam War as it erases the struggle and victory of the Vietnamese and consequently rewrites the narrative that benefits the United States in the same vein that it forgets the Philippine-American war.

**Spatial Colonization**

Platoon is one of the first, preceded by Apocalypse Now, to engage the intense cinematic vision of the jungles of Vietnam. However, Platoon differs in its exposition of terror. Kleinen detects this exposition in the film’s camera positioning, rendered to be “always inside the jungle to give an impression of the soldiers’ view of being surrounded by a hostile environment.” The jungle is a crucial aspect of the defeat of the United States Armed Forces in Vietnam. Referencing a United States Army’s field manual during the Vietnam War, Daniel Clayton cites that the “US troops had a fatal attraction to the jungle, viewing it as a dark space at the verge of death” and treating it as a “key obstacle” to American combat effectiveness and placed a “hypnotic spell” on the physical resolve and mental discipline of US troops; this conflicted attraction is visually translated in Platoon.

The film opens with scenes of a dichotomy. It initially shows an innocent Taylor entering Vietnam, and then a weary soldier exiting Vietnam. It soon cuts into a panning high-angle shot of the jungle and later a panning low-angle shot that exposes the jungle timber’s height, introducing the film’s terrain. What follows are scenes of military men trekking in the jungle. Platoon shows bodily discomfort as the men ascend unfamiliar terrains and navigate through the thick of trees and shrubs. Focusing on Taylor makes apparent the uneasiness and physical exhaustion. As Kellner observes, Platoon focuses on projecting “the fear, the uncertainty, and the brutalization undergone by young Americans thrown into the jungles of Nam.”

This kind of visual framing defines the discourse surrounding the Othering of geographies. Clayton argues that “American geopolitical and military discourse had long been imbued with environmental assumptions about how climatic extremes of cold and hot mapped on to binaries of good and evil, progress and backwardness.” David John Arnold explores this idea in the concept of tropicality, which refers to how the West constructs and imagines the geographies of the East, considering it as the environmental Other of the former. In this view, the East is homogenized as part of the “tropics” or lands characterized by extreme heat, moisture, humidity, and torridity. However, as Arnold explains, the tropics become conceptual in the Western mind and are described as “something culturally and politically alien, as well as environmentally distinctive, from Europe and other parts of the temperate zone.” In imperial nostalgia, space is often tropicalized, correlated with the strangeness, primitiveness, pestilence, and peculiarity that would eventually be tamed. Tropical space perpetuates an imperial dichotomy, with binaries that subordinate the East as backward, barbaric, filthy, evil, and in some cases, the adversary, the negative of the West that is developed, civilized, comfortable, clean, and good.

Such geographical Othering is present in early American films set in the Philippines. Deocampo argues that Americans relied on depicting the Philippines as tropical, backward, and culturally retarded in the films of Dean Worcester and Clarence Miller. Often considered “educational films” aimed at providing the American public with the knowledge of their colony in the Pacific, Rice probes that these films argue that “the United States should not relinquish knowledge of their colony in the Pacific.”

Rice argues that these films argue that “the United States should not relinquish control of the Philippines, both for the good of US interest in the region and for the good of the people of the Philippines.” Thus, though seemingly worlds apart, the tropicalization of the Philippines and later Vietnam are premised on the same imperialist attitude, with the latter imbued with a strange combination of terror and nostalgia.
Violence and Memories

A particular scene in Platoon further exposes the film’s complexity, evidencing the terror inscribed in nostalgia and longing for a past imperialist self. It is widely known and documented that the primary basis for condemning the American intervention in Vietnam was the extreme violence that American soldiers inflicted on the local population. The most notorious of these acts of violence was the Mỹ Lai massacre. In March 1968, at the brutal hands of American soldiers, unarmed Vietnamese were raped, mutilated, and killed in what is considered by Bernd Greiner as the most horrific of Vietnam War scenes. According to William Thomas Allison, the casualties numbered more than 500.48

Other than its realistic approach to the jungle experience, Platoon was the first film to dwell on portraying the massacre, which was evoked by earlier Vietnam War films. It reveals the mercilessness of American military men as it renders scenes of maltreatment, physical abuse, and rape. However, the most violent scene comes unexpectedly when Staff Sergeant Bob Barnes shoots a Vietnamese native. Asking for information on the whereabouts of the Viet Cong, Barnes kills the native and holds his daughter for another forceful interrogation. The brutality is stopped by Sergeant Elias, who reasons, “If I wanted to burn, the better it will please me… I want all persons killed and burn. The more you kill and burn, the better it will please me… I want all persons killed who can bear arms in actual hostilities against the United States.”49 The tragedy, which will be remembered as the Bālinggīgı massacre, is estimated to have killed thousands of natives, including children, making it one of the most brutal operations of the United States.

It is not difficult to recognize the similarities between the turtle in Bālinggīgı and the massacre in Mỹ Lai. The latter’s depiction in the film serves as a perverted and veiled articulation of imperialist nostalgia as the United States recalls its imperialist violence through Platoon. The Mỹ Lai massacre scenes operate as visual articulations of the violence and brutality of the United States, critiqued, and therefore redeemed, in an anti-Vietnam War film. However, they simultaneously summon and gloss over the Bālinggīgı and other massacres in the Philippines before Vietnam, similar to how Philippine-American War films mediate and forget history.50

Confluent Frontiers and Regeneration

Toward the film’s end, the titular platoon is assigned to defend the front lines. A military disaster ensues as the soldiers are overwhelmed by an unexpected NVA assault. The nightfall encounter results in numerous casualties on the side of the Americans. In the chaos, Taylor goes berserk, charging toward the unseen enemy, randomly firing his rifle, and killing anyone on his way. In the thick of the moment, he shoots with obscenity: “It’s […] beautiful,” as the violence of the war consumes him. Taylor undergoes a personal metamorphosis, from entering Vietnam as a naive idealist and leaving it as a beast who survives. In the jungles, the experience fails to teach Taylor to abandon violence; instead, by implication, he learns “how to properly use it,” as argued by McCrisken and Pepper.51

This transformation represents the nostalgia of an earlier cinematic convention called the Sergeant Dane Moment. Referencing the propaganda film Bataan (1943), Robert Shokkin describes the convention as the scene where the hero “screams his rage and disgust as he lays down annihilating fire” against his enemies.52 Such a scene in the concluding parts of the film urges the viewers “to finish the job the platoon has started, to learn the enemy’s lesson and win the war.”53 It is an indirect invitation to continue supporting the war and proceed with the nation’s unfinished business. In a similar filmic fashion, Taylor’s moment of metamorphosis assumes the same motives, capping the violence the film criticizes by showing the protagonist’s ultimate hatred of the enemy.

Violence operates as an integral component in Platoon. Identical to Rolando Tolentino’s assertion on other films on the Vietnam War shot in the Philippines, notably Apocalypse Now, Platoon “[refurbishes] history” in its compelling conflation where the “national heritage” of the two nations is “salvaged, resituated, and rehistoricized into a workable narrative.”54 This filmic utilization of violence underlines the imperialist imperatives embodied in the film, functioning as a cinematic device that supports the US effort to erase its stained national identity and failed intervention in Vietnam.
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Endnotes

4. Ibid., 68.
10. Ibid., 198.
20. Welch and Whalle, The Oliver Stone Encyclopedia, 185.
29. Ibid., 9.
37. Kleinen, “Framing ‘the Other’,” 158.
41. Kelly, Media Culture, 119.
44. Ibid., 35.
45. Descamps, Films, 138-139.
46. Rice, Dean Wiscott’s Fantasy Islands, 165.
52. McKee and Pepper, American History, 151.
54. Ibid., 5.
I thought my years of sifting through archives for information to help me construct a history of cinema in the Philippines prepared me enough to breathe through a book like Vernadette Vicuña Gonzales’s _Empire’s Mistress: Isabel Rosario Cooper_ (2021). Picking up the book, however, I was pleasantly surprised to find that the author can still make me sit up and wonder and ask about how archives can yield or hide secrets that could provide knowledge or the absence of it, or as the author herself writes about colonial archives, a “true story.” Her book says a lot about archives as it does about Isabel Rosario Cooper, the subject of the book whose story she pieces together from the generosity or fragility of archives, depending on how the author succeeds or fails in her mission to find traces of her subject’s life. One even gets the feeling that the archive is as much a character in her story as it is about her protagonist. The book’s narrative leads us through a labyrinthine tale pockmarked by crevices and ruptures that speak about absences and disruptions, eschewing a neat closure for its end. It weighs down on the delicate life of a young girl, who had to weigh the pain, end the demons that haunted her life. Her mixed race existence was broken into unnamed chapters and unwritten expressions in two warm bodies snared in one romantic sweep. The book says a lot about archives as it does about Isabel Rosario Cooper, while giving details about Isabel that have for so long been left unknown, adds only to the mystique surrounding her personality. While creating a narrative about a mistress’s tale, the story only becomes more intriguing as one piece of information leads its readers to other befuddling facts about her life. The effect is one of trying to solve a jigsaw puzzle. Or perhaps, a riddle. A conundrum. One never gets to figure out the entire tale about Isabel as pieces about her life are scattered, with many parts missing. But after this book, Isabel’s story can no longer be a gossip told in hushed voices.

Gonzales provides incontestable documents and has struggled to piece together a fragmented tale in a form that mirrors the splintered life of her subject, a life which, as Gonzales continually reminds us, reflects the violence wrought in the Filipinos’ life by their experience of colonialism. The author’s struggle in writing the book shows in the way it takes on a constructivist form, composed of archival documents and library shreds of evidence mixed with imagined fiction, to paint a cubist look at her subject. “Just as Isabel Cooper’s life defy easy categorization, so too must the forms that attend to narrate it.” This Gonzales does well.

For how does one write a story about someone whose life was broken into unnamed chapters and unwritten scenarios? By Gonzales’s admission, she sought succor in places where she could find whatever fragments were left behind of Isabel’s life history. In archives. In libraries. In movie studio records. She sought this in film trade magazines. Perhaps even in gossip columns. Anywhere she could find traces of Isabel’s existential moments on earth. She sought this in obituaries, too, ascertaining what was said after the actress was gone. Despite being rewarded in her search with documents that could help her build a narrative, Gonzales was met with challenges every step of the way. She found a death certificate but not the findings of Isabel’s suicide. Also, the records of the movie star, also, the traces the amorous letters of the mistress’s military paramour but not of her own because, perhaps, she never wrote back. She found photographs of her bit-role career, all smiling and acting, but not one to show her in candid, real-life images—in her ordinary clothes perhaps—to show her in the greatest role she ever played, which was to live. I saw no picture reprinted in the book that showed Isabel as a genuine person behind the acting and the posed shots. Although, maybe as an afterthought, the photos showed the real Isabel Cooper. That was the reality she wanted everyone to remember of her.

In the absence of data, the author resorts to the imagination. It is not a wayward imagination but one shaped by history. It is a history written large over the nilmble life of a tragic heroine. It is a history of imperialism, one country wanting to dominate another. That domination is best shown by the slightly uncertain timeline of Isabel’s true-to-life condition. “As with stories narrated just off the axes of the power, the interrelated workings of gender, sexuality and race are essential to the telling.” So they are. Colonialism, gender, and romance are three main themes underpinned by betrayal, neglect, and, in the end, abandonment. Reading through the book, one feels the heavy weight of History weighing down on the delicate life of a young girl, who had to mature early in life only to feel unwanted and uncared for. In the end, Isabel gave up. But not without giving her last act of courage, end the demons that haunted her life. Her mixed race heritage had something to do with her nomadic life, belonging neither to the country where she was born nor the country where she wanted to belong. She took a stand to face the only remaining place left for her—eternity.

The book offers insights into the workings of empire, penetrating the life of an aspiring actress. Shifting between archive and fiction, colony and empire, ambition and reality—the author successfully suturets into her heroine’s narrative the trappings of colonialism. The theme of the female body, so poorly served by the author in what could be seen as the uncommon traits of the Philippines, she quietly slides into our conversation a hushed whose life was broken into unnamed chapters and unwritten...
REACTION SHOT

appearance in *American Guerilla in the Philippines* (1950). She was followed by a few more, like Gilda Gales, the Greta Garbo of Filipino movies, but, just like Isabel’s, their ambitions were all dashed to disappointment. If it were any consolation to these other actresses, none of their stories was as tragic as Isabel’s. None ended in suicide.

I sympathize with the author in her search for a narrative from the thousand pieces of information she found, with only a few making the cut for the story she wanted to tell. In our search for a past—I with the history of cinema and Gonzales with the story of Isabel—the notion of haunting becomes inevitable. Similar forces haunt both cinema and the actress. Big forces. Both are progenies of the same colonial experience. Offsprings of imperialist desire. Something about their past keeps reminding us of a disturbed and disquieted beginning. The haunting is, however, more felt and more pronounced when told in the desperate story of Isabel Cooper. For hers was a felt experience. She lived it. We empathize with her suffering. We understand her loss. But the haunting we see in her is no less different from what we see in the history of cinema, only grander in scope. What is personally felt becomes institutional and systemic when seen in the cultural infrastructure, such as the Filipino movie industry. There is a line that intersects in both their stories. It cuts deep.

As nothing escapes the burdens laid down by colonial influence, both cinema and the individual suffer from the malady of colonial excess. Isabel suffered throughout her life from the misgivings of a colonial relationship. Similarly, what is overlaid in this human drama is a familiar haunting that plagues Philippine cinema. In it, American cultural influences until now haunt contemporary Filipino cinematic culture.

Gonzales sees the haunting of Isabel through her myriad appearances and reappearances in the many incarnations of the actress and the mistress in media. Cinema’s haunting plagues Filipino culture with its ravaging copycat entertainment over decades of growth. The conundrum a once colonized people faces is this: when will this haunting end? What will it take for the haunting to stop? If we must take heed of the author’s wisdom, she writes at the end of her remarkable “biography” about a mistress and actress, “Perhaps the point is that we need not exorcise ghosts but could come to terms instead with their hauntings and the provocations.” As Isabel continues to find an afterlife in the stories told about her, Filipinos go on living with a culture that remains haunted by a colonial past that has Isabel Rosario Cooper, one of its favored icons, continuing to haunt the present.

Nick Descampo is a documentary filmmaker and film historian. The latest volume in his series of historiographies is *Alternative Cinema: The Unchronicled History of Alternative Cinema in the Philippines* (University of the Philippines Press and Film Development Council of the Philippines, 2022).

Endnotes

2 Ibid, 11.
3 Ibid, 6.
5 Ibid, 159.
In 1919, a young Filipina from Sibonga, Cebu, who went to America to study Radio, auditioned and landed a role in a major silent film made in San Francisco. By the 1920s, the San Francisco Chronicle, the Los Angeles Times, and newspapers all over the US hailed Elena Jurado as "the only Filipino who has risen to the ranks of principal in American Cinema" after her appearance in White Hands (1922) where she played the role of an Arabian girl who served and danced in a café. She was nicknamed "The Swede" among the cast and crew after Hobart Bosworth, dubbed the Dean of Hollywood, learned her name was Elena.

Years later, she appeared in two other silent films about American sailors fighting over women abroad in What Price Glory (1926) and A Girl in Every Port (1928), where she played minor roles before completely disappearing from the industry.

On 27 November 2019, ARCHIVO1984 Gallery hosted an exhibit and a lecture by multi-awarded writer Wilfredo Pascual called "Finding Elena." Pascual showcased his collection of photographs and news clippings of "the First Filipino Movie Star in Hollywood," following her curious rise to fame and her final performances as an actress. The writer’s talk presented his extensive research on Elena and how, through his passionate search for her, his life as a gay Filipino American became deeply entwined with hers.

Images in this section are from the collection of Wilfredo Pascual, except where noted, and courtesy of ARCHIVO1984.
Victor McLaglen with Girl #1 in Panama, Elena Jurado, in *A Girl in Every Port*
Elena plays the role of an Arabian girl who serves and dances in a cafe in "White Hands" (1922). 

Newspaper writeup published in San Francisco Chronicle, 26 June 1923, which gives details on the suit filed by Elena Jurado against the Motion Picture Utility Corporation. The suit was later dismissed.
News clipping from the New York Daily News written by Irene Thier, the paper’s film critic, featuring Elena Jurado and Victor McLaglen, for her writeup.

Newspaper clipping captioned, “Miss Elena Jurado who has her own company and will shoot pictures with her native land as her background. A special part in an emergency made her. She is a college graduate.”

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Elena Jurado with Hobart Bosworth, a photograph with a note from Elena, “To Mr. Bosworth—Sincere appreciation and many kindness to me during ‘White Hands.’ Lena Jacobs, Alias, ‘Swede’, 1921.”
To create the installation, I have recycled old curtains and bed covers (objects of my own sewing and mending) and arranged them with other household implements. Mostly rags petrified into black, roughly textured domestic artifacts, I interspersed them with mementos of familial and religious devotion. A craggy sack-cloth pillow on tiles laid out as a cold bed, an iron board adorned with Mater Dolorosa’s ray, a flat-iron hanging over worn-out slippers, an empty dish on a microwave oven, a hand reaching out, prickly mittens clipped with sentimental cassette tapes, a native mat, a fatigue suitcase, a faded flag, an arm cleaning a high rise window, a grass broom, a vacuum cleaner, images of the Virgin Mary, maid’s uniforms, a rope, a chain, a knife.


In the passage above, the artist Imelda Cajipe Endaya narrates images in a montage that jumps across time and space detailing a sequence of escalating horrors. In her text, grisly domestic tools forebode the violence of the last objects in her list: a rope, a chain, a knife. The list is from the artist’s notes on the components of her installation, Filipina DH (1995), a work that looks at the conditions and experiences of Filipina domestic workers in the mid-1990s. The image above was taken from the 1995 installation of the work at the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) Gallery in Intramuros, where it was shown as part of an exhibition with Egay Fernandez and Jose Tence Ruiz entitled Focus: OCWs—OCW for overseas contract workers.

Not shown in the photograph are two more arrangements by Cajipe Endaya: a black coffin (or an “isolation box”) which hung from a noose-like chain allowing the box to hover several feet off the floor, and a slideshow of images projected on a layered patchwork of light-colored maids uniforms which served as a screen. The slideshow includes images of Mater Dolorosa and the child Jesus; a brown, colonial-era caregiver; newspaper images of Flor Contemplacion and her children; Sarah Balabagan, whose trial followed the execution of Flor Contemplacion; and other photos of Filipina domestic workers from headlines of the time.

Lastly, the installation included music. Pieces by composers Jonas Baes and Dodjie Fernandez accompanied dance artist Myra Beltran’s Birdwoman, performed when the exhibition opened. Beltran’s performance for Filipina DH is an excerpt from a much longer piece.
Future, an understanding of filmic and protofilmic techniques is the basis for a different kind of making—but through it. It is a way of making sense of the ephemeral “discards” of works of art, given the limited capacities of material-based record keeping in our corner of the planet but also given the artist’s disinterest in the total possession of permanent objects (Cajipe Endaya has repeatedly referred to most of the objects in her installation work as “discards” saving but one assemblage, the aforementioned “Blouse of Dignity,” and the black textile backdrop with her handwriting—among over twenty other discrete components) and in a sense implying that such images serve as an important resource of the work, becoming itinerant and discursive artifacts of the installation. These images become, in the words of Monica E. McTighe, the work’s “mediator(s) of history and experience,” carrying with them flattened, circulating representations of fully embodied displays of objects and allowing them to decompress in the viewer’s mind, extending and expanding once more across various readings. They then gain status, for better or worse, as they travel the different realms of art.

This capacity of the installation photograph or document allows for ideas to drift. These photographs can remain in an archive, serve as references for future reinstallations, be mined as research material on the artist’s oeuvre, or even be sold as prints. They are also almost always moving, and traveling. The images of Filipina DH have been featured in over a dozen publications and/or newspapers locally and overseas since the ‘90s, the latest of which was by Terry Smith, closing the chapter on Asia from his book Contemporary Art: World Currents (2011). The artwork’s images echo the itinerancy of the bodies of the women whose physicality is implicated in the work. Unlike the artwork’s documentation, however, which remains preserved in time—still is the word in film for the taking of images during production—these Filipina domestic workers at present, almost thirty years after, navigate a space where they have now taken part in their own simulations, conveying their own images. Social media has afforded these workers a different kind of mobility, allowing a number of them to host vlogs, lend advice to those who aspire to work overseas, and show “a day in the life of” a domestic worker in Hong Kong, Romania, Japan, the US. Like the simulated images in Filipina DH, these women occupy a world of fast-moving, share-driven images, slipping in and out of the transmission, enormously felt, and the slideshow as pre-cinema technology and pedagogical tool in art history.

Photography

The complexity of artwork documentation, particularly of works that are time-based and/or site-specific such as video art, installation art, and performance, has been described by Amelia Jones as having a unique relationship with those who interact with documentary traces of the work. While such ruminations insist on the singularity of experiencing documentary evidence of live works of art, film language relies on photography (or perhaps, its filmic counterpart, cinematography) in order to insist on a film’s “reality.” Hence, continuity is a virtue—unless explicitly broken as a rule—and day for night or night for day treatments of light are considered basic cinematographic techniques. Light is the storyteller, and simulation is paramount. Unlike the argument for photographic documentation existing on the same plane as the live experience of time-based and site-specific work, film photography argues for its own kind of experience, which it labors to keep intact throughout the film.

In Filipina DH, there are two primary kinds of photographs in question. The first kind is the images that “simulate” the experience of seeing the work firsthand and in the flesh back in 1995, that is, its documentation. The second kind is the images in the slideshow, which are projected continuously on layered maid’s/uniforms, simulating a kind of courtroom presentation of evidentiary material: Exhibit A, Exhibit B. For those like me, who only witnessed the sensualized lives of Contemplacion and Balabagan on TV as a child, these grainy, visual documents recall the age of brownouts and corporal metaphors of migration—katas ng Saudi—but also now, as a mother myself, the heft of such horrors. I pause and remember Susan Sontag: “Eventually, one reads into the photograph what it should be saying.”

By looking closely at the first kind of photographs, the images serve as an important resource of the work, becoming itinerant and discursive artifacts of the installation. These images become, in the words of Monica E. McTighe, the work’s “mediator(s) of history and experience,” carrying with them flattened, circulating representations of fully embodied displays of objects and allowing them to decompress in the viewer’s mind, extending and expanding once more across various readings. They then gain status, for better or worse, as they travel the different realms of art.

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There is, importantly, the exceptional work of Xyza Cruz Bacani and Joan Pabona. They have turned to photojournalism to assert latitude within and outside their artistic practices while employed as domestic workers. Potentialities in these more recent directions of women engaged in overseas domestic work point toward image-making as a conveyance of decades of fraught transactions of bodies to maintain and sustain life, simulations of lives as scar tissue from the past, and other recent wounds in convalescence, remain fresh.
Mise-en-scene

*Filipina DH* is often described as “room-sized,” literally occupying a room. There are over twenty objects laid out almost as if they were composed for a live event or performance or, possibly, the aftermath of one of these. No singular form or object draws you in, no closed, solid, geometric shapes or any subtle interrogations of the grid. There is no allusion to representations of monuments.

These are the objects as they are but wrapped in a coarse exterior, stiff and heavily textured with a little color, almost everything in black and white. These are not imitative stand-ins or metaphors. According to Grace Glueck of the *New York Times*, they are, unapologetically, props.

In film language, mise-en-scene is typically “everything happening within the frame,” and *Filipina DH* is inventively composed as if it were inside one—as if it were simply waiting for a camera. In fact, its very first installation was primarily for photography. Cajipe Endaya made it to propose a work to a Thailand-based curator for an exhibition. The artist worked with the Cultural Center of the Philippines’ Production Center to put together the components in their workshop and composed them for photographs which were sent to the curator for review. There was no real audience for this first iteration of the work except for friends and colleagues who happened to be in the area and dropped by to take a look. It was, for all intents, a photography shoot with Julio Sambajon of the CCP. Several months later, the artist re-installed it at the NCCA, this time for public exhibition, where it was photographed again, this time by Manit Sriwanichpoom, who was assigned to take images of all the works for the *Traditions/ Tensions* exhibition catalog.

The arrangement of the components in *Filipina DH* has once been dismissively described in an overseas daily by Eleanor Heartney as “mere accumulation,” with the reviewer was assigned to take images of all the works for the exhibition. It was, for all intents, a photography shoot with Julio Sambajon of the CCP. Several months later, the artist re-installed it at the NCCA, this time for public exhibition, where it was photographed again, this time by Manit Sriwanichpoom, who was assigned to take images of all the works for the *Traditions/ Tensions* exhibition catalog.

This latter statement, aside from indicating the work’s reception, allows us to see the entirety of the installation not just as evocations of materials, events, and bodies but also as the artist’s attempt at bringing forth the aesthetics of an artist’s studio (all things beloved and inspirational in a devotional space) and the ordinariness of objects outside of it visible in one plane. It is a simultaneous transposition and transformation of contexts that allows us also to figure out how the borders between what does and does not constitute art are ultimately invented. What we get for mise-en-scene is a composite of both the artist’s creative life and the lives of other women. Perhaps it is also a way for the artist to bridge and think through realities to which she has limited means of access, but means of access she pursues, nonetheless.

Lastly, the reference to props is not entirely a misnomer. During its two opening days in Manila, Myra Beltran performed an excerpt from her piece *Birdwoman* within the installation. She would perform the piece again a year later in Casa San Miguel in San Antonio, Zambales, this time within the longer *Birdwoman-Filipina DH* excerpt. Beltran brought several components from the installation, including the black canvases with handwritten text (text lifted from an ad for Filipino domestic workers) and three pieces of luggage which two other dancers used with Beltran as props for one segment. *Birdwoman* is a dance that interprets a Japanese folktale about a Crane-woman who uses her feathers to weave cloth for trade, offered to the man who saved her from a hunter’s arrow. In Beltrains performance, documented by video, objects from the installation are recycled once more as objects to convey the metaphor of “this sacrifice by the bird woman.”

In Beltran’s piece, the Filipino worker moves from someone bound to home to what May Adadol Ingawanj may describe as a “creatively becoming” of a woman who finally takes flight after weaving her body into cloth.

### Slideshow

As I write this, I am working on a slideshow of *Filipina DH* for Imelda Cajipe Endaya’s retrospective at the Cultural Center of the Philippines. The slideshow consists of images from her archive, including her own photographs aside from Sambajon’s and Sriwanichpoom’s. The uneventfulness of the material guides us. More time and care are evidently given to some of the components than the rest of the objects in terms of building an archive of images. I imagine a more “balanced” sense of the photo documentation must have been submitted to the curator when this work was in its proposal stage. What the artist’s case at the moment reflected, however, was a tendency toward certain materials and mood. What might this tell us about the artist’s intentions for the afterlives of this work?

I worked with Aica Baja to put together what we hoped would be a complete overview of the work, aiming to provide viewers like ourselves who could not experience the work firsthand with a panorama of the room. We were given most materials: generally well-kept, scanned, and labeled slide films.

Gradually, as we edited the slideshow, it seemed some images were meant to have more screen time than the rest. For example, there were hardly any images of the boombox and the microwave with the plaster-cast hand, but several close-ups from different angles of the ironing board with Mater Dolora’s ray or rostrillo. There are several isolated detail shots of the rope, the chain, and the knife but almost none of the snaking, space-defining black luggage on the floor that we hoped to include. During the NCCA opening, the bags included inscriptions on their luggage tags addressed to migrant workers from visitors of the exhibition, including, according to Cajipe Endaya “the First lady, the Senate President, head of the overseas labor commission, social workers, returnees, and migrant workers’ families, school teachers and students.”

While we might have missed such performative details that hint at the reception of the work outside art reviews, Cajipe Endaya’s account and those of others who witnessed the installation firsthand, along with other descriptive texts, corroborate a work that is poignant, variable, unfamiliar (or too familiar), sentimental, discomfiting, tactile, literal, interpretational, and ornamental.

I am currently layering my understanding of the images based on extant discards of the work or what has been left for the archive. There is no existing video documentation, so I rely solely on the photographs for spatial orientation. Picking together materials from various sources, I also think a lot about what the artist seemed to dwell on—Mater Dolora’s ray, which echoes an image of the actual Mater Doloresa statue in one of the images shown through the slide projector. The sorrowful mother and her imposing rostrillo belong to Cajipe Endaya’s iconography of images which the artist almost always places compositionally in contradicting or ambiguous contexts. One of her earlier paintings, *Tutol ni Dolorosa* (1992), shows the Virgin Mother utterly displeased (i.e., masungit), arms crossed in annoyance just beneath her golden glowing heart with seven sorrowful blades pierced through it.

Thinking through the images of the slide projector and the slideshow that this ephemeral installation work will now take the form of, I cannot help but think about the slideshow itself as a format that exists in collocation with art history. As many have commented before, the slideshow is *art* history itself. There would be no teaching,
knowing, and concluding of ideas about art without it—how else to speak of a completely alien painting from sixteenth-century Spain, for example, which we have never seen, smelled, or aurally engaged with and yet must attempt to appreciate in order to dramaturgically narrate our understandings of, but through a reproduction?

In early cinema, a precursor of the slideshow was the magic lantern—an early image projector with a focusing lens popularized in European cities in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries until the arrival of film or the moving picture almost a hundred years later. With hand-painted plates or slides, the projectors magnified images for phantasmagoria and “spectral performances,” often to render ghosts and other spectral beings more phantom-like for spooking out audiences inside a theater—an early house of horrors.

I recall these as I look at the Filipina DH slideshow and its slideshow—thinking about the ghosts of an artwork. The suffering is still there, but now speaking from a different time and place. There is no longer the spectacle of diplomatic state failures and cruel and painful martyrdoms. These traces of a particular moment, the intricacies of which are now open not to reconstruction, but reimagining and retelling, led us to make the slideshow in the first place. Not to lecture or pretend that the images shown are the work as it is or was. It is to tell another story, another kind of moment. One that, with much hope, continues and allows for the work’s ideas to inspire other trajectories and traverse difficult thoughts, perhaps enough to harness energy for the subsequent retelling for the next moment—not as balm or medicine, but as a companion.

And while I struggle with this task of representation, I think a lot about Claire Denis, who said it most acutely about films that exist in a world that will always be cruel despite society’s or the maker’s aspirations of regeneration: “Films are not repairing…films are offering the best they can…not to hurt, but to be with….”

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Endnotes
2 It is worth noting that on some occasions there are actual physical photographs included in the display particularly those on the floor, laid out with garlic, mailing envelopes, and a novena. These small (around 4R) photos were snapshots of people outdoors and the Virgin Mary.
3 Susan Sontag, Regarding the Pain of Others (New York: Picador Press), 25.
4 Xyza Cruz Bacani, We are Like Air (Hong Kong: WE Press Co. Ltd., 2010), n.p.
9 Ibid.
10 Myra Beltran, e-mail message with the author, July 19, 2022.
12 Ibid.
According to the Philippine Statistics Authority, 1.77 million Filipino nationals worked overseas as Overseas Foreign Workers (OFWs) as of 2020. Of that number, 1.71 million worked as Overseas Contract Workers (OCWs), i.e., an OFW with an active working contract. Today, according to Maruja Asia, more than ten million Filipinos or people with Filipino heritage are either working or living abroad.

The current space of foreign migrant workers, and in turn, the films that depict these workers, stem from the latest multiple migrations from the Philippines that have existed since the dawn of transnational trade and the opening of Philippine borders to the global community. This latest global labor migration, starting in the late 1960s and the early 1970s, consisted initially of male labor workers to the Middle East, then mostly female migrants to East Asia, following rapid economic growth in those countries. Filomeno V. Aguilar states that this latest phase of migration stems from the Labor Code of 1974, instituted by the Marcos dictatorship, which codified labor export and human resources as state policy—a policy that has persisted through subsequent administrations up to the present day.

It is then worth looking at examples of films that take place during this latest wave of migrations. Luckily, there is no dearth of examples, and there is an abundance of films about the topic. In terms of widely seen mainstream films from the past few decades, Cherish Aileen A. Brillon notes Milan (2004) and Dubai (2005) as some of the first films from Star Cinema, arguably the largest filmmaking outfit in the country at the time, that dealt with migrant Filipino workers.

However, tracing the lineage of these contemporary OFW films does not start nor end with those two films. Arguably, one could draw the line further back in time to Olivia Lamasan’s Sana Maulit Muli (1995), a romantic movie about a woman who goes to work abroad, initially looking into.5 Notably, in the 2000s and 2010s Asian cinema, many Filipino roles during this time reflected the widespread stereotype of the female Filipino domestic worker, as seen in films like the Maid (2005) or Mercedes Cabral’s small role in Park Chan-wook’s Thirst (2008). Some films closely interrogate the transactional, often temporary nature of the relationship between these workers and their employers and the potential of forming emotional bonds with them, seen in films like Ilo Ilo (2013) or Still Human (2018), and partially in documentaries such as Baby Ruth Villarasa’s Sunday Beauty Queen (2016). Films such as Isabel Sandoval’s Lingua Franca (2019) and Frederikke Aspöck’s Rosita (2015) feature foreign nationals who try, and eventually fail, to form relationships with these migrants and workers, partially due to political and gender discrimination in the former, and financial concerns in both. Depictions of the Filipino diaspora were not very common in Western media until recently, with the push for greater representation among Asian (and particularly Southeast Asian) cultures.

Much more rarely, films are made by overseas workers in their country of residence, which reflects their struggles living in a foreign land, away from loved ones and conventional support systems. One recent example is Chino Pereira’s Lamentasyon (2021), exclusively filmed by and starring OFWs working in Dubai. Billed as a psychological thriller, Lamentasyon is actually an advocacy film about the mental health of Filipinos working abroad. In the film, an OFW slowly loses his sanity because of increasingly dire life events, ultimately affecting his capacity to work abroad and provide for his family. His mental breakdowns manifest as horrific hallucinations that intensify his downward spiral, aggravated by his lack of emotional support and limited access to mental health care.

