

# A Certain Tendency

Europeanization as a Response to  
Americanization in the Philippines’  
“Golden-Age” Studio System

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## Abstract

*Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958) possesses a curious reputation in relation to other prestige productions of the so-called first “Golden Age of Philippine Cinema” (roughly the 1950s). Although sharing certain neorealist properties with the other serious outputs of LVN, its production company, it also partakes of the overreliance on coincidence and the mercurial performative style that characterize the then less-reputable undertakings of Philippine cinema. This article attempts a reconsideration of the significance of film texts sourced from Philippine graphic novels (known as *komiks*) as more properly belonging to the period succeeding the Golden Age, when innovations that would eventually provide the foundation for more accomplished film activity during the martial-law period were first introduced.

## Keywords

*Malvarosa*, multicharacter narrative, neorealism, Philippine architecture, Philippine cinema, *retablo*

## Introduction

One recurring lamentation in standard discourses on Philippine architecture is that, despite the obvious and pervasive colonial influences, few structures aspire to breathtaking heights, much less attain them. Such anxieties might be prone to exacerbation now that the once-tallest building in the world has collapsed from a terrorist attack attributed to Islamic militants, and *the* tallest building (at least from 1998 to 2004 and still the tallest twin-building structure) is a few hours away from Manila by plane in the Islamic state of Malaysia. Other projects intended to challenge the current record holder, Dubai's Burj Khalifa, continue to be announced and undertaken, mostly outside the Euro-American sphere.

Interestingly, oftentimes the same sources who lament the Philippines' alleged underachievements in architecture also acknowledge in the same instance the basic need to design structures capable of withstanding the natural calamities that occur herein with near-predictable regularity, owing to the Philippines' unenviable position at the precise juncture of the Far Eastern typhoon belt and the earthquake-prone East Asian ring of fire (a literal hotbed of major volcanic activity that curves all the way from Japan to Indonesia, with the Philippines roughly at its midpoint). The most mortally self-conscious among the Spanish colonial period's classical architectural projects, the Catholic churches, employ various combinations of thick walls, bulky buttresses, massive columns, elevated floors, bipartite floor plans with occasional perpendicular wings, and in at least one instance (that of the San Agustin Parish Church in Paoay, Ilocos Norte), pyramidal finials reminiscent of Oriental temples.<sup>1</sup> Although European and foreign-trained architects supervised the construction of these structures, the end result unwittingly resembled ethnic strategies for massive constructions, as evident in this description of a tribal "large house":

The two-leveled T'boli *gunu bong* [can be] found in the Lake Sebu area of south Cotabato. Around 14 meters long and 8-9 meters wide, it looks bigger because it has no partitions. Divisions are suggested optically by means of levels and posts. The lower central space is thus integrated with the elevated side areas: the area of honor, the sleeping areas, and the vesti-

bule. The great size of such houses is necessary because a T'boli household, like the Maranao's, consists of an extended family numbering anywhere between 8 and 16 people. Polygamy, practiced by those who can afford it, adds to the number of residents in a house (Hila 39-40).

Reinforcing this cautionary propensity to maintain structural stability amid an imposing exterior and a sprawling interior, in Philippine Catholic churches, retablos [from the Latin *retro-tabulum*, “behind table/altar”] or altar pieces tended to be “more restrained than their counterparts in Spain or Mexico perhaps because of the absence of exceptionally brilliant European artists in the Philippines” (Javellana 156— defensive tone duly noted). In contrast with the foreign models, which emphasized designs and structures that the Filipinos relegated to decorative elements, the “foci were the niches containing *santos*” or icons of the saints (Javellana 157) (see fig. 1). Although prominence would be given to the so-called patron saint of any given parish, the walking-distance proximities of other towns (enabling *Visita Iglesia* or serial church-going during Holy Week) would still provide parishioners with the impression of the existence of multiple prominent saints.



**Fig. 1.** Retablo of Sta. Ana Church in Manila. (Photo by Theo Pie, used with permission)

Three final and apparent peripheral details should clinch this turn toward the visual—rather than the literary—tradition in relation to Philippine cinema. First is the open and willing participation of women in the decoration and maintenance of churches, occasionally forced into sexual servitude by friars during the Spanish era. Second is the repudiation of elements such as the retablos by the Second Vatican Council in 1965, which resulted in the demolition of some antique samples (Javellana 157). The third is the confirmation of the orientation toward the horizontal during the modernist phase of Philippine architecture, with municipal and residential buildings, cultural and convention centers, and, most impressively, shopping malls all vying for “largest” status not in terms of height but according to the number of city blocks each structure covers. As a specific example, Shoemart or SM, owned by Henry Sy, regarded as the pioneer in Philippine shopping mall constructions based its first few department stores on the shoebox design, with one long side of the structure constituting the façade. SM also holds the distinction of having three of the ten biggest malls in the world (Van Riper).

