

Of Maids and Tyrants

Or the Ethical (Im)possibility of Martial Law Narratives in the Age of Post-Truth

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Abstract

My paper compares Ninotchka Rosca's novel *Twice Blessed (TB)* and Darryl Yap's movie *Maid in Malacañang (MIM)* based on a similar storyline about Martial Law in the Philippines: even a tyrant and his maid's best-laid plans of staying in power are bound to fail. I focus on two scenes depicted in both accounts that foreground the maid as a key figure: the family gathering and the 1986 People Power crowd's storming of Malacañang. In my analysis, I draw out the element of time to show that if Rosca pictures the scenes through discordant temporalities, Yap encases them in an invariably presentist frame. Specifically, the maid in *TB*, Teresa Tikloptuhod, injects temporal otherness into the empty time of the tyrant, thereby opening up other possibilities beyond the time of fascism. Meanwhile, Biday and the other maids in *MIM* are visually assimilated into the unitary time of the dictator, hence, erasing other lived realities of the Martial Law period and, ultimately, denying the reality of the dictatorship. Thus, in visualizing time as porous, Rosca demonstrates an emancipatory ethics of narrating Martial Law. In contrast, in hollowing out the collective memory of Martial Law, Yap employs new digital filming techniques to cover up fascism's moral bankruptcy.

Keywords

Martial Law narratives, Ninotchka Rosca, relational ethics, *Maid in Malacañang*

Almost the Same, But At Odds: An Introduction

Two Martial Law narratives, released 30 years apart, have strikingly identical stories of maids saving their tyrant bosses. My paper investigates this intriguing similarity in an attempt to interrogate the ethical dimension of Martial Law fiction or cinema. In particular, I wish to address one of the provocations of the international conference on Ethical Literary and Cultural Criticism: “Does a literary work, apart from its aesthetic function, serve an ethical content, effects, and function?”¹ Already, I would like to hazard an answer as the premise of my discussion: Literature or culture, as exemplified by two Martial Law narratives, demonstrates that the aesthetic function is concurrent with the ethical content. Here, I posit ethics to be a form of truth-telling with and for others, hence, an ethics of otherness or relationality. Put differently, the specific question I wish to ask is -- when does the ethical content, understood to be an ethics of otherness or relationality, arise or get aborted in Martial Law narratives?

To answer this problem, I compare two accounts about the downfall of Ferdinand Marcos and his family, namely, Ninotchka Rosca’s satirical novel *Twice Blessed* (1992) and Darryl Yap’s docudrama *Maid in Malacañang* (2022). My discussion is premised on their undeniably similar storylines: even a tyrant and his maid’s best-laid plans of staying in power are bound to fail. For my discussion, I will present two set pieces depicted in both accounts: the family-meeting scene and the 1986 EDSA People Power crowd’s storming of Malacañang, both of which foreground the maid as a key figure in saving the Marcos family in their scramble for escape from the besieged palace. Despite being central to both narratives, these set pieces are conceived by Rosca and Yap differently, thereby achieving different effects. Primarily, I argue that Rosca’s depiction of these scenes through discordant time frames and, in contrast, Yap’s invariably presentist framing of the same scenes respectively demonstrate how historical fiction or drama either becomes or fails to be a process of truth-telling. In other words, insight into ethics may be opened up or impeded by the artistic depiction or manipulation of the element of time or temporality.

To understand the artistic approaches of Rosca and Yap in depicting the Marcos dictatorship, a short review of facts from our Martial Law archives is in order. The historical context for both narratives is the snap elections of February 7, 1986, held two decades after Ferdinand E. Marcos’ first presidential term in 1965 and 13 years since he declared Martial Law in 1972.² Accounts reveal that Marcos was pressured to call for an election

because of public outcry against his abuse of power as a dictator and of repeated injunctions from the United States to adopt democratic policies (Sanchez; "EDSA"; "The First Election"). However, it must be noted that for years the US turned a blind eye to Marcos' "brutal, corrupt, and extravagant" government (Juego) in order to keep the Philippines as its anti-Communist stronghold in Southeast Asia (Sanchez).

On February 15, when the Batasang Pambansa proclaimed Marcos and Arturo Tolentino as the election winners for the presidency and vice presidency, respectively, people rallied behind the opposition party's presidential candidate Cory Aquino who won with her vice-presidential running-mate Salvador H. Laurel, according to the unofficial tally of poll watchdog National Movement for Free Elections or NAMFREL. On February 22, Manila Archbishop Jaime Cardinal Sin called on the people to march to Camp Crame and Camp Aguinaldo, along Epifanio delos Santos Avenue or EDSA, to support cabinet and military officials, led by then-Defense Minister Juan Ponce Enrile and then-Army Vice Chief Fidel V. Ramos, who had deserted Marcos. Thus, from February 22 to 25, hundreds of thousands of Filipinos gathered at EDSA, "calling for a peaceful ouster of Ferdinand Marcos" ("Remembering"; "EDSA").