What constitutes an “OFW film” or a “diaspora film” varies wildly depending on who creates the film and the intended audience. It can be argued that certain films about migrant workers, such as those released by large companies like Star Cinema, aim to reach audiences both at home and abroad, where the migrant worker is both the subject matter and the consumer. Films created by people still in the Philippines serve as a reminder of the sacrifices made by these workers to provide for their families; films made by actual workers and members of the diaspora lean towards illustrating their struggles with identity and conformity in an alien society.

This also begs the question: Which examples above are still considered “Filipino Cinema”? In Rolando B. Tolentino’s essay titled Geopolitical Space and the Chinese City Films, the idea of a “national cinema” becomes much more fluid in the context of a rapidly globalized society and the formation of cultural connections between the Philippines and the arts, culture, and media of other countries and societies. With the rise of international co-productions featuring Filipino characters (and subsequently, Filipino stories) that are not explicitly “homegrown” (that is, not primarily produced in the Philippines), this fluidity is made expressly evident and is, at this very moment, re-constructing the very idea of “nation.”

It should also be noted that the emergence and popularity of streaming services almost exclusively airing Filipino content, such as iWantTFC and Vivamax, as well as the increasing number of Filipino films on global streaming services such as Netflix, has made Filipino films accessible to both migrant workers and members of the diaspora and vice versa, potentially changing the way audiences engage with and encounter these kinds of media. It follows that the very nature of audiencehip is rapidly changing due to the emergence of easily accessible streaming media sources, whether legal or not. As a result, it is starting to form its own distinct transnational identity, amalgamating many cultures into something unique and creating art and media to try to express this de novo cultural understanding that is uniquely its own.

This essay will look at and textually compare three contemporary films about migrants or migrant workers and how they utilize elements of storytelling and filmmaking to depict this divide between home and working in a foreign land. All three films were produced by Philippine-based filmmakers, at times with partial participation from members of diaspora communities.

The three selected films were released in the past five years, easily accessible through streaming or other platforms. The first, Cathy Garcia-Molina’s Hello, Love, Goodbye (2019) film, incorporates many of the storytelling tropes of the OFW
Hello, Love, Goodbye: A Prototypical Example

Released by Star Cinema in 2019, Garcia-Molina's Hello, Love, Goodbye is, to date, the highest-grossing Filipino film of all time. It follows Joy (Kathryn Bernardo) as she works as a domestic helper in Hong Kong. Even though, as a registered nurse, she is overly qualified for the job, it is much better than work opportunities in the Philippines. However, even her pay is not enough to sustain her own financial needs, so she works extra jobs on the side (which is illegal in Hong Kong). The opening sequence is accompanied by Joy talking about the notion of mobility—in that she must keep moving, working, and hustling to survive. This mobility manifests in her personal goal—to move out of Hong Kong and work in Canada, where her talents and qualifications will be fully utilized and where she can eventually bring along the rest of her family.

As the opening sequences also show, her plight is shared with many other overseas workers trying to make a living in Hong Kong. At the beginning of the film, she fetches her cousin Mary Dale (Maymay Entrata), a newly minted working, and hustling to survive. This mobility manifests in her personal goal—to move out of Hong Kong and work in Canada, where her talents and qualifications will be fully utilized and where she can eventually bring along the rest of her family.

Abandonment of family, but it is ultimately done to serve the family differently. Joy's mother's solution also excludes Joy's father from the picture, which Joy rejects.

Like many other films of its kind before it, released by Star Cinema or otherwise, Hello, Love, Goodbye presents Hong Kong as a colorful, almost exotic milieu. To potential audiences working in the city, it helps set up familiar markers that help connect their favorite local actors to their current environment. To audiences back home, movies like this serve as glimpses into locations that most viewers can only dream of, a fantasy or a method of escape into previously unreachable locales, while still being relatable with some familiar elements (actress, language, etc.).

There is, however, an undercurrent of sacrifice in this film's character arcs, best summarized near the end of the film, where our protagonist and her fellow domestic helpers watch a scene from Rory Quintos's influential OFW film Anak (2000), in which Vilma Santos's character delivers a monologue about the personal sacrifices she made for the children she left behind.

Nuuk: Subverting Paradigms

Released in the same year as Hello, Love, Goodbye, Veronica Velasco's Nuuk is a coproduction by MAVX films and Viva Films. Starring Aga Muhlach and Alice Dixson, the titular Nuuk is a relatively isolated town in Greenland where most of the proceedings take place. Elaisa (Dixson), a lonely immigrant to Nuuk, struggles with the loss of her husband. She meets and subsequently forms a relationship with Mark (Muhlach). However, Mark has sinister plans, involving revenge on someone close to Elaisa.

Nuuk is a film that focuses on immigrants rather than overseas workers per se. But instead of following the same storytelling beats as other contemporary films about migrants and migrant workers, it subverts them.

Instead of presenting a foreign, exotic milieu as a destination or a playground for escape, Nuuk is a cold and desolate place, hardly a wintry paradise and more empty wasteland. Velasco and cinematographer Noel Teehankee frame Elaisa as a speck among expansive vistas, accentuating her loneliness and isolation from peers. The sense of community seen in films like Hello, Love, Goodbye is all but absent, leaving the vulnerable Elaisa to be manipulated by Mark's sinister schemes.

Initially presenting itself as a romance, Nuuk subverts this idea of safety within communities of immigrants. Many contemporary films depicting OFW or migrant communities imply a safe harbor among fellow compatriots, where there should be trust. Usually, outside forces (whether bad employers, discrimination, or something else) create conflict, but here the conflict lies within, as Mark has malicious ulterior motives towards Elaisa. She falls into this trap, placing her trust in Mark because that is, culturally, what we have been conditioned to do. However, once Mark reveals his true colors, and with no one to rely on and trust, Elaisa's state of mind completely breaks by the end of the film.

Perhaps coincidentally, Nuuk can be compared to the earlier discussed Lamentasyon, which also delves into the problems migrants face regarding access to mental health and emotional support systems. Nuuk is an anomaly compared to other, more conventional films of its type. It was initially received with a lukewarm response from audiences and critics, but its subversion of commonly held storytelling tropes encourages a deeper look.

Hello, Love, Goodbye: Strange Dichotomies

Released by MAVX films and directed by Velasco in 2021's A Faraway Land. It tells the story of Mahjoy (Yen Santos), a Filipino worker who has lived in the Faroe Islands for six years. She is happily married to Sigmund (Hans Tórgarð), with whom she has one child. While being interviewed for a documentary about Filipino nationals working in the Faroe Islands, she meets Nicos (Paolo Contis), a Filipino reporter, and the two begin an illicit romance.

A Faraway Land incorporates different types of mainstream genre storytelling. It follows many of the tropes of films like Hello, Love, Goodbye, in that it places a romance-drama in an exotic, lush locale, it touches upon the concerns of the migrant population there, and there is a choice between a financially stable life and a more uncertain life back in the homeland. In addition to this, because of the love triangle between Mahjoy, Sigmund, and Nico, the film also draws from the sub-genre of infidelity films, which is relatively common in local mainstream film and television.
The film frames Mahjoy's choice of whether staying with her husband or leaving him for Nico is the “better” choice. This is where the film falter: if the intent was to make Nico and Mahjoy’s romance work, it struggles to tell the audience why it should be a thing in the first place. First and foremost, it’s a love story centered on cheating, which makes Nico and Mahjoy hard to sympathize with. Indeed, there is no indication that Sigmund is abusive to Mahjoy, and her in-laws and husband are both accepting and loving. The only time Sigmund gets angry is when Mahjoy neglects her responsibilities because of her actions toward Nico. Although one other character says Mahjoy didn’t like Sigmund at first, she later rethinks the idea, and it seems the two are in a functional relationship. Later, Mahjoy tells Nico that she intends to stay in the Faroe Islands. Like Hello, Love, Goodbye’s Joy, she no longer intends to return to the Philippines to live there, even though there are aspects of her homeland that she misses. Also, because her mother abandoned her as a young child, splitting up her family should be the last thing on Mahjoy’s mind. Yet, perhaps because of extended separation from her husband due to his work, extended stress from work and childcare, or maybe just due to a small moment of weakness, she engages in the affair anyway. Her decision can also be read as a yearning for home, or at least the idea of it. The fact that the affair is transient and ends on Mahjoy’s part and perhaps revealing that the marriage does not only connote the homeland per se but can also exist in many forms: food, Filipino-only social gatherings and events, and, most importantly, family.

The film is centered around Mahjoy’s choice between two men, representing an ideal of “home.” Mahjoy has found security with her husband, but he stands for a place and culture that is not Mahjoy’s own. The other choice is rejecting the overseas Filipino’s transnational state and returning to one’s homeland. In one sequence, Nico gives Mahjoy a gift of food, a parol (Filipino lanterns) for Christmas, and an opportunity to speak with a loved one. Nico’s overture toward Mahjoy places him as a stand-in for home and all the things she misses by being in the Faroe Islands. “Home,” as seen in this sequence, does not only connotate the homeland per se but can also exist in many forms: food, Filipino-only social gatherings and events, and, most importantly, family.

In all three featured films in this piece, the central protagonist is female. Two of them are mothers, while the remaining one (Hello, Love, Goodbye’s Joy) is engaged in a caregiving role. This reflects the proportion of women in the overseas workforce (recent data shows women comprise almost 60% of that workforce) and their cultural visibility as the prototypical OFW. To audiences both here and abroad (perhaps most importantly the latter), these women represent the nation, a transnational Inang Bayan figure who can embody all manner of discourse, with the potential for transformative or revolutionary discourse. Their narratives and struggles reflect our own struggles and the struggles of our relatives and, ultimately, our companions, forming a collective imagination with no national boundaries.

Given the above, it must also be stressed that our current system of labor export exists as a legacy of laws passed in the 1970s, where our neocolonial, neoliberal state utilizes foreign capital for development and economic reforms. Despite this, however, we can see in all three of the films examined, one of the central factors driving people away from the Philippines (and a major source of conflict in at least two of them) is the failure of the state to utilize this capital and 1) equitably provide for its citizens, 2) provide proper protections for these workers’ rights, and 3) create meaningful economic reforms to render this labor export system unnecessary eventually. To address these things, it falls on the state to help safeguard the rights of our migrant workers via protective labor legislation, especially the rights of Filipino women overseas, and to create an economic milieu where the diaspora is no longer forced due to economic hardship, but done freely out of a desire for self-improvement, adding to the pool of knowledge, or simply an expression of free will.

Until then, the Overseas Filipino Worker is eternally displaced, their identity in two places simultaneously—their minds constantly in an idea of “home” while bodies remain trapped in an alien land.

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Endnotes

7. Roldano B. Talentino, “Geopolitical Space and the Chinese City Film: National/Transnational Subject Formation and Media in and On the Philippine” (Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 2003), 85.
8. Mapa, “2020 Overseas Filipinos Workers (Final Results),”
10. Mapa, “2020 Overseas Filipinos Workers (Final Results),”

Conclusion

It goes without saying that only three films, regardless of their influence and cultural importance, would barely scratch the surface when trying to define a diaspora or OFW film. Despite that, in the three films featured in this essay, I see certain patterns in their construction, the themes they embody, and the characters portrayed.

In two of these three films, there is a longing for home, though not necessarily a desire for return, and the idea of “home” does not only refer to the physical space but also to the people these characters leave behind. Socioeconomic realities constrain the characters of two of these films to live a life that may not necessarily be their first choice. Visually, in the service of local and expatriate audiences, the juxtaposition of the familiar and unfamiliar is emphasized, often to differing ends.

A Faraway Land tackles the phenomenon of marriage migration, a gendered aspect of globalization, and a significant aspect of the lives of many Filipino overseas workers. Women make up a considerable portion of the overseas workforce;8 some, willingly or not, marry a foreign national in the country they work in. This has the added benefit of gaining citizenship and financial benefits for workers and their families. Many of these workers are in fields related to domestic work, caregiving, or even sex work, which predisposes them to interactions with men.

There is a level of stigmatization and prejudice toward female overseas workers who get married to foreign nationals, in that it is perceived that their decision is fueled primarily by financial opportunity. By getting married to these men, there is a level of non-conformity to some arbitrarily established notion of traditional Filipino femininity, reinforced through the stereotype of the “mail-order bride” prevalent in various forms of media. On the other hand, the reality is a bit more complex, as these women should be free to do what they want, and some form close, equitable, meaningful relationships with their partners. In a field study conducted by Gwennla Ricordaz,9 interviewees from among Filipino marriage migrants showed that their decision to marry was their own decision and not forced upon them, and that their relationships were no stronger to romance. Unfortunately, the film tacitly leans into stereotypes by allowing the affair to be consummated. This can be interpreted as the film revealing a deep dissatisfaction on Mahjoy’s part and perhaps revealing that the marriage may have been initially catalyzed less by love and more by something else. Whether it eventually blossomed into true love or not, the film leaves that aspect ambiguous.

Distaste for the main characters’ questionable actions becomes the shaky foundation of a film whose disparate parts fail to work together. Even the tragic ending, where Nico is killed due to a culture of impunity back home, feels arbitrary and tacked on for dramatic effect.
In 2018, The Filipino Channel (TFC), a global subscription network owned and operated by ABS-CBN, one of the Philippines’ leading broadcasting networks, conducted a study about Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs). Its findings signaled a significant iteration and deviation from the usual image of the OFW. “If before, mga Pinay, two decades ago, they felt na walang power, helpless, grabe pinag-iba, empowered,” shared screenwriter Carmi Raymundo in an interview. “Dati tiis, para sa pamilya, lahat titiisit, its lang buhay ko, everything for other people… Based doon sa naging research, hindi na ganoon, ‘yong mga Pinays natuto na magtabi para sa sarili nila. How can I pour from an empty cup?” Such findings from the research would later become the springboard for the creation of the Philippines’ highest-grossing film to date, Hello, Love, Goodbye.

In the same interview, Raymundo emphasized the renewed motivation of many women OFWs that would be echoed in the film: “May pangarap, hindi na ito ang final destination, Marami pa akong puwedeng gawin, may gusto akong marating sa buhay.” This attitude is a significant shift from the long-suffering image and identity festooned on OFWs by the government, particularly through the labor export policy introduced in the 1970s by the late dictator Ferdinand Marcos and the rhetoric of the “Bagong Bayani” popularized during the time of Corazon Aquino in 1988. As explained by political scientist Jean Encinas-Franco, the conventional rhetoric extols sufferance even as the state acknowledges that the OFWs’ sacrifices are defined by precarity and risk, by the dangers of being abused by employers and having limited protection under the law.

Hello, Love, Goodbye centers on the lives of Joy Marie Fabregas (Kathryn Bernardo), a second-generation domestic worker played by Kathryn Bernardo, however, moonlights as a dishwasher at the bar Ethan works in so she can save up more money as soon as possible to leave the city. From Hello, Love, Goodbye (Prod. Star Cinema). All images are author’s screenshots of the film.

Joy explains to Ethan why she has no space for any romantic relationships or commitments in her life.

Ethan Del Rosario, played by actor Alden Richards, is a bartender in Hong Kong who falls for Joy Fabregas, a second-generation domestic worker played by Kathryn Bernardo. However, his decision to move to the United States with his then-partner. The two would meet and eventually fall in love in Hong Kong.

The divergence in their dreams and priorities becomes the central conflict in their romance.
Confronting Filipinos’ Classism

Another movie, written and directed by Hong Kong filmmaker Oliver Siu Kuen, also tries to break the “modern hero” stereotype. The award-winning Still Human (2018) tells the story of Evelyn Santos, a second-generation Filipino domestic worker who was able to pursue her passion of becoming a photographer through the support of her employer, a paralyzed local named Leung Cheong-Wing, played by Hong Kong actor Anthony Wong.

The movie’s plot is not far-fetched. It reflects the story of real-life Filipino domestic worker-turned-photographer Xyra Bacani, who gained global recognition and acclaim for her photos depicting the lives of foreign domestic workers, including that of her own mother, also a domestic worker in Hong Kong. Bacani, who worked as a domestic worker for ten years, bought her first camera money loaned to her by her mother’s employer, Kathryn Louise. In 2015, she was selected as one of the Magnum Foundation Human Rights Fellows. The photos she took became part of her book, We Are Like Air, published in December 2018.

Bacani will not be the last Filipino domestic worker in Hong Kong to become a professional photographer. In 2017, Joanna Pabona, who had been working in Hong Kong since 2013, would win first runner-up in the National Geographic Wheelock Properties Youth Photo Competition. Pabona photographed scenes in everyday Hong Kong, capturing the atmosphere of a city that has become the destination of many Filipinos like her, who, while having completed a degree in her home country, could not earn as much working in the Philippines compared to becoming a domestic worker abroad. In 2019, she quit being a domestic worker and became a full-time photographer. Pabona, in an article in The Standard, said she wanted to “break the stereotype” about domestic workers, their being perceived as a lower class.9

This is also why Criselda Consunji, the Filipina actress who portrayed Santos wanted to be part of Still Human. In an interview, she told PeksiDA that she mainly wanted to work on the film because she wanted to know how the film would approach a story or a struggle that is not inherently that of a Hong Konger’s: “How will you tell a story that’s not yours? Filipino OFWs are portrayed as sob stories. ‘Poor you, woe is me.’ What do you have to share?”10

Consunji said she was surprised to find out that the writer and director of the film, Oliver Siu Kuen, did her research well, so much so that she was able to show the range of the humanity and capacity of Filipino domestic workers, an imperative message that challenges Filipinos to recognize their very own misconceptions about domestic workers. “Filipinos, anywhere in the world, we are such a classist society. It’s always, whatever your class was in the Philippines, the social class you were in, seems to define you,” she said in an interview.11 “There was such discrimination among us Filipinos,” the Filipina performer and businesswoman, who has been in Hong Kong for fourteen years, stressed.12 “People will tell me not to go to Central, mapagkakamalan kang ‘ate.’ That’s so demeaning, and that’s so derogatory towards your own people.”

Still Human endeavors to show that diversity is part of living. In an interview with Asian Movie Pulse, Consunji said her goal with the film “was also to make people not think diversity is a bad thing, not to make people think in this situation, in wheelchairs or minorities, are pathetic…” This is some kind of very bad generalization, the so-called ‘these people.’ But they are not ‘these people,’ they are ‘us,’ they are just everyone. People have different destinies; they run into different lives.”13

Of Space and Identities

Central is one of the districts in Hong Kong, the streets of which are filled with Filipino domestic workers during Sundays, their designated day off. They could be seen sitting in groups, with makeshift mats and partitions made of cardboard. The Filipino domestic workers would gather and eat there together. This image is the kind of Central seen in Hello, Love, Goodbye and Still Human, a place where Filipino domestic workers congregate and where Joy, Bernardino’s character, goes around as she tries to sell her wares.

Central is also the biggest stage for domestic workers who compete to become beauty queens, even just for a day, in Baby Ruth Villarama’s Sunday Beauty Queen (2016). The documentary shows how Filipina domestic workers are associated with Central, as the place serves as the space where they could explore and exhibit their interests in dancing, singing, and organizing events. The film shows scenes of their preparation for the pageant alongside the everyday scenes of their work and struggles as domestic workers, giving us a peek into the varied relationship between employers and employees.

The documentary presents a mix of experiences. Some face harsh treatment from their employers; one of the domestic workers, Rudelie, gets fired after she fails to meet her curfew one Sunday. Other employers, ranging from mothers to veteran film directors, express support for domestic workers, even cheering them on as they try to win the crown in the beauty pageant. Rudelie’s new employer even watches with her son as Rudelie dances onstage as part of the program. The beauty pageants in Central are not just held for the pomp and pageantry but also as part of charity work, as they are usually...
held for a cause, as explained by Leo, one of the domestic workers who organizes the event. In Sunday Beauty Queen, Central serves closest to its conventional image as the place where domestic workers could congregate, but also as a space where they could transform, albeit temporarily, and escape from their six days of hard work.

Less enthusiastically, The Helper, a 2017 documentary by Hong Kong-based filmmaker Joanna Bowers, depicts some domestic workers who are discouraged by their employers going to Central on Sundays. “Nakikita niya maraming helper nagtatamang sa Central, ‘pak, dumadaan sila mga bata ‘pak Sunday, sasalang maging kasi nasa gid, nakasapao mga kawaling Filipino,” Liza Avelino, a domestic worker featured in the documentary, said in an interview.1 Avelino, however, did not take this observation as demeaning. On the contrary, it made her realize that domestic workers could expand and extend their interests and hobbies beyond Central. Rather, the domestic workers’ choice to be somewhere else becomes a way of discovering who else they can be other than the go-to breadwinners of their respective families.

“Pag titingnan mo, ganito na lang ba kami, ganito na lang ba kami na lang ba ‘yong daan, dito na lang ba kami sa lapag, sa underpass, sa ilalim ng bridge? We also earn money. We should do something to upgrade ‘yong respeto sa sarili. Nakikita ng mga tao, a ganyan pala mga helper ‘pak Sunday, they do something else, hindi lang nagtatamang ‘don, nakahiga sa daan, nagti-tiskahan,”2 she said in an interview with Pelikulang 2022. Avelino then opted to go to public libraries, then try hiking. This sparked a dream within her, something that would take her to over twenty-five hiking destinations, including the Everest base camp and Mt. Kilimanjaro in Tanzania.

Another set of domestic workers who chose to inhabit another space during Sundays were the members of the choir Unsung Heroes, formed by Jane Engelmann, who belonged to the performing arts industry in the city. Again, the domestic workers practiced on Sundays. In the film, they are shown rehearsing the song, “I Wish I Could Kiss You Good Night,” which speaks of the longing of the domestic workers for their children back home. The choir became a hit, so much so that they could perform at Clockenflap, one of the most awaited music and arts festivals in Hong Kong, Englmann, in the film, challenges the choir to make the audiences at Clockenflap “see you as real people with real stories, not just domestic helpers, because that’s not who you are, that’s not who you are to be.”

Joanna Bowers said her primary motivation in making The Helper was to change the misconception that foreign domestic workers are “one-dimensional.” In an interview, she explained, “People are looking at migrant domestic workers here as like indentured servants most of the time…. That was a massive misconception, that people didn’t understand that these are women, with families, lives and goals, and ambitions,”3 she said in an interview. To her, domestic workers must be depicted as “more fully-rounded, people to be respected.”4

However, she was also aware that even if the domestic workers featured in her documentary deviated from the usual activities done in Central, Central remained the only option for many OFWs in Hong Kong, who have no space to call their own inside the homes of the families they work for. “They have no living room to relax in; this is equivalent of that,” Bowers said, pointing out how Central also represents the community. “People go to those groups or networks and reinforce the sense of identity they miss back home”, she said in an interview.5

Diversity and Deviation

The digression from the usual space they go to on Sundays, as shown in the films “Hello, Love, Goodbye,” “Still Human” and “The Helper,” signals the expansion of domestic workers’ interests, aspirations, and identities at different levels. Labor policies in Hong Kong can shake them to fixed identities, mainly because foreign domestic workers can never be granted permanent residency no matter how long they have worked in the city. This situation is the unique challenge that the films take on, as they try to show that domestic workers and are could be well-rounded individuals despite limitations imposed on their social and economic mobility.

In Still Human and Hello, Love, Goodbye, even as Evelyn and Joy regularly go there to Central to meet with their friends and fellow domestic workers, they have the inherent desire to carve or create another space altogether for ambitions they could solely call theirs. This space is physical and conceptual, where their desires to achieve something for themselves imbricate and intersect. Hence, even as they frequent Central, they are conscious that they will not always be there, a nod to the impression of Hong Kong as a “stolen lover.” In the case of Hello, Love, Goodbye, this affects and characterizes the developments in the relationship between lovers, Joy and Ethan: “Two ships passing, stopover ‘to, transience ng pagmagamahan,” as Raymundo describes in it an interview with Pelikulang 2022.6

Unlike going back to the Philippines, the ultimate destination of OFWs in general, the space for self-actualization in these films is not quintessentially the Motherland but somewhere else. Of course, this fact does not make the struggle for migrant workers less difficult, nor does it present perfect growth, but there is a chance to be someone else. As Gonzaga posits:

“This assertion of agency in various ways has made Hong Kong the milieu of possibilities for testing how far a domestic worker can break away from the “Bagong Bayani” branding, though this sense of identity is also evolving now for Filipino domestic workers in Hong Kong. From Anak to Still Human, the story of the domestic worker is also in transition in this space of transience.”

Endnotes

1 Carmen Raymundo, interview by Purple Romero, Zoom Interview, February 2, 2022, quote used with permission.

2 Raymundo, Zoom Interview, February 2, 2022.


5 Liza Avelino, a Filipina domestic worker, goes for a hike abroad, fulfilling one of her dreams to climb mountains all over the world. From The Helper

6 Unlike going back to the Philippines, the ultimate destination of OFWs in general, the space for self-actualization in these films is not quintessentially the Motherland but somewhere else. Of course, this fact does not make the struggle for migrant workers less difficult, nor does it present perfect growth, but there is a chance to be someone else. As Gonzaga posits:


8 Adriana Rosati, “Interview with Director Oliver Siu Kuen Chan, Actor Crisell Consunji and Actor Anthony Wong: ‘I had to manage lots of people that, like me, were not familiar with what they were doing’,” Asian Movie Pulp, May 15, 2019, accessed on October 23, 2022, asiansmovelpulp.com/2019/05/interview-with-director-oliver-siu-kuen-chan-actor-crisell-consunji-and-actor-anthony-wong/.

9 Liza Avelino , interviewed by Purple Romero, Zoom Interview, December 12, 2022, quote used with permission.

10 Joanna Bowers, interviewed by Purple Romero, Zoom Interview, February 5, 2022, quote used with permission.

11 Joanna Bowers, Zoom Interview, February 8, 2022.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid.

14 Adriana Rosati, “Interview with Director Oliver Siu Kuen Chan, Actor Crisell Consunji and Actor Anthony Wong: ‘I had to manage lots of people that, like me, were not familiar with what they were doing’,” Asian Movie Pulp, May 15, 2019, accessed on October 23, 2022, asiansmovelpulp.com/2019/05/interview-with-director-oliver-siu-kuen-chan-actor-crisell-consunji-and-actor-anthony-wong/.

15 Liza Avelino , interviewed by Purple Romero, Zoom Interview, December 12, 2022, quote used with permission.

16 Avelino, Zoom Interview, December 12, 2022.

17 Joanna Bowers, interviewed by Purple Romero, Zoom Interview, February 5, 2022, quote used with permission.

18 Joanna Bowers, Zoom Interview, February 8, 2022.

19 Ibid.

20 Raymundo, Zoom Interview, February 2, 2022.


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A review of the few existing literature on Philippine film animation explicates a history that can generally be situated along three interrelated streams: the form’s mutualism with comic arts, or komiks as it is known in the vernacular; its intervening relationship with political and institutional entities; and its industrialization, collocated in the proliferation of domestic animation studios. Of the three, I seek to critically analyze only the third, setting aside the other two for merited discussion at another time. Specifically, this article aims to surface how the development of Philippine animation as an industry articulates captivity as a modality of postcolonialism.

While related to its usage in the social sciences, particularly its ties to western conquest and its denotation as the practice of literally capturing peoples, I simultaneously borrow the term and notion of captivity elsewhere: from the field of business. A captive unit in business parlance is defined by Ilan Oshri in his book *Offshoring Strategies: Evolving Captive Center Models* as an offshore entity established by and operating for, or mainly for, a parent company. Captivity can thus be understood as the state in which a subordinate entity is legally owned or controlled by a superordinate. I extrapolate this definition to explore captivity beyond but close to its business notion, arguing that captivity in the cultural sense has also betided the Philippine animation industry. Moreover, I discuss how the captive state of the industry has been mated with nationalism. On the other hand, decolonizing sense has also betided the Philippine animation industry.

Defining Captivity

Using the homonym “captive” to identify overseas subsidiaries, particularly those attached to multinational corporations, invites scrutiny on the humanist origins of the term, which aligns with its modern business usage. Called captivity narratives, accounts of North American settlers literally held captive by pirates, natives, and other “others” comprise a genre in colonial discourse buoyed by ideological undercurrents that construct the subjectivity of both captives and captors. However, Paulin Turner Strong in her book *Captive Souls, Captivating Others* demonstrates that such narratives have traditionally been selective in their telling and retelling, lending a rationale for violent conquest under the pretext of civilizing. For instance, the well-known Native American figure Pocahontas’s captivity was largely unscribed in Anglo-American colonial history. This erasure can be understood to be due to her capture and subsequent alliance with settlers contradicting the hegemonic and oppositional representation of the dual English as captive and “Indian” as captor. To borrow Strong’s term, this typification, among others of captivity, dominates colonial historical narratives that have since come to represent Euro-American identity.2

In cinema, captivity narratives have often been associated with motifs concerning the body, engendering the concept of the captive body. How film is exploited to construct corporeal images elucidates its performative role in othering and of “containing” its subjects. According to Gwendolyn Audrey Foster in her book *Captive Bodies: Postcolonial Subjectivity in Cinema*, the trope of the body in bondage and captivity is itself only a simulation of reality, preserving into order gender, racial, sexual, and colonial binaries such as masculinity and femininity, whiteness and blackness, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and ultimately, captivity and freedom which are all apropos to experienced reality.1 Incidentally, film itself bears captive connotations in its active vocabulary; Foster touches upon phrases such as to “shoot” a film, to “capture” images, and to be “captive” by the cinematic spectacle to suggest film’s cinematographic affinity with captivity, conceiving the camera as a captive apparatus whose gaze consequently implicates its holder as the captor, figuratively.

While early captivity narratives were authored to legitimate the perceived threats to western colonial enterprises, my usage of captivity upends this traditional notion. It alters the authoritative representation of the Euro-American colonizer as captive, shifting the locus of rhetoric from one that is exclusionary to one of accountability. The conventional narrative frames the imperial settler as the victim and the “others” as the enemy, respectively, but I appropriate the term captivity to mean the opposite. By dislocating the role of the colonizer as captive and restoring his role as captor, I reprise captivity into a colonial condition leveraged for and not against the colonized. Through this understanding, to be held captive is to be subjected to colonialism and bound within colonial parameters. This subverted definition becomes my basis for positing how captivity is reified in the postcolonial era.

In the wake of capitalism, the western colonizer has reconfigured itself into a monopoly, albeit fulfilling the same ideological function of conquest, this time through the mode of international trade. Aptly, these monopolies, as exemplified by the global animation industry, more often than not own and control offshore business entities, which have come to be known as “captive” centers or units, drawing the parallel between this operational and the aforementioned colonial notion of captivity.

Besides a reversal of the traditional captive-captor role, postcolonial captivity can be differentiated territorially. Whereas in traditional captivity narratives, subjects are captured and held in foreign territory, in modernity, captive entities are held within their own territory, “captured” by the commercial dragents of expansionist corporations. Control forfeited, an entity is then, following Strong’s notion, rendered captive by its disposition of power, not unlike the unscribed capture of natives by settlers whose exercise of superiority is
typified by such collection of othered individuals as tokens.4 A treatment of captivity distinct from its Eurocentric gaze, therefore, articulates, on the one hand, colonial subjectivity from the standpoint of the captive or colonized and subverts, on the other, traditional power relations by coalescing the role of captor and colonizer as one and the same.

Having laid out the article’s critical purview, what follows is a history of the Philippine animation industry viewed through the lens of captivity. I peregrinate across the major domestic studios and works emerging from the industry to discursively demonstrate its entanglement with captivity, positioning the Philippine animation industry as a critical site in Philippine postcolonial discourse.

Nascency in Advertising

Before progressing into its present state, Philippine animation had roots in the postwar era when cartoonists and illustrators like Jose Zabala Santos, Francisco Reyes, Larry Alcala, Jeremias Elizalde Navarro, and Vicente Petrenatra dabbed with the form.3 Early accounts suggest that domestic animation, among its start, found sustenance and subsistence on the turf of television advertising. According to John A. Lent, Santos produced animation for commercials in 1952 under the Philippine Manufacturing Company (PMC).5 Following Cynthia Roxas and Joaquin Arevalo Jr.’s account, Santos joined PMC in 1949 then left the company in 1970 and subsequently worked in Reyes’ advertising agency, which also did some TV ads for PMC.6

In 1955, Santos and Reyes produced the animated commercial Juan Tamad in which Santos’s nephew Nonoy Marcelo, who would later become a notable figure in animation himself, also had a hand in making. Marcelo asserts, though processed in New York, the commercial advertised the local product Purico,7 a vegetable shortening brand and a portmanteau of Spanish pura and rico. Juan Tamad had the namesake of a popular character in Philippine folklore and was, according to Marcelo, the longest animated commercial at the time,8 although Nick Deocampo reunits the film did not have its run.9

Meanwhile, Larry Alcala worked for Universal Promotions in 1956, doing commercials for clients such as Darigold and Caltex, the latter for whom he drew characters such as two enthusiastic gas station servicers eager to do their job. According to Deocampo, the 15-second black-and-white ad that featured the characters was shot with a 16mm Bolex and shown on TV, while Alcala’s 35mm commercial for Darigold and Caltex, the latter for whom he drew characters processed in New York, the commercial advertised the local product Purico,8 a vegetable shortening brand and a portmanteau of Spanish pura and rico. Juan Tamad had the namesake of a popular character in Philippine folklore and was, according to Marcelo, the longest animated commercial at the time,8 although Nick Deocampo reunits the film did not have its run.9

The Two Early Major Studios10

The expensive outlay for starting a full-fledged animation facility in the country inhibited, on the one hand, the formation of possibly but one major Filipino-owned studio in the 1980s and spurred, on the other, the trend of service exportation, which proved to generate higher profit margins. In 1983 or a year later, Optifex International, Inc. was established along Salcedo Street in Makati, a Filipino outfit founded by Chito S. Roto that likewise engaged in producing local TVCs and OBBs. In an interview, Nelson B. Caligia Sr. said that although primarily service-oriented, Optifex had aspired to create Filipino narratives and envisioned adapting a fable best known as a retelling of Jose Rizal’s childhood—the tale between the moth and the flame, but the film never came to fruition.11

Around the time Optifex was established, another studio operated along the same street in Makati, bearing the name Burbank Animation, Inc. (BAI). According to Giannalberto Bendazzi, the outfit was a subsidiary of Australian animation company Burbank Films and became known as the first instance of a foreign-owned animation facility to incorporate into Southeast Asia.12 While initially providing ink-and-paint work, Dan Torre and Lienors Torre observes that BAI later variegated, offering professional services such as storyboarding, animation, inbetweening, layouts, backgrounds, editing, mixing, and photography.13 In a personal interview, Achu So recounts that among the projects the studio received were sourced from Marvel Productions through Sunbow Productions, which commissioned BAI for The Care Bears (1986–88), Defenders of the Earth (1986–87), and My Little Pony (1986–87).14 The perceived gloss of BAI, effectuated by impressions of other studios and works emerging from the industry to discursively demonstrate its entanglement with captivity, positioning the Philippine animation industry as a critical site in Philippine postcolonial discourse.