### **Modernization and Resistance**

The modernist impulse in Philippine architecture may have been in evidence during the late Spanish era, but like film, the impulse took root and increasingly seized the citizens’ imagination during the American occupation. By the time of the founding of the Philippine Institute of Architects in 1933, the younger names associated with it were to become associated with the arrival of modernist practice during the 1950s. The Philippines’ post-war recovery efforts, coupled with the need to replace several major structures razed by the bombing of the city by the returning American forces, provided fertile ground for architectural modernism to take root: “Experimentation in cast concrete led to façades, massing, and building silhouettes never before seen” (Alcazaren).

Not surprisingly, following global trends, “during the last century, modern architecture ... was emblematically enmeshed with nationalism. ... By being both an agent and a product of nationalism, architecture can be considered not merely as a finished product ... but more importantly as an

active component of the formation of our consciousness as national subjects” (Cabalfin 34). As explicated by Edson Cabalfin, the strategy of “vernacularization” became the primary means of locating architecture “by alluding to indigenous social, cultural, political, and historical concepts” (34).

The process by which American colonial urban policy betokens not just an appreciation for lessons learned by previous practitioners given the new territory’s alien properties (in relation to the experience of life on the American continent), but also the US’s implicit acknowledgment that its colonial motives essentially proceeded from and built on the examples of European, specifically Spanish, predecessors. Daniel Burnham’s redesign of Manila, observing the City Beautiful movement’s prescriptions, were implemented by William Parsons via the Bureau of Public Works on the assumption that “the existing Spanish colonial architecture was indigenous; therefore, it was something to be preserved, and furthermore to serve as inspiration for future designs” (Cabalfin 35).

Cabalfin posits that the state of Philippine architecture after World War II persisted with the strategy of vernacularization but in the reverse direction: instead of regarding the indigenous as “something to be added [as Burnham and Parsons observed], but submissive to the overall foreign technology,” designers during the newly independent nation “saw the vernacular as a way of asserting distinctiveness by using it as the dominant feature of design ... an articulation of a core doctrine of nationalist ideology” (35). This strategy allowed for Philippine architects to come into their own—a privilege even more pronounced in the allied popular-culture formats of film and serialized picture stories whose English name was Tagalized to *komiks*. A well-circulated sample page of the latter (see fig. 2), originally published in 1937, illustrates how the “indigenous” has the capacity to upend its foreign vessel: the characters, although in a rural setting, are attired like dandyish city types according to their generational associations; more surprisingly, even by contemporary standards, father and son engage in an exchange of blackmail based on faithlessness to one or the other’s spouse or girlfriend, with the more elderly character getting the better of his more urbane-ap-

pearing son despite committing the greater transgression of courting the son's girlfriend.



Fig. 2. The misadventures (“kabalbalan”) of Kenkoy by Tony Velasquez, originally serialized in *Liwayway* in 1937. (Reprinted on page 36 of John A. Lent’s *The First One Hundred Years of Philippine Komiks and Cartoons.*)

### Continuities

The reversal of the modernist strategy where the vernacular serves as the starting point, rather than the material added to Western-sourced media,

formats, and genres (presumably to enable local audiences to participate as consumers) shifted the onus of recognition from consumer to creator. In other words, where in a *komiks* sample like *Kenkoy* the reader would have had to follow a native character's progression in a new, mechanically reproduced vehicle, the later shift in modernist strategies ensured that the consumer (reader or audience) would be guaranteed with sufficient familiarity with the material, with the native producers and artists confronted with and working out the challenge of minimizing the potential for the consumer to be alienated or defamiliarized or distanced from the material, owing to technological novelty or innovation.

Following Cabalfin's description of the US colonial-era producer reconfiguring Spanish-era practice as a sufficient indigenization of local cultural material, we may now be able to see the critically derided folk and fantasy material of the 1950s First Golden Age of Philippine Cinema<sup>2</sup> as bearers of this turn toward the recognizably "native." Many of these were *komiks*-derived; some were drawn directly from pre-American lore while others were contemporary inventions intended to evoke nostalgic attachment to an imagined premodern set of values occasionally set as counterparts to foreign pop-culture models, specifically in such characters as *Dyesebel*, *Kulafu*, *Juan Tamad*, *Darna*, the aforementioned *Kenkoy*, and the European royalty cast of the magical Adarna bird legend or the nationalist allegories of Francisco Balagtas or Jose Rizal, plus outright adaptations of foreign (non-US) materials referencing Muslim-Christian conflicts such as the stories of Prince Teñoso or the Seven Lara Princes, as well as epic-scale oriental narratives.