Undeterred, Marcos held on to power, and on February 25, two presidents, he and Aquino, took their separate oaths ("Remembering"). On the evening of the same day, the US forced the exile of the disgraced dictator, together with his family, in Hawaii, where he would stay until his death in 1989 (Sanchez). The people cheered in the streets as "a peaceful protest had just toppled a dictatorship" ("EDSA"). When the Filipinos "stormed Malacañang" later that evening, they would denounce the obscene wealth of the Marcoses in the palace (Sanchez).

Both *TB* and *MIM* depict the days leading up to Ferdinand E. Marcos' complete overthrow by the EDSA People Power Revolution. In both Martial Law narratives, their maidservants are key pieces of the puzzle, given that, as revealed in *MIM*, the real-life maids of the Marcoses were constantly loyal to them. However, I claim in this paper that Rosca experiments with the gendered consciousness of the maid in *TB* to picture Martial Law history as heterogeneous or as a temporal otherness. This way, Rosca's work demonstrates ethical creativity. In contrast, digital media in the age of post-truth, exemplified by Yap's *MIM* exploits the figure of the maid to visualize time as rigid, onedimensional, and even paranoid. In this manner, Yap's attempt is a questionable basis of ethics or morality.

Toward an Ethics of Otherness

To give more dimension to my questions on ethics, I would like to turn briefly to the 2012 work titled *An Aesthetic Education of Man in the Era of Globalization* by Gayatri Spivak. Given the present and dangerously charged global political climate, reading this work now is a radical act. In this book, Spivak locates and reorients ethics in the enduring wisdoms of peoples in the

Global South, particularly, in the Arabic concept of *al haq* in the Qur'an. Google Translate generates at least three tightly intertwined concepts for the Arabic term “ح ق,” or ‘*haq*.’ At once it stands for “truth,” “right” (in the sense of entitlement, or simply, a birthright), and “what is due or owed,” or, one’s responsibility. A concept and practice that imply a triangulation of right, responsibility, and truth simultaneously are what Spivak calls the “paraindividual structural responsibility” into which, as believed in this wisdom, every living being is born (*Aesthetic Education* 341). In other words, what stands for truth in this Arabic concept is that it is everyone’s birthright or entitlement to be responsible for others.

Here, Spivak notes in *haq* a “catachresis” in that one concept is used to mean another. That is, we have two lexically diverging concepts that mean the same in this Arabic wisdom: on the one hand, “responsibility” (which connotes a going outward, subtracting something, from the self) and, on the other, “right” (which is something intrinsic to, or stays within, the self) are two non-synonymous terms brought together in *al haq*. To say it more pointedly, *haq* “inscribes collective responsibility as a right” (341). As such, we find a concept of truth founded on difference.

According to this Arabic concept, to abide in the truth that one is born with the privilege to be collectively responsible for *others* is not simply to care for the “human community.” To care for “others” also means to live for one’s “human habitation” or “the earth” -- or what Spivak calls the “planetary” (294; 341). For Spivak, the planetary stands for what one cannot fully know. And this unknowable, or the incalculable is the concept of alterity or otherness inscribed in *al haq*. Such is Spivak’s “ethics of alterity” from where this paper comes in claiming an ethics of otherness or relationality. For us scholars in the Global South, this ethics of alterity is a necessary springboard for rethinking our existence or our morality today. What Spivak does is to clear a path to it, with this diffracted genealogy of ethics: one that is both a Eurocentric derivation and an enduring yet pre-capitalist wisdom of peoples of the Global South. And if indeed, there has been, as literary-and-cultural-studies scholars have been claiming, an ethical

turn in the field, then this 2012 book has been directing us more keenly toward ethico-genesis, as it were, that has never been more urgent in the time of globalization.

Globalization and Post-truth

For this paper, I would like to inflect globalization as a category of time, that is, as our time of post-truth, when, as McKenzie Wark puts it, information or data have become the new commodity (ch. 1). Specifically, the post-truth era is characterized by the use of information and content on social media and streaming or on-demand entertainment for deception, propaganda, misinformation, and disinformation toward the devaluation of the public sphere or democracy. According to Ari-Elmeri Hyvönen, “post-truth politics” is a unique phase of the long history of mass media deception where shared realities comprising our collective knowledge have become eroded or erased by this consensus reality in the virtual realm. In the words of Hyvönen, we see the “devaluation of factual truths in public debate” (48). And as democratic spaces for healthy debate and disagreement come undone, what takes its place is this virtual realm where what Judith Butler calls “degraded speech” (85) proliferates. Here is Butler simplifying this scenario: “When the “no” is taken as “yes,” the capacity to make use of the speech act is undermined” (85). In other words, where lies or untruths are the currency, there is little to no space for agentive speech. By agentive speech, I mean something akin to Butler’s “speech acts” or performative speech which has the capacity to, quite simply, give rise to norms that affirm individual and collective life of humanity (85) and the planet.