The perceived gloss of BAI, effectuated by impressions of a workplace where the shows being made were for famous American names such as Marvel, and where women animators were seen wearing boots and dresses to work as opposed to the plain-clothed employees of Optifex, attracted a number of the latter to transfer to the Australian studio and marked what would be the onset of labor poaching between the two companies, consequently compelling Filipino animators into moonlighting. As a former employee of BAI and Optifex recalls, he found himself working for the Australian studio during the day and then for the Filipino studio at night.15

The mature animation background of BAI, however, coupled with its enticing higher wages, arguably gave it the upper hand over the neophyte Optifex. The offshore studio not only produced animation for local commercialswith Larry Alcala among those it commissioned16—and TV shows, but also did portions for full-length television films adapted from literary classics. Following the historical account by Torre and Torre, these were workload forwarded from and principally handled by Burbank’s main studios in Sydney.17 Examples of such animated features were Alice Through the Looking Glass (1987), The Odyssey (1987), Black Tulip (1988), Hydrautitha (1988), and The Carissian Brothers (1989).

Bendazzi notes that some 80 Filipino animators and five Australian trainers originally comprised the workforce of BAI, but their number grew twofold in less than three years,18 owing to the studio’s expansion of its reach globally. Indeed, according to Lent, BAI provided services to countries like France, Belgium, New Zealand, and the United States.19 In its heyday, Torre and Torre states that BAI’s staff rose to about 500 employees.20

Meanwhile, Optifex pursued advances of its own in positioning itself more competitively. In an interview, Chito S. Roto said its management flew to the United States to directly engage with a potential partner,21 and as early as 1986, Optifex had thus served as a contractor to Hanna-Barbera, an American monolith in animation production. That same year saw William Hanna, creator of Tom & Jerry and co-founder of Hanna-Barbera, personally visit Optifex to oversee its animation work. Payper (1986–88), The Jetsons (1962–63; 1985; 1987), Smurfs (1984–88), The New Adventures of YellowQuest (1986–87), and Scooby-Doo and the Reluctant Werewolf (1988) were some of the western shows and features the local studio had a role in animating, in addition to contributing to iterations of The Flintstones and Yogi Bear, among other cartoons.

Optifex’s moves were to be confronted with a caveat, as Hanna-Barbera planned to establish its own subsidiary in the country. The initiative spearheaded by Jerry Smith, a Hanna-Barbera associate who had previously successfully planted operations for the company in Australia, Taiwan, and South Korea, led to the formation of Fil-Cartoons, Inc. The studio was incorporated in November 1987 and eased into the local animation scene, becoming the official Philippine appendage of Hanna-Barbera.

Optifex, on the other hand, had arrived at its tail end. Benji Agoncillo recounts that by the last quarter of 1988, Optifex stopped receiving work from Hanna-Barbera22 and eventually folded. The vagaries of business also led to the closure of BAI, and not long after, of its parent company. Their cessation was portended when New World Pictures acquired Marvel Productions along with Marvel Comics Group in 1986. Following the move, there were bids to have BAI similarly acquired by the American firm, but a boycott never eventuated according to sources.23 Bankruptcy soon shuttered business for BAI, and in 1989, Burbank Films itself divested.24

References

[5] Bled Tulip (Franco Cristoferi, Burbank Films Australia, 1988)
The Rise of Fil-Cartoons

In what seemed to be a triumphant maneuver for Hanna-Barbera, the decline of BAI and Optifex became the conduit for the pool of talent from both lapsed studios to converge into Fil-Cartoons. Agoncillo recounts that its production was initially housed in a makeshift office in Manila, Mandaluyong, then relocated to the corporate buildings along Emerald Avenue, Pasig, before returning to Mandaluyong to occupy an enormous facility—said to be the largest in the world at the time, as claimed in its promotional advertisement—fulfilling outsourced work for many of the popular animated shows in the United States where its parent company was headquartered. In 1989, Fil-Cartoons exceeded the employee count of BAI at over 900, according to Margaret Parkes, one of the animation directors based in the studio at the time and among the contingent Australian staff who managed Fil-Cartoons initially. By 1993, Jonathan Karp reports that the studio’s workforce had peaked at nearly 1,000.


The animation work for most of these titles passing through Fil-Cartoons was not always outsourced solely to the studio but divided among one or more production houses in other countries. It was not uncommon for Hanna-Barbera to hire multiple service providers in order to distribute the work required for various aspects of its film projects, as did other major production companies at the time. Such an arrangement does not necessarily preclude prime contractors from subcontracting other studios, hence the assembly of a hierarchical and elongated pipeline that is often witnessed in the production of full-length animated films, for which hundreds of workers are employed and thousands of yearslong workhours are rendered.

In the same manner, Fil-Cartoons not only received requests from clients directly but also partnered with other studios as a subcontractor, if not as a co-service. Wang Film Productions in Taiwan, Mr. Big Cartoons in Australia, AROM Production and Sunrom Animation in South Korea, and Jade Animation in China, among others, were some of the overseas studios that had worked on the same projects as Fil-Cartoons. Collaboration also occurred at the local level, with Fil-Cartoons having subcontracted other outfits in the country, such as Philippine Animation Studio, Inc. (PASH), which it considered an ally.

PASI of Malaysia

Contrary to its name, PASI was also a captive entity that originated as an enterprise of Malaysian-Tamil business magnate Ananda Krishnan. The Makati-based studio was established in 1990 and similarly grew, as with the production houses before it, to employ a sizeable workforce, comprising, according to Carol Espiritu, of about 400 in-house artists and 150 freelancers in 1996. Some of these individuals originally came from Fil-Cartoons, who were themselves formerly BAI or Optifex—a contingency that characterizes the close-knittedness of an industry engendered by a tight labor market, which has remained to be its present condition.

Don Groves notes that by 1999, the number of PASI’s internal artists had increased to 500 and its facility had fully transitioned to digital technology. Accompanying these changes was a shift in focus from services to co-production ventures, which the studio reinforced through a new policy it began implementing in 2000, according to Christopher Harz. Aligning with Tessa Jammies’ accounts, the “artist-invested” scheme offered PASI employees a percentage in profit for every co-production they participated in, basically granting them credit-based ownership relative to their productivity.


Toei of Japan

Though an outlier among the prevailing western-owned operations, PASI was not the only captive studio in the Philippines whose owner had originated from Asia. Another player from the region also approached the country in the interest of outsourcing labor, no less one that is a major animation producer. Established earlier than PASI, Toei Animation Phils., Inc. (TAPI) was formed due to an untypical alliance between a Philippine construction firm and a Japanese animation studio. The latter, Toei Animation Co., Ltd., sensationally labeled as the “Disney of the Orient,” is owned by the media and entertainment titan Toei Company founded in Japan.

TAPI traces its conception back to 1986 when the Industrial Training Corporation of Asia (ITCA) included a complementary graphic arts program in its curriculum. According to Mynardo A. Macaraig, the program was for Filipinos training to become migrant welders.
LONG TAKE

and engineers in the Middle East. The Technical Education and Skills Development Authority (TESDA) states in their webpage that the labor ITCA initially supplied to Toei was painless, although this later expanded to include other processes.

When the training was discontinued, the graphics component developed into a joint venture between EEI Corp.—ITCA’s parent company, then known as Engineering Equipment Inc.—and Toei, leading to the creation of EEI-Toei Animation Corporation in 1993, with the former being the majority shareholder. In 1998, however, TESDA notes Toei Animation Co. Ltd. owned the majority, and in 2000, EEI sold the rest of the venture’s shares to the Japanese studio, making EEI-Toei Animation a wholly-owned subsidiary of Toei Animation Co., Ltd. and henceforth renamed Toei Animation Phils., Inc.

Unlike the other captive studios, TAPI’s staff has been consistently fewer, numbering close to only 200 in total. According to Macaraig, this comes as a result of its management’s observation that rapid scaling pushed the early studios in the country into precarity and eventual demise. TAPI has nevertheless been copious with its animation production, having played a part in the creation of many anime and some American titles, most of which had gained popularity not only in Japan but across the globe. Of these were The Transformers (1984–87), Crying Freeman (1988–92; 1994), Dragon Ball Z (1989–96), Slam Dunk (1993–96), GHOST SWEEPERS Mokami (1993–94), One Piece (1999–present), Ring ni Kakero (2004; 2006; 2010–11), and Powerpuff Girls Z (2006–7), as well as originals or iterations of titles such as Gurren Lagann, Dr. Slump, Sailor Moon, G.I. Joe, My Hero Academia, Digimon, and Pokémon, to name a few. TAPI is also noted for its standing as the longest-running animation studio in the country, which may be partly attributed to its adherence to maintaining itself as a medium-sized enterprise.

Captivating Captivity

Inasmuch as the early domestic animation studios in the country were involved in the making behind their clients’ and parent companies’ creations, regardless of how minute the scope or negligible their parts were in the earlier days, nor how common they were precluded from onscreen credits, they share to an extent in the hegemonic success of the many fictive characters which have become household names in the world of film animation. Sources indicate, this has been largely made possible by the primary attraction they held in the world of animation that cannot be overstated to have been formalized in the Philippines. With some still extant as of this writing, among the other foreign outfits that have waged in the Philippines were Yoram Gross Animation, a studio named after an Australian producer of children and family entertainment; contemporaries of Fil-Cartoons such as Los Angeles Animation, Island Animation, and Moving Images International; Toon City Animation, Inc., established by Colin Baker in 1993 which primarily serviced Disney; Top-Draw Animation Inc., founded in 1999 by Wayne Dearing, a former executive of Fil-Cartoons and PASI; ImaginAsia and VirtualMagicAsia, sister companies under Global Animation Holdings; Digital Eye Candy, an arm of Kanbar Entertainment; Snipple Animation Studio, founded by English Kaine Patel in 2010; and Xentrix Toons, Inc., formed in 2016 as a subsidiary of an India-based studio.

Outsourcing and the Perfunctory Artist

The proliferation of studios in the country inevitably and cumulatively correlated to a prodigious output of animation that cannot be overstated to have become global if not Eurocentric in scale, with the productions Filipino animators are involved in figuring anywhere from television films to visual effects to Hollywood features. According to a documentary by Lynette Buenafe, the propitious years of production in the 1990s thus gave the period credence as being the nation’s “golden age of animation outsourcing,” while, for Michael Switow and Maria Ressa, the country itself at the time was vying to become the “cartoon capital of the world.”

Bike Miss from Mars


Fantastic Four: The Animated Series

(Philippine Animation Studio, Wing Film Productions, Marvel Entertainment Group, Marvel Films, 1994–96)

X-Men: The Animated Series

(Philippine Animation Studio, Cartoon Network, 1992–97)

Bob and Margaret

(David Fine and Alison Snowden, Snowden Fine Animation, Philippines Animation Studio, National Film Board of Canada, Nehas, 1993–2001)
Substantiation of these claims encompasses not only a measure of the industry’s gross revenue and animation exports but also the sheer number of people employed in discrete studios at the time, both of which attest to the widespread public demand for animation as a source of entertainment, particularly one that is marketed to a western audience. In developing and exercising skills that required both haste and talent to produce such commodity adequately, the Filipino animator learned to meet quotas in Taylorist fashion, imbibe foreign conventions and humor, and accept artistic choices or standards as a given.

However, the work outsourced to the country is almost always not the most creative component. A case study by Feichin Ted Tschang and Andrea Goldstein on the major existing animation studios in the country as of 2004 shows that the assignments the participating studios received from clients were more or less well into the production stage; development, preproduction, and postproduction were primarily made and done earlier at the hands of the project owners. This finding is consistent with the cases of Optifex, BAI, Fil-Cartoons, PASI, and TAPI, whose credits, the first and second having worked on purely traditional animation, and the rest, both on traditional and digital formats, similarly consisted of labor-intensive aspects such as tracing, painting, cleanup, retweeting, and camerawork, or what Tschang and Goldstein have termed as mecanistic, as opposed to creative, work. Where there are instances of original animation locally developed by outsourcing studios, such as Fil-Cartoons’ Child Soldiers (1997) and Swamp and Tad in Mission Imfrogable’ (1997) as well Top Peg’s Tawhiti Patrol (Dragondfly Patrol, 2003), such productions have been few and far between.

According to Tschang and Goldstein, the demarcation between the outsourced and the in-house is determined by the project owners, while the outsourcing process itself abided by a vertical, regimented workflow chiefly contingent to what has been identified as coordination and codification—the former assuming the back-and-forth regulation syncing activity into order, and the latter taking the form of specifications or “bibles” packaged abroad often including the script, storyboard, and, in the traditional era, exposure sheets. Such rigidity leaves little opportunity for feedback on the part of the servicing studios, whose designation is limited to interpreting the specifications to the best of their abilities. The bone of contention, therefore, is that, following the argument of Lent, the role of the conforming Filipino artist within the domestic animation industry has become perfunctory.

Captive Proclivities

On the issue arising from foreign animation’s place in Southeast Asia in general, Lent recognizes there are both positive and negative sides to the matter. Lifting from his rhetoric, on the one hand, it can be argued that animation production in the Philippines has been primarily undergirded by labor exploitation. Almost all studios in the country have privileged foreign production to the detriment of the development of local narratives. They are headed mainly by expatriates or owned by overseas entities who possess the inalienable rights to final creative decisions. On the other hand, it can be averred that there would have been no impetus for forming a local industry without the entry and assimilation of foreign involvement. Regardless of either view, the trajectory of animation’s development in the country as a commodity undeniably signifies dependence on, if not subservience to, the west, as manifested in two imbricating layers: culturally, in terms of the ubiquity and consumption of foreign animation vis-à-vis the marginalization of Filipino narratives, and materially, in terms of the domestic industry’s economic subjugation by foreign control. What has ensued then is an inability for the industry to elevate and for the local market to recognize its homogenized narratives beyond the vocabulary of western animation, which in turn has resulted in the relatively anemic reception of indigenized works, notably full-length films.

In the words of Lent and Hassan Muthalib, based on a comment made by Bill Dennis who was a former general manager of Fil-Cartoons and ex-president at Disney, “Indigenous animation did not take off because Filipinos are too partial to American animation.” Therefore, the domestic industry is ironically engaged in animated trade while succumbing to a catactonic state induced by a disconnect with local patronage.

The historical dimension of Philippine animation as an industry thus exemplifies and affirms the nation’s circumcision to a long-wrought colonial framework. In the first place, domestic animation’s utility in television advertising operated within the greater industrial and cultural structures introduced and tempered by the American occupation. In the second place, the ingress of foreign studios to capitalize on low labor costs and expand business, as well as the establishment of Filipino-owned entities, which have likewise promoted the outsourcing of animation to foreign interests, also articulates the colonial legacy that has ossified in the national subconscious. This analysis coincides with Roland Tolentino’s examination that Philippine animation emanated from print capitalism and service businesses—modalities of the early American capitalism that sought maximizing wealth. Regardless of either view, the trajectory of animation’s development in the country as a commodity undeniably signifies dependence on, if not subservience to, the west, as manifested in two imbricating layers: culturally, in terms of the ubiquity and consumption of foreign animation vis-à-vis the marginalization of foreign involvement. Regardless of either view, the trajectory of animation’s development in the country as a commodity undeniably signifies dependence on, if not subservience to, the west, as manifested in two imbricating layers: culturally, in terms of the ubiquity and consumption of foreign animation vis-à-vis the marginalization of
Such legitimization of animation as an export product uncannily parallels an analysis by David Frederic Camroux on how the state’s cooptation and farming of overseas Filipino workers have been reconfigured as a vector for economic growth, entailing Filipino expatriates as the “new national heroes” in light of the enormous remittances they feed to the state.61 As how the State-to-state-sanctioned sending of emigrants—a “weakness in Filipino national development”—has been “reformulated as an expression of Filipino strength,” so, too, has the captivity of Filipino animation been hoisted by the industry as a banner for nationalism, branded as an expression of pride, and utilized as a source of financial inflow at the expense of a paucity in indigenized or indigenous works.

Counterflows

The propulsion of homgrown animation within the industry, meanwhile, has only been a fairly recent phenomenon, with developments such as the flagship animation festival Animahenasyon inaugurated by ACPI in 2007, the sprouting of boutique outfits like Rocksheep Studios in 2000 and Tuldok Animation Studio in 2005, and the formation of animation departments attached to local media conglomerates such as ABS-CBN, arousing a decolonizing locomotion of sorts. However, the preponderance of indigenous animation, away from the creative distortions of the captive studio system, is arguably still located predominantly in the peripheries of the industry, orbiting in what Nick Doscampo has described as alternative, or what Michael Kho Lim has designated as independent, cinemas. Within these modes of production where commerciality is not as much, if not just as much, an agenda as artistic ferment, expression, or activism, Filipino animated films have also found a foothold.

For instance, an early outcome of a proximate breakaway from captivity was Nelson Caliguia Sr.’s Livingroom Productions, which Caliguia established while working as an animator in Fil-Cartoons. Literally, the studio operated on a makeshift capacity in the living room of Caliguia’s house and involved his family members in its productions. The studio most notably bore the animated short *Mokmok* (1995), which features a titular mosquito and its cronies who attempt to carry out a mission of spreading dengue in an impoverished barangay. Despite its unfinished and makeshift capacity in the living room of Caliguia’s house and involving his family members in its productions, the studio most notably bore the animated short *Mokmok* (1995), which features a titular mosquito and its cronies who attempt to carry out a mission of spreading dengue in an impoverished barangay. Despite being fraught with budgetary constraints, the film opted for a commercially unviable story nevertheless germane to the realities of Filipinos.

With shorts, the default mode of production has almost always been artisanal rather than assembly-line, with works emanating from students now conceivably occupying the majority of the country’s animation filmography. On the other hand, non-student films are also often produced and completed only by virtue of their filmmakers’ resourcefulness in the face of financial incapability. Ellen Ramos’ *Doon sa Kabila ng Bulkan* (The Other Side of the Volcano, 1997), the first Filipino film to compete in Annecy International Animation Film Festival, Dange Desembrana and Emmanuel Dadivas’s *Anak Maynila* (Child of Manila, 1993), and Fruto Coerte and Dadivas’s *The Criminal* (1984), are examples of such films relying on improvised creative methods, or what Molinia Anne Velasco-Wansom has contextualized as the aesthetics of “making do.”

More than digressions from the conveyor belt system of animation production, what these counterflows signify is a struggle to imagine Filipino identities that are distant, if not unfettered, from captive parameters, not unlike the Philippines’ struggle to gain independence from colonial sovereignty. It is uncertain if the Philippine animation industry’s surmounting of captivity will also occasion the nation’s homgrown animation to burgeon to the same extent as, or even greater than, Filipino live-action cinema. For now, there is only an incipience, a modicum of works whose counterflows could only wax or wane in the histories to come.

**Child Soldiers** (John Rie, Fil-Cartoons, Inc., 1997)

**Mokmok** (1995)

A short film produced by the home-based studio Livingroom Productions established by Nelson B. Caliguia, Sr.

**RPG Metanoia**

(John Rice, Thaumatrope Animation Production, 2010)

**Saving Sally**

(Avid Liongoren, Rocketsheep Studios, Mandrake Films, KB Studios, Alchemedia Productions, 2016)

**The Criminal**

(Nonoy Dadivas and Fruto Coorte, Media Concepts, Inc., 1984)

**Child of Manila**

(John Rice, Thaumatrope Animation Production, 2010)

**Mokmok** (John Rice, Fil-Cartoons, Inc., 1997)

**saving sally** (Avid Liongoren, Rocksheep Studios, Mandrake Films, KB Studios, Alchemedia Productions, 2016)
Endnotes

9. There are differing claims on the length of Juan Tamad—two, three, and six minutes. See Doscamp, 90; Marcelo, "Malabon, Drawing Board to Our Country's First Full-length Animation," 81; Doral, Panaja, and Lim, "Animation.
10. Doscamp, 90.
11. Ibid. See also Lent, "Comic Art in the Philippines," 246.
12. For this and according section, notes in parentheses indicate the title’s running period or release, not the year of studio’s involvement. Where a title has no accompanying year, the specific film iteration is unidentified.
16. Achiu So, interview by Roland Cartagena, Chat Interview, July 14, 2022, transcript courtesy of Roland Cartagena, quoted with permission.
18. Tore and Tore, 181-82.
22. Chito S. Roa, interview by Roland Cartagena, Chat Interview, June 27-28, 2022, transcript courtesy of Roland Cartagena, quoted with permission.
23. Benjie Aguiol, interview by Roland Cartagena, Chat Interview, June 20-23, 2022, transcript courtesy of Roland Cartagena, quoted with permission.
25. According to Tore and Tore, Burbank was revived in 1991 under a new management and was renamed as Burbank Animation Studio. See Tore and Tore, 182-83.
35. Ibid. See also Tosa Jammes, "PASI Instigates Artists Revenue Sharing," Victory, November 6-12, 2000, 67; Tosa Jammes, "PASI Reasoning Animators Philippine Studio After Years in Deluxema," Victory, August 7-13, 2000, 30.
42. Technical Education and Skills Development Authority, "Toon Animation Philips," Inc.
51. Tore and Tore, 205.
52. "Philippine Animation," in Philippine Short Film Animation, in Encyclopedia of Philippine Art, 2022, transcript courtesy of Roland Cartagena, quoted with permission.
56. Ibid.
A
fter more than six decades of an illustrious
career that spanned the silver screen, radio,
and later the small screen, the scholarship
written about the Queen of Philippine Movies, Susan Roces,
has mostly centered around her films,1 her star image,2 and her
enduring fandom.3 Her work behind-the-scenes as a producer,
both for her Rosas Productions and later for her husband’s
FPJ Productions, is little explored. While she never shied away
from discussing the topic at length in interviews,4 no in-depth
reportage nor a dedicated exploration of that aspect of her
career has been available to the public. If at all, it has only ever
been treated as an interesting angle for film promotion.5

This glaring gap in the production of popular and
academic knowledge about Roces’s producing activities might
have been a consequence of her overwhelming star image,
that of the postwar Babaeng Pilipina Ideal—a vision of the
Filipino woman whose virtue lay in her deeply Christian
morality and her active civic co-participation with her man not
as independent of but always in partnership with him.6 The
ideological pull of this narrative—of the ideal Filipino woman
and businesswoman behind Rosas Productions and FPJ
Productions.

The Story and Filmography of Rosas Productions

By the eve of 1968 and at 26 years old, Susan Roces
had been the most sought-after freelance star in the country for
the past three years.7 Since completing her eight-year contract8
with Sampaguita Pictures in February of 1965, only four other
stars—Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ), Joseph Estrada, Amalia Fuentes,
and Romeo Vasquez—had been in as much demand as she was
to appear in the then-burgeoning pool of independent film
productions that sprouted at the end of the classical studio era.
Of the lot, all four had already ventured into producing,9 with
Poe the earliest to make the transition to star-producer, having
put up FPJ Productions in 1962 and released Batang Maynila
in the same year through Tagalog Ilang-Ilang Productions,10
a production company that had earlier acquired Poe’s services
as freelance star and whose owner, Atty. Espiridion Luna, had
become a close family friend according to Elizabeth Poe in an
interview with Jeffrey Sonora.11 Indeed, it was Poe who
was the first independent producer to secure Roces’s services
fresh off Sampaguita for a film that teamed both the reigning
King and Queen of Philippine Movies for the first time, which
resulted in a then-record breaking first day gross of P36,000 for
a Filipino film, a record that remained unbroken until at least
1966.12

The business relationship and friendship between
Filipino moviedom’s top two draws that began in 1965 with
Ang Daigdig Ko’y Ikaw soon became a real-life romance. In
1968, after completing thirty-three tops- and high-grossing
films in three years, of which four films co-starred Poe and
a further five were produced by the latter’s subsidiary film
outfits, Roces believed it was time to take on the task and risk of film
producing herself. Just as Poe had done in the early days of his producing
venture, Roces sought her partner’s help in putting up Rosas Productions,13
so named after a variation of the screen surname she had built up as
her personal brand, and made use of the logistics and distribution
infrastructures already in place at the Phil-Am Film Compound, the
production and post-production facility FPJ rented at the time and which
came to be known as the FPJ Studios, to mount her projects.14

The maiden year of Rosas Productions saw the release of three
outings—each in the vein of Roces’s most successful films from both her
contract and freelance days. It would not come as a surprise then that all
these films from this first batch of offerings starred Roces herself in roles
and genres that her massive audience would have been familiar with seeing
her act in and had clamped for more.

Kaily Rosas ang Pag-ibig, which co-starred Ramil Rodriguez, with
whom she acted opposite for the first time during her final year in contract
with Sampaguita Pictures, was a light romance drama released on May 29,
1968. While no official synopsis of the film has been found, the remaining
ephemera of this production, such as stills published in Susan Roces
Blogspot, a web blog dedicated to chronicling Roces’s film career,15 suggest
that its story and themes were similar to her earlier hits, like Portrait of My
Love (1965) and To Love Again (1967), both of which co-starred frequent
on-screen partner Eddie Gutierrez and were produced by her former mother
studio. Shot in only twelve days and released in first-class venues such as
the Ever Theatre after fifteen days of post-production, Kaily Rosas ang Pag-
ibig was declared a huge hit. Moreover, as Roces did for Gutierrez’s career
in their earlier team-ups, this proved to be Rodriguez’s biggest film at the
time, which moved the entertainment press to consider Roces a starmaker
in her own right for raising the profile of her co-star with her very first
outing as an independent producer.16

Tanging Haru!… Roces’s second producing effort and one of four
films co-starring Poe that year, was released on August 4, 1968. Essentially
a variation on Ang Daigdig Ko’y Ikaw, the action rom-com saw Roces and
Poe Jr. in a reversal of roles. This time, Poe played a wealthy filmmaker who
wanted to learn more about the plight of the poor for his next film and
decided to live under pretense in a slum community, where he befriended
and later fell in love with an enterprising, tough-talking street urchin,
played by Roces. The film was such a hit that Roces and Poe would revisit
and rework this premise—of an odd couple that met under false pretenses,
particularly about the socio-economic background of one of the pair, and
would eventually fall in love in the end, differences be damned—at least
two more films after.17

To Susan with Love, the final film released during Rosas
Production’s first banner year, was an anthropological adaptation of four
stories that were featured in the radio program of the same name hosted by Roces
for broadcast giant DZRH. Released as the outfit’s Christmas offering
on December 7, 1968, it co-starred four of Roces’s previous leading men
episodes in that spanned different genres: Ramil Rodriguez as a ghost
who mistook a writer/Roces as his lost love in a variation of The Ghost and
Mrs. Muir (1947); Eddie Mesa as a playback pop singer who figured in a
chance encounter with a country lass/Roces visiting the city for the first

122  123

LONG TAKE

Title card bearing the Rosas Productions Logo in Florida (1973). Images are
author’s screenshot of the films

Title card bearing Susan Roces’ producer credits in Maligay (1977)
time, Joseph Estrada as a jeepney driver who filed suit after the jeep he sent in for repairs was accidently destroyed by the talyer (automobile repair shop) owner's tinkering tomboy of a niece/Roces; and Poe as a prince betrothed to a woman he has yet to meet and so disguised himself as a commoner to find true love for himself, only to encounter another royalty-in-disguise/Roces. The film was a box office hit despite or perhaps because of rumors during the film’s production that the King and Queen were on rocky ground and headed toward a breakup. The frenzy surrounding the couple hit an even higher pitch when a little more than a week after the film’s release, on December 16, news broke of Roces and Poe’s elopement and surprise civil wedding in Valenzuela according to a contemporary report by Baby K. Jimenez. Their Christmas Day church wedding, dubbed “The Wedding of the Year,” was opened to the public, which only furthered the feverish appetite for not just this film but also for a re-release of Ang Daigdig Ko’y Haro early the following year, this time with the full-color coverage of the real-life wedding included as a special attraction.

As Roces would later state, she considered herself effectively semi-retired from the acting profession from the beginning of her marriage, which would explain periods of occasional lulls and sudden outpourings of onscreen productivity in the years that followed.

Roces Productions officially became a part of the larger film production ecosystem under FPJ Productions at the start of 1969. Following the union of its proprietors, the former independent outfit joined the latter’s other sub-outlets—D’Lanor Productions, which, according to Jimenez, specialized in child-friendly fare such as comedies, fantasies, and superhero films, and JAFERE Productions, so named after the initials of all the Poe siblings—Jenny, Andy, Freddie, Elizabeth, Ronald, and Evangeline—and which served as the producing outfit for the other members of the Poe family. With the main brand of FPJ Productions in charge of action films and the larger-scaled projects that mainly starred Poe himself, Roces Productions differentiated itself by filling the space for female-driven stories centered on women’s issues within this branding system.

True to her statement, Roces kept a lower profile in the first three years of her marriage, only starring in two films in 1969 and one film each in 1970 and 1971, all produced for her by FPJ Productions. The sudden scarcity of new films starring Roces at the height of her popularity made these four films even bigger hits, effectively turning each one into a considerable film event.

After the three-year lull, Roces revived Rosas Productions into its most productive year in 1972, when she produced four film projects—three vehicles for other actresses and only one starring herself.
momentum with the release of *Florinda* on February 01. Adapted from Rico Bello Omagay's Tagalog classic komiks serial, the film marked a new phase in Roces' acting career, which confronted the more mature and horror-adjacent elements only previously hinted at in her starry spell. The opportunity to explore the darker aspects of the repression, vulnerability, and ontological ambiguity inherent in the Babaeng Pilipina ideal, this gothic romance drama started what has come to be known as Roces' signature horror film cycle, and for which her outfit has since been most associated with.

While the film was a huge hit among Roces' massive audience, *Florinda* proved to be Rosas Productions' sole outing in 1973. She then starred in two more films released later the same year from FPJ Productions, and it would not be until the latter half of the following year that her production outfit would come out with two new releases, both of which starred Roces herself.

*Patayin Mo sa Sindak si Barbara*, released on August 16, 1974, served as her sophomore effort in the horror genre. No longer bound by *Florinda's* more suggestive and restrained approach to horror, this slow-burn descent into dread and the abject horrors of female jealousy and sibling rivalry, conceived by celebrated filmmaker Celso "The Kid" Ad. Castillo, has proven to be one of Roces' most enduring contributions to genre filmmaking in the country. The film eventually earned Roces another FAMAS nomination as Best Actress, the third film from Rosas Productions that brought on this recognition. Such has been the film's legacy in the popular imagination of Filipino horror that this film has been remade thrice. The first, with the title shortened to *Sapagkat Kami'y Mga Misis Lamang* (1996), was released in 1995. It was followed by a limited series adaptation with the same shortened name in 2008 that starred Roces as the mother of the titular Barbara, a role created especially for her. The most recent remake is *Barbara Reimagined* (2019), a reworking of the source material by the original filmmaker's son, Christopher Ad. Castillo.

That monster hit was followed by Rosas Productions reinvigorating another Elena M. Patron surrogacy drama, *Dalaosa ang Nagdalaan sa Akin*, released on November 8, 1974. While it shared the attention-grabbing title scheme of the earlier *Lihimang, as well as the central premise of the then-novel phenomenon of surrogacy, this film delved deeper into the underlying theme of the conflict between medical science advancement and Filipino spirituality involved in cases of fetal transplantation. Roces and Anson-Roa co-stared as lifelong friends, Lourdes and Eufemia, faced with a difficult medical situation after Eufemia/Anson-Roa had been diagnosed with an inoperable brain tumor that grew at such a rate that she might not survive long enough to carry her pregnancy to full-term. Out of empathy, Lourdes/Roces agreed to the medically precarious procedure of fetal transplantation that would allow her friend's child to grow in her womb and eventually be delivered to full term, but not without having sacrificed her health with the series of medications and medical procedures required of her. The twists of fate that followed both women, which included the miraculous shrinkage of Eufemia’s tumor and the gradual decline of Lourdes’ health as they navigated the tension-filled task of co-parenting the child that they now shared, provided the meat and bones of the film's thoughtful exploration of female friendship and the complications behind non-traditional family setups. While a big hit during its initial release, *Dalaosa* has since been overlooked and forgotten because it has been difficult to find a copy to review and reevaluate. Fortunately, FPJ Productions has recently completed its restoration of the film, hopefully leading to its rediscovery by a new generation of fans, scholars, and film enthusiasts and its eventual critical reappraisal.