In terms of theater-going, the local culture's rootedness in Spanish-era practice may be deduced as well. The secular buildings that most resembled the form and function of Catholic churches were of course the movie theaters. Readily identifiable even up to the present are the façade that inspires commitment, the collection box(-office) that demands affordable contributions, the oral and written announcements that indicate regular and special performances, the formal seating arrangement that directs attention to the spectacle up front, the seemingly three-dimensional retablo with its bevy of living icons. The facts that the alien languages of Latin and Spanish

have been replaced by vernacular tongues and that the notoriously abusive Caucasian friars have been permanently banished from the scene serve to heighten the appeal of the new temples.

Modernity makes its mark most felt in the manner in which technological developments enhance the experience further: sound and color, special audiovisual effects, air conditioning, luxurious seating more or less, casual fashions and behavior—all ensure that any relevant developments in future will somehow always find their way to the individual devotee, unlike the many eternal discomforts of church attendance. And above all the darkness, always the darkness, perfect for anyone who wishes or needs to carry out the occasional suppressed pleasurable act in virtual anonymity: whether talking back to onscreen characters or out loud to friends or strangers, cruising for any number of illicit transactions, consummating lustful or gluttonous propensities, even indulging in one's own personal spectacle through the simple procedure of falling asleep and dreaming, sometimes without ever awakening again.

The romance of regular film attendance and its origins in religious attendance point up the limits that serve to contain whatever transgression occurs on the part of the spectator, whether acted out by the spectator herself or, more often, witnessed on the projected spectacle.<sup>3</sup> The participant has to be assured that, at worst, the occurrences onscreen remain a fiction, or that her personal scandals will somehow be disengaged from her public identity once she emerges, so far still-unrecognized, into the light outside.

On the national scale, this dynamic of intermittent resistance and ultimate containment was constantly being played out in the country's engagement with the historical circumstance of colonialism. The very first encounter with European adventurers demonstrated this principle: on the one hand, the "heroic" Ferdinand Magellan, a mercenary adventurer who could only supplicate another country's king for the support he needed for his trip; on the other hand, a band of natives, numerous enough to overpower the Spaniards, who (by the Spaniards' account) employed stealth and deception to send the enemy running, their leader fatally wounded. Juxtaposing this factual instance with the droll, possibly satirical treatment



of epic heroes in native myths might enable one to argue that individual heroicizing, whether of oneself or of others, is circumscribed in local culture by the Oriental tendency toward humorous self-deprecation.

Film production ensures an industrial niche that will hold its own against takeover attempts by outsiders since the requisite of cultural specificity (starting with native-language fluency) gives the edge over to the local practitioners. In the aftermath of the worst periods of economic devastations in the Philippines in the last half-century—the mid-century Japanese occupation as well as the people-power uprising against Ferdinand Marcos in the last three decades—the local film industry was always the first to revive and forge ahead in impressive ways, through box-office record-setting, successful promotional gimmicks, and critical and popular patronage. Evidence of the primacy of the local can be seen as early as the founding years of production, when American investors competed in releasing films on Filipino heroism and patriotism, sometimes to the point of incurring the ire of colonial officials. The first local film controversy, which occurred in 1912, was also long regarded as resulting in the first film productions that could be called “Filipino,” even though the major players were Americans. This consisted of Albert Yearsly rushing a production, *La pasion y muerte de Dr. Rizal* (*The Suffering and Death of Dr. Rizal*), to coincide with the subject and release date of a major motion picture, *La vida de Rizal* (*The Life of Rizal*) being directed by Harry Brown from the play by Edward Meyer Gross (Pilar 12-13).<sup>4</sup>

To be able to see how this balance—between questioning a predetermined and inevitable arrangement yet in the end submitting to its terms—was negotiated and maintained, a film release from the period under discussion can be brought in as an emblematic sample. The said title was produced by LVN Pictures, a major house just starting to consolidate its position of prominence in the industry, and directly referenced the still-prevalent socioeconomic crises brought about by World War II; just as significantly, it features a central woman character who embodies a combination of hope in the present and anxiety in the future. In the type of films this sample represents, however, the central character functions not so much as a lone

hero as a social hero. The difference can be understood from a sampling of generic texts from the opposite extreme, the male-centered Hollywood genre of, say, film noir or, better yet, the Western, where the hero either functions alone (with his romantic interest serving as distraction or even liability) or, when forced to interact with a community, changes that community, makes his mark on it, impresses it with his qualities as a man.

### Social Heroics

In a sense, the positioning of the generic male protagonist as always “heroic” is an inescapable consequence of the values assigned to two overlapping spheres of practice: masculinity (with its ethos of dominance) and characterization (with its abhorrence of passivity), one reinforcing the other. To say, however, that with women passivity thereby becomes acceptable (see fig. 2) is to operate within the same terms that gave rise to the present-day sensitive-male conundrum in the West. In fact, the process of crossing over from the colonizing center to the colonized margin enables the reformulation of gender relations, not just as a reversal, but also as a corrective to the political relations between nations and groups. A man, from the perspective of the colonizer, can no longer be an equal if he has been colonized. But while First-World liberals may view with disfavor and consistently denounce deteriorated instances of what they see as the replication of traditional Western gender relations in the Third World, the question lies in how exactly concepts of gender are formulated elsewhere, and if the same valences of automatic inequalities apply.