The current mass and social media debate on the Middle East perfectly exemplifies this degraded discourse where, for example, anyone demanding for ceasefire or peace is accused of hate speech or anti-Semitism. Meanwhile, the Prime Minister and government officials of Israel dominate media and social media platforms in justifying their terrorist attacks on Gaza and settler violence in the West Bank as democratic and peaceful. The motive of post-truth politics is to saturate and circumscribe our mediated realities with lies so that this virtual economy stays rigidly polarized, confused, and unfounded. Ultimately, according to Hyvönen, the aim is to preempt any democratic sphere or sincere debate from ever emerging (39).

Post-truth politics is the enabling groundwork for movies like *MIM*. Produced by Imee Marcos and distributed by Viva Films, *MIM* is just the first of a trilogy. On its own, this 2022 movie boasts of a star-studded cast

including a surprise appearance of celebrity-politician, Robin Padilla. Its up-and-coming director, Darryl Yap, has been known for his controversial “shock” videos which often flouted common decency and political correctness (Aguila). As to its plot, *MIM* recounts how the maids helped manage the crisis in Malacañang in the lead-up to the overthrow of Marcos. Not surprisingly, *MIM* is not so original. The title alone is an obvious appropriation of the 2002 Hollywood romance *Maid in Manhattan*. But the lack of originality runs deeper given that the same narrative has been written 30 years before by Ninotchka Rosca in the form of her novel, *TB*. At the time of her writing of *TB*, she had been an exiled activist. Before that, she was a political prisoner under the Marcos regime. At present, Rosca continues her feminist activism and is currently based in New York, USA.

Ethical Impossibility in the Time of the Self

TB is Rosca’s thinly veiled satire of Ferdinand and Imelda Marcos’ “conjugal dictatorship,” to borrow from Primitivo Mijares (40). But Rosca creates an even more morally rotten fictional world as she portrays the central characters to be twins involved in a secret incest. The twins are Senator Hector Basbas and Katerina Basbas. With them in the Basbas household are the three incestuously- conceived children -- Epee, Ine, and Marmol. There is also Armand Gloriosa, Katerina’s figure-husband who is, as will be eventually revealed, also Hector’s lover. Teresa Tikloptuhod, whom we can consider as the chief assistant to the Basbas twins, is privy to all this wickedness. Smart and unusually highly educated in her time, Teresa is the loyal aide and trusted confidante of the twins. Because she devotes her life to serving the Basbas family, we can consider her as Rosca’s maid figure in *TB*. The story is told from Teresa’s perspective. Through her, we also discover the most disgusting perversion of all: Epee, who is Hector’s secret eldest child -- an adolescent -- is pregnant with her father’s (or Hector’s) baby. This moral depravity, on which the corrupt Basbas leadership is anchored, is what Teresa protects and enables to succeed. So with *TB*, Rosca creates a world devoid of morality -- which is a 180 degree turn from her previous works of fiction (Ojano, “Female Teleological Subject” 154).³

A good analogy for the world in *TB* would be an Andy Warhol painting, *Campbell’s Soup Cans*, visualizing for us a world of repetition in the time of consumer capitalism. Meanwhile in *TB*, it is the imbrications of imperialism and feudal-patriarchy that give rise to a world of Hectors or the self. In other words, we have Hector as an autocratic figure who arrogates

for himself absolute control of bodies and creativity. As such, we can describe *TB* as a world of the self, or, a world of sameness.

As to the plot, the story begins with inaugural preparations being led by Teresa for Hector who had just won the country's presidential elections. But things take a turn when Blackie Dominguez, the incumbent president and re-electionist, accuses Hector of massive fraud and cheating. And so, to foil this electoral protest and rally support for Hector, his camp launches mass media propaganda campaigns and large-scale bribery throughout the country. The family-meeting scene, which I will cite shortly, is the part where the Basbas camp will plan out this campaign. But essentially, this is the gist of the novel: the sum of two months' worth of the Basbas twins' scramble for the presidency, punctuated only by Hector's plane crash midway through the plot which ends by coming full circle: Hector, side by side with Katerina, is finally inaugurated into the presidency. As such, *TB* could also be described as the origin story of a future dictator ("Female Teleological Subject" 154-55).

In the book, the family-meeting scene is also attended by Hector's retinue, including not only Teresa but also the Diablos, Hector's private army. It is not mentioned in the following passage but the plan was a sortie where the family, Teresa, and the Diablos would fan out over Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao to bribe local politicians and their constituents with illegal firearms, money, women, liquor, luxury goods, and empty promises (Rosca 67). This family-meeting scene culminates in the following quote in which Teresa's eyes would now settle on her master with awe and adoration:

In the days to come, they would be grateful for this impromptu assembly. It gave Hector the chance to set down, concisely and succinctly, their guide to action, so that when he disappeared, the organization continued to function though bereft of his guidance. Had they faltered for a single moment, their enemies would have torn them to pieces -- figuratively speaking or maybe not -- and they would've become truly the orphans they felt at the time. Years later, in a foreign land, unpacking and making an inventory of all that she had managed to snatch from disaster, Teresa would recall this moment and her eyes would water when she thought of how magnificent, decisive, and iron-willed Hector had been. (Rosca 74-75; emphasis added).