This by-then rare quarterly output at the end of 1974 would, unfortunately, be the last time Rosas Productions had consecutive offerings, despite the consistently great business each of its releases made every time. In the next three years, the outfit would only produce two more films, never to be revived afterwards. Indeed, Roces herself as an actress only starred in the two films she produced in 1974, and from then on acted in only one film a year until 1978.

On October 22, 1976, Rosas Productions came out with its penultimate release, the ensemble comedy *Sapagkat Kami'y Mga Misis Lamang*. The film, which co-starred Roces with the new movie queen of the '70s, Nora Aunor, character actress Celia Rodriguez, and comedy powerhouse Chichay, marked the former's first comedy picture in more than three years. While the film's publicity materials marketed it as a playful domestic battle of the sexes, an official film synopsis has yet to be found. However, its related ephemera of stills suggest its similarity to the husband-wife comedy pictures that Roces and Poe would later star in near the end of the decade, *Mabuhay, Saan Ka Nanggaling Kagabi* and *Mabuhay, Ginagabi Ka na Naman*, both released in 1979 by FPJ Productions.

Less than a year after this, Rosas Productions presented its final offering—the supernatural horror *Maligno*. Released on June 23, 1977, the film reunited Roces with her constant leading man Dante Rivero and filmmaker Celso Ad. Castillo in what would be the last official horror film made by her outfit. *Maligno* shared its story premise with the American horror film *Rosemary's Baby* (1968), and indeed was perhaps inspired by the release of the latter's made-for-TV sequel *Look What's Happened to Rosemary's Baby* just the year prior (1976). Nevertheless, this take on the woman-impregnated-by-Satan narrative did more than just transplant the plot to the Philippine context. Instead, it used it to explore distinctly Filipino themes and concerns, such as the plight of the modern working Babaeng Pilipina, the anxieties of motherhood, and a sincere reflection on the limits of faith and the constant struggle to believe. Indeed, the film's defiant theological treatizes, particularly those uttered by Roces near the end, served as an intelligent unpacking and questioning of the Christian virtues and morality found at the core of her performance of the postwar Babaeng Pilipina ideal. While the film proved to be another monster hit at the box office, it also delivered the last FAMAS nomination and first win for Best Actress that Roces received for a Rosas film production.

While the story of Rosas Productions officially ended with the financial and critical triumph of *Maligno*, there remained one film produced after it that people—fans and scholars alike—have continued to mistake as the last Rosas Productions outing—*Gumising Ka... Maruja.* Released on September 14, 1978, this film has been considered the last entry in Roces' horror film cycle. However, while the film was the star's final venture into the gothic horror genre, this project's epic scale motivated her husband to
produce the film for Roces as a “gift of love” for her, according to an article on the film in *Liwayway Magazine*. As when asked about it after a screening of the restored film in 2019, Roces credited Lino Brocka for the project’s inception because he came to them with the story and script, the cast he had in mind, and the locations he envisioned. As may be gleaned from her response, this view of the scope of the work of film producing as the total conception of the creative vision for a film project, together with the logistical labor and financial investment toward the realization of the said vision, might serve as an instructive encapsulation of the behind the scenes work that Roces had rendered as a producer for all the Rosas releases and the FPJ Productions offerings she oversaw after taking on the responsibility of being the latter’s co-proprietor.

Indeed, *Gumising* worked reflexively as a celebration of so many layers of Roces’s career—of the continued hold her portrayal of the character Maruja had over the public’s imagination since the release of that mega-blockbuster in 1967, of her enduring as a star who, despite her then increasingly limited appearances, would not need a comeback because, as in the words of her character Nina Concepcion, “I never left,” and of the intelligence, stamina, and business-savvy that characterized her career behind the scenes labor for Rosas Productions and the entire FPJ Productions’ filmmaking ecosystem.

It would only be fitting to close this discussion of the story of Rosas Productions and this bonus hanger-on film that had always been mistaken as a Rosas production to acknowledge that *Gumising Ka… Maruja*, like the other films in her acclaimed horror film cycle, made a killing at the box office and, most importantly, earned for Roces the distinction of not just another FAMAS nomination for Best Actress but the then in its entirety, “Pwede nating palitan itong [bahaging ito ng] Maruja sa ikagaganda ng produksiyon. Ang mga ito ay ang kanilang business foresight or acumen are the reason why most, if not all, pictures of FPJ or Rosas Productions are money-makers.

This brief assessment of Roces and Poe’s producing philosophy—her vetting and selection of story material for adaptation and determine how best to conform it to or accommodate Roces’s star image extended even to her favorite source materials—komiks serials. She also believed that stories published in komiks [are] pre-sold na sa mga fans, so meron nang following iyan, so they’re translated to film [they’re assured hits]. Like Maruja, di ba? Maruja was the number one serialized [komiks story at that time], walang dalaing sa Maruja. It was the number one serialized story by Mars Ravelo. Ang mga tao [are] tao ngayon sa tindahan, “Wala pa bang Pilipino Komiks?”—I think it was in Pilipino Komiks—“Wala pang bago kasi yong Maruja? Ano kaya, buhay siya.”

While we no longer have access to sources that could detail her degree of involvement, particularly in the conception of the few original stories she produced under Rosas, such as *Kulay Rosas ang Pag-ibig* (1968) and *Forever* (1972), Roces’s extended interview with Boy Abunda in 2009 about how she came up with the idea for a film that later spawned a franchise of domestic comedy features, which starred herself and her husband for FPJ Productions, provides us with a glimpse into her creative impulses as a producer.

The Stories of Susan Roces as Producer and Businesswoman

While telling the story of Rosas Productions consisted of going through the outfit’s filmmography vis-à-vis the personal developments, financial decisions, and critical reception that informed the production of each of its releases, as well as documenting the general shifts in the outfit’s productivity during its ten-year run, exploring the work of Roces as producer and businesswoman, on the other hand, would necessitate gathering accounts of her business philosophy and creative interests, her work ethic and working relationships with collaborators, and the extent of her grasp of her audience and their dynamics.

When Susan Roces passed away last May 20, 2022, the country lost not only the Queen of its cinema industry but also a cultural icon whose performance and embodiment of a distinctly Filipino femininity has endured as an ideal in the popular imagination. As our collective loss has rendered a direct glimpse into her creative impulses as a producer.

She loves to get stories from authors, and then pinag- aromal niya ito. Ito-analyze niya yong mga istorya at then she would meet with the authors, and then discuss na, “Prede nating patalin itong [bihagahan ito ng kwento].” “Maraming ideas yun…”

This effort to shape each story material as a film adaptation and determine how best to conform it to or accommodate Roces’s star image extended even to her favorite source materials—komiks serials. She also believed that stories published in komiks [are] pre-sold na sa mga fans, so meron nang following iyan, so they’re translated to film [they’re assured hits]. Like Maruja, di ba? Maruja was the number one serialized [komiks story at that time], walang dalaing sa Maruja. It was the number one serialized story by Mars Ravelo. Ang mga tao [are] tao ngayon sa tindahan, “Wala pa bang Pilipino Komiks?”—I think it was in Pilipino Komiks—“Wala pang bago kasi yong Maruja? Ano kaya, buhay siya.”

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This very grounded and immediate approach to market research kept Roces and her husband abreast of popular tastes and created a deep and personal connection with their audiences.

From the start of her stardom under Sampaquita, Roces had been known for the kindness she showed her fans. While acknowledging the genuine kindness of her friend, Jimenez also recognized the beneficial dimension of this close relationship between the star and her fandom.

That’s why Susan reads her fan mails, because sinasabi nila ‘Gusto namin ho yong ganito yong gawin niyo.’ Magaganda ang suggestions ng fans, alam mo ba? ‘Bakit hindi ho kayo gumawa ng—?’ Nakikinig, nakikinig iyan.46

This access to direct and active fan feedback rewarded both Roces and her fans, as the former continued to have an ever-evolving understanding of what made her fans click and how best to hold their interest, while the latter gained some degree of access to and formed a kind of relationship that no longer remained purely parasocial with their idol.

Indeed, when Roces decided to produce Dalawa ang Nagdagdag sa Akin (1974), a film that might seem superficially a retreat of an earlier surrogacy-themed Rosas hit, Isinilang Ko ang Anak ng Ibang Babae (1972), and cast herself opposite one of Isinilang’s stars, Boots Anson-Roa, it was a creative decision she openly credited to her fans.

Noon pa man marami na ang humihiling na pagsumahala sa pelikula sina Susan at Boots. Marami ang sumusulat sa tanggapan ng FPJ Productions, maging sa at sa ibang istudyu, nang kumarri sanay na sina Susan at Boots ay tatalakal sa pelikula.


A LETTER TO SUSAN ROCES

Dear Susan,

We were dicussing once about you in our former school where our Mother Superior was listening. After a while, she joined in our conversation. She told us that the root of many evils today is the influence of bad movies. She even added that we should try to convince our favorite stars to make films about the lives of saints, since they, secretly when they’re very popular like you, can influence the younger generation.

The youth love to emulate their favorites and there is nothing greater than the imitation of saints. I think Mother Superior is right, Susan, is she not?

Why not start the ball rolling by playing the life of any of our saints like St. Margaret Mary, St. Therese Neumann, or any of your favorite patron saints? You can do wonders whenever you vary from your usual roles. Remember, change of role in Anne-Boberta! It almost gave you the FA-MAS statute. So I think you should have another change now.

It’s over a year since you made that movie. Since then, you haven’t made any picture for the FA-MAS. Maybe this time it’s possible?

As a freelancer, you have a hand in the choice of roles, and if no other producer dares to venture in this picture, perhaps Ronnie will be willing to finance it for the love of God and his fellowmen.

You can portray the role of a saint convincingly. You have the talent and most of all, you’re a good Catholic. Did they do it in the States, like the Saint Roch, The Ten Commandments, etc. Why not? If so, then the Filipinos like to emulate only James Bond pictures. But when it comes to worthwhile pictures like that of the saints, they are afraid to venture in. Can’t you be the leader, Susan? We’ll be more proud of you if you will lead them.

For the director, you can perhaps ask Father Reuter and you can even use some talents from the Catholic schools’ dramatic guilds. I’m sure even Cardinal Sinon will like the idea, especially if the premiere night’s earnings will be donated to worthy organizations such as the Catholic Charities, the Pope’s Leperarium, etc. And if it’s really a good picture, Catholic newspapers will even recommend it.

Your leading man? Don’t you like your Lord to be the one? Other stars try to win in the FA-MAS by portraying roles of bad women like hostesses and prostitutes. Can’t you try winning the same award via the life of St. Therese Neumann for example?

Will you fail those who rely much on your talent and your Christian charity?

Love,
A Susan fan

---STARDOM---

Endnotes
5. See Chua, “Constructing the Bahagian Pilipino Ideal: TULISAN (1962) and the Three Faces of Postwar Filipino Femininity,” for an elaboration of the Bahagian Pilipino Ideal and how this resultant cultural standard was a negotiated amalgamation of two earlier competing colonial images of femininity.
6. Tributes to the passing of movie queen Amalia Fuentes frequently cited her achievements as a hybristata—actress, morsor, and producer—including discursive and writing efforts, in remembrance of her legacy, such as in this one by Jewelle Paa, "Veeran actress Amalia Fuentes dies at 78," Pika Pika, “Jewelle Paa,” October 5, 2019, www.pikapika philippines.com/veeran-actress-amalia-fuentes-dies-at-78-local-news.
8. In a 2014 interview with PikoPiko, Roces says of this eight year contract: “I had signed to a four-year build-up contract with Sampaguita Pictures. It stated that when you are named a star within your first year, it automatically becomes another four years. So I graduated with flying colors for eight years from the Sampaguita Academy.” Quoted from Greggy Vera Cruz, "Bed of 'Roces',” Stargate PeopleAsia, May 23, 2022, accessed on November 28, 2022, peopleasia.ph/bed-of-roces.
9. Jimenez, "Supported by Facts and Figures, Writer Baby K. Jimenez Says that the Nation’s Hottest Star and Undoubtedly the Queen of Local Cinema is Susan Roces.”
11. See Chua, “Constructing the Bahagian Pilipino Ideal: TULISAN (1962) and the Three Faces of Postwar Filipino Femininity,” for an elaboration of the Bahagian Pilipino Ideal and how this resultant cultural standard was a negotiated amalgamation of two earlier competing colonial images of femininity.
The very notion of film preservation, much less restoration, has taken a sense of urgency in the last decade, arguably through the visibility given by the efforts of ABS-CBN Film Restoration’s Sagip Pelikula (yes, it is a mouthful). When the initiative started in 2011, we were viewed as nging-a-kugen or a flash in the pan, starting off with high profile films like Himala (1982), Oro, Plata, Mata (1982), and Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon? (1976) only to fade into oblivion after a few rah-rah.

A decade and more than 200 films later, the landscape has changed, and the urgency of rescuing our films is front and center in many people’s minds even as our efforts have slowed down considerably due to external forces that impacted ABS-CBN considerably—the franchise denial and subsequent loss of budgets and human resources.

No Aftermarket

Before television became a staple, films were originally just for the big screen and had no real life post theatrical. There was little value in maintaining print copies that occupied space and needed special storage conditions. Nitrate stock was highly flammable and caused quite a few fires, while acetate cellulose decayed if stored improperly—which was usually the case—and resulted in vinegar syndrome, the odour pungent odor the film stock emits as it degrades. Our weather conditions certainly didn’t help as it was far from ideal—too hot, damp, and humid. That’s why we never heard stories of cinematic gems being unearthed in some abandoned cinema in a remote area.

To the few that did have foresight, like Reyna Films and FFI Studios, it was a costly enterprise that, fortunately, they could afford. Armida Siguion-Reyna and Fernando Poe Jr. had dedicated rooms and, while not necessarily humidity controlled, would maintain a fairly consistent temperature with staff to maintain the library. Other producers would settle for keeping the cans with the film laboratories if they could get away with it—beneath beds or in cabinets in an occasionally air-conditioned room or poorly ventilated basements or storage rooms—often forgotten until something started to smell.

With the advent of television, home videos, and cable, that thinking was further reinforced when cheaper video tapes took up less space and could easily be replicated, proving more practical and economical. Many surmised video was the way to go and they could just keep dubbing multiple copies when the older tapes deteriorated. This technology being analog, there was no mindset that video duplication also causes quality loss over time and what was once crisp would be soft and blurry a few copies down the line.

Many of us probably remember New Year’s noisemakers made from discarded film reels, sold in bulk and by weight after finishing their runs in far-flung cinemas. It was the final revenue to be made off those cumbersome cans of film that took up space and would eventually smell of rot.

The Road to the ABS-CBN Film Archives and Restoration

My love of cinema started early as both my parents would take us to watch Hollywood and local films. The first movie I remember watching in cinemas was Zoom, Zoom, Superman! (1973) with Ariel Ureta. Growing up, afternoons screenings of LYN andamp; andamp; Sampaguita movies were staples after homework was done or when my neighborhood playmates were not yet available. And I would watch one to two movies a week on the big screen because I felt that’s where they needed to be seen.

In ABS-CBN in the early 1990s, I found myself tackling local film acquisitions as content for broadcast and the pre-Cinema One film cable channel, benefiting from being familiar with many titles.

In Chico Santos-Concio, I found a kindred spirit, and we could talk movies with a shorthand that made it effortless, so it was a no-brainer when we set up the ABS-CBN Film Archives in 1994.

In Jo Atienza, we had a collaborator and well-regarded archivist, when there were so few of them then, who would steer us towards an ideal and viable path.

Film restoration was already part of what the Archives wanted to do from the onset. Back then, it was all analog, and an initial exploration using Oro, Plata, Mata was met with daunting challenges that still would not fix many of the problems, along with astronomical costs even by today’s standards. After a few weeks of exploration and trying to rationalize costs, including consulting with the film’s director Peque Gallaga, the project was dropped.

It was in 2009 when we revisited the idea of restoring films once again. Central Digital Lab’s Manet A. Dayrit pitched a proposal using new digital technologies that have had considerable success in many film capitals. Still, it was a tough sell given the vehemently opposing views then on film versus digital, but the results were compelling enough for us to take it to the next step using the Star Cinema film Maalaala Mo Kayo: The Movie (1994) as the test subject.

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There was much back and forth with samples, screenings, discussions, comments, criteria, and quality assessment. However, by mid-2010, ABS-CBN management was impressed enough with the technical results and much lower restoration costs, and then-Chairman Gabby Lopez greenlit the project with the belief that this was the next step in preparing our content for emerging digital platforms. At our behest, Gabby and Chico concurred with expanding the restoration efforts to include marquee titles already with the ABS-CBN library or that we could acquire as part of the advocacy we wanted.

In 2011, restoration activities officially began in earnest. Himala took some eight months to restore and even had major hiccups when after five months of scans, grading, and clean-up—which we were all giddy about—the image was blurred and soft once projected on the cinema screen at Rockwell for the first time, and all the work had to be redone. With the initial learnings, Oro, Plata, Mata was done quicker in about five months, Ganito Kami Noon in some four months, and we continued the back and forth, deciding on quality and parameters as to how far we can push the restoration.

By 2012, some eight to ten films were in various stages of work or near completion as we also tried to consult with the still-living filmmakers who worked on the films. Peque supervised the color grading of Oro, Ricky Lee was consulted for Himala, with Ishmael Bernal already gone, Joey Romero, son of the late Eddie Romero, gave inputs on Ganito Kami Noon. Manet of Central was an editor on many of the movies. And still-active cinematographers like Rommy Vitug were keen to give details as well, especially if they happened to be at Central for other projects.

Himala was supposed to premiere in the first half of 2012 but was pushed back to coincide with Ricky Lee’s coffee table book launch for Himala and a planned documentary by Cinema One. Himala Ngayon (2012). The screening was delayed once more when the film was invited to have its world premiere on August 29, 2012, in Venice. It was introduced by Nora Aunor, who was at the festival for another film.

Himala finally premiered locally on December 4, 2012, riding a publicity wave that included a book, a documentary, a world premiere at the prestigious Venice Film Festival, and adjudged Best Asia-Pacific film by CNN in 2008—not bad for a then thirty-year-old film.
Respect for the Filmmakers

I remember conversations with industry colleagues who were also part of the academe, and one of their frustrations was teaching or studying film but being limited to foreign titles because so few local films survive in decent conditions, not even enough to be appreciated.

The impression stuck, so the idea behind ABS-CBN’s restoration efforts was to showcase a wide range of creators. We decided we were going to be primarily director and writer-centric. We listed directors and writers by their works and identified the titles we wanted to prioritize. Of course, it was easier if the works were already with ABS-CBN, but otherwise, we can now look into pursuing specific films for those that were not.

That perfect plan soon became troubled as we had to shuffle titles within the director-writer selections when multiple problems arose. These included ownership and rights, copies or lack thereof, condition of the available film material, which was in many cases the only surviving restorable copy, completeness of the film reels, and a whole range of other concerns.

Would Virgin People (1984) be my first choice for a Celso Ad. Castillo film restoration? Not really. Unfortunately, a restorable copy of Tag-Ulan sa Tag-Araw (1975) didn’t surface until much later, the existence of Babadok Queen’s (1977) prints remains a rumor, and the unearthed Paguitang ng Uwak, Pag-Itim ng Tagah (1978) reels had already melted beyond recovery to the dismay of Vilma Santos, the film’s producer, who no longer had a copy but was very supportive of our efforts to secure the rights and search for intact film print materials.

Nevertheless, in a decade, we did manage a good cross-section of film work from not just different directors and writers but also cinematographers, film scorers, production designers, many award-winning and commercial movies in a wide range of genres spanning eight decades:Bernal, Brocla, De Leon, Romero, Zialcita, Suzara, O’Hara, Guillen, Lee, Abaya, Zabat, Vitug, Siguiere-Reyna, Roño, Ad. Castillo, Fernandez, Cayabyab, Arellana, Conde, Sikos, Reyes, De los Reyes, Chionglo, the list goes on.

Learning Along the Way

Central Digital Lab was our first partner locally. We did the tests with them through all the arduous trial and error, frustration, and jubilation, and every other emotion in between. The commute to Makkazi was a regular thing as we nitpicked and scrutinized every detail. There were no precedents then, and we were charting new territory. Nevertheless, it was imperative that we do the work with a Filipino company to show the world that the Philippines can do world-class restoration as well.

I visited the facilities of Paramount Pictures, Warner Bros. Entertainment Inc., The Walt Disney Company, 20th Century Fox Studios, University of California Los Angeles, Universal Pictures, Post Haste, Deluxe, and Sony Imageworks, seeking guidance and inspiration because ABS-CBN Film Restoration is an expensive enterprise. While I learned a lot about processes and systems, what excited and terrified me was that what we had planned was far more ambitious than what the Hollywood studios were doing then. They were amazed that we were proceeding with our initiative with a far ahead look into the future, whereas revenues per film on the immediate governed their decisions. On the other hand, our cinema tie-ups, marketing campaigns, and roadshows were being done as part of an overall strategy designed to put everything under our corporate advocacy. Ergo, we had no template to follow and were making the rules along the way.

Caution and responsibility were our new mantras. We planned, strategized, shifted priorities, capped restoration costs, partnered, and explored better options so we could get the best value without draining our limited budgets. Saltero (1984) and Misteryo sa Tuwa (1984) would have been our most expensive restorations because of film damage requiring some 20,000 hours of manual work, so we waited it out, split the work, looked for new technologies that could bring down the cost even if it took seven years to get it done.

To put it in perspective, preservation work on Saltero and Misteryo sa Tuwa to arrest deterioration needed to be done first for nearly a year in L’Immagine Ritrovata before we could scan the prints. The films were gassed to unspool them and make them less brittle, scanned slowly to minimize tension on the print and limit possible breakage, color graded, and manually restored frame by frame—and that is just on the image. To put it in more straightforward terms, the photos we see on the social media that have been touched up and colorized are the equivalent of a single frame of film. There are twenty-four frames per second, sixty seconds per minute, so with a ninety-minute film, which was rarely the standard film length, we are looking at 129,600 individual frames, minimum. While not all frames will require the same level of restoration, that’s still a massive amount of work to remove scratches and jitter, stabilize the image, eliminate molds and splices, and a whole bunch of problems.

Our partnerships and collaborations expanded beyond Central Digital to include the Ritrovata in Bologna in Italy, Kantana in Thailand, the British Film Institute, the Singapore Archives, the Japan Foundation, the Film Development Council of the Philippines, the Cultural Center of the Philippines, Wildsound, and our in-house team in ABS-CBN. It was no longer unusual for a film to have multiple restoration credits: scanned in Italy (L’Immagine Ritrovata), color-graded in Manila (Narra Post-Production Studios by Wildsound), restored in Thailand (Kantana Post Production), audio-restored in Manila (ABS-CBN and Narra Post-Production Studios by Wildsound).

Making the Old Feel New for a New Generation

We love old movies and would watch a clearer, cleaner, enhanced version anytime. The same cannot be said about the younger generation who do not share the passion for the old films as we do. Not for anything, but they were simply not exposed to the same movies as a broader range of choices with better technical quality became available not just in the 500-channel universe but on other multi-media platforms.

For the younger generation, why not make the old films accessible and make them feel new? That’s what we had planned was far more ambitious than what the Hollywood studios were doing then. They were amazed that we were proceeding with our initiative with a far ahead look into the future, whereas revenues per film on the immediate governed their decisions. On the other hand, our cinema tie-ups, marketing campaigns, and roadshows were being done as part of an overall strategy designed to put everything under our corporate advocacy. Ergo, we had no template to follow and were making the rules along the way.

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We clearly needed to re-introduce the “classics” to a new audience. It would be a slow process as we were pragmatic enough to know that it’s a tough sell, convincing young people they needed something they didn’t even know.

While Maaalaala Mo Keaya ‘The Movie was the first restoration, we decided we needed to start with a true classic—Himala. The Star Cinema movies were barely fifteen years old at the time, hard to call classics even if we add the word “modern.” So we included them to the mix of what would be considered classics.

When we decided on new posters, the only mandate was that they were eye-catching, had an impact, and could stop the passerby dead on their tracks enough to consider watching the movie on the strength of an image. We have had only one poster designer since we started, and Justin Besana delivered the passersby dead on their tracks enough to consider watching the movie, especially if we loved the movies the first time, but millennials and Gen Zs? So we challenged young generation would watch it, especially if we loved the movies the first time, but millennials and Gen Zs? So we challenged young generation.

As a private enterprise, we need to be fiscally responsible, and while a few titles, especially the early ones, have recovered their cost, many still have not. The idea was for ABS-CBN Film Restoration to be self-supporting with revenues funding the later restorations, a bit of a pay-it-forward mentality.

The new trailers also had to feel new and young despite the films being twenty or thirty years old. Our generation would watch it, especially if we loved the movies the first time, but millennials and Gen Zs? So we challenged young generation.

We weren’t deceiving people by making them think it was a new film. It was an old film, but it’s a good one odd made well enough to survive changing tastes and preferences of several generations and was worth revisiting. We just needed to put a fresh spin or a more polished veneer so old didn’t feel old.

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140

We couldn’t be seen the same way?

If the old Hollywood films can be perennial seasonal staples put a fresh spin or a more polished veneer so old didn’t feel old.

The author at the Legacy Sagip Pelikula 2016. Photo by Andrei Antonio

Sagip Pelikula

Sagip Pelikula continues to be an active advocacy, reaching out to different audiences. People won’t know what to look for if they are never exposed to it, so it’s our job to create awareness. Social media, cinema partnerships, viewing platforms, international film festivals, academic and professional symposia, and advocacy campaigns have all been venues to share this passion and belief.

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The journey has been a difficult one. Not everybody agrees that resources (and it is considerable) should be allocated to the old and that they are better spent on new productions. “Luma na yan, Gagastusan niyo na naman.” But I have a quick rebuttal: “And what makes you so sure your new movie will be a classic?” That pretty much ends the debate in most instances.

Even locally, acknowledging what we do is spotty even part of the movies we restore attend our screenings, give us feedback, and could often be frustrating. However, we had supporters within and outside of ABS-CBN who would bat for us and give us much-needed encouragement. Many artists who are not even part of the movies we restore attend our screenings, give interviews, and re-tweet our posts to help us spread the word.

I always like to point out that Polo Pascual was key to the evolution of ABS-CBN Film Restoration’s advocacy campaign. We were coincidentally traveling in Nice, France, sometime in 2011. While telling him about our plans and asking for his support, about two minutes in, Polo told me to stop and said yes, which started the ball rolling for us. At the heart of what we do are Charo and Ricky, who guided and inspired us from the beginning.

We weren’t deceiving people by making them think it was a new film. It was an old film, but it’s a good one odd made well enough to survive changing tastes and preferences of several generations and was worth revisiting. We just needed to put a fresh spin or a more polished veneer so old didn’t feel old.

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Three years into the ABS-CBN Film Restoration initiative, we decided it was due for a makeover with a catchy handle that summed up everything we wanted to accomplish. In one of our regular brainstorming sessions, promo producer Ian Faustino came up with Sagip Pelikula (ABS-CBN was then already using Sagip Kapamilya), which immediately stuck, and it’s a banner we have used since, recently tweaking it a bit to ABS-CBN Sagip Pelikula.

On August 18, 2015, Ricky, Manet, Joey Romero, Manolo Abaya, Cecille Castillo, Laurie Guillen, Joey Reyes, Mel Chionglo, Romy Vitug, Sunny and Sherbert Iacad, Ronald Arguelles, filmakers and advocates all, joined us for the launch of Sagip Pelikula, using their influence and status to give our advocacy more gravitas.

Over the years, many more have joined sharing the Sagip Pelikula efforts with their followers and fan bases, an effective tool to bridge generations—theirs and ours. As is often the case, all it took was a call and the most common reply was, “Tell us when and where, and we will be there.” Piolo Pascual, Ricky Lee, Angel Aquino, Boy Abunda, Nora Aunor, Maja Salvador, Atom Araullo, Roderick Paulate, Paulo Avelino, Aiko Melendez, Alex Medina, Antoinette Jadaone, Bembol Roco, Carlos Sigainon-Reyna, Cherry Pie Picache, Dan Villegas, Icaz Calzado, Jaime Fabregas, Jerry Lopez-Sineneng, Jess Mendoza, Joey Reyes, Junel Hernandez, Max Cruz Alvaro, Marc Solis, Mon Cojado, Nonie Buencamino, Raquel Villavicencio, Ricky Davao, Romy Vitug, Rory Quintos, Shaina Maglaya, Tirso Cruz III, Vangie Labalan, Zanjoie Marudo, and Eddie Garcia were all part of our black-and-white campaign. Many others, titans and legends of Philippine Cinema—Rosa Rosal, Marita Zobel, Delia Razon, Bienvenido Lumbera, Mike De Leon, Chito Rofo, Christopher De Leon, Vilma Santos, Maricel Soriano, Olivia Lamasan, John Lloyd Cruz, Bea Alonzo, Richard Gomez, Dawn Zulueta, Aga Muhlach, Lea Salonga, Fiel Zarub, Jon Latorio, Nikki Valdes, Rico Locsin, Lorna Tolentino, Zsa Zsa Padilla, Angelica Panganiban, Bihert Ortiz, Caridad Sanchez, Lucy Quinto, Peque Gallaga, Albert Martinez, Butch Perez, Snookey Serna, Elizabeth Oropesa, Alma Moreno, Eric Quizon, Cherry Pie Picache, Marvin Agustin, Jolina Magdangal, Sharmaine Arnaiz, Mike Idon, Joel Torre, Richard Quien, Kuh Ledesma, Cathy Garcia Molina, Marc Solis, Camille Prats, Judy Ann Santos, Ryan Aogonillo, Cholo Laurel, Eugene Domingo, and countless others have lent their voices broadening the reach of our advocacy.

I have always found the most fulfillment when I am approached by a Gen Z thanking ABS-CBN and Sagip Pelikula for giving them the opportunity to watch a classic. “Mayagad pala siya.” “Ako na po ang mga tao noon.” “Van ko po ang panagbawasan nila.” “Kaya wala siya tinawang na King of Comedy [referring to Dolphy].” “Lalo ko po ‘yong isang artista at ngayon ko lang po siya napanood.” Zsa Zsa Padilla and her daughters have gone to all our screenings that feature her father, internationally-famous boxing referee Carlos “Sonny” Padilla Jr., who was a leading actor during
the LVN era. Rap Fernandez, Victor Silayan, Kiko Estrada, and other descendants also find new opportunity to watch the works of their legendary ancestors.

It doesn’t hurt that we gained more respect by winning at the International Association of Business Communications’s Gold Quill Awards in Toronto in 2014. We are one of only two Philippine companies to receive the Award of Excellence. It’s sad that we are recognized more away from our shores than here, but we were never as flashy by local standards.

With the ABS-CBN franchise denial and the pandemic in 2020 severely diminishing our capabilities, we have pivoted on our strategy. While full restorations are off the table, for now, we have brought back treasures from more than a half-century ago, notably Prinsipe Tiñoso (1954), Badjao (1957), Malvarosa (1958), Biyaya ng Lupa (1959), Sandata at Pangako (1961), and Ibong Adarna (1941) and Giliw Ko (1939), two of only five pre-World War II movies known to survive. Not pristine expensive restorations, but new 4K scans and enhancements we can do in-house still give the films their best look since they were originally released in cinemas.

One of the greatest tragedies is for many of our filmmakers to be forgotten, even with the honors they have heaped on the country or the craft they have employed to document our history, culture, struggles, and journey as a people. The Sagip Pelikula advocacy seeks to immortalize them with our humble efforts so they will be forever remembered.

We know that not everyone will appreciate the old. It’s simply not in our education, culture, or DNA. However, if we manage to impress and excite two to three of every ten young minds, then that collective memory will continue to live on and be passed down instead of fading with our generation. That is the most important legacy we can leave behind, a testament to a cinematic past full of life, color, history, and culture that defines our Filipino identity.

Leo P. Katigbak set up the ABS-CBN Film Archives in 1994 and currently oversees its restoration efforts under the Sagip Pelikula campaign. From 2008 to 2015, he was Chief of Staff under the Office of the President and handled Special Projects, including ABS-CBN’s Content Management Initiative and a planned ABS-CBN Museum. He has over 35 years of experience in television, having started in 1986 as a writer, editor, director, and producer on a wide variety of shows such as Penthouse Live, Oh No! It’s Johnny, Maalaala Mo Kaya, Tatak Pilipino, Ryan Ryan Musikahan, and Okay Ka, Fairy Ko! before moving on to head programming in the channel Studio 23, and subsequently becoming its Managing Director.
In the mining industry. David reminds them of the bottom option. But the other men on the table dismiss her. (Later in soon realize this dream. At work, David and his colleagues wife tells David that their English-speaking son “dreams of a house and lot so they could resettle. Over a video call, his complicated life. He works as a CEO of a mining corporation Alejandro) appears like another hiker from Manila with a still be plenty to look at, and perhaps even more to learn about with a few of his dodgy but hilarious neighbors, there would others search for the missing horse and its thief, believing the next morning, Podong steals Bulkan’s horse in retaliation event eventually finds out, leaving Podong with a blackened eye. The next morning, Podong steals Bulkan’s horse in retaliation and proceeds to the base camp. Meanwhile, Bulkan and three others search for the missing horse and its thief, believing the culprit is only a day or a few hours ahead of them.

If Arbi Barbarona’s third feature The Highest Peak (2020) followed only Podong’s adventures, including his antics with a few of his dodgy but hilarious neighbors, there would still be plenty to look at, and perhaps even more to learn about the lives of people living around Mount Apo.