Gregorio Fernandez’s *Malvarosa*, released in 1958, concerns a large nuclear family aspiring to recover from the devastation wrought by World War II, when both the retreating Japanese occupiers and the advancing American re-occupiers dropped so many bombs, set so many fires, and killed so many civilians that, after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Manila was one of the most devastated cities in the world at that point, traditionally regarded as comparable in its misery to Warsaw. The country was in such dire straits that, when the American government insisted on setting up military bases and implementing parity rights as preconditions for financial aid,



**Fig. 3.** LVN stars in gendered *harana* [serenade] poses, with the men wooing via the use of music and the women, perched by the window, reserving the prerogative to be moved by their serenaders' entreaties. (LVN publicity still)

the Filipinos had no choice but to acquiesce. Thus the United States wound up with the largest chunks of real estate for military and naval use outside its borders, free of charge, and enabled its citizens to repatriate the profits they made in a country whose investors were in no position to even the score even if they were allowed to. The strongest blows to national pride were dealt on the military level. After the United States forces pulled out of Manila and declared it an open city, the Filipinos were left to organize their own resistance movement against the Japanese. In the spirit of the United States' wartime alliance with the Soviet Union, the Hukbo ng Bayan Laban sa Hapon (Hukbalahap, or Anti-Japanese People's Army), under the leadership of the Communist Party of the Philippines, participated in the resistance. Filipino guerrillas were on the verge of liberating Manila when

United States Gen. Douglas MacArthur reappeared, in fulfillment of his promise to return.<sup>5</sup>

The scenario was reminiscent of the first American occupation, when during the turn of the twentieth century the United States forces showed up and claimed to have banished the Spaniards when in fact the Filipino troops had already effectively routed the colonial army. As in the earlier occupation, any form of resistance to the United States was dealt with severely. Not only were several anti-Japanese guerrillas rounded up and imprisoned for being Communists, non-Hukbalahap fighters had to wait decades (many eventually died of old age) for the compensation as veterans that the United States had dangled as incentive. The Hukbalahap guerrillas who managed to elude imprisonment carried on a peasant-based armed struggle that continues to the present, in spirit if not in lineage.

Philippine partisan scholarship traditionally regards the successful members of the native bourgeoisie as collaborationists, who surrender the country's patrimony in exchange for personal and familial gains. The predicament in this formulation is that colonial apologists can (and regularly do) take up the same line of argument to shift the blame back to the colonized population, i.e., that the national character is so flawed that those who achieve positions of leadership are incapable of thinking for and acting in the interests of the larger group.<sup>6</sup> The behavior of the post-war Filipino film industry as a whole exhibited these contradictions. Effectively a cartel patterned after the pre-Paramount decision era in the United States, the industry comprised three active production houses, just as it did before the war, with one participant being replaced by a newcomer. Hence, the pre-war Sampaguita, LVN, and Lebran mutated into the post-war LVN, Sampaguita, and Premiere.<sup>7</sup>

Apart from their expected record as monopolists who, by ushering in a period of stability, gave rise to a clutch of quality productions, the so-called "Big Three" are more strongly indicted in historical texts for union-busting, adopting the Hollywood version of the anti-Communist blacklist to apply to unruly performers and technicians. The Filipino film critics circle's Natatanging Gawad Urian (Urian Lifetime Achievement Award) citation for

actor Anita Linda related how she supported a crew strike at Premiere, her home studio. Though she was regarded as the top dramatic actress of the period (now known as the first Golden Age of Philippine cinema), she was reprimanded, her contract dissolved, and after approaching a rival studio and being put on hold, she could only find work in television until her comeback during the Second Golden Age of the seventies (Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino 364-67).

Here we see how, where the concerns of Hollywood were squarely in line (or, from a different perspective, forced to conform) with the American avowals of god-fearing, free-trade principles, those of the Philippines's Big Three simply centered on self-survival. More tellingly, the post-war Big Three's insistence on formalities—from behavior through training to salary agreements—though usually ascribed to the need to upgrade the image of the industry, can now be regarded in a different light. After all, how much upgrading is needed to be done when the industry's founding entrepreneurs were white men, when established local talents in theater and literature found their way to wangling film assignments (and found their way back to the stage, during the three-year shutdown that occurred during the Japanese occupation), and when lofty sentiments, nationalism not the least of the lot, became the subject of popular controversy? The heyday of Filipino B-film and soft-core pornographic production was still in the future, during the aptly named swinging '60s, and considered inconceivable at that point.