At the outset, let me note the economy of sameness which structures the Basbas world through Hector's "guide to action" so that any excess or difference is villainized as "enemies." But to further parse the quote above, I focus on the element of time, indicated by the lines: "*In the*

days to come...” “...when he disappeared, the organization continued to function *though bereft of his guidance*” (74-75 [emphasis added]). As I said, this is Teresa’s lens through which we see the family-meeting scene happen. And with the temporal markers I emphasized, it becomes apparent that, as Teresa apprehends the present moment of the family gathering, she also sees into an immediate future when Hector is no longer around. Finally, the last line, while referring to a future, implies that it is a “disaster.”

Specifically, Teresa as she narrates the scene of the family gathering also gestures to a future that, at the same time, has passed. That is to say, she points to a time in the future when the present family-meeting scene is a past and, more importantly, when a certain “disaster” had already transpired. In a way, this is Teresa’s double vision at work in which, first, she is completely riveted by Hector in this family gathering, but, second, she also seems to be aware of a different future where there is no Hector (Ojano, “Female Teleological Subject” 196).

Ethical Possibility in the Time of Alterity

Next, I look into temporalities at work in the second scene. But first, the context: at this point in the novel, it has become clear that Teresa is the brain of the Basbas political camp. Here in particular, when Hector goes missing in a plane crash, she takes the helm of the propaganda campaign, showing herself to be the brawn as well of Hector’s power grab plan. Hence, this scene, where she is airlifted back home from a successful mission in the northern provinces, albeit with a seriously injured bodyguard, San Custodio, one of the Diablos. It must be noted that the love affair that she would have with the comatose San Custodio is hinted at in this passage but this will be a matter for another discussion. Instead, I focus on her vision of a fire which she augurs in the defeated figure of her bodyguard (“Female Teleological Subject” 198):

Teresa glanced at San Custodio propped up and belted on a backseat. Eyes closed, his head rested on his right shoulder -- which was *how he would be*, Teresa saw, until the day, oh how far into the future, the day a torrent of people, crashing through the doors of her home, found him, still asleep, still young, but half aware, as his suddenly upright member showed, of the tremendous excitement boiling in the streets, in the house, outside the door of his vestal room; the crowd, not knowing what to make of this zombie and mistaking him for an inanimate instrument of perversion, consigned him to a bonfire of portraits, memos, cushions, and tables in the yard.... *But in between, through the years...* Teresa took her eyes from the premonition and considered the sky,

which was slowly darkening from blue to gray, as roils of agitated air began to attack the helicopter. (Rosca 125; emphasis added)

Here, we note the paranoia in this world that to Teresa, even the sky darkening and the air getting agitated are ominous threats to it. And of course, we see the real threat in this double vision of Teresa. Specifically the threat is in her “premonition” of this different time of a fire which ties back in with the “disaster” mentioned in the earlier passage. And let’s say it once and for all that this “*day...far into the future, the day a torrent of people [would] crash[] through the doors of her home*” is an obvious allusion to the People Power Revolution, particularly when the crowd marched into the Malacañang palace.

Teresa’s vision is a threat because of one important thing: it is a future where the Basbas rule is already defunct as a result of the anti-dictatorship resistance. This temporal otherness is what the narrative suppresses. But Teresa, despite being duty-bound to Hector, is the one who continually gets diverted to these visions or, to say it another way, the one who involuntarily injects into the present, this “beyond” or “elsewhere.”

To visualize how the time from “beyond” or “elsewhere” bears on the present, I want to quickly turn to the installation work of Renee Green, whose art is one of Homi Bhabha’s examples for his argument that the location of culture -- meaning, the location of emancipatory meaning -- is in spaces or instances of movement and contingency (Bhabha 4). In particular, I wish to take up Green’s art installation “Site of Genealogy” in the attic, which is part of her *Out of Site* exhibition in the 1990s. As an African American, Green often employs her art as a critique of racism in the US. And in the attic, we see such polarities or hierarchies represented by the two flimsy and slightly-curved pillars in the foreground, already being challenged from the get-go (Bhabha 3). That is, tracing these lines of demarcation, we are also simultaneously redirected elsewhere, according to what attaches and detaches to these dividing lines. There is so much motion, fluidity, texture, depth that assail and, in effect, decenter or redirect these divisions or inequalities. And finally there is the light. Sure, there is a lamp that is lit inside the attic but note that there is light coming through the windows as well, as in, light coming from beyond. This is to say then that what is “beyond” or what is “elsewhere” illuminates the present. To put it in spatio-temporal terms, what is elsewhere or beyond is also in the here and now.