Alas, there is an outsider. At the start of the film, David Justimbaste (Dax Alejandro) appears like another hiker from Manila with a bucket list to tick. However, a series of flashbacks reveal a complicated life. He works as a CEO of a mining corporation in Davao City. His wife and son live elsewhere. He acquired a house and lot so they could reettle. Over a video call, his wife tells David that their English-speaking son “dreams of climbing the highest peak.” David promises him that they will soon realize this dream. At work, David and his colleagues weigh the advantages of open pit, as opposed to shaft, mining. Belinda, a female colleague, opposes the highly destructive option. But the other men on the table dismiss her. (Later in the pantry, the same man remark that women have no place in the mining industry.) David reminds them of the bottom line: “The cheapest way to mine, and the fastest way to deliver products to the market.” The company plans to operate somewhere within the vicinity of Mount Apo.

As David’s story unfolds, misfortunes pile up. He survives an accident that kills both his wife and son. He slides into depression and does not show up at work for days. He has also been having an affair with Belinda, which compounds his guilt of having survived. The mining firm nearly goes bankrupt. To keep stocks afloat, his business partners buy him out of his share. On top of all this, David suffers from what helplessly is a case of temporary blindness, his eyes damaged by the accident. In search of solace, he resolves to fulfill his promise to conquer the highest peak.

After decades of stagnation, more stories from Mindanao and Sulu are finally being told in Philippine cinema. The digital independent filmmaking movement in the mid-2000s began a prolific period. One criticism of a number of these films often concerns representation. Some filmmakers, particularly those working in the National Capital Region, glorify what is perceived as “authentic” in the clothes, customs, and beliefs of Indigenous Peoples, obscure the root cause of armed conflicts, or reduce these to religious differences. Even some films made by Mindanao-born directors are not entirely faultless. The strength of Barbarona’s filmmaking lies in his familiarity with terrains and his deep understanding of the complexities with which Indigenous Peoples are enmeshed. This intimacy with the landscape powers his kinetic and insightful first feature Tri Pag Ima’tay (2017), which follows Ubonay, a Talaguing woman who escapes and triumphantly turns the tables on her military torturers. Having worked as a cinematographer for acclaimed directors such as Arnel Mardoquio and Gutierrez Mangansakan II, Barbarona’s graceful camerawork conveys the soaring hills and lush jungles of the Pantaron Range. The grandeur of nature is set in contrast with the ruthlessness of state forces who violate a Lumad couple, terrorize women and children, and tie a volunteer teacher to a wooden post, among other atrocities.

In The Highest Peak, Barbarona pairs off a Lumad with a Tagalog migrant to create an instructive and comic “buddy film” set in Mount Apo. Like Tri Pag Ima’tay and his second film Kaarayan sa Sulod (2019), The Highest Peak tells a story “rooted in the realities of [the characters] place.” Unlike in those films, however, violence is sublimated in the form of a series of earthquakes. While also revisiting the subjects of armed insurgency and the enforced closure of Lumad schools, Barbarona adds an ecological dimension to these linked incidents.

As they pause to drink water from a safe source, Podong shows David the rash on his torso as proof of contamination. Absurdly, David scolds him, “Kayo kasi, hindi ininho iningating kung anong mayroon kayo [You don’t you take care of what you have].” Podong shuts him down by pointing out how some rivers are already tainted with pesticides and mercury. Earlier, David sees a farmer spraying chemicals on the soil around the mountain. Once in a while tremors, which may be caused by explosions, interrupt their journey.

Barbarona and screenwriter Arnel Mardoquio evince political commentary with levity. Even Bulkan gets to reference, with a line of dialogue, the infamous local televangelist who infamously said in public that he could command an earthquake to stop. In an earlier scene, the young, Lumad guide throws a textbook at David. He could use the pages to wipe himself after squatting in the bushes. When what he asks is for, Podong says, “Human na kog basa ana [I’m done reading that].” In truth, the school he used to attend has been closed down. That Podong is carrying a textbook with him on the way to Mount Apo is both humorous and poignant.

As Henyo Ehem plays him, Podong is always at ease, even with a fart joke, or when he is made to deliver poster slogan lines (“Ang pagdaut sa kinaiyahan, mao na ang pinakadakdo kayo nga krimen”). Podong is terrific when he reacts to David’s codescending questions. When David asks him why he understands Tagalog, Podong retorts, “Sagpakat datapwat, aloy na nakakasaw na saltang ugt.”

In another scene, Podong asks David if the meatloaf he’s eating was made in China. David tells him the canned good was made in China but god [Because if it’s from China,]. Podong continues, “karton ang sulod, gipalasang karme lang ni [this is actually cardboard made to taste good].” He tells David that his father used to work in a food manufacturing warehouse in Cebu where, apparently, horse meat is used for making meatloaf. “Mali ako[Then I’m wrong],” David teases. “Made in Cebu pala yan. [It’s actually from Cebu].” The talk segues to the revelation that Podong has stolen his neighbor’s horse. David asks whether the Lumad knows that what he did is a crime. Podong responds that the real crime is the destruction of the environment.

A striking moment takes place as they descend from the peak. Left inside the tent, David overhears Podong speaking to his parents who, as it happens, are guerrilla fighters. The next day, he asks Podong why his parents joined the rebellion. “Sundalo sila sa kabos [They are fighters for the people],” Podong says, “…para wakasin nila ang minahan ng mga dayuhang dito sa Mindanao […] they need to stop the mining companies of settlers here in Mindanao.” David, who used to run a mining firm, could barely respond. Their longing for family—one separated from his by a tragic accident, the other by war—deepens the affinity between David and Podong. When they finally
With Podong’s help, David learns about the ills that the Indigenous People around Mount Apo are confronted with. He realizes that the very industry to which he once belonged has brought suffering to the likes of Podong. When he meets the members of Podong’s community, David attests that Podong is a capable and responsible guide. He thanks Podong for opening his eyes (even though he literally could not see any more). David alludes to having taken so much from the people, but never discloses the extent of his involvement. After the climb, Podong proves to the community that he has grown up. Even Bulkan has had a change of heart. The film ends with a montage of a blind David living among Podong and his people, while in the background, Podong sings a Manobo song.

This neat and happy resolution feels hesitant, if not unsettling, as though the climb, Podong, and the standoff with Bulkan’s group were all but a figment of David’s conscience. The sense of dissatisfaction stems from an uneven treatment of contexts. David’s assortment of suffering overshadows Podong’s predicaments.

Since Barbarona locates David’s afflictions in Davao City, events that take place here are conspicuously earnest. The lively trek is interspersed with ponderous sequences inside cubicles and conference rooms. Whenever David is shown drifting aimlessly around a subdivision, wallowing inside an empty house, or returning to a junk shop to view the wreckage of his car, Ehem and Dax Alejandro’s effortless rapport is missed. The film’s sly humor recedes as murky personal history saddles the journey with emotional baggage. The nonchronological arrangement of these episodes seem to represent David’s fractured consciousness and failing vision. The script, too, affects a stilted register. When David finds out that he lost his position, he reminds Paul, the new CEO, that he’s “still one of the legitimate owners of this company.” Paul corrects him: “Not anymore, man,” and goes on to expound, more for the benefit of the audience, how it came to be so. Apart from disrupting the film’s tone and rhythm, these intrusive memories aggravate the unequal relations between David and Podong. The migrant is afforded, no matter how overwrought, an interior life. In comparison, the porter’s homesickness, his sadness over the destruction of their school, and his fears over environmental ruin are merely hinted at. There have been plenty of investigations into the sores of an urbanite, especially one from Manila, but Podong’s contemporary trickster hero rarely gets his chance.

So much importance has been given—and rightfully so—on the ethical representation of those whose realities seldom appear in moving images, yet only a handful of films have managed to tell their story with thoughtfulness and a sense of responsibility. The Highest Peak is commendable for shifting the focus on a transactional moment between the Settler and the Lumad. But beyond the shock of contact lies a range of experiences still to be probed as these identities regard one another.

John Bengan teaches writing and literature at the University of the Philippines Mindanao. He co-edited Ulirát: Best Contemporary Stories in Translation from the Philippines (2021). He is a member of the Young Critics Circle Film Desk.

Endnotes


According to Jason Tan Liwag, in 2019, one feature film was consistently present in several lists of Best Filipino Films of the Year, or even the decade: Glenn Barit’s Cleaners. This QCinema International Film Festival grantee and awardee is known for its quirky visual treatment. The entire film is presented using digitized photocopies of the edited film, with images selectively and manually colorized using highlighters. Essentially, the film revolves around high school life, a subject matter favored in mainstream cinema as a potential milieu for barkada movies and a launching pad for love teams, but clearly, Barit wanted to present high school life through his unique lens.

In an article by Apa Aghayani, Barit recalled that growing up in Tuguegarao, Cagayan, he was constantly exposed to Manila-centric mainstream media, feeding him with narratives and events that, for him, were not relevant to his life then. Cleaners was shot entirely in Tuguegarao, featuring a cast of non-professional actors from the same place. He wanted to represent high school life as he experienced it in the 2000s in his hometown while also using the texture of those times. Justifying the decision behind the visual treatment of Cleaners, Barit said in an article by Mario Alvaro Limos, “Since this film follows a thematic arc of what it means to be clean, I wanted to play with the film’s form in a way that coincides with this theme, as well.”

Before Cleaners, Barit has already experimented with film form in his short films. In an interview hosted by the Cultural Center of the Philippines, he described his films as makulit (playful) yet sincere. His cinematic treatment has makulit Cultural Center of the Philippines, he described his films as film form in his short films. In an interview hosted by the then.2 narratives and events that, for him, were not relevant to his life to Manila-centric mainstream media, feeding him with growing up in Tuguegarao, Cagayan, he was constantly exposed and a launching pad for love teams, but clearly, Barit wanted to present high school life through his unique lens.

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Dead People and OFWs as Aliens

Aliens Ata (2017) opens with a drone shot of a landscape set in the province. From a bird’s eye view, we see the father teaching his sons how to ride a bicycle. The camera is so distant that the vast landscape dwarfs the human characters, like action figures walking on a green background. Throughout the film, the audience borrows a God-like perspective, watching humans down below and listening to their conversations.

We figure the father takes care of his two sons while the mother works abroad. When the father dies, the two boys agree that he has ascended to the sky and turned into an alien. The mother briefly visits the two boys, and before returning to work in Singapore, she tells them that, from now on, they will live with their lola (grandmother). The film ends with the two boys watching the sky, waving to a passing aircraft. The younger boy asks if their mother has become an alien, too, to which the older brother has no answer.

According to a recent Philippine Statistics Authority (PSA) report, there were 1.77 million Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) from April to September 2020, 59.6 percent of whom were women. The same report reveals that the most significant number of OFWs come from the provinces (93.6%), with CALABARZON (18.5%), Central Luzon (11.8%), and Western Visayas (9.2%) as the regions with the highest number of OFWs. Aliens Ata contributes to the narratives of migrant workers, a notable subject in Filipino films. However, this short film is a departure from the treatment of popular films like Milan (2004) and Dubai (2005) that foreground the quest for love over the real challenges that OFWs experience in the foreign land and the families they leave behind. Rowena Festin critiques how these films romanticize working abroad by highlighting migrant labor as a form of sacrifice so that Filipinos back home can experience better lives and by showcasing the beauty of foreign lands to make it look appealing for work. According to Festin, the use of celebrities portraying OFW characters also adds to the idealization of working abroad as they look more like tourists than workers while supposedly performing blue-collar jobs.

On the other hand, Barit distances us from the visual appeal of OFW films by situating the narrative in the Philippine regional landscape and positioning the camera, the audience, in the sky. We do not see the faces of the characters, and we only see them through their movements on the ground. The aerial shot makes the characters appear small since the landscape fills the frame. An angle usually used for establishing a scene, the aerial shot is used throughout the film to present a poignant story of an OFW who left and those she has left

OF DRONES, WALLS AND FACE MASKS: THREE SHORT FILMS BY GLENN BARIT

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The entirety of Aliens Ata was shot using a drone. All images are used with permission.

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behind—her children. Nevertheless, despite the smallness of the children in the film, we can clearly hear their voices. The characters might be faceless, but their emotions are intact, and we can still feel their pain from a distance.

The aerial shot that provides a powerful view of the subject also makes us helpless viewers of an OFW’s family on the verge of detachment, of two young boys deprived of their parents’ guidance and closeness. When the children imagine their dead father and OFW mother and liken both to aliens in the sky, the film highlights the sense of loss the absence of OFWs introduces to their loved ones’ lives. Neither of the parents is imagined as dead, yes, but they are also equally imagined as aliens. The children must be on their own and accept financial support as an indicator of their mother’s love. We understand that working abroad is a sacrifice to be made by the OFW and is not just a personal decision. For many, it is difficult to find career options in the country that can sustain a family, especially in the provinces, as indicated in the PSA. Parents’ guidance and closeness. When the children imagine their dead father and OFW mother and liken both to aliens in the sky, the film highlights the sense of loss the absence of their auras are intertwined in the same space.

The film does not attempt to present a linear narrative or even a storyline. Instead, the fragments of moments, the voices of those who lived in the house, and the dramatic score evoke nostalgia. Nangungupahan will resonate with people renting apartments, moving into an empty space, unpacking things, buying furniture, unfolding their lives momentarily, and eventually moving on and leaving the old house empty again to welcome new tenants. People carry the memories with them, but the memories and energies linger inside the house.

Like in Aliens Ata, a novel perspective is thrust upon us in Nangungupahan. We are the walls—the eyes and the ears—of the house. Sound plays an essential role in hinting at how the house gathers time, probably across decades. Aside from the voice of the tenants, the film contains audio clips from the proclamation of Martial Law in 1972, theme songs of children’s TV shows like Batibot (1984-2003) and Sinesk’wela (1994-2004), the SM Department Store jingle (We’ve got it all for you), the honks of cars, and other sounds. The camera’s proximity to the fragments of images mixed with the voices of people who once lived in the house makes the memories alive.

Aside from evoking nostalgia, Nangungupahan also comments on urban life, our internal migration story. The city is often perceived as a place for better opportunities, and it is usually people from the provinces who opt to relocate near areas of employment and study. Not all can buy and own a house, and it is common for people to transfer addresses in short periods of time.

The city has become a melting pot of different backgrounds and traditions. People keep up with the speed of life and the constant changes happening in the environment. As a space of supposed continuous development, the city is also a space of impermanence. It is not surprising to observe people come and go and see places built and then destroyed.

The artist expresses the film’s thesis in a scene where he bids farewell to his friend. The artist gives his painting to his writer-friend as a parting gift. The artist says the painting symbolizes all the cockroaches they killed in the apartment. The writer replies: but there is only one cockroach in the painting. The artist answers that even if you do not see them, it does not mean that they do not exist. The last frame hints that the house has been demolished and turned into a shopping mall, perhaps another SM Mall, a structure that dominates the cityscapes of Metro Manila, hiding behind and beneath the lives of transient laborers and contractual precarious. Finally, the scenes and memories inside the frames stop appearing, interrupted by “progress.” If the structure is no longer there, will the memories of its tenants survive?

Presence of Absence

In Nangungupahan (2018), we see the interior of a rented house. The camera is planted in a corner, and throughout the film, we only see one angle, featuring the house’s main door, living room, and a part of the bedroom. Suddenly, scenes inside irregular-shaped frames randomly appear and disappear as if superimposed. These scenes show vital moments from the tenants who have once lived there: a newly married couple, a struggling artist and writer, two young brothers, and a grandmother and her help. There is also an instance when the apartment is empty, while an old man is seen creeping in, smelling, and feeling the space. The scenes are like puzzle pieces in the rooms and corners where they happened—the artists killing cockroaches, the man stacking the encyclopedia on the shelf, the boys sharing a brick game, the grandma grieving for her dead cat, and so on. They are people not connected by kinship and lived in the apartment at different time frames, but their auras are intertwined in the same space.

The filmmaker, Aliens Ata, a directorial collaboration between Barit and Che Taggamon, the five-minute Maski Papano is an exploration of the meaning of life amid the COVID-19 pandemic. The film follows the journey of face masks after being used and disposed of by their owners.

The part-live-action, part-stop-animation short film personifies masks like sentient beings capable of feeling and thinking. After being thrown, the protagonist finds himself in a pile of trash and realizes that “his” human has replaced him. “Everything reminds me of my failures, of my lack of purpose,” says the face mask in Filipino after losing a job protecting his human’s nasal and oral cavities from droplets. In his quest for life’s meaning, the mask-protagonist finds solace in fellow disposed masks who also struggle with their situation. They create a community that fosters support for one another.

Maski Papano uses humor and wit in representing a depressing situation. Images of sentimental face masks illustrate the feeling of worthlessness and uncertainty during, especially at the beginning of, the COVID-19 pandemic. The loss of mobility meant losing livelihood for many Filipinos. It also meant a loss of hope and the feeling of uncertainty for the future.

After being discarded, the masks find ways to reclaim their worth and dignity through the help of fellow brokenhearted friends, discovering new hobbies like baking cookies, and finding meaning through shared activities, like exercising and doing yoga. The masks became essential for mobility when the world slowed down due to the pandemic. Wearing face masks might be seen as an inconvenience to daily living, but it also brings the possibility of continuing a (new) normal life. The film suggests that we may feel like trash amid the pandemic, but it is within us and the help of our community to survive and make sense of this world.

Masks Have Feelings Too

The short films discussed in this article articulate familiar issues with depth and irony using unconventional cinematic spaces and techniques. Aliens Ata feels intimate even if the narrative unfolds entirely from the sky. Nangungupahan, from the collage of images, offers a sense of wholeness in fragments. Finally, Maski Papano reimagines the travels of
humanity and the importance of community through animated close-ups of disposable face masks. Much of the discussion has focused on Barit’s images, but his films are also made potent through his use of sound, especially the element of voice.

In all short films, the voice makes us “see” through the depth of the narratives. While the shots of landscapes in *Aliens Ate* express physical and emotional distance, the conversations between the characters make us aware of the events in their lives and their internal struggles. Barit gives these innocent “small humans” voices rarely heard in cinema. The voices in *Nangungupahan* are from snippets of conversations between people from different time frames, absorbed by the walls of an old house. The voices help the images fulfill their function as memories that linger through the years. The absence of a voice at the end of the film signifies an erasure of memories with the destruction of the place. *Maski Papano*’s talking face masks make these disposable items act like us, humans who feel depressed and worthless but have the tenacity to move on despite the pandemic. In a way, the prominent use of voice in Barit’s short films gives agency to the voiceless, whether physical structures and disposable items that are supposedly inanimate or the people whose voices are usually unheard.

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This essay examines how some Philippine regional film festivals adapted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2021 and their considerations moving forward. It looks into how the changes in the visibility and accessibility of these regional films influenced programming decisions, manners of appreciation, audience consideration, and opportunities for film education.

Regional film festivals are characterized as those that are organized outside Metro Manila. Since these festivals had to shift online, it is observable how the pandemic paved the way for these regional films to be more accessible to wider audiences inside and outside the Philippines, as long as there is internet access, presumably improving the appreciation and familiarity of these kinds of films from the regions. I am from Manila, I have only been able to appreciate regional films more when these film festivals became available online, as it is costly and time-consuming for me to attend the physical events organized in the regions. But when they were offered online exhibition, I appreciated these regional films since they became more accessible to me. But perhaps an interesting question is: How did the change in space change the festival programming, appreciation, audience attitude, and opportunities for film education?

Film Festivals Before COVID-19

Cinema Rehiyon (CR), as with other regional film festivals, had already established its position in nurturing the plurality of cinematic expressions and cultural identities by providing an exhibition venue for the often-neglected regional cinema. In Katrina Ross Tan’s account, these film festivals were chosen for their geographical representation and scope.

The Binisaya Film Festival (BFF), a smaller film festival, was started by a group of Cebuano filmmakers in 2009 who conducted screenings in Cebu City and organized guerilla screenings in various areas in the region to promote these kinds of films to the masses. They were able to screen in basketball courts, galleries, and under a tree, among other locations. BFF is primarily self-funded and run by volunteers.

Meanwhile, the Pelikultura, founded in 2010, is based in the University of the Philippines Los Baños and caters primarily to students. In the past editions of their festival, they invited college and high school students from other universities and schools, professionals, and other artist groups from the communities. Organizers are usually composed of student and faculty volunteers.

On the other hand, the Mindanao Film Festival (MFF) started with a series of workshops, in which the final product would be short films that would then be shown in cinemas in Gaisano Mall for one week. It claims to be the longest-running regional film festival in the Philippines, which started in Davao in 2003. They also receive support from NCCA and the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP).

Rudolph Alama, festival director of MFF since 2012, said that one of their motivations in holding the MFF is to screen their films in cinemas to generate earnings for filmmakers. Unlike other regional film festivals, their audiences paid regular cinema fees to watch these films. A percentage of the profits then went to the filmmaker. Alama believes that filmmaking is not just an art; filmmakers should also learn about the business side of the craft. Getting revenue, although not so big, from their films was the MFF’s way to encourage filmmakers to keep creating films. He says that students and families would watch in cinemas, while government officials and business people would also support the film festival. As Alama puts it: “Na-realize nila ‘yong capabilities ng mga Dahawenyo.”

These regional film festivals bring awareness and appreciation to different audiences of these kinds of films from the regions. In the case of Pelikultura, according to Tan, although students were required to watch these films at first, they eventually became very curious and interested in the films. For Binisaya, according to Deligero, although it is challenging for them to promote regional films to the masses who are used to watching romantic comedies, they kept holding guerilla screenings in unusual spaces.
Uncertainties in the Time of COVID-19

When the government imposed the lockdowns, there were many uncertainties for these regional film festivals, and they almost did not push through. According to Tan, some smaller regional film festivals also had to cancel or postpone their events. Katrina Tan, founder of the Pelikultura, says: "Originally ayaw namin mag-online festival kasi semyempre ano siya eh, bago siya. Highly reliant siya sa technology and wala namin kaming ganunong expertise. Katulad ng iba, akala natin sandali lang yong pandemic, na the following year, magbabalikan na tayo on-site." Aside from this, it was challenging for filmmakers to shoot on location due to lockdowns and health protocols.

Keith Deligero, a founder of BFF, still had uncertainties at the beginning of the pandemic even though they had started screening their films online in 2013 when he was experimenting and finding more ways to self-distribute films. Deligero shares in an interview with Third World Cinema Club in May 2020:


MFF was almost canceled. However, according to Alama, they decided to push through because many were still submitting films.

The Online Space: Its Advantages

Since these regional film festivals had to shift online, they explored the possibilities of online platforms. They used YouTube, Vimeo, and Facebook as streaming platforms and Zoom for film discussions and workshops. Pelikultura also used the messaging application Discord to create engagement between audiences and filmmakers.

One of the most obvious advantages of being online is the expansion of audiences, making the films accessible not just in different parts of the country but also worldwide wherever there is internet access.

During their online festival, MFF screened and scheduled films through Facebook and YouTube Livestream. According to Alama, the festival registered more than 60,000 views on its online platform, the highest ever viewership for the festival. The virtual screenings opened them to a much wider global audience. According to Alama, their films definitely became more accessible for audiences who could not go to Davao City. He says that foreign audiences could also discover them, and some films were even invited to international film festivals.

Tito Valiente, festival director for Cinema Rehiyon 2021, noted the “amazing” numbers of viewership when they shifted online. Although CR traveled to different places, he says they still have niche audiences limited to film communities and enthusiasts. He says he met more new people from inside and outside the Philippines, and the shareable content for calls online may have contributed to this. “Based on the submissions among filmmakers, meron kaming entries na from people na hindi namin kilala eh. I think that’s one evidence na nakapag-reach out ka beyond our usual network,” Tan says.

For all festivals, there was a higher submission of films from inside and outside the Philippines, and the shareable content for calls online may have contributed to this. “Based on the submissions among filmmakers, meron kaming entries na from people na hindi namin kilala eh. I think that’s one evidence na nakapag-reach out ka beyond our usual network,” Tan says.

Opportunities for film education also expanded. When CR launched its global kickoff in 2021, it offered four free masterclasses wherein participants were required to register to secure a slot. Those who registered participated on Zoom, while others watched via Facebook Live. Pelikultura, on the other hand, launched two new components of the film festival in 2020: a film criticism workshop and a film production grant.
Tan says she preferred conducting film discussions and panels online because it was easier for filmmakers and speakers to attend the workshops because they were not required to travel anymore, as many of them were working from home. There was no need to rent a venue, staff, and other logistical requirements for a physical event. Less human resources were also required.

In a press release by the organizers, it said that CR 2021 screened 130 films from different regions for a total of 36 hours through the Vimeo platform Video on Demand, which audiences could access for free through a promo code.28 After the event, some of the filmmakers agreed to leave their films online indefinitely or until the organizer decided to remove the film from the platform.29 In this way, filmmakers can now access these regional films anytime and anywhere.

Global Audience and Fluid Boundaries

The shift to online platforms made some programmers and curators question what regional cinema means. Valiente observes that online technology has redefined the concept of CR. When they shifted online in 2021, they started accommodating filmmakers from the National Capital Region, an issue before the pandemic. Valiente says that the geographical influence and “regionalistic” attitude dissipated because of the absence of physical space. For example, they accepted a film about Bicol, made by a Bicolano filmmaker based in Manila. Before the pandemic, it would have been a big issue, but when CR moved online, it became acceptable because the concept of space had blurred. He notes: “This is really what’s happening. Identities are subverted by technology.” Boundaries and cultures are more fluid online, he adds.30

When CR launched its global kickoff through the online platform in 2021, Vilaherita said in a press release: “Cinema Rehiyon will still be about films from the region, now redefined according to the spaces created by online engagement.”31

With this global scope and more fluid geographical boundaries, Pelikultura had to shift its messaging online. Prior to the pandemic, their approach to promotion and marketing was intended for local audiences, but now they had to design it for a global audience. “Panao mo ‘ide-design’ yong message mo na hindi mae-alienate ‘yong iba, walang local flavor? Parang naging generic copy or communication na, ” says Tan.32 She felt that they had mounted a new film festival altogether when it moved online.

The Online Space: Its Disadvantages

For Alama, sustainability in filmmaking is very important. Films would get revenue, even a little, by screening them in cinemas. But when they were online, they had to set that aside. They had to waive the fees and ask for donations instead. Individual filmmakers also had to conduct their fundraising efforts to support their craft.34

On the other hand, Tan notes that despite higher viewership online, it is still not enough: Naka-gain ng bagong audience, but I don’t think it is that significant, compared to when we were based in Lao Baños, and we can see the audience are engaging, and like they were really watching, lining up to see the film, etc. Because in online you cannot monitor… and online people are very distracted. “Ang ikli ng attention span… sige maraming views, pero what is the quality of that viewing? Parang, natapos ba nila yong program? Or you know, ang damping uncertain eh, ang damping tanoq.”

Deligero notes the distracted audience and high competition online due to multiple tabs. He says that the audience reception is better face-to-face because people are more committed. “Planado talaga ng tao ‘yong pagunta sa venue. Kumbaga naglaan talaga sila ng oras para dito.” He adds that it is also very saturated online. They want to promote their films to the general masses; however competition is really hard online. “Ang damping kalaban—TikTok, gamers, RTs, concerts. Sobrang saturated. Madami ring webinar. Hindi ka nga gagastos para pumunta ng venue pero struggle naman sa time at internet connection,” Deligero says. Moreover, access to the internet is a struggle for many.35

Despite the high turnout of audiences and accessibility of films online, both Alama and Deligero believe that simply showing their films online is not enough to promote regional films and encourage people to watch them. They both believe that promotion and marketing play an important role, and support from the government or private groups is needed. Deligero observes that their audiences remain the same demographic as before, including students, filmmakers, and film enthusiasts. He also says they would need more budget to compete with the mainstream content. He has thought of boosting their Facebook posts and getting a social media influencer to host their events online to encourage people to watch.36 Meanwhile, for Alama, continuous support from the government and private individuals, like business people, will keep their endeavors at the MFF afloat, especially since their ultimate goal is to establish a stable creative film industry in Davao.37

Tan notes that these online films are only accessible to those with internet and devices, such as laptops and cellphones, or those with enough mobile data to stream these films on their phones.38

Although the online platform widened the scope of audiences to national and global, it also became limited because everyone and everything is now in the same space. As Tan mentions, scheduling became harder, and overlapping time resulted in higher competition. “So may gatón ding issue sa online, ang siklap nung festival calendar kasi lahat nasa online. Nag-o-overlap talaga. Hindi katulad kapag onsite, nag-o-overlap siya pero meron kanang ibang audience, meron kanang on-site audience eh,” she says.39

There was a less meaningful sense of community online. Deligero mentions feeling the synergy of the crowd when it was on-site.30 Regional film festivals have become an opportunity to network with other filmmakers, critics, and enthusiasts and to promote films to different audiences. Alama31 and Valiente32 miss the post-screening parties where they would gather, have some drinks, and build camaraderie. When they held their festival on-site in regions, the local government units supported them and really made it an occasion. “Nandoon ‘yong groundng ng Cinema Rehiyon sa lagu, sa kultura, at even sa politics kahit pa limited ang reach,” Valiente says.40

Tan says that although they reached a broader connection with filmmakers, the quality of the audience did not improve. Although it was initially exciting that they would reach more audiences, it was not enough to appreciate regional films. “Parang ayaw namin na awareness lang. Parang gusto namin na parang ano siya, kahit kongroo pero valud, yong kuwento audience na yun. Yan parang alam nila yong value ng festival,” she says.41

Considerations in Post-Pandemic Film Festivals

The COVID-19 pandemic has presented new opportunities and challenges on how regional film festivals will be conducted moving forward in the post-pandemic new normal.

According to Tan, as with the experience of other global film festivals, the ideal step is to go hybrid.42 However, it will still depend on financial and human resources and the willingness of audiences to go out and watch films again in cinemas. Health protocols should still be observed. For a small film festival like the Biniyu, Deligero says that the risks are still so significant, and they don’t have the budget to cover swab tests, liabilities, and insurance. He says they will probably continue the online screenings, but they are also considering a hybrid micro-physical screening equivalent to an installation that can be shown online.43

He notes that online screening is more accessible, especially considering the economic realities of watching inside a cinema. “Regardless of saan siya ipablas, it doesn’t matter basta mayroon. . . . Mas malaya sa labas [ng sinehan],” Deligero says.44

Valiente has seen the benefits and value of an online film screening, so he prefers to continue it even after the pandemic. He is thinking of a hybrid model where it will be done the way it was before, wherein they get to hold regional film screenings offline, but it will already be streamed online.45

For MFF, they still do not have a definite plan. Even if physical screenings are allowed, they are not sure if the Gaisano Mall Cinema will still support them because the business will need to recover the revenue it lost in the two years of the pandemic. Alama is worried that the audiences are used to watching online and wouldn’t want to pay to watch in cinemas. That’s why they are now looking for ways to make online screenings more sustainable. He is open to the possibility of using a subscription service, but he still doubts if people would pay and watch. For him, the future for MFF still looks uncertain.46

Despite the wider reach online, Alama recognizes the unique cinema experience of watching films on the big screen, unlike watching them on smaller screens. “Mas magnada ang audio, parang mas immersive siya as compared when watching it on [a] laptop, tablet, or phone,” he says.47 However, post-screening discussions became more productive as they did not only include Davaoenos, but also audiences from different parts of the Philippines and the world.

Meanwhile, Tan says they are thinking about community screenings in open spaces, although it will still boil down to the government’s decision. As for Pelikultura, they still cannot resume as before until students are allowed to return to universities for face-to-face classes. Despite all these uncertainties and unpredictability, Tan notes: “I think it would be an exciting next [couple of] years for the festival landscape because people will try different things given the new changes... That would define a new era, I think, for the festival landscapes. Some will probably revert back to on-site lang before... the pre-pandemic setup. Some would probably explore hybrid; some would probably just retain the online. We don’t know. So, I think I would like to see...
it that way, that it would be an exciting era, an exciting new chapter for our festival landscape. And even the global film festival landscape."43

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A Rustling of Leaves (RoL) setting the milieu of historical injustice and landlessness represented by the exploited smalls or sugar workers in Negros Island. All images are author's screenshots of the film

Before making A Rustling of Leaves, director Nettie Wild produced Right to Fight (1982), a documentary about the housing crisis in Vancouver. She was a Bachelor of Fine Arts graduate of the University of British Columbia with a major in creative writing and a minor in film and theater. In her initial forays in the Philippines, she coordinated with the Philippine Educational Theater Association (FETA) for research on Brechtian theater. FETA is a people-based social advocacy theater troupe, and through its political network, Wild was able to connect with the larger people's movement in the Philippines. With a theater background versed in narrative-building and characterization, the zeal of an emergent documentarist, and the freshness of perspective of a foreigner, Wild followed a serendipitous series of events in post-Martial Law Philippines. Her research on militant theater eventually led to the production of A Rustling of Leaves, a documentary illuminated by an activist's piercing historical materialist insight into the tumultuous turning points in Philippine history in the late '80s.

The documentary opens with a montage of sugar cane fields and workers or sabahas accompanied by a narration that provides a sweeping historical overview of the conflict—by virtue of its premiering in the Philippines more than three decades after it was made, A Rustling of Leaves: Inside the Philippine Revolution (1989) provides a broad vantage point of the politics of mediation in the country. The documentary follows two revolutions—the muted aftermath of the democratic People Power Revolution that ended the Marcos dictatorship in 1986 and the continuing revolution waged by the Communist Party of the Philippines (CPP). Founded by Jose Maria Sison in 1968 at the crux of the twenty-year dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr., CPP is a rectified Maoist reorientation of the communist revolt in the country established in the 1930s by urban labor unions. Over time, the CPP swelled in ranks as a response to the Marcos excesses, with a rallying cry for national industrialisation, removal of US bases, and comprehensive land reform. Shot only a year after the Mendiola Massacre that saw the killing of disillusioned peasants protesting Corazon Aquino's non-fulfillment of her promise to redistribute land, A Rustling of Leaves honed in on the deep-seated malady of landlessness unresolved by revolutions.