By way of illustration, *Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958), which will be discussed more intensively later, was produced by LVN, whose owner-founder Narcisa Buencamino vda. de Leon (her preferred title) was better known by the Hispanic honorific Doña Sisang and was described as caring “not only about [her stars'] financial stability, but about their private lives” to the point of monitoring their choice of dates, destinations, and arrival at home (Tirol 132). This obsession with detail had less to do with moralistic control, since Doña Sisang occasionally defended her actors' indiscretions, but was necessary because “in a factory, you don't allow the luxury of a temper tantrum. Scheduling is all” (Torre, “Doña Sisang” 10).

An easier explanation for the stiffness (and stuffiness) of film practice, and of immediate post-war Philippine “high” culture as a whole, can be deduced from a parallel in literature from an earlier era: during the initial turn-of-the-century period of American occupancy, “The poets [who wrote] in Spanish resisted American colonization and its corroding influence by exalting *hispanidad*, or the value of the country’s Hispanic past, the Catholic religion, and the Spanish language. In their poems, *hispanidad* [became] synonymous with *filipinidad*” (Cruz-Lucero 239). To say that this perspective of using an older foreign culture as a buffer against a newer one had trickled upward, as it were, until it was naturalized as a nationalist strategy by local industrialists is to misperceive the crucial class-based nature of the phenomenon as it evolved in the Philippines. To be a poet, i.e., to be literate, during and immediately after the Spanish era, was to be so privileged that the colonizers even had a term, *ilustrado*, for such exceptional native residents. Thus the clash of cultures, although intended by the natives (and Spanish descendants) to counteract the incursion of the New World (see fig. 3), also bespoke of contempt for the arrival of the individualist, materialist, secularist, and relatively negotiable values being brought over by the Americans.

The fact that the vast Filipino majority became Americanized more quickly than their “betters” had as much to do with the Spaniards’ resistance to assimilating the *indios* (a policy in marked contrast with their colonial strategies elsewhere, including in Latin America) as with the Americans’ eagerness to demonize the Spaniards from the outset, starting with their endorsement of the reformist José Rizal, executed by the Spaniards, as the Philippines’ national hero, and proffering English language usage, public education, and widespread immunization as innovations that would make an impact on the grassroots level. This Foucauldian demonstration of the benevolence of power thus served to mask, if not complement, the brutal and heavy-handed suppression of dissent by United States troops, both propensities working hand in hand through the duration of the American occupation. And though, several decades later, United States militarists might prefer to blame the assistance extended by the Soviet Union to the Vietnamese for the failure of the Americans’ second colonial adventure in

Asia, the Philippine experience provides a paradoxical basis for qualification: In order to succeed, not only should the process of colonization be unopposed and inhumanely ruthless (an option unavailable for the most part in Viet Nam because of the coverage of liberal American and global media), it should also be “benevolent” to the point, if necessary, of unprofitability—a point asserted in reverse (as a condemnation of the failure, in financial terms, of the Philippine colonization enterprise) by certain influential military officials (Anderson 305-06).

### Forward-looking

*Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958) possesses a curious reputation in relation to the other prestige productions of the first Golden Age. Two other LVN films that preceded and succeeded it, Lamberto V. Avellana’s *Anak Dalita* (*Child of Sorrow*) (1956) and Manuel Silos’s *Biyaya ng Lupa* (*Bounty of the Earth*) (1959) respectively, garnered major prizes in regional festivals during the period, and eventually wound up as the only black-and-white titles in a *Sight and Sound* type survey of ten all-time best Filipino films (David with Garduño 135). Although sharing certain neorealist properties with the other LVN entries (the slum setting of *Anak Dalita*, the yearning for one’s own land in *Biyaya ng Lupa*), *Malvarosa* also partakes of the overreliance on coincidence and the mercurial performative style that characterize the less-reputable commercial undertakings of Philippine cinema, those of its home studio included (see fig. 4).

The opening sequence, which explicates the origin of the title, has a slum-dwelling couple, both fond of gambling and drinking, discover the wife’s pregnancy; Prosa, the wife, then consults a fortune-teller, who tells her the child will be a boy and will be followed by four other sons, until in the end a daughter will be born. Through what may be preposterously expert family planning or, more likely, unnaturally fortunate flippancy, Prosa decides in advance to name the boys in such a way that they form the acronym “Malva” (Melanio, Alberto, Leonides, Vedasto, and Avelino), and the girl of course becomes “Rosa” (see fig. 5). The plot then skips over the kids’ childhood years and shows them as young adults, with Rosa playing



**Fig. 4.** Vicente Salumbides's *Florante at Laura/Florante and Laura* (1949), based on a Spanish-era nationalist narrative which, though written in Tagalog, is set in Europe with triumphant Christian morality as its metaphorical foundation. (LVN publicity still)

the role of breadwinner and budgeter, pinning her hopes on her youngest brother that he may finish his education, and holding off on her ne'er-do-well elder brothers and her persistent suburban-obsessed suitor. Her position as surrogate mother is consolidated when Damian, her father, in a drunken stupor, is run over by a train and her mother, having witnessed the accident, goes into and out of catatonia for the rest of the narrative.