Going back to *TB*, we can then say that the coinciding of the future with the present and past as heterogeneous temporal elements is the impossibility that becomes possible in the character of Teresa. Her gendered consciousness is the temporal otherness or alterity that shatters the Basbas illusion of eternal time or the time of fascism. But let us be clear. Teresa is thoroughly culpable for being a hardened Basbas enabler and loyalist. Her name *Tikloptuhod*, a compound Tagalog word coinage of Rosca meaning ‘bended knee,’ suggests her resignation to her unconditional subordination to Hector. But to be cheeky about it, she bends down to Hector but does not bend over, given that she is a resistant gendered consciousness who has this queer grasp of history as difference, as an alterity. As such, we can consider *TB* to be Rosca’s feminist innovation of political satire into a gendered satire. What necessitates the telling of the story of a future dictator is the possibility of transgressing it. This is the emancipatory aim of her gendered satire, which is to make possible a different world beyond the world of fascism in anticipation of true social justice.

From the start, Rosca’s motivation for writing is already an ethical grounding for her creation. Rosca, writing a narrative about oppression from the point of view of the oppressor, evokes Martin Luther King’s exhortation in “Beyond Vietnam” to take up the painful “but no less necessary task [of] speak[ing] for those who have been designated as our enemies,...to understand their feelings even if we do not condone their actions” (King qtd. in Spivak, *Aesthetic Education* 324). As Rosca’s readers, we are furthermore challenged to “imagine [a world through the eyes of] the other who does not resemble the self” (*Aesthetic Education* 324).

As I hope to have shown in the process of our reading earlier, when we transgress or breach limits of our understanding or of our political beliefs, when we acknowledge the lives of strangers or enemies, when we submit to what is unsure or unknown -- in other words, when we experience alterity or otherness, all of which are encapsulated in the concept of *al haq*, the truth -- we give rise to an ethical moment or possibility. This is what literary encounter or aesthetic education offers us: ethical possibilities which we can only experience uniquely or as singularities; but moments which cannot be apprehended, calculated, or systematized. Ethical possibilities are “unavailable to evidence but necessary for [a life-affirming existence -- or a life for others --] to be possible” (*Aesthetic Education* 297).

Of Maids, Tyrants, and Empty Time

I will now turn to an analysis of the scene of the family meeting with the maids in *MIM* in the hope of eliciting the movie's notion of time. Furthermore, I will explore the implication of the unitary or homogeneous time of the world of the Marcoses which *MIM* advocates in a thoroughgoing manner. At the outset, I wish to note here how the movie foregrounds oldest daughter Imee Marcos (Christine Reyes) as the lens through which we see all events unfold. The opening of the movie shows her hurriedly ending the medical trip of her family to Singapore after a worrisome phone call from her father, Ferdinand E. Marcos (Cesar Montano). The scene then cuts to actual clips of the press conference held by Enrile and Ramos, announcing their military coup against Marcos as well as to a footage of Cory Aquino, speaking in front of a civil disobedience rally in Cebu. Conspicuously, this 10-minute opening omits the context of why Marcos was being beleaguered left and right by military defections and public protests.

Subsequently in the movie, Imee upon getting home, immediately accosts her father who is weakly consuming his meal in the drawing room, for being too passive and "trusting" despite the betrayal of his cabinet and military officials. To this, he responds calmly that things will right themselves from then on, as he turns over the control and decision-making to Imee. For historically informed audiences, this scene obfuscates the facts of the post-snap elections of 1986. Instead, the scene diverts the attention to Marcos as this sickly, softspoken, and benign political leader. Indeed, it reduces history to the image of a defenseless Marcos unjustly faced with an imminent ouster by his opponents and his renegade government and military. Only in this manner of mystifying history can the character of Imee assume moral high ground as her father's rescuer.

After this scene of the bequeathing of power from father to daughter, Marcos calls for a family meeting. Noticing that one of the maids is missing, he asks for Biday (Beverly Salviejo) and beckons to her to bring Imee up to speed on the goings-on outside the palace. Biday then cherry-picks details from news she has overhead and contrives an account about an impending takeover by the Aquino family, side by side with the rebellion of the military. The casting of the comedian Salviejo, an Ilocana herself -- including the direction and scoring that surround her acting -- makes it obvious that Biday's ethnic expressiveness, signaled by her Iloko interjections and swearing, mainly functions to give the scene comic relief. It goes without saying that as an Ilocana maid, Biday's class and gendered otherness intersect with her ethnic identity to give the Marcos household the

appearance of being inclusive or even representative of a regional or minority culture. (Interestingly, the acting of Montano fell short of conveying the Ilocano identity of the real-life Marcos). The fact that Marcos defers to her, presumably because she keeps up with radio news and is therefore in the know, makes it look like she has a voice. But on the whole, she provides no more than gossip -- one that is devoid of any historical nuance or grounding in the political and economic catastrophes that characterized the time of the dictatorship.