In her analysis of the fraught power dynamics in Post-EDSA Revolution Philippines, Belinda A. Aquino scrutinized the PnB as only the second legal broad alliance of leftist groups in Philippine history, following the 1946 Democratic Alliance (DA), likewise composed of members of militant labor unions. While the DA won six seats in the 1946 congressional elections, the PnB candidates landed at the bottom of the 1986 senatorial election results. The stark difference between the popularity of the DA and PnB campaigns tells a tale that Wild astutely situates within the broader framework of the Cold War. Since 1947, a year after the DA won the congressional elections, the world has been divided between the warring camps of the capitalist US and the communist Soviet bloc. The Philippines, as a US neocolony, naturally fell under the ontological circumstance of modern Philippine media and cinema history.

In 1976, Kumander Dante was captured by the Marcos administration and imprisoned in solitary confinement to quell communism. In 1953, New York Times reported that he “in order to illuminate this conflict, I had to find two sides, the many sides (of the story)…And it was difficult.” The key players in the documentary represent the many sides. These include the fighters of the CPP armed wing New People’s Army (NPA), Jose “Ka Oto” Madlos is an eloquent CPP-NPA leader, having finished his college education at Central Mindanao University in Mauan, Bukidnon, where he was a student activist before deciding to join the CPP-NPA. “Batman” is a new member of the CPP-NPA condemned to death by his guerrilla unit’s “People’s Court” tribunal for being a military informant. On the other side of the political fence are rabid anti-communist radio DJ Jun Pala and military personnel and vigilante group leader Lt. Col. Bato dela Rosa. In the middle are individuals representing the legal underground left comprised of newly freed political prisoners: artist and radical priest Ed dela Torre, and CPP-NPA founder Bernabe “Kumander Dante” Buscayno. The story arc mainly follows Kumander Dante. In his youth, Kumander Dante was an exploited sabado who rose against the landowner of the lands he tilled in Angeles, Pampanga, to demand humane wages. He was consequently recruited by the communist guerrilla group Hukbalahap, or the Huk, but later broke away with his unit to join the CPP founded by Sison, whose unit likewise splintered from the Huk. Kumander Dante’s armed group officially became the CPP-NPA in 1969. The CPP-NPA’s initial headquarters was based in Angeles, surrounding the Clark US Airforce base. Established at the turn of the century under American colonial rule, the existence of the Clark US Airforce base after the Americans left became a monolith that attested to the extractive neocolonial relations that continued to burden the Filipino peasants.

Jun Pala in the DXGO (855 AM) Aksyon Radyo radio station in Agdao, Davao City

Bersalvay “Kumander Dante” Buscayno in the 1987 Philippine Senate election campaign trail under the Partido ng Bayan

Pinga’s covert influence lies in the ideological underpinnings contained in the technological innovations and pedagogical orientations he introduced in the country as a soldier informed by a film education funded in line with the anti-communist information campaign. This statement certainly does not disregard the crucial contributions he pioneered in the country but rather calls attention to an unproblematic ontological circumstance of modern Philippine media and cinema history.

The PnB’s defeat in 1986 foreshadowed the dissolution of the communist Soviet Union, ending the Cold War in 1991. In parallel to this decline was a forty-year-long global anti-communist propaganda campaign. In A Rustling of Leaves, we see how this ideology trickled down and became internalized by the likes of Jun Pala, an anti-communist radio personality and spokesperson of Alba Masu, the largest anti-communist group in the country based in Davao City. Despite his disinformation-laden account about the infamous Davao Death Squad, Duterte mouthpiece and Davao-based columnist Jun Ledesma provided the details on the unexpected start of Pala’s anti-communism. Ledesma wrote that Juan Piorras “Jun” Pala was an outspoken anti-Marcos radio DJ known for his program “Operation Tulong” at DXRH, a radio station based in the Agdao District of Davao City that was also the main headquarters of the urban unit of the CPP-NPA. His anti-government stance naturally put him on the side of the rebel fighters until the newly appointed Regional Commander of the Integrated National Police for Region 11 Col. Dionisio Tan-Gatue Jr., ordered the closure of his program. In exchange for reviving his show, Pala commenced his anti-communist campaign to declare his loyalty to the police. We see Pala’s resolve to keep his job in the form of an unwavering allegiance in the documentary. Never breaking intense eye contact with institutions and some of the first film schools in the country. Pinga’s covert influence lies in the ideological underpinnings contained in the technological innovations and pedagogical orientations he introduced in the country as a soldier informed by a film education funded in line with the anti-communist information campaign. This statement certainly does not disregard the crucial contributions he pioneered in the country but rather calls attention to an unproblematic ontological circumstance of modern Philippine media and cinema history.
the camera, he lays down his self-appointed mandate of eradicating communism to maintain so-called moral order: “Christ or Communism!”

Religion is a potent tool for mediation in modern Philippine society, having been deeply ingrained in the Filipino psyche during three centuries of Spanish colonization. In Metro Manila, the democratic People Power Revolution was ignited by calls for moral justice made by Cardinal Jaime Sin at the 2020 Daang Dokyu Film Festival. In the festival only premiered in the Philippines 32 years after its production in North America, Europe, and Australia and won awards in the 1989 Genie Awards and Berlin Film Festival. However, it does not benefit both the US imperial interests and the economic and political interests of the local elite.8 The documentary illustrates this as the US-Aquino tandem that validated vigilante groups, whatever their mission or methods, as part of a larger global imperial framework of anti-communist American divide and conquer tactics during the Cold War.9

A Rustling of Leaves has since been widely distributed in North America, Europe, and Australia and won awards in the 1989 Genie Awards and Berlin Film Festival. However, it only premiered in the Philippines 32 years after its production at the 2020 Daang Dokyu Film Festival. In the festival discussion session with the director, Wild explained:

The film came out in 1989. Where in the Philippines are we going to show it? Which cinema? We had a film for commercial release…Where could we have shown an uncult version? But its interesting to think about A Rustling of Leaves going out digitally. Over the entire country in a way that is safe….Maybe those 32 (sic) years are enough distance to provide protection and encourage reflection. Maybe it is the perfect premiere.10

But Wild’s optimism for new technology is unfounded. A Rustling of Leaves gives a glimpse into the probable missing links in the narrative of long-time Davao City mayor Rodrigo Duterte’s rise to the presidency in 2016 and the ensuing impunity of his “war on drugs,” both aided by a massive online disinformation campaign in the country. According to Yuji Vincent Gonzales’s report in 2017, retired police officer Arturo Lascanas claimed under oath how his group, the Davao Death Squad, was ordered by Duterte to kill Pala in 2003.11 The connection between Duterte and Pala goes back. In 1988, Duterte allegedly won the mayoral election against a more popular candidate, the anti-Marcos Zafiro Respicio, with the help of nuisance candidate Pala.

Miguel Paolo Reyes’s research on the Duterte and Pala connection outlined that their was a divide-and-conquer tactic: Pala…would take some of the votes that would have gone to Respicio, who supported Alsa Masa; Duterte, who was running with pro-Marcos people but had a “leftist” reputation…would take both pro-Marcos and anti-Marcos votes, as well as votes from areas under the control of the New People’s Army.12

Likewise, Duterte shared the airwaves with Pala. Carolyn O. Arguillas narrated how, since 1998, Duterte has communicated to his Davao City constituents through a weekly television show called “Gikan sa Masa” (From the Masses).13

The show, broadcasted on the ABS-CBN regional satellite, ran for 17 years and only ended during the preparation for his presidential campaign. Echoing Pala’s firebrand broadcasting style, Duterte had a penchant for inserting explicatives and politically incorrect statements in his show. However, unlike Pala’s grimness, his broadcasting was mixed with an errant attitude that endeared him to his constituents in Davao City and, later on, to Filipino voters in the national presidential elections. Both employed the tactic of reading names of erring individuals who would later be found dead. The same tactic was used during Duterte’s “drug war” campaign when he publicly read the names of suspected narco-politicians. This tactic was associated with the extrajudicial killings on the ground, helmed by his appointed Philippine National Police chief Dela Rosa, the same person who had previously led the Tadtad vigilante group. Strongmen Pala and Duterte eventually battled over Davao territory in their respective bid for power. One had to be eliminated for the other to move forward unhindered.

A continuing past is embedded in postcolonial and neoliberal mechanisms that are strongest where the state is at its weakest. A Rustling of Leaves investigates an important piece in the puzzle that connects Duterte’s “drug war” impunity and disinformation campaign to anti-communism in Davao City as a specific geopolitical mediation engineered and calibrated within the chaos in the margins. Here, the margins refer both to Davao (in relation to imperial Manila) and Philippines (in relation to Cold War global power dynamics). Within these spaces rife with volatile politics and changeable loyalties converged a distinct brand of disinformation, a many-headed hydra that thrives on political gain as a moral imperative. This aspect of local mediation and the innovation of its technological infrastructures paralleled a sustained global and...
state–funded anti-communist campaign. The same ideological framework established a critical spectrum of communication channels in the country—from state communication outfits to media educational institutions. In this light, the seeming recent phenomenon of disinformation that confounds us in the Digital Age is but the remediation or persistence of the information war model cultivated in the peripheries and tolerated by the vested interests in the center, in another technological form and platform.

The power of a Rustling of Leaves as a documentary lies in its relentless seeking of authenticity amid this information war. Collaborating with various groups and artists in the Philippines, Wild documented a thirst for understanding, not one truth but the constellation of situated truths that compel each subject to fulfill his or her perceived role. Deep knowledge of the human condition springs not from an expert eye but from a desire to know more. In her search for answers, Wild documented something not seen in other audiovisual documentary works at that time or even in recent memory—a mapping of similarities across borders. Her stories shuttled between Imperial Manila and Mindanao, between the local concerns and global interests, across political colors, and through the continuum of human desires. This is no mere technique but the ethical mandate of any storyteller—a committed and conscientious effort toward unfolding the narrative from all sides to surface the scourge lodged within the core of a society.

In 34 years, the conflict outlined in a Rustling of Leaves has only grown more menacing. The root of an ongoing revolution, the conflicted land itself, has been eased out of the main story. Kumandante Dante acquiesced to this new frontline, rejecting armed struggle in favor of moving into the parliamentary battlefield of representation. Unseen in the documentary, Törnquist wrote that Kumandante Dante went back to his home in Tarlac in 1988 to establish government–supported land cooperatives despite knowing full well that the initiative would fail within the parameters of the system. “Aesthetically political controlled by the players savvy in capital and media remains at the center stage. The Marcoses, patron of arts and culture and allies of empire, are all too familiar with this arena and have taken advantage of it to engineer their return to power in 2022 with the presidential win of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr. Through a glass darkly, A Rustling of Leaves makes us understand the chronicle of the necessity of a concerted grassroots remediation of a people’s resistance and self-determination that has been and remains the target of disinformation ground zero.”

Adjani Guerrero Arumpac is an Assistant Professor at the University of the Philippines Film Institute. She is a documentarist working on an ongoing autoethnographical trilogy on internal diaspora in the Philippines currently comprised of Halil (2006) and War is a Tender Thing (2013). Her other project is a series on Philippine female icons, including Nanay Mameng (2013), a feature on the life of octogenarian Philippine urban mass leader Carmen Deunida, and Conchita (2018), a documentary about former Supreme Court Justice and Ombudsman of the Philippines Conchita Carpio-Morales. She was awarded the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office’s Chevening scholarship in 2018, through which she finished her MA in Digital Media and Cultural Studies at Goldsmiths University of London.

Endnotes
Looking back on how we responded as artists and cultural workers over the past six years, there are few whose ideas of response went beyond the sphere of mainstream platforms. A significant few also maintain that response should be through an assembly, an alliance—organized and cognizant of the thing it deemed worthy of our unequivocal attention. RESBAK, or RESpand and Break the Silence Against the Killings, was formed in 2016 to condemn the violation of human rights brought about by Rodrigo Duterte’s regime—one that was responsible for the country of illegal drugs within six months after he assumed office. RESbak is Filipino street slang, the flipped syllables of the English word, backets. RESbak means support or reinforcement, especially for the downtrodden, bullied, or wronged. The collective RESBAK is a response that speaks of urgency, of immediate action. Composed mainly of artists, cultural workers, filmmakers, and media practitioners, RESBAK, as the name suggests, is a gathering of forces—to seek leverage for the oppressed or to reclaim justice—is a distinctive alliance because it promotes response to a specific situation. It is a response that makes responding viable, and seen.

On July 3, 2022, at stall no. 9 at the Cubao Expo, a particular response took place. This day was just a few weeks removed from the unlawful arrests in TINAL, Tacloban, where nearly ninety civilians—farmers, activists, and cultural workers—were rounded up by police and military men and imprisoned without clear charges. Another alliance of artists, SAKA, or Sama-sama Artista Para sa Kultusang Agrayo, was at the forefront of the peaceful demonstrations held to support local farmers—who were agrarian beneficiaries prevented from cultivating their own land. RESBAK’s gallery, which just resumed on-site operations at the beginning of the year, opened an exhibition called Lag Filo, or Mga Tala, An Inventory of Acts of Resistance by Cultural Workers.

That evening, activists and cultural workers gathered together in the same space to report on their experiences and the different scenarios they encountered in situ. The show—which served as an inventory of the issues and responses in the past six years, exhibited works in different forms and mediums. From extrajudicial killings performed during the drug war, to the reinstatement of a dictator’s family in governance, to the diachronic and inhumane impositions of lockdowns during the pandemic, the works shown served as records of these abuses and their fraudulent jurisdiction. As an uncommon site for art galleries, Stall No. 9 was infused with art and discussions, where the likes of Ka Inday of Kadamay, Patricia Marcos with her way of being, Anne Marie Suarez of SAKA, and Max Santiago of Uagt-Lahi, spoke about pressing issues amid artworks that have been crystallized as supplements to these talks rather than mere ornaments, like in Bale Bagatsing’s Sayo Project Baul, which is a florilla of breathing masks with stitched messages called from the sentiments of a country ‘masked’ for silence instead of protection.

Among the works that contended for a much-needed appraisal of the public image were three moving image works by three artists that have demonstrated different ways of responding to the call of “breaking the silence.” First is Adjani Arumpac’s Electric Your Human Rights, a series of views and street footage that probes directly into the government’s response to the pandemic. Here, we see the blatant contrast in responses. As the health crisis worsened, the government under Duterte’s administration elected to hit back with a strategy that is tantamount to the force. This is evident with the mix of news footage and the administration’s press briefings, admonishing the public to stay indoors or face severe sanctions at the hands of the police and military. Streets and residential areas were locked down like prison sites, immobilizing families and individuals from their daily regimen in exchange for vague promises of aid and sustenance. These ultimatums in Arumpac’s video are intercut with scenes from congested communities, whose residents clamor for the leniency of restrictions to address their daily needs. The sights and sounds tell everything: residents are berated, some thrown to the ground, others are hit with wooden sticks. In this interaction between authority and citizens, between ruler and ruled, Arumpac’s cause-and-effect montage takes an interesting turn—one that stays true to the facetious nature of bare governance—through which we begin to hear a glimpse of the economy of livestream as its soundtrack, and when the screen splits to show the diagram for breathing exercises. Exercise—as the title points out, also pertains to physical exercise. As an instructional video—and video as parody—of the government’s public announcements on proper exercises to stave off the virus.

If Arumpac’s work was meant to satirize workout videos by evoking the foolish/humorous against the grimness of the situation, Nikki Luna’s Dancing With A Dictator (2016) demonstrates the contemplative and brooding effects of video. Shot in a single frame and single take, we are affixed to the sight of a woman’s high heel shoe as it slowly burns. The shoe is a wooden replica from one of Imelda Marcos’s collection. Here, video is used for its ability to contemplate and interpret the past—a memory machine. However, memory here is burdened with a concept, the same way that certain histories cannot be stripped of their dire effects. The interpretation of the past is one that Luna reminds us through her work, but the effects of those events cannot be set aside without judgment or sound discernment. The stillness of the scene becomes active as if still life is recorded for its transformation. Moving images have that power to transform stillness into motion, to make the passive activity come alive again. In Luna’s depiction of an object associated with the Marcos matriarch, she allows an inventory to serve as a symbol laden with meanings. In this work, we are reminded how inventions remain vital forces in assessing our histories. It has become more powerful than collections and archives because judgment, classifications, tallies, and values are inherent within the act.” There is no reason social inventories cannot act as a moral force.

A prime example of how video can utilize its own idiomatic manifestations to raise awareness is RESBAK’s collective project called Christmas In Our Hearts (2016). Latching on to an iconic and staple Filipino holiday tune, combined with one of the people’s favorite pastimes—the videoke, this video draws from the clout of popular culture in portraying the grave effects of drug war. The video replaces the song’s original lyrics with words condemning the killings. The new lyrics are written on cardboard, mimicking the extravagadical crime scenes where cardboard are placed on dead bodies, like “I am a drug addict.” This particular work can be considered a unique case study in treating inventory as appropriation. In repurposing music that has become a cultural artifact, the age-old quandaries in privatization and property rights take full effect. As Facebook took down the RESBAK page without prior notice after the video reached more than 100,000 views and 1,400 shares. While no tampering was involved in the actual music, we can see the power juxtapositions wield. In running the song with images that decry the administration’s policies, the work proved that transferences, mash-ups, and remix strategies in today’s video culture effectively convey meaning in the social media sphere. Whether it was outright censorship or an exaggeration of issues in artistic rights, the video Christmas In Our Hearts by RESBAK is another example that bars who controls culture. That whenever benign, its popularity is openly celebrated.

In RESBAK’s own statement, the exhibition Log Files (Mga Tala) sternly reminds us of the dangers when we forget that data is essentially information that requires inquiry and interpretation. It is not too far from the dangers of thinking that art—whenever it is political—is enough. The exhibition in Cubao Expo’s stall no. 9 understood this notion: that art, like data, should be interpreted and deserve our inquiry in many ways. Whether through form, manner, timeliness, or function—art, even in its politicalness, can never be an end in itself.

The three works in video shown here provide yet another understanding of how moving images can transcend the usual manifestations of spectacle or entertainment. While incorporated in video, the principle of art do not necessarily mean the esoteric or concealed. And in their manifestations that can occupy either galleries, cinemas, and social media, we can potentially foresee the shift in cinema whereby we want to direct our inquiries on how art, images, or other popular media like films and paintings are made. And their content, while overtly political, navigate the blind spot of art’s politics by firmly anchoring themselves in the suppositions of “response,” of
an alliance, of a force—a necessary reinforcement—and beyond that, an inventory that supplements the gaps and blind spots within the incessant distortion of our histories.

Cocoy Lumbao Jr. is a visual artist, writer, and curator. His works have been exhibited in MCAD, The Metropolitan Museum, Mo_Space in the Philippines, Mindset Art Center in Taiwan, Osage Gallery in Hong Kong, Loop Gallery in South Korea, and the 2016 Art Stage in Singapore. In 2017, he was the recipient of the Gasworks artist residency program in London. He is a founding member of Lost Frames, an initiative that supports up-and-coming artists by organizing screening programs. He teaches art history under the Department of Theory at the UP College of Fine Arts.

Endnotes


2. An interesting essay on how Filipino society has made these acceptable, from the point of view of Japanese scholar, see Wataru Kusaka, “Duterte’s Disciplinary Quarantine: How a Moral Dichotomy was Constructed and Undermined,” Philippine Studies: Historical and Ethnographic Viewpoints 68 no. 3-4 (2020): 423–42.

3. For online reports and archives of developments on the unlawful arrests in Tinang, Tarlac, see “Tags: Tinang 83,” in Bulatlat, bulatlat.com/tag/tinang-83/.

4. For more discussion on how archival practices have expanded and evolved in film, the internet, new media, etc., and how its concepts have become more unstable, see Eivind Røssaak, ed., The Archive in Motion: New Conceptions of the Archive in Contemporary Thought and New Media Practices (Oslo: Novus Press, 2010).

5. Appropriation used here in the context of art—but also appropriation as viewed through the more nuanced concept of the object’s material condition—when it is offered to the public for its gains but ceases to become public for its usage.

When we think of data we often think about abstract systems, incoherent datum, and transactional exchange housed in highly engineered technology. A man-made resource aimed to connect amidst distance and capture interaction. For decades now, machines store and secure information, or controversially, survey human behavior data points on the premise of documentation. Full histories of activity have been recorded in sequences represented through the binary system of ones and zeroes. They record our appearance, our interactions, and our conversations. Yet the data created, constructed, and consumed amidst tense worldviews remains far from capturing whole realities. Relying on the idea of data, we also often forget that for it to become information, data requires inquiry and interpretation.

The works of Dash Araya, Jaja Arumpac, Dee Ayroso, Aie Balagtas See, Nikki Luna & Patreng Non activate notions of data. Mediated through videos, fabric, stone and steel, zines, comics, and a food cart, the exhibition takes stock of pieces that document and discuss oppressive conditions to call for state accountability. Log Files / Mga Tala is an inventory of works that question and creatively respond to a range of human rights violations in the Philippines committed between 2016 and 2022. Including, among countless others, impunity in the War on Drugs, the repression of dissent and freedom of expression through the Anti-Terrorism Act; and neglecting people’s rights to health, food security, and life. As we navigate these precarious times between regimes, these initiatives serve as reminders of necessary contexts, the very human ability to inquire and investigate, and to resist continuously amidst disinformation and injustice. It is this space where Resbak keeps log.

—Eya Beldia
Eya Beldia's background in creative communication informs her research which entwines art histories, contemporary art, and care practices. She teaches Critical Perspectives in the Arts at the University of the Philippines.

RESBAK (RESpond and Break the Silence Against the Killings) is an interdisciplinary alliance of artists, media practitioners, and cultural workers. The primary goal of RESBAK is to advance social awareness about the killings brought forth by the Duterte administration's 'war on drugs'. Through various art forms and platforms, we seek to empower the most vulnerable sectors targeted by impunity.
In the early days of documenting Rodrigo Duterte's drug killings for the documentary *Aswang* (2019), I kept a private blog to write down facts, thoughts, and observations of each filming day. For several months, the day would start after dinner and end sometime before sunrise. Back home, I tried to write the day's observations during the tedious ritual of transferring the footage from the cards and preparing three separate copies. It was a form of *pagpag* (in Filipino, it refers to the act of using a piece of cloth to shake off dust or dirt; it also refers to the ritual cleansing of going elsewhere, out of the way, after attending a funeral or wake, so the evil spirits do not follow you), committing the night's deadly energy into data and paper, so I did not bring them with me to sleep.

Arriving at a scene of a killing, we were often greeted with a hushed silence, sometimes a low sobbing, a guttural howling. There would be whispers and the photographers' camera shutters. Always, the pinks and blues of the police lights bounced off the walls. I started equating police lights with killings so much that my heart would start pounding whenever I saw them randomly on the streets. The unknown killers would leave cardboard notes with their 'signatures' or draw smiley faces on the heads of the slain wrapped with tape. It was unsettling that many killings seemed to have been designed as a spectacle for the media.

The violence and cruelty a human being can inflict on another remain incomprehensible to me. Turned out to be an overwhelming night, as many killings were happening everywhere, seemingly endlessly.

Around 5am, on my way home, we learned that there was another operation that killed 7 people in Old Balara. They only had one target, but there were several other 'drug personalities' in the same place. They were doing a pot session, they said. They were taken to the hospital (‘you know, for human rights,” an officer told a reporter) but they were all declared dead upon arrival. A total of 29 people were killed in the metro by the time the sun rose.

One night we went to Navotas Fishport after news of an incident. Coming in, we saw a group of men on motorcycles with masks on. They were the executioners in plain clothes—in basketball shorts and bulletproof vests—leaving. A man sprawled facedown on the ground looked like he had tried to escape into an alley. I met the dead man's sister, who declared, “He deserved it; he was a police asset.” He was supposedly a known pusher and was being hunted down. “This is the last one. It will be quiet now,” the police chief told us.

Minutes later, an older woman arrived, frantically trying to get a look at the body. Her pregnant daughter had not been home in days, and she rushed over when she heard the news of another killing. I overheard her prayers because I was monitoring the audio. “Susmarya, 'wag po, 'wag po” (God, please no, please no), she muttered to herself softly. She had already lost a son to the drug war a few months back. The TV lights turned to her, and the microphones shoved onto her face. “Is this your son? What's your son's name?” The media quickly lost interest when they realized it was not her child and pointed the lights back to the corpse. “The prisons are big enough,” she yelled in Filipino as she walked away. “Just lock them up. You don't have to kill them. The prisons are big enough.”
Whenever a man is killed and his body taken away, someone places a candle in the pool of his blood. When the hubbub dies down, the blood is washed away with a pail of soapy water. Once, a man was gunned down while he was having dinner. They put the candle on his unfinished tapisilog (a Filipino breakfast meal of fried meat, eggs, and rice).

On my sixth day, a man was shot dead in a place ironically called Katarungan (Justice) Street. The narrow alley where the slain lived and died was packed with journalists and bystanders, a circus of TV lights and cameras. When they took his body away, the media hounded the crying family to speak on camera. Then, when things calmed down a little, one crying woman started to sweep away the massive pool of blood with a walis-tingting (reed broom).

Like clockwork, and ever so calmly despite sniffles, one woman started scrubbing and washing the blood away. So quietly hysterical.

Amid that chaos, I could not help but think about the blood on the ground. It belonged to a person. Blood is so intimate and precious, even if it has been spilled on the ground. It belonged to a person. Blood is so intimate and precious, even if it has been spilled on the ground. It belonged to a person. Blood is so intimate and precious, even if it has been spilled on the ground. It belonged to a person. Blood is so intimate and precious, even if it has been spilled on the ground. It belonged to a person. Blood is so intimate and precious, even if it has been spilled on the ground. It belonged to a person. Blood is so intimate and precious, even if it has been spilled on the ground. It belonged to a person. Blood is so intimate and precious, even if it has been spilled on the ground. It belonged to a person. Blood is so intimately linked.

Understandably, the families feared for their lives and decided not to follow through with the investigation. Their fear and grief were displayed on TV and in newspapers, and many sympathized. But, ultimately, they carry their fear and grief alone.

Documentary filmmakers like myself often (ideally) operate on a ‘do no (further) harm’ premise. We do not put the subjects in danger. We try not to traumatize them further by repeating interviews, asking difficult or leading questions, and initiating reenactments. We tend to immerse more and develop relationships with subjects, often blurring lines that can be advantageous to the film but otherwise problematic. Though many of us follow guidelines adapted from printed and broadcast media, there are no defined codes on the ground, and the decision-making is mainly personal. These decisions are the filmmaker’s burden and remain so long after the film is released. We try to exercise much restraint, involve many critical eyes in the process, and dialogue with the editors in the cutting room. What you choose to leave out can carry as much meaning as what makes the final cut. The entire process, or journey, is a constant and rigorous contemplation of one’s practice and values, for they are inextricably linked.

This burden, I feel, is something shared particularly by nonfiction filmmakers. The film is over, but stories keep unfolding, people go on with their lives, and you will never stop worrying about them because life in the Philippines is simply violent. In real life, there is no justice for the thousands of victims. The architects of this bloodshed still roam free. Aside from the killers of Kian delos Santos, whose murder was caught on camera, no one has been held accountable for drug-related killings.

What, then, is the purpose of our work?

At the height of the drug war, my colleagues and I always spoke of the future, the day Duterte leaves office, and the killings finally end. We were convinced or convinced ourselves that accountability and justice must be imminent. We never stopped hoping that with each photo, story, or film, the Filipinos who supported this carnage would have a change of heart. I now understand that undoing lies and disinformation is a much more arduous process, and more than ever, storytellers play an essential role. Truth-tellers—filmmakers, writers, photographers, journalists, artists—must ensure that we leave indelible memories.

In 2020, the film festival Daang Dokyu made documentaries about Martial Law available to the public, including A Rustling of Leaves (1988), Marcos: A Malignant Spirit (1986), and others, and it is both fascinating and heartbreaking to see that nothing has truly changed. Our nation refuses to learn from its past. However, this is not to despair; rather, it simply reaffirms the value of the documentary form’s intrinsic function as evidence and memory. That cinema endures. And I look forward to being part of a movement that reimagines and transforms our discontent into a cinema of resistance and truth. This is the task at hand.

Alyx Ayn Arumpac is a Filipino filmmaker. She received her Master’s in documentary film directing from Docnomads in Portugal, Hungary, and Belgium and studied at the University of the Philippines Film Institute and the Philippine High School for the Arts. She is also an alum of Berlinale Talents Docstation, IDFAcademy, Talents-Toyko, and Docs by the Sea. Her debut feature, Aswang (2019) won 25 awards, including the grand prizes at Gawad Urian, FAMAS, and Pinoy Rebuty in the Philippines and at the Montreal International Documentary Festival, DMZ Festival in South Korea, Film Festival Dokumenter Yogjakarta, and the critics’ prize at the International Documentary Filmfestival Amsterdam.
L
ike corruption or political violence, environmental terrorism occupies a sweet spot in the minds of certain corners of the middle class, enough to cause the clucking of tongues and the shaking of heads, and the relegation of such concerns to the category of “bad news.”

It takes a particular trigger to elevate one concern over another in one’s personal circle of collective consciousness: for example, increased proximity to the issue brought about by fewer degrees of separation from it, or a sudden personal involvement in the situation.

Sometimes, it takes a particular voice. In Karl Malakunas’s documentary Delikado (2022), produced by Marty Syjuco, Michael Collins, and Kara Magsanoc-Alikpala, that voice is Bobby Chan’s, a well-spoken lawyer educated in one of Manila’s most prestigious private schools who has taken up the cause to defend Palawan’s rainforests from concerted destruction by illegal loggers who operate with impunity, implicitly under the protection of a corrupt government.

Chan’s ragtag team of longtime volunteers are natives of the municipality of El Nido, which lies on the northern part of Palawan Island. The members of the Palawan NGO Network, Inc. (PNNI), headed by Chan since 2009, count among them Ruben “Kap” Arzaga, a husband and a father of five, and Efren “Tata” Balladeres, a former member of the government’s paramilitary force. As barangay captain of his village (Kap is presumably short for “Kapitan”), Kap is respected among his small community and thus also plays the part of their protector; Tata’s previous occupation has opened his eyes to the government’s duplicity and sees his environmental work as a personal mission of redemption.

Delikado also follows the stories of Nieves Rosento, elected mayor of the town of El Nido in 2016, the same year Rodrigo Duterte was elected president. Rosento leads a startlingly and disarmingly simple lifestyle—she dresses in t-shirts and slippers like everyone else, takes a tricycle to work, and operates a sari-sari store to augment her family income.

The modest lives of the El Nido natives are in stark contrast to the landscape and the reputation of El Nido itself. To outsiders and the world at large, El Nido is a postcard–perfect idea of the last undiscovered paradise on earth: bright green tropical islands, vast powdery beaches, shimmeringly clear marine waters alive with flora and fauna.

But the ecosystem is hardly undiscovered, or untouched. Tourism has encouraged the establishment of roads and large-scale resorts across Palawan’s delicate archipelago, and the accompanying surge in investments and income has brought the expected environmental strain. Mayor Rosento knows how much her town may stand to gain—but is also acutely aware of the heavy price progress will inflict on their life and their future.

Bearing bolos, GoPros, and a mandate upheld by the principles of citizen’s arrest, Chan’s NGO is clearly not armed enough or strong enough to be considered a credible force against the constant buzzing of the chainsaws in the forests. Between footage of Kap, Tata, and their small team trudging barefoot on paths that snake into seemingly unending green are shots of hectares of denuded land, stripped of color and of life. If the contrast is stark, so, it seems, is the futility of their cause.

At the center of the struggle, Chan cuts an appropriately futile figure. He speaks eloquently of fighting
back amid the Filipino culture of violence but is also quite aware
that he is an outlier and an outsider to the system. Outside his
office, he has erected a tree made up of dozens of chainsaws seized
from illegal loggers, but he knows the chainsaws will keep coming
anyway. He devotes time to reading the Bible and writing letters
of complaint to the authorities, but by this time, even the viewer
knows that prayer and formal procedure will not stand a chance
against state-backed “progress.”

When Mayor Rosento begins her reelection campaign,
she becomes another all-too-easy symbol of futility. President
Duterte, it is revealed, has close ties with the higher government
officials who seem to have abetted illegal logging activities. Later
in her campaign, Rosento finds herself named as a drug trafficker
by Duterte himself on television, further reducing her chances of
reelection. She faces a powerful opponent who touts tourism as a
boon for the local economy, and her campaign takes dismal and
dark turns as she attempts to drum up support amid resistance
from the local police—and a defeat that is almost assured.

What is also almost assured is the tragedy that happens
while the documentary is being shot, further earning the
film its title and giving it the urgency and currency that few
documentaries can achieve. With a strong story arc that lays a
struggle at the viewer’s feet, Delikado makes a compelling case not
just for inspiration, but for attention, and action.

I saw Delikado at a screening that marked the end of the
Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival at the Cultural
Center of the Philippines, an ambivalent symbol of a violent
regime that recognized the powerful role of culture in shaping
thought and sentiment. In the audience were the usual suspects:
the cinema community composed of practitioners, academics, and
students, as well as the cultural and social elite. Also present in
the audience were the lawyer Bobby Chan, former mayor Nieves
Rosento, and the surviving members of the PNNI. In this manner,
Delikado went beyond its frame and attained a vital presence.