The combination of jump-starts, attention-grabbing devices, and haywire developments marks the story as *komiks*-derived—it was, in fact, written by contemporary film scriptwriter and scholar Clodualdo A. del Mundo, Jr.'s father and serialized in a popular outlet, *Espesyal Komiks* (*Special Comics*) (see fig. 6). The material was adapted for film by Consuelo P. Osorio, who went on to become one of the few active Filipino women directors until the Second Golden Age of the 1970s, famed for “light” genre pieces such as comedies and teen-idol musicals. The typical narrative excursions, plus the





Fig. 5. Sensationalist layout for *Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958), with emphasis on the mother figure played by Rebecca del Rio, known for her specialization in glamorous *femme fatale* roles. (Photo courtesy of Video 48, used with permission)



**Fig. 6.** The beauty of suffering: symmetrical pattern of the sibling characters in *Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958), with the youngest and only sister as floral stigma and her brothers as petals. (Photo courtesy of Video 48, used with permission)

invaluable contribution of visual novelty, helped make serial picture-stories better sellers than the standard journalistic outlets of newspapers and magazines, a fact that held true until the end of the previous millennium (much the same way new media monopolizes the attention of the young today), and that continued to generate resentment on the part of “professional” media practitioners.

What violates the ethos of prestige during the period is how a film with such low-brow origins could have been slated for quality release, and in fact the likelier, though now-unconfirmable, process was that as a project, *Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958) was begun as primarily a commercial showcase for the sensual and fiery Charito Solis (playing Rosa), a character



Fig. 7. Cover and first page of the issue that launched the *Malvarosa* serial. (Photo courtesy of Video 48, used with permission)

actor with a villainous persona (Rebecca del Rio, playing Prosa, the mother), two theater-trained “heavies” (Vic Silayan and Vic Diaz, playing Melanio and Leonides respectively), two romantic types (Carlos Padilla and Leroy Salvador, playing Alberto and Candido, Rosa’s suitor, respectively), and two up-and-coming matinee-idol types (Rey Ruiz and Eddie Rodriguez, playing Vedasto and Avelino respectively) (see fig. 7).

The centrality of Rosa in the narrative is one further affront to the masculinist sensibilities of serious storytelling in local film practice, where for purposes of contrast *Anak Dalita* (Lamberto V. Avellana, 1956) has the

returning Korean-War veteran saving the golden-hearted sex worker from perdition and *Biyaya ng Lupa* (Manuel Silos, 1959) has the townspeople overpowering a *taong-labas* (outsider) to save the orchard of a virtuous widow. The difficulty of appreciating the unraveling of the strands in a multiple narrative is evident in the customary recourse among plot summarizers of recounting the story as an account of each of the characters, as exemplified in the following actual summary in the government-published arts encyclopedia:

Rosa's brothers go through their own agonies. Melanio is pursued by the women he has had affairs with. Alberto, who is driven away by the mother of the girl he loves, attempts to rape the girl and, frustrated, commits suicide. The crafty Vedasto persuades Rosa to work for a wealthy man who has designs on her. The violent Leonides kills a man and dies in a bloody encounter with the police. The youngest, Avelino, is the only brother who is patient and responsible enough to help Rosa bear the family's burdens (Sicat 174-175).

Such a plotline suggests an affinity with early theatrical attempts at relating the stories of several characters in succession, notably Arthur Schnitzler's 1896 play *La Ronde* (*The Roundabout*) (adapted for film in 1950 by Max Ophüls). If the adaptational process were identical, the result would not only be as described in the above summary, the unifying character (Rosa in *Malvarosa*, the Raconteur, or Death, as it turns out, in *La Ronde*) would also serve as both guide and motive. The viewing experience, however, will reveal a more complicated designation for the lead character in *Malvarosa*, one that blurs any distinction between activeness and passivity, thus further ensuring its sub-literary stature in relation to the canon. In the absence of any available screenplay, the sequence breakdown of the transcription from a videocopy of the sole existing full-gauge print may be sourced online (Osorio).

The sequence list takes several liberties for the sake of brevity and simplification. From sequence 30 onward (out of a total of 60), or roughly midway, the film increasingly relies on parallel editing strategies, with the plot resolution comprising as much as four settings being intercut for quicker

spacing and heightened reality effects. The fact that Filipino film producers from the first Golden Age observed a dichotomy between realism and popular fiction is relevant but not entirely applicable in this instance. The moguls were proceeding from an undeclared Old World-vs.-New World opposition, expressed, as explained earlier, in a preference for a high-culture Europeanized past to balance (and critique) the unmitigated materialism of the Americanized present. Within an aesthetic framework, this consisted of neorealist products being created for international festival and local awards competitions, while more generic Hollywood-inspired samples were the bread-and-butter products that enabled the realization of these occasional prestige projects.