Far from being agentive, the figure of Biday is empty of the lived experience of poverty and suffering that brought forth the political unrest at the time. To put it another way, Biday is a mere figure or token of otherness, villainizing critics and political rivals of the Marcoses and voicing nothing but her sycophantic praises for her master and the little bosses. Like Rosca's Teresa Tikloptuhod, Biday is an extension of the master or of the self but this time, empty of any historical experience that would give her any independent consciousness. Altogether then, the chorus of the maids led by Biday functions to not only tell but also validate a seemingly impartial victim narrative of the Marcoses. The maid's narrative myopically construes the unrest among cabinet officials, the military, and the people as unwarranted actions against the Marcos family. It leaves out immediate historical facts that led to such unrest, including the fact that the US Senate, through an international fact-finding body, ascertained the results of the 1986 snap elections to be "invalid" because "rigged by the ruling party" ("A Path" 1; "Remembering"; "EDSA").

Adding another dimension to the scene is the camera work, that is, it establishes the temporal dimension in which Yap intends to encase the entire plot. The family-meeting scene begins with a long take of the entrance into the room where the rest of the family and the maids have gathered, as well as of their conversations. Without any cuts, the camera focuses on each family member, on the left side of the screen, and also on the maids, standing opposite the seated family, as they selectively discuss the unrest outside the palace. This non-cut, circling take pulls the spectators, as witness-collaborators, as it were, into this seamless univocal world, where only the time of the self, or the ahistorical Marcos temporality, exists. And when Imee stands up and takes a step beyond the rug to join the ranks of the maids on the other side of the room, she seals the circle. Resolutely, Imee now takes on the helm by proclaiming her debut mission as her father's protege: vindicating her father against his opponents by expediting his inauguration as the rightful president of the country. Here, we must note that

the drama--of Imee confronting the odds unfairly stacked against her father--openly disregards publicly available facts that Marcos, exploiting his powers as the then-incumbent president, was declared the winner as soon as seven days after the snap elections of February 1986 and that he was sworn into office on February 25 in Malacañang ("Remembering"; "EDSA"). Therefore, to set the record straight, although *MIM* claims that Imee's father was deprived of his victory, the truth was that Marcos "claimed victory" (Sanchez) in the face of the International Observers Delegation's report released on February 19 of the incumbent party's nationwide electoral fraud and cheating ("A Path" 45; "Remembering"). Nevertheless, disinformation is the stuff of this post-truth movie production. With such a spin on Martial Law history, Yap is able to foreground Imee as the heart and brain of the supposed crusade of the Marcos family for justice and vindication.



Figure 1. "Maid in Malacañang / Behind-the-scenes..." by Viva Films features snippets of the rehearsals and the camera work, resembling the final take of the family meeting scene. Here the camera focuses on Biday in her monologue (00:19:08).



Figure 2. The camera then circles around the room to the Marcos family, attuned to Biday's gossip ("Maid in Malacañang Behind-the-scenes...", 00:10:58).



Figure 3. Ending the family meeting scene, Imee (Christine Reyes) rises to the occasion to have her father sworn into the presidency. The camera then foregrounds her as the Marcos family's feminist heroine ("Maid in Malacañang / Behind-the-scenes...", 00:00:46).

From the start, with the first of its ten chapters titled “Rebelde,” *MIM* sets out to depict Imee as the figure of the quintessential modern woman -- responsible and loyal but also liberated and outspoken. On the one hand, she appears as this jet-setting mother and wife who tirelessly juggles these duties with taking care of her father. Dressed like “the material girl” Madonna and accompanied in the background by a remake of Sampaguita’s rock song hit in the 1980s, “*Nosi Balasi*,” she is, on the other, spotlighted as this daring feminist heroine of her family’s fight. Unequivocally, *MIM* flaunts Imee as the consummate image of a “rebel” for her cause of reclaiming justice for her wrongfully persecuted father. Thus, the movie tries to pull its audience into the unitary time and univocal narrative of the Marcoses in which they are both victims and heroes in their nation of traitors.

But from a historical perspective, *MIM* is a shameless project in its theft of the vocabulary of the anti-dictatorship resistance. In attributing a *rebelde* status to the Marcos heroine whose cause is to clear the Marcos name, *MIM* arrogates for itself the ideals of the People Power revolution: human rights, social justice, and democracy. Ambitiously, the movie also tries to negate the actual Maoist armed rebellion that formidably fought the US-backed Marcos dictatorship. But as a case of Butler’s degraded speech, where “no” means “yes,” *MIM* has the ironic effect of hollowing out the ideals it steals, thereby becoming, literally, empty rhetoric. On top of this epistemic appropriation, the movie also egregiously omits any reference to the dictatorship and Martial Law, which were, in the first place, the actual circumstances that pushed the Marcoses to such a dilemma!