In this way, too, the filmmakers recognized how this
particular form of film is its own struggle. It is a kind of news—
very often, bad news—that relies on the dramatic exposition of
facts to make a case. In the case of Delikado, the nature of its
subjects’ ongoing fight is amplified in the larger, darker dimensions
of our continuing landscape of terror, uncertainty, and violence
brought closer and closer to an audience that must be moved to
act.

Angelo R. Lacuesta has won many awards for his writing, among them three National Book Awards, the NVM Gonzalez Award,
numerous Palanca Memorial Awards and Philippines Graphic Awards, and the inaugural Madrigal Gonzalez Best First Book
n the context of the failures of democratization following authoritarian rule, the legacies of politically dissident artists during the Marcos dictatorship continue to haunt current cultural practices of political resistance. Scholars have revisited the legacies of New Cinema filmmakers during the so-called Second Golden Age of Philippine cinema to highlight their essential role in the struggle against the dictatorship. In Contestable Nation-space: Cinema, Cultural Politics, and Transnationalism in the Marcos-Broka Philippinos (2014), Rolando Tolentino highlighted the dissident role of filmmaking, as practiced in particular by New Cinema filmmaker Lino Brocka, revealing how cinema serves as an important vehicle to advance a counterhegemonic, if not revolutionary, nationalist agenda. More recently, Talitha Espiritu’s Passionate Revolutions: The Media and the Rise and Fall of the Marcos Regime (2017) examined cinema’s crucial role, along with photography and journalism, in the construction of affective publics that engaged (with) the melodramatic politics of the Marcos dictatorship.

Jose Capino’s Martial Law Melodrama (2020) is a compelling addition to these scholarly projects. In this book, the author revisits the cinema of Lino Brocka, tracing in both his “prestige” and mainstream works the figuration of anti-authoritarian politics. This critical endeavor takes melodrama as the politico-aesthetic framework in Brocka’s political cinema that touches upon the relational dynamics of fictional characters inhabiting the complex terrain of Philippine society. Capino adopts the notion of melodrama as an elastic narrative mode that traverses genres and themes, refusing to cast it against social realism. With this expansive view of melodrama as a vehicle for socio-political representation and critique, Capino also adopts a broader view in his inquiry into Brocka’s oeuvre and in post-EDSA filmic and television works.

The book traces Brocka’s growth as an artist who articulated his political activism in explicit and covert ways through his films while at times undertaking pragmatic compromises. Productive in this regard is the archival labor undertaken by Capino, which enhances these close readings and yields a full-bodied and dynamic view of the cultural politics of the 1970s-1990s, an era marked by various modes of cultural regulation by the dictatorial and post-dictatorial regimes, as well as counterhegemonic maneuvers that found their way in the interstices of cultural work. Through creative traces such as screenplay drafts, production notes, and other anecdotal accounts, Capino painstakingly reconstructs the complex ways creative workers like Brocka and his collaborators—including militant creatives like Pete Lacaba and Ricky Lee—tactically embarked on subversions of and negotiations with politico-cultural regulatory structures. Equally compelling is the surfacing of the films’ critical and popular reception, allowing a glimpse into the kind of public engagement and discourses provoked by Brocka, not just within the domestic public sphere but in international festival circuits, where they were generally viewed in light of the political turmoil in the Philippines.

Capino extends his inquiry into Brocka’s oeuvre beyond the formal end of the dictatorship, emphasizing the filmmaker’s growth as a militant artist, commenting on the continuing political violence plaguing the country’s democratic transition. While the filmmaker’s death cut short a career veering toward a more Left-wing sensibility, Brocka’s signature has since made its presence visible in the filmic productions that carry commentaries on and critiques of the social injustices under the nominally democratic regimes.

That the book was released during the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte renders it even more provocative. Capino mentions how Brocka-inspired filmmaker Brillante Mendoza has perverted the aesthetic resources of Brocka’s dissident cinema toward fascist ends, an argument forwarded by Patrick F. Campos in The End of National Cinema: Filipino Film at the Turn of the Century (2016), written before Duterte. But ultimately—and this is what Capino’s study of Brocka’s cinema politics surfaces—the example of Brocka, and more broadly, his New Cinema contemporaries, attests to the potency of political cinema in creating a dissident public sphere even, and especially, amid an atmosphere of political terror.

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Works by student filmmakers constitute a continuous line in Filipino film history while they also catalog the ruptures and forking trajectories of this history. They are copious and everywhere in daring forms in the archipelago and yet exist at the margins of mass imagination. Recognizing this paradox, one can appreciate how such films are seeds that bloom and transform cinema over a stretch of time.

Despite the pandemic, the past two years have been no different, no less prolific, and certainly no less audacious for student filmmaking. However, as this filmography of eighteen works from 2021 and 2022 (eight of which were initially presented at Jakarta’s Semester Pendek Film Festival) testifies, the stubbornly faithful act of calling into being a new cinema has also been a defiantly hopeful challenge to transform society itself.

From a very particular situation of untheredness and commitment, these student films experiment with varied techniques of documentation, animation, and narration and turn to allegory, mythology, folklore, and ritual to find a line that cuts through the noise of disinformation and polarization, and reveal what matters most urgently.

Their films hold up a mirror to the contemporary Filipino youth’s distress, yes. But they are no mere reflections; with the compassionate lucidity and vulnerable courage of the young, they propose to reconstitute the real of history. By unveiling and then reshaping images received from their elders, opaque but purporting to be transparent, they recast their immediate world into a picture one could characterize, in the way Walter Benjamin describes “genuinely historical” images, as dialectical.1 It is not only that the past illuminates the present in a purely temporal sense, Benjamin asserts, but that, “in a flash,” a dialectical image can transmogrify into a web of figures, transforming the connection between what-has-been and now and reorienting the possible unfolding of tomorrow.2

These student films, although but a sampling of many more produced in the last six years, varied and uneven in their formal achievement, political motivation, and personal sentiment, nevertheless collectively picture this flash, foreshadowing a Benjaminian explosion, a locking of horns between present and past, with an eye clearly into birthing a different future.

Though anguished and mournful, these student filmmakers, one quickly realizes, are not weary. While history is brazenly distorted by the power structure exploiting mainstream cinema and social media, these young artists utilize the moving image outside the trite and tired as an artistic and political engine for change, recovering lost time, marking the passing of time, and biding time for tomorrow.

—Patrick F. Campos

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Endnotes
1 The Arcades Project, trans. Howard Eiland & Kevin McLaughlin (Belknap Press, 1999), 463.
2 Ibid.
**LUMALABAS (Going Out Inside)**  
Mico Tagulalac / 2022 / Experimental / RT: 6:44  
Mapúa University

Capturing the anxiety of cabin fever during the pandemic lockdown and expressing our innate desire for freedom, the film projects a shadow exploring the outdoors via photographs while remaining indoors. It experiments with and documents two spaces, one’s psychological interior and sociopolitical exteriors, to present a journey of recollection and reconnection amid difficult times.

**RAMBUTAN**  
Shayla Perales & Mae Tanagon / 2021 / Experimental Animation / RT: 5:17  
Mapúa University

Bright tropical fruits offer a vivid picture of how a virus spreads, symptoms of internal rotting spiral into disease when left unattended, inoculation works, and cures that may appear threatening heal. A stop-motion animation of when the rambutan realizes its power, the dance of nature, an allegory for our times.

**PANHUWAS (Healing)**  
Isabelle Santiago, Michael Cheung, & Rac Santiago / 2022 / Fiction / RT: 17:59  
De La Salle University Manila

What if the savior is a manipulator, and the victim embraces one’s victimhood as salvation? In this allegorical horror film, thirteen-year-old Pio, the son of a faith healer who possesses unquestioned religious authority in a small town, discovers the monstrosity of his father and comes of age in untempered rage.

**TANAWING PINTA (Scenic Delusion)**  
Edel Torres Hembledor & Samantha Grace Maceda / 2022 / Fiction / RT: 9:50  
Far Eastern University

A bejeweled woman in a Filipiniana dress—an Imeldific figure—is unperturbed as she paints the reality she wants to see on three white cloths while mayhem erupts around her and blood flows to her feet from beyond her curtain of art.

**SI BIBOY KAG SIGBIN SA SIUDAD**  
(Biboy and the Sigbin in the City)  
Hannah Britanico / 2022 / Animated Fiction / RT: 9:14  
University of the Philippines Visayas

Biboy’s innocent world turns upside down when his father disappears. According to his mother, a sigbin, a blood-sucking goat-like mythological creature, abducted his father, compelling his young son to search for him. In the boy’s rescue mission, he meets other kids whose family members were also taken by the sigbin. Despite the dangers, the boy perseveres until he uncovers the sinister identity of the creature and the horrors during Duterte’s presidency that engulf the city at night.
PAGBILANG KONG TATLO (That Night the Moon Shined)
Xzy Dumabok / 2022 / Fiction / RT: 18:52
University of the Philippines Diliman

To relive their childhood innocence, a group of teenagers plays a Filipino version of hide-and-seek called bang-sak (an onomatopoeia for the sounds the gun and knife make, bang-bang and saksak) in an abandoned building. However, by nightfall, their revelry turns dark when a police officer they slighted earlier hunts them down one by one. In the mold of a thriller, the film paints a picture of police brutality and impunity that had defined the macho culture extolled under Duterte and been brought to greater public attention with the “drug war” killings of teenagers and the exposure of young people to police abuse caught on camera.

RIVER OF TEARS AND RAGE
Maricon Montajes / 2021 / Documentary / RT: 26:12
University of the Philippines Diliman

Activist Reina Mae Nasino was a month pregnant when Manila’s police arrested her on bogus charges. She endured in one of the world’s most crowded prisons and gave birth to Baby River Emmanuel while in detention. With the government denying the infant care from her mother, Baby River died at three months old. The film reactivates social media as a repository and expression of outrage and resistance and culls from the film collective Kodao’s Facebook Live coverage of Baby River’s wake and burial. Amid the pandemic, a dead infant becomes a symbol of political oppression by the Duterte regime, denounced worldwide for its human rights crimes.

HINDI KA MALAYA, MAHABA LANG ANG TANIKALA (You’re Not Free, The Chains Are Just Long)
Nsc Garon & Lica Oreiro / 2021 / Experimental Documentary / RT: 3:06
Mapua University

Assembling archival travelogue and found news footage, this documentary juxtaposes how the privileged and the outsiders looking in peddle a postcard-perfect Philippines while the underclass and people from the grassroots experience the grim reality of everyday violence. The montage of images from different periods evokes the feeling of being trapped in a vicious cycle, the country itself a victim of endless historical repetition, and the desire to break free of one’s chains.

SI MARIANG MATAPANG (Maria, Courageous)
Trisha Mae Llaguno / 2022 / Fiction / RT: 4:11
Miriam College

A university student convinces her father that resisting a corrupt and murderous government is just. In a dramatic dialogue, they work out their generational differences and convictions and decide that the present generation owes it to their forebears, including the titular Maria’s mother, who had been killed resisting Martial Law, and their children to keep the sacrifices of the past sacred and the future free.
ANG AMOMONGGO SA ATON (The Monsters Among Us)
Vinjo Entuna / 2021 / Animated Fiction / RT: 16:31
University of the Philippines Diliman

The film is set in the aftermath of the Escalante Massacre in Negros Occidental, when, on September 20, 1985, during a protest rally to commemorate the 13th anniversary of the declaration of Martial Law, military forces killed over 20 civilians. The Magbuelas family lives in fear because of the rampant killings in their peasant community following the demonstrations. The government blames the apelike creature Amomonggo for the deaths, while the Magbuelas turn to the same folklore to quell their anxiety. However, when the brutality comes knocking at their door, and the monstrosity is revealed for what it is, the family’s matriarch decides to fight back.

ANG MGA SISIW SA KAGUBATAN (The Chicks in the Forest)
Vahn Pascual / 2021 / Animated Fiction / RT: 4:06
De La Salle – College of St. Benilde

A children’s tale of a town under siege by a hungry monster who is never satisfied and a little chick who will no longer be cowed. This animated short is a reminder that when we forget as children, we fail to remember as adults. But when the young sow seeds of memory, they reap remembrance and transform their community.

HAL-AL
Nadine Dumasig and Hillarie Ualat / 2022 / Fiction / RT: 5:21
Far Eastern University

A young woman in a rural town is the only one who sees a beloved candidate, celebrated as a hero, in the upcoming election as the monster they had once upon a time driven away. Though not knowing how, she vows to reveal the truth, whatever the cost.

PANURADBUBAD (The Sunrise Ritual)
Alexis Noelle Obedencio / 2022 / Animated Documentary / RT: 8:11
University of the Philippines Diliman

The Lumad, or Indigenous Peoples, have long faced oppression by state forces in collusion with predatory capitalists, who displace the natives by militarizing their ancestral domains, shutting down the schools that teach them not only to read but to fight for their land, dispossessing them of their natural and sacred resources, and threatening to exterminate them. This animated documentary is centered on a Catholic Manobo teacher from Surigao del Sur, who remembers the darkest night of her life at the brutal hands of the military and recalls her fondest memories and dreams for the future of her Lumad school and her students, struggling to make their way back home.

TANDA NG PAGTANAW (Mark of our Reckoning)
Aireen Remoto / 2021 / Music Video / RT: 6:00
Meridian International College

Presented in the form of dance performed in the farmlands over “Saka,” an originally composed, written, and produced music, the film is a symbolic protest in solidarity with four farmers who, in their agrarian struggle to regain the land that was snatched from them, were arrested during the pandemic on trumped-up charges filed by a landlady in Cordon, Isabela. The music video not only calls for justice for the Cordon 4 but also offers a paeon for courageous peasants who continue to fight for their land.
ANG MGA BOSES SA PADER (The Voices in the Walls)
Chic Cruz Mirano / 2021 / Fiction / RT: 16:08
University of Sto. Tomas

In this period film, Martina is a 20-year-old deaf woman who returns to her childhood home wishing to regain some part of herself she had lost with her hearing years earlier. In their abandoned house, she begins to hear voices from within the walls, voices she soon realizes of her past selves when she was still hopeful and idealistic despite the trauma her family had suffered during Martial Law.

BOTO PARA SA PAGBABAGO (Vote for Change)
Eunice San Juan / 2021 / Public Service Announcement / RT: 0:30
Lyceum of the Philippines University - Manila

A 30-second public service announcement that calls on people to participate in the national elections and exercise their right to vote for change. However, instead of a straightforward informational PSA, the audiovisual presentation is molded as a thriller filled with images of violence and sounds of wailing, performing the labor of remembering the victims of the Duterte regime.

TRACING THE TESTIMONY OF THE POLITICS OF ART IN SCENES RECLAIMED

A REVIEW OF PATRICK F. CAMPOS, KARL CASTRO, TITO QUILING JR., AND LOUISE JASHIL SONIDO’S SCENES RECLAIMED (CULTURAL CENTER OF THE PHILIPPINES, 2021)

GIAN CARLA AGBISIT
The authors highlight how the boundary between elites and the masses is put into question under the administration of Corazon Aquino. The rhetoric of the CCP under Aquino was encapsulated in the terms and processes of Filipinization, democratization, and decentralization. The CCP came to recognize popular forms such as komiks, pelikulang bakbakan, and the like as art. But, of course, the democratization of art is always Janus-faced. While film as an art form can extend its access to marginalized and unrepresented community members, it continues to be a potent tool both for propaganda and protest. The book presents us with documentaries that detail the Mendiola massacre and other films that critique the shortcomings and crimes of the administrations, not only of Marcos but also of Aquino and every administration after, up to Duerte.

The book also touches on different issues such as the portrayal and struggle for inclusion of Indigenous Peoples, technological evolution and how it changes or reshapes film history, the contentiousness of awards, award-giving bodies, and film festivals and how they play a part in the implicit or explicit politicization of art. These varied and overlapping contexts explain why the authors problematicate, and not only champion, what it means to create and consume independent films. What does it mean to be free or independent? And from what? Must the independence of cinema be construed in a veering away from the CCP’s and the country’s complicated history, or must independence mean reclamation, a redefinition, a retelling of them?

In talking about Cinemalaya, they wonder what entails independence in artmaking. The book affirms that art and politics are always already intertwined. Nevertheless, this does not mean that freedom is unattainable. Reading this book, I realize that in the very complex history of Philippine cinema, independence entails a profound awareness and paying serious attention to art’s relation to politics; to claim otherwise is, at best, naïve and, at worst, Machiavellian.

*#NeverAgain,* the book concludes, emphasizing that despite the unbearable burden imposed by a tyrannical state that continuously coopts art for its caprices, artists and filmmakers continue to fight for freedom. The ambivalence of art, despite the odds, allows artists to retain a sense of agency and independence. Even under heavy censorship, filmmakers could make movies that pass the standards of ostentatious idefickal values; but viewed without the veil of Martial Law, these movies provide a trenchant critique of the Marcoses. And is this not the power of art? A simple story about a family living in the slums is always already a reflection of the political. Similarly, Deleuze and Guattari wrote: “The individual concern thus begins all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified, because a whole other story is vibrating within it. In this way, the family triangle connects to other triangles—commercial, economic, bureaucratic, judicial—that determine its values.”

**Endnotes**

3. Campos, Scene Reclaimed, 91.
At the turn of the century, the music video as a form thrived in the Philippines. It proved to be a conducive format for young filmmakers and artists to use uncommon approaches and emerging technology, packaged within a commercial, promotional product broadcasted to audiences across the country. Collectively, these works also document and depict popular culture and subcultures involving the rich and diverse music of Filipino musicians, from the independent to the mainstream.1

“Any idiot can make an MTV [music video],” Quark Henares recounts about being berated by a former teacher. While music videos were often trivialized as a commercial format instead of an art form, this dismissal was also an opportunity for filmmakers to experiment and create interesting works. Seemingly anything was possible, and looking back, the production company-slash-collective Furball, Inc. emerged as a prolific hub producing many music videos that received critical and popular acclaim.2

Furball, Inc. gathered artists and creatives across different practices such as independent filmmaking, advertising, visual art, web development, video art, and more. This new generation of filmmakers was in the right place at the right time, and with the sheer diskarte (translation) and gumption that youth embraces, they were able to create music videos that left an indelible mark on Philippine popular culture.

On channels such as Myx and MTV Philippines, a pop singer like Kyla could birit (belt) over a montage of cockroaches crawling around a dilapidated mansion.3 Young artists whose names would come to be renowned in international contemporary art would even cameo or work behind the scenes of videos such as Sugarfree’s “Mariposa” (2003). Likewise, multimedia mixtures of analog film and early video could collide, against the conventions of the time, in videos such as “Get Away” (2001) by Slapshock.

The production, distribution, and consumption of popular music and music videos have changed leading up to the present and continue to change. However, Furball’s body of work is a solid temporal coordinate from which this writing can survey the milieu of the time, despite the historiographical challenges. Unfortunately, many music videos are not in a centralized archive; the main mode of access is unintentional archives on online streaming sites. Even the music video of “Ang Huling El Bimbo” on the Eraserheads’ official Vevo YouTube account is missing the iconic and goosebumps-inducing zombie reanimation scene of the Paraluman muse at the climax of the song.

For clarity, the following discussions will indicate in parentheses what specific medium is being referenced.
In the late '90s, before the country’s widespread adaptation of video technology, music videos were made in the Philippines on a less prolific scale. Labels treated music videos as a prize rather than a promotional supplement to be created after a song became a commercial hit, according to Henares. The cost of 16mm proved prohibitive for record labels to invest in music videos.

Still, the music video itself was also receiving critical recognition as an art form, with works directed by award-winning independent filmmakers early in their careers. Movelfund Film alumnus Raymond Red had directed Francis Magalona’s “Kaleidoscope World” (music video, 1995), five years before Red won the Palme D’Or at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival. Aurora Solito was awarded the MTV International Viewer’s Choice Awards at the 1997 MTV Asia Music Video awards for his work on the Eraserheads’ “Ang Huling El Bimbo” (music video). Robert Quahral directed “Harana” (music video, 1998) for Parokya ni Edgar, which won the MTV Asia Music Video “Kaleidoscope World” (music video, 1995) five years before Red won the Palme D’Or at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival. Aurora Solito was awarded the MTV International Viewer’s Choice Awards at the 1997 MTV Asia Music Video awards for his work on the Eraserheads’ “Ang Huling El Bimbo” (music video). Robert Quahral directed “Harana” (music video, 1998) for Parokya ni Edgar, which won the MTV Asia Music Video 2008 and the MTV Asia Music Video “Kaleidoscope World” (music video, 1995) five years before Red won the Palme D’Or at the 2000 Cannes Film Festival. Aurora Solito was awarded the MTV International Viewer’s Choice Awards at the 1997 MTV Asia Music Video awards for his work on the Eraserheads’ “Ang Huling El Bimbo” (music video). Robert Quahral directed “Harana” (music video, 1998) for Parokya ni Edgar, which won the MTV Asia Music Video 2008 and the MTV Asia Music Video 

The Rise of Furball

The young generation of filmmakers who would form Furball was primed to adapt to new technology. Furball initially started with three departments: film production, led by Lyle Sarcis; sound, led by Mark Lakay; and web design, led by Carlo Estrada. The other filmmakers and artists who would join Furball met in different places. Some were alumni of Movelfund, the UP Film Institute, the UP College of Fine Arts, and De La Salle University. Others were colleagues at work. Others were musicians and artists who would frequent art spaces and live music venues around the city.

The name “Furball,” stemming from an inside joke, was also chosen because it did not overly produce a production house, according to founder Sarcis. He avoided including the terms “productions” and “films” as well. Sarcis’ sentiment was that he was an outsider in production and approach, with a clear anti-establishment attitude to boot. Initially, they planned to steer clear of hierarchies even in the credits, where Furball as a whole would be credited as the collective director, or the crew’s names would be listed alphabetically instead of by department. However, as bills had to be paid and livelihoods remained a concern, there was a need to formalize as a company accountable to taxes with official receipts and bureaucratic red tape.

The collective was eventually formalized as a company and business in 2001 with the goal of making an artist-run company, occupying offices around Quezon City. Many artists associated with Furball worked as freelancers, often channeling the income from commercial projects into art. They were also active participants in underground art and film circles, often hanging out at places such as Big Sky Mind, Mayric’s, and Club Dredd.

In 2001, Furball had to leave its original Mindanao Avenue base to find a new office space. Katya Guerrero, co-owner of Big Sky Mind, offered them their recently vacated print studio in a compound along 18th Avenue, Cubao. The area was home to several artist projects across different fields, such as filmmaking, contemporary art, and publishing. Among their neighbors were Louie Cordero, the artist initiative Surrounded by Water, Jun Sabayton’s space Canteen Plate Gallery, and printing presses of women’s magazines and comics. By the time Furball left their Cubao office space in 2008, the compound had grown into a bustling creative hub.

Being situated in a space with fellow peers, Furball reached out across their different networks for projects and built a communal collection of equipment and resources within the company. Given that budgets for music videos were limited, DIY tactics were vital to making the concepts come to life and influencing the cinematic treatment of Furball’s works.

Furball’s members have numerous anecdotes demonstrating the sheer lengths of diskarte that the production members went through. In addition, it was common for personal funds to be shelled out to augment the production costs, as was the case on many occasions for director RA Rivera.

The various interviews conducted for this article had the Furball crew fondly recounting clutch moments and mishaps. For instance, Slapshock film reels being stolen, trailing veteran celebrity German “Kuya Germ” Moreno for a guerrilla shoot (for Ciudad, “Make it Slow,” dir. RA Rivera), and production designer Poklong Anading finding a Volkswagen Kombi two hours before the call time for Teeth’s “Shooting Star” (music video, 1999). Anading himself frequently re-used materials on different sets. Some Furball members were also inspired by Dogme 95’s critical-aesthetic approach to spectacle and technique via overproduction and the movement’s determination to create films within limited budgets.

A Mark of the Times

These conditions of film production and the music industry are evident in Furball’s music videos, as works were made during the transition from film to digital and the subsequent adaptation of new artistic approaches. They were telling of not just the technology of the time but the character and idiosyncrasies of pop culture at the turn of the century. With Furball being closely tied to outsider and underground music and film circles, some music videos became a documentation of these subcultures and youth culture.

It is crucial to note that because music videos were commercial in nature, the factors that determined their screening were different from those of other movements in concurrent alternative and independent cinema. Music videos were broadcasted because of the song and artist they were connected with, rather than the artistic merit of the video itself as film. If a music video’s artist or song were in high demand, then the video is “assured,” so to speak, of airtime. Compared to the music the video promoted, the video’s treatment, cast, and crew were minor factors contributing to whether it would be broadcasted, when, and how frequently.

In Sandwich’s “Procrastinator” (music video, dir. Qqrk Henares), the band sports layered haircuts and technicolor skinny jeans during an instructional video of rock poses—and not of that of machismo glam rock, but of the disco and dance-influenced guitar and indie rock of the time. This was, I argue, emblematic of the generation’s definition of cool in its off-kilter, reckless, take-it-or-leave-it kind of way. The scene’s fashion is also evident in Taken by Cars’ dance-rock tune “Shapeshifter” (music video, 2008, dir. Qqrk Henares), which has Sarah Marco wearing a black statement tee with large, block text which was ubiquitous in the mid-2000s.

While the setting of “Shapeshifter” is not explicitly a call center, a certain scene where a man in business attire smokes a cigarette as the sun rises is evocative of what call center agents experience daily, as their entire lifestyle and schedules revolve around graveyard shifts.

Interestingly, “Shapeshifter” is also a document of the shift of urban development’s priorities in Metro Manila. Shot almost entirely within the then-sparkling new infrastructure in Bonifacio Global City, Taguig, the buildings and streets seem almost devoid of people aside from the band members. This decade also saw a rapid rise in the development of high-density commercial and residential areas.

In the larger economic picture, in which the policies of Gloria Macapagal Arroyo’s administration actively supported...
to offer services that catered to English-speaking populations and white-collar workers drawn in by relatively competitive salaries (2007, dir. Marie Jamora). It cultivated a generation of young professionals who were drawn to corporate AVPs. The video finds catharsis in corporate work in “Shallow Graves,” Henares also satirizes the hollow promises that workers are made to believe they will achieve by following the corporate ladder. The romance would culminate in a real-life meetup, colloquially known as “EB” or “eyeball,” but in this case, the woman glances past Ebe Dancel, foregoing the real-life meetup, colloquially known as “EB” or “eyeball,” but in this case, the woman glances past Ebe Dancel, foregoing the encounter entirely.

These are some of the ways the internet had been used socially in the early days of the formation of online communities in the Philippines before the internet calcified into the centralized structure of privatized and mercilessly monetized social networks. These online games thrived on the transition from dial-up internet to DSL broadband that was being introduced in the Philippines. The use of avatars and the anonymity they afforded also became an avenue for people to create personas and aliases, which could be based on or even depart from how people perceived themselves in real life. It was a new form of expression that the internet enabled, which, in actuality, could also be a space of empowerment and self-actualization for women and the LGBTQQ community to subvert pervading gender and sexuality assumptions. Slapshock’s “Agent Orange” (music video, dir. Lyle Sacris) was not just a departure from the prevailing telenovela sheen in terms of filmmaking, but vocalist Jamir Garcia’s flaming red dreadlocks and bottom lip piercing were a defiant flip-off to the mainstream. Slapshock was one of the main bands that were a budding romance between a young boy who finally gets to meet a beautiful woman online. Unfortunately, however, “Chiksilog’s” transphobic lyrical undertones (“Kaya palang huyas mo sa espada / Si maldita ay lalaki pala!”) have not aged well. On the other hand, Sugarf free’s “Burnout” (music video) chronicles how the internet could become a tender and vulnerable space for romance, with a young couple going through romance and heartbreak via their online characters. Vocalist Ebe Dancel anguishes in front of a chunky computer monitor, eventually standing up to serenade a lost love with the rest of the band. The young couple could change their clothes, appearance, and behavior. The romance would culminate in a real-life meetup, colloquially known as “EB” or “eyeball,” but in this case, the woman glances past Ebe Dancel, foregoing the encounter entirely.

Aside from being in line with Gen X’s characteristic sentiments of giving a middle finger to the man, “Shallow Graves,” Henares also satirizes the hollow promises of meritocracy and employment benefits frequently peddled by corporate AVPs. The video finds cathartic in corporate work in favor of dancing and enjoying life, which ties back to the ethos of Furball. After all the political and economic milieu of the early 2000s, Furball was arguably an exception as an artist-run company that consolidated freelancers looking to make a living for works that would take on a grittier, edgier approach that Sacris’ direction complemented. At the time, two prominent camps of Filipino music scenes were rock and hip-hop, with few instances of bands crossing over between the two. With the kind of songwriting and conventions ushered in by Western bands such as Korn, Linkin Park, and Evanescence, nu-metal also marked a peculiar yet fondly remembered era in which heavy rock music was widely accepted by the mainstream, well beyond its subcultures. Nu-metal fans also counted among the employees of the new generation of white-collar workers portrayed in Chiciocci’s “Shallow Graves.”

Rivermaya’s “Umaaraw, Umuulan” (music video) also depicts the local subculture influenced by Britpop and New Wave, with Rico Blanco’s bleached hair and zipped-up parka, along with the song’s percussive rhythm that shares a kindred spirit with Blur and Oasis of the ’90s. The video also features a vintage candy machine, a telephone booth stranded in the middle of the desert, a goldfish bowl atop a lone television, an homage to Rene Magritte’s painting The Son of Man (1964), and other surrealist non-sequiturs. The song is a remarkable example of how Filipino musicians were able to channel foreign influences to create material that resonated within our cultural context. This was the new generation of musicians departing from the essentialist inclinations of the Original Philippine Music movement to define what was “original” or “Filipinne.”

Popular culture could be permeable, swirling between the foreign and the local, embracing influences, and expressing culturally specific sentiments. Lyle Sacris’ music video for “Hanggang Ngayon” (music video for “Hanggang Ngayon”) by Kyla is an unsettling series of moving images that stand in stark contrast to typical videos of her fellow songstresses. Here, a spectator of Kyla roams around an abandoned house riddled with cobwebs and cockroaches. Kyla’s reflection takes on a life of its own, moving independently of herself as it distorts in a pose of longing. Slapshock’s Jamir Garcia makes a cameo as a man lying in a bloody bathtub. It reeks of death and dilapidation, which, despite the macabre imagery, actually circle back to the song’s sentiments of regret and loss. The music video complicates the songwriting, adding contextual layers to a viewer’s experience of the song. An otherwise conventional ballad, in this case, becomes instantly memorable for its music video, and it eventually garnered the Viewer’s Choice Award for Southeast Asia at the 2001 MTV Video Music Awards. Aside from documenting popular culture, some of the videos, made against commercial odds, also ended up being evidence of outsider music at the time, such as “Twice Detached” (music video) by Down Boy Down. The video was shot on the same set as “Umaaraw, Umuulan” in the Lapaz Sand Dunes of Ilocos Norte. During the shoot proper, Jun Sabayon and Ernest Concepcion, billed as the Ayuz Brothers, stepped aside and shot this melancholy, slow-motion video of a silhouette against a scorching sunset. In the trademark Furball humor, Concepcion’s YouTube description states: 1st video from the ‘Parasitism Film Movement’. All props and equipment courtesy of Furball and the Rivermaya (“Umaaraw, Umuulan”) production team and funds. Meaning, the entire video was made entirely [for] free. In the video, the Ayuz Brothers also depicted what Cuban, Manila would be in the year 2040. Kind of like Mad Max-ish.21

The song features a lone, doe-eyed guitar player singing in a whisper, backed by dissonant guitar feedback—the kind of experimental music on Mads Adria’s DIY label DOCU MENTO Records, which was specifically for sound and noise art.
The aforementioned “Parasitism” mentioned by Jun Sabayton was influenced by the Dogme 95 works brought to the Philippines by Mowelfund. Though Dogme’s “Vow of Chastity” are too strict to apply to these works (and, of course, are not entirely applicable when transplanted from its Danish context to the Philippines), the relationship it proposes between films and their budgets, which is to say the value of rejecting spectacle in favor of the director as an artist, clearly resonated with several of Furball’s filmmakers such as Sabayton.

RA Rivera’s directorial work for the Beat-influenced band Radioactive Sago Project also embraces low-budget, resourceful filmmaking that pays irrevocable homage to Philippine popular cinema and its conventions, tropes, and clichés. The music videos for “Astro Cigarettes” and “Wasak Na Wasak”, both of which were shot on expired film that Rivera procured, are punk caricatures of the conventions of Philippine romance and action films. The former’s climax is a Fernando Poe Jr.-style fight scene interlocked with grandmothers dancing the cha-cha. The latter concludes with a Spanish colonial era Damaso-like fraile preaching to indios, decrying a way of life that is.

The cultural and musical landscape of the time was suspended because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furball launched Mamatay Kang Hayop na COVID Ka!, a ten-day telethon featuring 24/7 programming to raise funds for health care workers and frontliners. The line-up featured a wide range of appearances: musical performances from legends such as Raymund Marasigan and Ebe Dancel to young and emerging musicians; informational sessions educating viewers about the state of frontliners and COVID; reunions of popular TV and radio personalities; and even movie star John Lloyd Cruz. The line-up foregrounded Furball’s extensive network of creative collaborators they built over their existence, most of whom had come together voluntarily in response to the pandemic. Even the behind-the-scenes tech of the program was run by Furball members and associates, working around the clock to keep the stream running. For viewers, it was a welcome reminder of art and the art community’s capacity to comfort, alleviate, and unite people despite social distancing and isolation. It was also a sign that the music scene was alive and kicking despite gigs and other live gatherings being indefinitely suspended because of the pandemic.