Though currently considered to belong to the “prestige” rather than the commercialist camp, *Malvarosa* actually breaks out of either mold in that it utilizes generic elements—melodramatic developments, action sequences, fantastic coincidences, contemporaneous humor and lingo—in the service of a slum-set narrative that, more important, promotes an unusual empathy with undesirable social types (the murderer, the pimp, the polygamist, the rapist) through the then-also-unusual strategy of identification with a female character. The latter, though virtuous, was not anyone’s mother either—in other words, a “girl,” with all the attendant pre-feminist connotations the word carries. But if Rosa’s girlishness reduces her stature relative to the men and the mother the narrative surrounds her with, other factors point to a reverse arrangement: not only has the mother been neutralized, the father is dead; the brothers demand of her the impartiality of a parent, which she refuses to grant; her suitor keeps breaking up with her for downgrading his marriage offer, yet keeps returning to reconcile with her; and though at one point she turns into the standard damsel-in-distress type in the hands of her physical (and social) superior, it is her allure, rather than her boyfriend’s good-heartedness, that causes the latter to seek her out and enables him to save her (fig. 8).

In contrast with this recognizably post-classical sensibility, through this period until well into the sixties, the most successful Filipina film auteur was director-actor Rosa Mia, of whom no scholarly consideration has yet



**Fig. 8.** Publicity pose of the *Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958) siblings, with Rosa (Charito Solis) and her wholesome brother (Eddie Rodriguez) bookending their problematic older brothers (left to right: Rey Ruiz, Carlos Padilla, Vic Silayan, and Vic Diaz).

been done. Part of the reason for the glaring lack may lie in the fact that, in feminist terms, her persona provokes as much embarrassment as her career generates admiration: her success was founded on her monopoly of the role of religiously devout working-class mothers martyred by godless family members. In fact Mia can be regarded as a direct predecessor of leftist-feminist icon Nora Aunor, not only because of the overlap in their timelines and their similarity of skin color, but also because of the martyr-element in their respective personae, with Aunor's partaking of the more politically responsive (and analytically enabling) role of the domestic worker.

### Final Ruptures

Against the concern of experiencing a text as having multiple characters, the use in *Malvarosa* of a girl as social hero facilitates a crucial combination of distance (the character is neither mature nor motherly) and appeal (she strives to play grown-up in a world populated by some of the worst possible types of men). The fact that, within the ideal of classical unities, the narra-



**Fig. 9.** Scenes from *Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958), clockwise from top left: grown-up, Rosa is first seen being treated as laundry worker by her older brothers; when her drunken father fetches her mother from the gambling house, he stumbles on the railway tracks and gets run over by a train; when Rosa supports the youngest brother's education, her other brothers accuse her of playing favorites; one brother, a sacristan, scolds their mother for her traumatized fixation on her late husband; the youngest brother tries to appease the sacristan sibling, but the latter leaves and attempts to rape a neighbor whose mother had disrespected his family; the last brother to leave, the eldest, does so after Rosa chases away his girlfriends, who had insisted on asking her for support for the brother's children. (Frame captures by author)

tive is fractured serves to disrupt, among other things, the processes of identification (Fig. 9). In a genuine multiple-narrative sample, the narrative's disruptions coincide with the emergence of new lead characters demanding identificatory responses, but what matters within the scope of film practice represented by the exceptional case that was *Malvarosa* is how, although affiliated with (and bearing the stamp and pedigree of) neorealist practice,<sup>8</sup> the film is actually closer to a non-constructive realism:

The realist position is compatible with the argument that the claims we make about things are not all and fully controlled by us. But unlike constructivist

accounts, which hold that we cannot in principle know anything about the mind-independent world (let alone the ways in which this world exercises constraints on us and our knowledge), the realist account actually takes the idea of causal interactions between humans and the world seriously without discounting either our dependence as finite beings on the world or our own causal interference in it... It is, in fact, the intimate interaction of matter and idea in the human world, with its constraining and enabling forces, that allows us to pose the question, not of whether we can “reach” (or not reach) the real, but of whether we can have a more or less effective significant mediation/knowledge of the world, with its attendant questions of particular error or correctness (Hau 22-23).