Moral Rot and the New Digital Entertainment

I wish to continue with my interrogation of the digital movie elements and techniques employed by Yap in his depiction of the People Power crowd’s march into Malacañang as a senseless raid by looters and rioters. In this case, I investigate how tools for cinematic depiction of history, particularly of mass dissent or otherness exemplified by the EDSA People Power Revolution of 1986, may become or fall short of becoming an ethical production. The scene for analysis happens toward the end of *MIM*. At this point in the movie, Marcos and the entire family are surreptitiously escorted outside of the palace. On their heels are the rioters who would later eventually break into the palace. The last to take her leave, Imee remorsefully gives her final reminders to the maids and the palace attendants who were rounded up in a room. Hysterically, she instructs each

of them to cut a piece of fabric from her mother Imelda's yellow gowns to tie around their heads so that they can blend in with the arriving rioters. As she exits with her little boy in tow, she begs them tearfully and inconsolably to save themselves.

As such, the maids and staff are left in the palace lobby in their last stand. A brief spat ensues between them and the protesters after the latter break into the palace doors. But to allay the suspicions of the ghoulish that they are

“*maka*-Marcos” or pro-Marcoses, one of the maids, Santa (Karla Estrada) yells that they support “Cory!” and raises her hand with the “L” sign. To prove her point, she yanks a rock from the grip of the lead protester and hurls it violently at the glass doors of the palace hall. Finally, as the maids join in the chanting of “Cory! Cory! Cory!”, they also make their way into the crowd and toward their escape.

Such a glimpse into Yap's unintelligent depiction above sums up his attempt to dislodge the event of the EDSA People Power Revolution from history. He erases the democratic nature of this historic and bloodless uprising and, unsurprisingly, creates a Hollywoodized caricature of the People Power crowd as a torch-carrying mob, monolithically dressed in yellow. Thus, the EDSA People Power Revolution is villainized. Meanwhile, the Marcos family appear as the sacrificial victims of the ungrateful Filipinos. One of the impressionistic sequences of this scene amplifies this point. Here, the blissfully waltzing pair of Imelda (Ruffa Gutierrez) and Marcos are layered on top of the yellow-clad rioters turning the palace upside down and, remarkably, smashing a bust of Marcos. In the background, the soft and raspy song “*Traydor na Pagibig*” (Marion Aunor) plays, together with the voice-over of the real-life Imelda. In her voiced recollection of her conversation with her husband, Imelda narrates:

Sabi niya [Marcos], “Now that I'm president, I'll build a house for the Filipino people. You'll make it a home.” Then I reflected, what makes a home? Love.

Of course, from a historical perspective, the irony that Yap signals is unconvincing. It attributes gratuitous violence to the People Power Revolution (known historically and worldwide as peaceful and bloodless) as the Marcoses claim for themselves the values of filial loyalty and integrity, and ultimately, of kindness and love. As such, not only does this movie, as I have shown in the first scene, steal the vocabulary of the anti-dictatorship movement but it also freely deflects the atrocities of the Marcos dictatorship's violence onto the ordinary Filipino citizens. This kind of

dichotomy or logic only works if history is denied. In turn, this kind of historical denialism or distortion is only doable in the era of post-truth when broadcast and post-broadcast media continue to be instrumentalized to, arguably, successfully erase or repress the historical and moral atrocities, injuries, and trauma caused by the Marcos regime and the dictatorship.

In the end, *MIM*, in villainizing and discrediting the People Power Revolution, renders us ordinary Filipinos invisible to ourselves and instead, puts front and center a Marcos figure -- whether Dictator, wife, daughter, or son is a version of the same or of the self -- as the hero/heroine. In this case, *MIM*, epitomizing the mainstream movie industry, becomes a classic form of epistemic violence or a subordination, if not a stifling, of grassroots voices and realities to the twin discourse of the nation-state and imperialism. That is, the post-truth era is marked by mainstream entertainment media serving as the platform for morally bankrupt politicians. In our midst are new forms of deception or artsy dramas about the self and its fascist power in which any acknowledgment of shared history or knowledge or of moral responsibility for others -- that is, of an ethics of relationality -- is unheard of.



Figure 4. Darryl Yap's caption of the raid of the Malacañang palace scene in MiM as "akyat-bahay 1986, MAGNANAKAW NG KAPANGYARIHAN, AKYAT-MALACAÑANG" is his use of Facebook in tandem with the movie to distort and discredit the 1986 EDSA People Power Revolution.