**Ephemerality–It is What It Is**

Perhaps it could be said that this was a fragile, fleeting time. Such is the nature of youth culture. Whether intentionally or not, the works mentioned above, whether in form, technology, content, music, or narrative, are firmly dated in popular culture of the early 2000s. They feature different facets of subcultures ranging from the mainstream to niche and outsider scenes, demonstrating the diversity of musical practices during the decade.

Much of Furball’s history has existed through anecdotes, and is documented nebulously as online posts, magazine scans, articles, and of course, the videos themselves on YouTube. Even those videos are often low-res versions with sub-optimal audio and video by current standards, possibly as remnants of YouTube’s early days before it supported high-resolution streaming. Furball lives on in those who witnessed and participated in its activities and through anecdotes and oral stories, which were the basis of this article.

The cultural phenomenon of the time may have been excluded or overlooked in written histories and documentation because they were rendered ephemeral on multiple levels. First, they had faced archival challenges, having been made on celluloid which lacked in terms of capital in attitude, reciprocal relationships, and creative spirits. (Of course, getting paid was great, too.)
The demand for music. The statement “any idiot can make an
study. As discussed, music videos were typically a promotional
economic capacity to initiate such studies and efforts. Of course, takes precedence in this case, especially considering
economic sustenance and livelihood being the more immediate
if their goals were to build a thriving artistic community, with
diskarte
and institutional recognition has gained traction since then. Popular culture is already the subject of critical study,
with the caveat of its reach extending to the urban population
culture is unfortunately assumed to be a product for mass
photos on their Facebook accounts. @othermattersph.32 Other Furball members occasionally post

Fernandez builds a case for popular culture “as a
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body of work, Furball’s legacy continues as they endure in the
spirit of collaboration, eagerness to adapt to new technologies, and sheer willpower to see ideas carried out against the odds. Even if they have parted ways to pursue individual careers, they continue to revel in unconventional or new ways of filmmaking and creative production amid changing technological landscapes. Their work has arguably also influenced younger
generations of filmmakers inspired by their resourcefulness and
spirit of collaboration, eagerness to adapt to new technologies, and critical commentary that young artists provide as a
counterpoint to antiquated notions, should people give the time to listen.

The historical ephemeralism of Furball music videos and the times they tell is not a failure of its movement; sometimes, the adaptation and subsequent obsolescence of trends is part and parcel. After all, popular culture’s capacity to keep up with an urban public’s swiftly changing tastes and concerns, where what is trending today is passe tomorrow, is its strength as a cause for and result of articulating a specific anchor in time.

Despite the archival circumstances concerning their body of work, Furball’s legacy continues as they endure in the spirit of collaboration, eagerness to adapt to new technologies, and sheer willpower to see ideas carried out against the odds. Even if they have parted ways to pursue individual careers, they continue to revel in unconventional or new ways of filmmaking and creative production amid changing technological landscapes. Their work has arguably also influenced younger generations of filmmakers inspired by their resourcefulness and humor. Two decades strong, they deliver works that respond to

@othermattersph.32 Other Furball members occasionally post photos on their Facebook accounts.

A second level to archival challenges is that pop culture is unfortunately assumed to be a product for mass consumption rather than a subject of cultural study. Decades earlier, Doreen G. Fernandez had already pointed out how literary scholars and journalists failed to contextualize popular culture according to the terms of the respective disciplines:

The problem with most of the above is that it is done in isolation, without a clear perspective, and undirected in a definite context. There is, in no other words, no concerted effort to define the Filipino
through his popular culture, or to synthesize findings so as to determine this culture’s broad effects on him. […] the volume of available literature touching on popular culture and related topics, much of it is diffuse, unstructured, and not always focused on either the significance of the popularity of the cultural form, or the meaning of the cultural form that has achieved such popularity.33

Fernandez builds a case for popular culture “as a
form of discourse serving as a potent force for persuasion and value-building and for the perception of consciousness,” with the caveat of its reaching to the urban population in Metro Manila and other urban centers, and a limited capacity in rural areas subject to the penetration of broadcast technology. However, much has happened since the essay was written in 1981, including and most especially the rise of the internet.

Certainly, Fernandez’s case focuses on the broad forms of mass media, including film, radio, television, and print. Popular culture is already the subject of critical study, and institutional recognition has gained traction since then. However, what about the early 2000s deadlocked nu-metal growlers, dance punk nightcrawlers, and drinkers jazz fusion outsiders who, intentionally or not, embody anti-establishment attitudes through DIY and youthful abandon? What if their goals were to build a thriving artistic community; with economic sustenance and livelihood being the more immediate goal rather than critical acclaim and awards? Making a living, of course, takes precedence in this case, especially considering the precarity of freelance work in the Philippines. This does not preclude the possibility of scholars and writers with the economic capacity to initiate such studies and efforts.

Third, music videos, as popular culture, face their own barriers toward becoming legitimate works of art and objects of study. As discussed, music videos were typically a promotional device that outsider approaches could hijack and were often commissioned by record labels and musicians to keep up with the demand for music. The statement “any idiot can make an MTV,” as Henares recounted with amusement, says more about gatekeeping attitudes toward art rather than the makers of music videos themselves. To shut music videos out is to close off a valuable documentation source of artistic movements.

Thus, a historical approach must provide the music videos’ context, while an archival approach must also consider the technology and consumption amid which these were made. Not to mention early internet culture, including games, social media, and proto-memes, is often blamed for being the cause of the youth’s moral deterioration rather than acknowledged as space and tool for their expression and agency. Rock and roll—or more aptly, rakrel—is still a care parent, but perhaps Furball’s music videos are proof of the sharp awareness and critical commentary that young artists provide as a counterpoint to antiquated notions, should people give the time to listen.

This writing is also a continuation of my archived research about music videos in the Philippines, which had was presented as a screening program titled Music Only sync at The Hub, Eclatia in April 2019, which featured and contextualized music videos that evidence cultural and technological signs of their times from the nineties to 2019.

1 This article was made possible thanks to Furball members Lyle Sacris, Mals Adrias, RA Rivera, Quark Henares, Jon Sahyoun, Edhel Us, Lyndon Santos, Paklong Anahing, Kaley Olivar, Mikko Abelino, and Ilango Dela Cruz, who generously shared their stories and experiences over Zoom interviews conducted in January 2022.


5 Eraserheads, “Ang Huling El Bimbo.”


7 Mals Adrias, interviewed by Mariah Roscida, Zoom interview, January 14, 2022, quoted with permission.

8 Lyle Sacris, interviewed by Mariah Roscida, Zoom interview, January 16, 2022, quoted with permission.

9 Ibid.

10 Ibid.

11 RA Rivera and Paklong Anahing, interviewed by Mariah Roscida, Zoom interview, January 29, 2022, quoted with permission.


14 RA Rivera and Paklong Anahing, interviewed by Mariah Roscida, Zoom interview, January 29, 2022, quoted with permission.


17 Cambio, “Call Center,” directed by Dante Jamer, MCA Philippines, Manic, 2007, music video.


19 Kamikaze, “Chikado,” directed by Quark Henares, Rok Own!, 2005, music video.


25 Ibid.


27 Jon Sahyoun, interviewed by Mariah Roscida, Zoom interview, January 16, 2022, quoted with permission.


31 Mals Adrias, interviewed by Mariah Roscida, Zoom interview, January 14, 2022, quoted with permission.


34 Ibid.

35 Quark Henares, interviewed by Mariah Roscida, Zoom interview, January 13, 2022, quoted with permission.
ON SURVIVAL MODE: FILM PRODUCTION DURING THE PANDEMIC

CHRISY CRUZ USTARIS

WHEN THE PANDEMIC STARTED...

When the pandemic started in the first quarter of 2020, it was as if the world had reached a standstill. During that year, the rules of lockdown in the Philippines included banning mass gatherings, requiring people to stay home, halting the on-site operations of establishments like offices, restaurants and schools, and suspending public transportation. It was a dangerous time as the coronavirus spread quickly, cases were on the rise, and the death toll from the disease was a daily fare in the news.

In 2021, some restrictions were eased, and by the first quarter, people began to receive vaccinations to protect themselves from COVID-19. However, according to a news report, the severe Delta variant of the virus entered the country in June 2021, which, according to the World Health Organization, was “twice as transmissible as the original virus, with one positive person potentially capable of causing infection in another nine to 13 persons.” This strain had contributed to a rapid rise in cases, thus increasing reported daily deaths around the third quarter of that year. According to the Department of Health, by December 2021, the Omicron variant was detected in the country, a less severe strain than the Delta.

Meanwhile, to reopen the economy, more establishments were allowed to operate in 2022. Malls permitted more consumer traffic from previously limited capacities; employees from work-at-home setups started to return to their offices; while some schools began limited on-site classes. Gradually, public transportation transitioned from operating at limited capacity to total capacity. As of this writing, the pandemic is still happening. Much could be asked from operating at limited capacity to total capacity. As of this writing, the pandemic is still happening.

INTER-GUILD ALLIANCE PROTOCOLS AND GUIDELINES

In May 2020, the Inter-Guild Alliance (IGA) released its protocols and guidelines that aim to re-evaluate and reconfigure how film production is carried out during the period that the coronavirus remains a threat to health and safety. This guide aims to minimize risk and infection in all filmmaking phases. The alliance comprises various groups from the Philippine film, television, and advertising industries. As of July 2020, it is composed of the League of Filipino Actors (AKTOR); Sound Speed Philippines (SSP); Lupon ng Pilipinong Sinematograpo (LPS); TV and Film Screenwriters Collective (TFS); Alliance of Producers, Line Producers and Production Managers (ALP); Guild of Assistant Directors and Script Supervisors (GADSS); Kapisanan ng mga Assistant Directors ng Patalastas (KAPS); Production Design Technical Working Group (PD-TWG); Filipino Film Editors (FFE) in cooperation with United Post Group (UPG); and the Directors’ Guild of the Philippines, Inc. (DGPI). These IGA protocols are discussed in the following sections concerning the interviewees’ experiences in production during the health crisis.

Jed Medrano, Line Producer, Black Rainbow (2021)

Jed Medrano produces and line-produces feature films, short films, ads, and branded content under her production house, FB Media. Liway (2019), Bagale (2017), Piaynay (2016), Bambanti (2015), and Missing (2013) are among the films she has worked on as a freelance line producer. She is also the line producer for Black Rainbow (2021), an entry to the Sine Halaga, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) Filipino Values Film Festival. It won the Best Short Film Award, NETPAC Award, and Best Screenplay Award at the 2022 Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival. Filmmaker Zig Dulay directed all these films mentioned (except for Liway, which he co-wrote).

As a line producer, Jed oversees the budget and the daily activities during filming. She identified the following additional costs due to the pandemic: a) COVID-19 testing; b) additional vehicles for transportation; c) hiring a safety officer; d) disinfection materials; and e) accommodations during lock-in productions. All these are included in the IGA protocols. In terms of procedures, testing is done before production begins to ensure that no one is infected by the virus while filming. Next, the seating capacity of production-hired vehicles must follow the rules on social distancing. For example, for vans, only two people should occupy each row. Meanwhile, production is required to hire a DOLE-accredited Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Officer, or safety officer, to supervise and ensure that the production implements the health and safety protocols.

This includes the general work area disinfection at certain times of the day for all locations, sets, workspaces, equipment, and props. Items for disinfection are additional costs as well.
Finally, the production houses the cast and crew in a locked location for a specific duration. Additional expenses are incurred from providing food and lodging to everyone. This production mode is called “lock-in shoot” or “bubble” shoot and is seen as a solution to prevent infection by controlling people’s movements while principal photography takes place.

Black Rainbow did lock-in production twice in their location in an Aeta community in Porac, Pampanga. Their first lock-in was two days in October 2020. Unfortunately, they had to halt shooting by noon on the third day and postpone taking exterior shots since the rains were not letting up. The second time was in November, which took them three days. Although additional expenses were incurred in the production process, Jed shared that there were also aspects she could save on: “The advantage is that we can conduct preproduction online, whether it’s Zoom or another platform. That saves us money on transportation and food since it’s done online. Moreover, there was little to no excuse for people not to attend an online conference. Unless the person I’m meeting don’t have wifi or their device is running low on battery, their location is no longer a hindrance to meeting online. Plus, it’s recorded, so there’s proof of points agreed on.”

Another cost-saver concerned the printing of scripts. “I just send, for instance, the department heads the file, and they can just read it on their devices. Unlike before, I had to give them printed copies whenever there’s a new version of the script. Of course, come production time, I still have to print it. But at least there were some savings. I like anything that can save us money.”

When asked about good practices that emerged in the pandemic that she would want to keep, Jed was quick to answer that it was the application of fixed working hours and turnaround time. In the IGA guidelines, working hours are pegged at 12-14 hours a day and a turnaround time of 10-12 hours. “I hope that practice is retained for other productions where people are overworked and up for 24 hours or longer. Our production works fast, and we pack up early even during the Rambanti days. We’re conscious of our limitations financially, and we make use of minimal lighting. Thus, we only have a few night scenes.”

“People in both TV and film production were working continuously for 24 hours. It was especially difficult to film a television series or teleserye. They [the crew] were getting sick, and even directors were dying. I believe that the FIDCP (Film Development Council of the Philippines) has started working on protecting these workers. When Tito Eddie (Garcia) died due to the accident, people started to review the industry on protecting these workers. When Tito Eddie (Garcia) died due to the accident, people started to review the industry on protecting these workers.”

Jed added that a practice worth keeping in her line-producing work was the cashless transactions that became popular during the pandemic, like online banking and GCash transfers. “I no longer have to bring a large amount of cash for my payments. That reduces risk on my part. It also lessens the paperwork since there’s no need for vouchers. The online transaction automatically generates a receipt that serves as documentation.”

“Lastly, it’s good that people have learned to be more conscious of their cleanliness and practices that ensure safety. For example, people consciously try to observe social distancing even at meal times and refrain from talking too much. These practices of controlling one’s actions are good to continue to ensure safety at all times. This shows that people started to prioritize health and safety, unlike before.”

Martika Ramirez Escobar, Director of Photography, Hello Stranger (2020)

Martika Ramirez Escobar is the writer and director of the short films Living Things (2020), for which she won the Best Director Award at the 2020 Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival, and Pusong Bain (2014), which was awarded Best Short Film in the same festival in 2015. Her first full-length film, Lesser Will Never Die (2022), was awarded the World Cinema Documentary Special Jury Award for Innovative Spirit at the 2022 Sundance Film Festival, among others.

For this article, Martika shares her experiences as the director of photography of Hello Stranger, directed by Dwein Baltazar and produced by Black Sheep in 2020. “We were on lock-in for 21 days in a resort in Batangas around November 2020. It was still very strict at that time.” Jed and I addressed the technical aspects of the film, like how to mount a particular scene or what the coverage is for a sequence. Such specific requirements as a crane or dolly are also discussed.

“I prefer in-person meetings since I want to have a detailed discussion on, for instance, what the director wants and what areas she wants to explore. Another challenge was the cam test. For that, you try out different cameras, lenses, and filters to know which fits the director’s vision. You can also test special requirements, like if you want to try a particular zoom lens of one brand compared to another. It’s usually done at the rental supplier’s place. Ideally, you’re with the director when you do the cam test since it has to do with creative decisions that will affect the film. Because of the challenges due to the pandemic, I did the cam test with my camera operator and sent Dwein what I think will work for the film.”

“One more thing I found challenging was the rule on only one shooting location allowed per day or ‘wadong balas.’ That’s difficult since it means that if you’re going to cluster scenes, they should be feasible within one house, one location, or one area. As we know, films have plenty of scenes with numerous locations. Because we’re limited to one area, we adjust by doing everything within that location. For example, we have to set up a classroom in the resort. That’s an extra effort in production design and cinematography. For the latter, you’d have to create the mood for a space with the proper lighting.”

“Furthermore, the lock-in shoot affected my creativity as a DOP. It was dealing with a different kind of compromise—you have to make things work with the limitations in the location. It’s like, ‘how will we make this feel like a different place or time of the day?’ Additionally, since you wouldn’t want the audience to have the impression of the film being shot in just one area, even if that’s the truth, you can’t take a wide shot so as to not give it away.”

On the matter of social distancing rule, Martika explains, “It’s inevitable to be close with the people you’re working with. For example, your focus puller is beside you and the person assigned to adjust the tripods and change the lenses. So that’s a challenging requirement for us.”

On practices worth continuing, she emphasizes, “Definitely, it’s the 12-14 shooting hours. That’s the most malasakit (humane) I love. And because we’re still in the pandemic, it’s the awareness of being extra careful on set. It’s good that people are no longer smoking everywhere since there are already designated areas. It’s more organized. I also like that there would still be a safety officer, even beyond this crisis, to ensure that workers are well taken care of and the
Pam Miras, Filmmaker and Second Unit Director for GMA

Pam Miras is a director and screenwriter for film and television. Her feature debut, Pacacina (2012), won Best Picture at the 2012 Cinema One Originals. Her short films have won awards and screened at international festivals. She is currently employed as a director for local TV dramas. In 2021, she wrote Kitty K7 (2022), produced by Vivamax.

This portion deviates from film production proper to provide an understanding of television production during the pandemic. The Philippine entertainment industry is composed of intersecting communities of TV and film, where workers and artists traverse both fields.

Since the pandemic started in 2020, Pam has worked as a second unit director on four mini-series for GMA. She explained how lock-ins for such television programs work: “For eight weeks, my crew and I would be locked-in for production. That's like being an OFW (Overseas Filipino Worker). The shoots are usually two to three days straight, with defined working and turnaround hours daily. And then you have breaks—so two days, then break; three days, then break, until you're done shooting. My interview with her is referenced in the subsequent quotations in this sub-section.

“I used to see cameramen or gaffers have shoots that end at two a.m. and then proceed to another show's shoot with a six a.m. pullout. That's no longer allowed nowadays. There has to be a turnaround time from the pack up to your next work. Safety officers are also required. I hope the 12 to 14 working hours are followed. And if any [medical] symptoms are exhibited, somebody can attend to it. The continued presence of a safety officer at every shoot would ensure that there aren't any abuses taking place on set. By abuse, I mean I've seen grip people working for four days straight: their eyes are red when you take a close look.”

Escobar continued, “On realizations on film productions during the pandemic, it’s understanding that in the world of film or any production, we need to adapt to whatever situation we're confronted with if we want to continue making films. There will always be a way. Besides, obstacles are ever-present: if it's not money, it’s the pandemic; if it’s not the pandemic, it’s going to be something else. So it’s more of dealing with the circumstances and making the best out of the resources you have at the moment.”

On challenges as a director during the bubble shoots, she shared, “It’s building a world that feels like it’s not the pandemic while shooting in a pandemic-stricken space. We need to create an illusion that it’s a different place. Actually, that's the joke that we have about what's happening in the timeline. It happens in the present, but there's no crisis. It's an alternate reality. At least for TV, nobody wants to watch something set in a pandemic situation. So we need to show that.”

>You also need to plan the spaces well. That’s another challenge—shooting in one location per day. Writers had to situate the narratives within the existing spaces. Additionally, you can't have huge crowds, unlike before, when you were given 20 to 25 extras for that. Now it’s only around five to 10 talents. With that location limitation and your few talents, how can you make it look like it's still part of the real world? That’s the challenge creatively.”

“I no longer write for TV, but I observed that there are also lessons for writers when creating stories to be shot during the pandemic. All the limitations I mentioned earlier make for tighter storytelling. Writers have been forced to streamline the characters and the story. They're trained to make things tighter and simpler. It's writing a story around what resources are available. But through all these, you discover that you have the ability to adapt to the circumstances.”

“We also realized that these considerations affect the kind of stories that get made and, thus, the kind of content we get to watch. Some stories are put on hold or shelved since it’s impossible to produce them now. Then, possibly when things ease up, they can be made.”

“I also saw that against the usual practice of coming out with a script every week, since the pandemic, writers had to finish, let's say, writing the episodes for at least half of a season. For a 16-week season, that is eight weeks. There used to be weekly adjustments in the story based on how the ratings were going. Now, that’s no longer done. I’d say that’s one of the good things that came out of this. It’s ideal on the production end since you can prepare before you shoot. I hope that practice continues.”

Pam described her observations on film. “It’s no longer the cinemas that people patronize. People go for what’s streaming online. The mode nowadays is to earn from subscribers instead of ticket sales. A subscription is cheaper. Moreover, the budget for film production has been slashed to half or a third of what it used to be. As filmmakers, you need to adjust to that. If you don’t, then there’s no work. How are you going to survive?”

Most of the filmmakers I know are working for Viva since it constantly needs content. And since the budget shrunk, the stories have also become smaller: Sex sells, and currently, a great deal of content on sex is being streamed.”

“Through all these changes brought about by the pandemic, this crisis had driven the formation of guilds: like AKTOR for actors and screenwriters [Filipino Screenwriters Guild]. People used to be just focused on their own thing, but when the pandemic hit and many were out of work, people learned to reach out to each other. Even just for emotional support and not necessarily financial help. There was a kind of solidarity built in the industry.”

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214  215
When a project is offered to you, that's when the opportunity arises, just like a series of short videos I made for NCCA, which was able to provide work for others. Those who work in production, in turn, serve each other since collaborative effort is needed to create a film. Furthermore, film as a product serves the audience through the stories it tells. When a story resonates with its viewers, that is the service the filmmaker receives through the fulfilment of what he or she created. That's how filmmaking as an act of service comes full circle.19

Furthermore, he shared: “People, in general, have been feeling down, and there’s a high level of anxiety during the pandemic. I learned that making films will save you during this difficult time. Filmmaking will somehow help you escape all the madness created by this crisis. And in some way, that also helps you realize that despite the situation, you can still be productive. That does a lot in keeping your sanity.”20

Finally, in his capacity as editor, Zig believed that this role ensures that all the limitations of shooting a film during COVID are concealed. “The result must be an output in which the audience will not feel something’s wrong because of the restrictions that constrained the production.”21

Roman Perez Jr., Director for Vivamax

The streaming platform Vivamax was launched in January 2021. As of April 2022, it has gained three million subscribers according to Carvajal.22 Among the various content it produces are adult films, which Roman Perez, Jr. has been directing since 2020. “It started with Adan. That started the wave of what we have now. Adan is a lesbian erotica film. We just wanted to join a film festival. It flopped in the cinemas in 2019. It was removed from the theaters just after a few days’ run. Then the pandemic hit. In March 2020, Viva sold Adan to iFlix. It was top in Southeast Asia for March, April, and May 2020. Viva figured out that that was the magic of streaming COVID are concealed. “The result must be an output in which the audience will not feel something’s wrong because of the restrictions that constrained the production.”21

I wanted to see that for myself.”29 According to an article written by Tomada, a sensuality workshop helps actors doing intimate scenes become comfortable with each other and establishes a connection between them.30 According to Roman, “We as a director work to understand the motivations and levels of erotica. For the look test, he said it intends to see the chemistry between actors and how the wardrobe looks on them.

“Taya (2021) was the guinea pig. For that look-in, no one was allowed to leave. I already had COVID. I didn’t want that to happen again.”30

Furthermore, Roman detailed his preproduction process. “Script analysis, script-reading, scene by scene—all these were done online. I even had acting and ‘sensuality’ workshops done online in 2021. But I didn’t do the ‘look test online. I wanted to see that for myself.’” According to an article written by Tomada, a sensuality workshop helps actors doing intimate scenes become comfortable with each other and establishes a connection between them.30 According to Roman, “We as a director work to understand the motivations and levels of erotica. For the look test, he said it intends to see the chemistry between actors and how the wardrobe looks on them.

“I didn’t like preproduction done that way, but I realized it was possible. It’s economical, and we get things accomplished much faster. There’s no need to look for a common time to meet physically, and the waiting time for people to arrive is eliminated. But I don’t mind waiting. I miss talking to people face-to-face. There’s a different kind of understanding there. It’s good that when the time to shoot the film arrives, we don’t mess up since prior to that, we were only able to meet online. It’s because I’m very careful with the details in preproduction. Actually, there’s that possibility that things won’t go well when you’ve only been doing preproduction online. Now, there are more opportunities to do preproduction on-site, and we have been doing that.”31

“Taya had online auditions in 2021. Many girls auditioned for that film. The girls in the film—AJ Raval, Angeli Khang, and Jela Cuenca—came from these auditions. I accepted them online. AJ had already done Paglalik Ki, Gusto Kang Maging Pusotan (2021) at that time. She auditioned in June 2021 for Taya. Even Sean De Guzman, the film’s male lead, came from an audition.”32 My interview with him is referenced in the subsequent quotations in this sub-section.
The director described the challenges he encountered in filmmaking during the pandemic and how he handled these: “It was difficult in 2020. Interaction within the set was minimized. There was the pool system wherein the production area was divided into pods or camps. There was a camp for the actors and one for the director’s team. That’s challenging for me as the director. We were disconnected. Our movements weren’t in sync.”

“Next, I found the process slow. I work fast. The art department was the first to set up; then the lighting was set up; then the AD would set up to rehearse the talents; and then only did my turns come to block it. It was slow-paced. That’s why we came up with a system of pre-set-ups for the sets and lighting. When the actors arrived, we would first meet outside the lock-in area. I’d chat with Albert Martinez and Tita Jane [Jachy Jose] about how to do a scene. We observed social distancing.”

“I would do the blocking, then take the scene. We had to change the system because we weren’t connecting and the connection was needed to make a film. I was disconnected from the talents, my DOP, my staff. I was separate from them, just looking at a monitor. That wouldn’t work for me since I was trained as an AD, so I used to being in the set. So we had to modify the initial system. Finally, when the system worked, the production became prolific. We were fast. That’s why we were able to produce many films in 2021.”

He further explained other difficulties he experienced: “The process can also be tiring. There’s no room for mistakes. That’s my grounding since I also came from theater. I challenge the actors and tell them there’s no room for errors. If we make a mistake, we have to start from the top, especially with the love of the actors and one for the director’s team. That’s challenging for me as the director. We were disconnected. Our movements weren’t in sync.”

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“Another thing I appreciate is the 12 hours of working time. We need to take care of ourselves. It’s all a waste if we get sick or die from working. As for me, after 12 hours, I’m done. That’s a good practice to continue. I heard that the 24-hour working schedule, without turnaround time, has returned in commercials, TV, and film productions. The IGA protocols are already being forgotten. Since the Eddie Garcia Bill is not yet a law, the old system has returned. There have been complaints about this aired on Facebook. Viva’s instruction is 12-14 working hours. In my production, when I feel I’m done for the day, I tell them to turn off the generator. Even if the producer still wants to proceed, I’m done. I tell everyone to rest.”

“As for creativity during the pandemic, I saw that the more you’re limited, the better you do things. The more you’re pressed for time, the more you become creative in finding ways to accomplish your work. With limited resources, you become more precise in your work. What’s exactly needed is what’s delivered. And you work more efficiently. Once you arrive on the set, you need to be prepared, and you need to be precise. Decisions, creative inputs, and blockings need to be exact. There’s no room for mistakes. You can’t be fickle about the setups since there’s dissemination to consider; stuff will be moved. And you’ll have to start over again. So prepare well.”

“The senior actors appreciate these changes. I’m quite sure if Eddie Garcia were alive, he’d be happy with this system.”

**Conclusion**

Just when we thought it would take long before the film industry could produce movies again due to the pandemic, protocols and guidelines were put into place to ensure people’s safety during film production. Of course, the system was not perfect, but it enabled filmmakers to pursue their passion for this art (and business). Furthermore, it boosted the streaming platform, becoming a leading new mode for film distribution and reception.

Film movements that emerged in the past were shaped by the catalyzic events of their time and place. Similarly, as the pandemic continues, an evolution has introduced new practices that redefined the cinema landscape. Whether these continue beyond the crisis is a question yet to be answered when this is all over. What is certain is that film production is an endeavor that persistently survives and thrives, even in the harshest of times. **Endnotes**

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5. Jed Maduros, interviewed by Christy Cruz Ustaris, Online Interview, July 29, 2022, quoted with permission.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
10. Ibid. Subsequent quotations within the sub-section is referenced from the same interview with Martin Ramirez Escobar.
11. Ibid.
12. Martika Ramirez Escobar, interviewed by Christy Cruz Ustaris, Online Interview, September 4, 2022, quoted with permission.
14. Ibid. Subsequent quotations within the sub-section is referenced from the same interview with Martika Ramirez Escobar.
15. Pam Miras, interviewed by Christy Cruz Ustaris, Online Interview, August 1, 2022, quoted with permission.
16. Miras, Online Interview, August 1, 2022.
17. Ibid. Subsequent quotations within the sub-section is referenced from the same interview with Pam Miras.
18. Zig Dulay, interviewed by Christy Cruz Ustaris, Online Interview, September 1, 2022, quoted with permission.
19. Dulay, Online Interview, September 1, 2022.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
24. Roman Perez Jr., interviewed by Christy Cruz Ustaris, Online Interview, October 19, 2022, quoted with permission.
25. Perez, Online Interview, October 19, 2022.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid.
28. Ibid.
29. Ibid.
31. Perez, Online Interview, October 19, 2022.
32. Ibid. Subsequent quotations within the sub-section is referenced from the same interview with Roman Perez Jr.
With the continuous technological shift in the Philippines, industries have experienced accelerated changes that have led to individuals becoming content creators on various multimedia platforms rather than filmmakers more traditionally. Video storytelling has been democratized and has given opportunities to audiovisual artists through streaming services to be spaces for creative practice. Films, whether short or full-length in any genre, can now be seen in cinemas and smaller screens, from televisions to mobile phones and tablet computers. Given these developments, we thought about how we can assist young filmmakers in becoming storytellers with unique perspectives.

Making a film is a collaboration born from an initial dream, an insight, or an inspiration. A starting filmmaker who encounters challenges along the way in development, pre-production, production, post-production, marketing, and distribution processes needs guidance to break through.

The Film Dream started on June 11, 2013, as a personal blog that shared reflections and discoveries in our own filmmaking journey but eventually shifted to supporting young Filipino filmmakers. Because film festivals happen throughout the year, The Film Dream gets involved in the early phase of the filmmaking process to help those who are determined to craft and share their stories. We gravitate toward stories of truth, hope, justice, faith, hope, and love, as told by early-career Filipino storytellers. To date, The Film Dream has helped over a hundred young filmmakers from different parts of the country.

While it is true that passion is a vital ingredient, a lot of the filmmakers that we collaborate with are concerned about whether they’ll continue doing films or just find another job that is more financially rewarding. Many young filmmakers face a common struggle—funding and resources. Most of the time, if they can’t find a film grant or sponsorships, they shell out money from their own pockets.

According to Marc Misa, the director of Crossing, an entry to the Cinemalaya Philippine Independent Film Festival 2021 (Cinemalaya 2021), he struggled to secure development funding for most of his projects. He stated in an interview with us that he is certain he wants to continue with the project, but he also must face the reality that he has a family to support.1

Arjanmar Rebeta, the director of An Sadit na Planeta, another entry to the Cinemalaya 2021, said that he came to a point wherein he was torn between producing a film or finding another job to support his family. According to him, “Noong nagdesisyon ako na magpunta sa filmmaking, sobrang suntok sa buwan. Kasi panganay akong anak tapos may responsibilidad ako na makakatulong talaga. Pero noong nagdesisyon ako na mag-focus sa filmmaking or sa photography noong una, parang alam ako na magmukang naman ako sa pagtulong kasi tritigl ako sa trabaho ko na stable na ‘yon talaga ‘yon nakakapagbigay sa akin ng monthly na sahod.”2

Filmmakers at work. All images are used with permission
John Paulo Comediero, a Batangueño filmmaker, shared that the resources for their film project were very limited, so they had to improvise and make do. The film’s bar location was set up in their university’s studio, while customized backdrops, colorful lights, and bottled drinks were thrown in to create the mood while cutting production costs.

Janille Ann Go, who directed Parangalan as her entry to Knowledge Channel’s Inter-Collegiate Contest, faced the same situation. She wanted to keep the cost of production as low as possible, but at the same time, she wanted to make a good documentary. Fortunately, she has supportive friends who shared their time and resources to make her project happen.

Student filmmakers Raymond Cultura, the director of Al Basir an entry to LYCINEMA, and John Bolivar, who directed Manggagalaw, an entry to the Metro Manila Film Festival in 2019, did not only have limited resources. They also had a hard time managing their finances.

Apart from issues with finances, young filmmakers also encounter other problems. For example, Shiri De Leon, the director of Ang Pagdadalaga ni Lola Mayumi, an entry to the Cinemalaya 2021, shared that she was pressured to promote their film with stereotypical branding. However, she wanted to break the stereotypes of women who create films that initiate uncomfortable and sensitive conversations.

Meanwhile, Sheryl Andes, the director of Pandanggo sa Hukay, an official entry to the Cinemalaya 2019, which placed third in the 68th Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature in the Dulang Pampelikula category, was also challenged by the harsh stereotypes of women. According to her, “I was bullied because I am a female director. Ang tingin nila sa akin ay AD lang ako. Ito ‘yong mga taong nag-doubt sa akin pero kilangan mo pa rin silang pakisamahan kasi nandoon pa rin kayo sa circle kasi ang liit ng mundo.”

Because of these and many other experiences, we realized the need to provide support for budding filmmakers who are committed to persevering and being part of the continued growth and evolution of the Philippine film industry. Thus, we aimed to foster an environment where filmmakers could learn, create, and share. We began to conduct filmmaking seminars and workshops as part of The Film Dream’s advocacy of assisting starting filmmakers. We also initiated a hub for educators and learners who want to share a creative and safe space to pursue their talents. At the core of The Film Dream’s advocacy is to provide the essentials of storytelling through film, alongside the responsible use of digital tools and resources. We also stream films via our website to showcase the works of starting filmmakers and to provide an avenue for sparking conversations with fellow filmmakers and enthusiasts. In so doing, we hope in our little way to contribute to the development of local film culture.