From the foregoing one could provisionally conclude that the social hero, within the terms of a potentially multiple-narrative text, is positioned firmly within the world contained by the film narrative. Although the avowal of the hero in *Malvarosa* is to rise above her station one way or another, the resolution “flattens” her heroism, in a manner of speaking, in a way that favors and augments social insight. She has striven—and most valiantly no doubt, but she lives in a man’s world (much as a Third World country exists in an American universe), and so in the end she winds up with even less, in material terms—no house, no job, no reputation, no men to assist her. The survivors’ defiantly upbeat walk into the sunset is actually a radical modification of the Hollywood Western generic feature: not a hero but (the remnants of) a family, not away from the screen (and the social witnesses, the audience) but toward the camera, representing the sun setting down on what history has wrought on slum inhabitants wherever and whenever they dare and continue to hope. The survivors walk on the same railway tracks on which the family patriarch died. With Rosa leading this final party, we can look at a prophetic element in the historical record of Filipino women confronting the onslaught of development (wherein the country keeps losing in relation to and because of neocolonial interventions), all the way to the current reality of Filipinas outnumbering Filipinos in staking economic claims as migrant laborers all over the world.<sup>9</sup>





**Fig. 10.** Scenes from *Malvarosa* (Gregorio Fernandez, 1958), left: Rosa is prevented from committing suicide by her boyfriend and her youngest brother, but unknown to them, an even worse event, the conflagration of her family's house, is about to be announced; right: now homeless and seeking their future, Rosa's family reconciles with the only other surviving brother, who had earlier been banished for attempting to pimp his sister to a rich friend. (Frame captures by author)

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## Notes

1. For extensive descriptions of specific samples, see the entries in Tiongson (ed.), *Philippine Architecture* for “Daraga Church” (227), “Laoag Cathedral” (239-40), “Loboc Church” (241-42), and “Paoay Church” (263-64).
2. Standard periodizations of Philippine cinema name two Golden Ages: Jessie B. Garcia’s “The Golden Decade of Philippine Movies” (39-54), considers the 1950s heyday of the Big Three studios (four actually, but with one declining as the other emerged) as the first; while Joel David’s “A Second Golden Age” (1-17) argues for the martial-law period (roughly 1974, two years after Ferdinand Marcos’s declaration, to 1986) as the second. Contemporary digital practitioners claim that the current revival of quality production constitutes an ongoing Golden Age as well. More confusingly, the “official” history of Philippine cinema, published in the CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art, argued for a pre-1950s Golden Age, roughly set during the 1930s (Torre, “Classics of the Filipino Film” 50-57), despite the current unavailability of any of the films cited as proof by the article. David provided a problematization of the Golden Ages mentality in “The Golden Ages of Philippine Cinema: A Critical Reassessment” (217-24).
3. For an accomplished problematization of the transgressive prerogatives of the female spectator (and their containment), within the context of early Italian cinema, see Giuliana Bruno’s *Streetwalking on a Ruined Map*.
4. For an account of how American film producers encountered censorship problems in the Philippines, ironically from their own colonial government, see Agustin Sotto’s historical monograph *Pelikula* (8).
5. One piece of evidence that indicts MacArthur and his arrival party is in fact the celluloid proof of his landing— so perfectly shot at low tide with impressively starched uniforms and the sun at a just-so angle that it could only have been taken much later in the day, with allowances made for costume changes owing (presumably) to the need for retakes; hence the claim that he had been able to “liberate” the island of Leyte within the same day could not have been carried out by himself or the other performers.
6. See, as a fairly sympathetic example, Nick Cullather’s *Illusions of Influence*, which nevertheless argues that crony capitalism in the Philippines was promoted by American colonial policy (193). More appallingly, throughout his Granta publication, James Hamilton-Paterson persuasively insists that the couple who implemented a United States-sanctioned conjugal dictatorship unparalleled, even by global standards, in its rapacity and staying power were actually being true to the nature of the Filipino.
7. Because of periods where newly founded studios overlapped with about-to-be-defunct ones, a number of observers maintain that four is the magic number.

Justifications for and speculations on the numerological principle of having three participants—a major, a rival, and an underdog—can be found in David (126-28).

8. Elliott Stein, reporting on the 1983 edition of the Manila International Film Festival, describes *Malvarosa* as having been “directed as straightforward neorealism.... The crazed sincerity of this curious slice of life is deeply affecting” (51).
9. The national-allegorical complications of this type of reading have been discussed extensively, the most celebrated case being the exchanges in the *Social Text* journal between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad. See Jameson, “Third-World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (65-88); Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and the ‘National Allegory’” (3-25); and Jameson, “A Brief Response” (26-28). How productive the debate has been can be seen in the number of major discursive commentaries it continues to generate, including Madhava Prasad, “On the Question of a Theory of (Third) World Literature” (57-83); Michael Sprinker, “The National Question: Said, Ahmad, Jameson” (3-29); and Imre Szeman, “Who’s Afraid of National Allegory?” (803-27) in addition to book-length interventions by Spivak, Chakrabarty, and Jameson and Ahmad themselves.

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