For good measure, the actual documentary clips of the people pouring into the Malacañang grounds that Yap adds to this montage are meant to corroborate the Marcos narrative. The scenes he culls from this documentary feature the 1986 People Power crowd pushing themselves through the palace gates, climbing over roofs and jumping over a staircase, searching through drawers, a refrigerator, offices, halls, and the entire palace from top to bottom. There is also a clip of people punching and kicking at the portraits of Imelda and Marcos. These scenes are corroborated by a 1986 *New York Times* account of how, advancing into Malacañang, a multitude of people took out their indignation on the couple's portraits and on the luxury and wealth in the palace. The article also describes a man shouting "This [Malacañang] is ours now," pertaining to the people's aim of reclaiming social justice for their fellow Filipinos. Most importantly, the piece takes

note of "little looting or unruly behavior" among the "huge crowd" (Butterfield).

However, it is clear that Yap intends to keep the extracted footages detached from history so that, when juxtaposed with the staged mayhem in *MIM*, the EDSA People Power Revolution will seem like an unprovoked and meaningless barbarity. And yet at one point in the extracted documentary, a protester, eating something from the fridge that he had opened, points to the fridge's contents and looks straight to the camera to say, as if explaining, that "these were stolen from the Filipino people." For a split-second, the fourth wall is broken as an actual 1986 protester speaks to the graft and theft of the Marcoses which is precisely part of the context being repressed by the movie. Contrary to the logic of sameness imposed by Yap, this utterance, albeit fleeting, is nonetheless a different -- because historical -- consciousness that shatters the unitary time of the Marcoses.

Furthermore, there is a quick juxtaposition of two iconoclastic moments that unintentionally fractures the narrative of the self. The first instance is in Yap's dramatization of the Dilawans' wrecking of the bust of Marcos as the couple dances; and the second is the documentary footage of the enraged People Power crowd destroying the portraits of Marcos and Imelda. Here, Yap wishes to dismiss in passing these repeated scenes as nothing more than a show of, according to the background song, "*traydor na pag-ibig*" [treacherous love] and, as I said above, of senseless mob violence. But in that case, he also aligns them with an earlier instance when Yap divests of any meaning the initial shock of the palace glass doors being broken by the maid Santa. Altogether, Yap seems to downplay the two scenes of iconoclasm to the level of feebleness of the maid's fake action. He clearly disregards the historicity of these actions. That is, he seems to think that a movie, as a form of narrative control, can stifle the historical grounding of such displays of mass indignation and irreverence against authority. But what the scenes actually convey is a discerning, meaning, not an indiscriminate, collective will to desecrate and destroy symbols and structures of fascism which, simultaneously, opens up the possibility for political change and transformation. As a commentator on the politics of religious destruction of idols has said, the irreverence and destruction in iconoclasm are also "transformative" and generative (Carnes 753). In a political register, the case of *MIM*, where there is profaning and destruction of what was revered, is also a spatio-temporal rupture toward a new political sphere. Thus, if there is anything of interest at all in this otherwise simplistic and awkwardly acted depiction of the people's incursion into the palace, it

is the insertion of these documentary clips which betray the writer-director's presumptuousness and mendacity in his curatorial choices.

In the final analysis, *MIM* is no more than what Walter Benjamin has called aestheticization of politics (241). Indeed, we see new filming techniques and technology used in *MIM*. However, instead of conveying any emancipatory meaning, Yap employs these film innovations to distract his audience from real-life inequalities, exploitation, and suffering. Put another way, the educational or instructive capacity of art or film is deliberately blunted by new technologies of propaganda. In effect, in Yap's attempt, new digital entertainment becomes another form of curtailment or repression of dissent and decolonizing creativity.

Ethical Imperative in the Time of Post-truth: A Conclusion

As I hope to have shown above, ethics in artistic and cultural production is a rather straightforward (than esoteric) issue. Spivak's attempt to situate it in the indigenous Arabic concept of *al haq*, meaning, the truth of one's responsibility for others (*Aesthetic Education* 341), reveals its simultaneous simplicity and nuance. Following her point, ethics in art and culture may be understood as the process of coming to truth through an artistic investigation of one's life-affirming relation with others. In my analysis of *TB* and *MIM* as Martial Law narratives, I have demonstrated the striking recognizability of ethical and unethical art in terms of the artistic representation of time. Specifically, Rosca's fictional experimentation with time as heterogeneous is her avowal of her responsibility for others in conceiving of another possibility beyond fascism, and Yap's cinematic manipulation of time as unitary or as a totality forecloses the imagination for social justice and change. Thus, on one level, we can say that the narrative plot about the dictatorship can be told for either ethical or self-serving ends. But on another level, we also see how this--two narratives, 30 years apart, having the same story about the dictatorship--is more than a case of a stolen plot but a testament to how entrenched this decades-long culture industry has been in the Philippines.

That is to say, the Marcos family's instrumentalization of mass media and popular entertainment as forms of mass deception and control was already, in the Martial Law and post-dictatorship years, the problem that Rosca was directly contending with when she was writing *TB*. And according to Jonathan Beller, the use and censorship of art, culture, and mass media for Marcos propaganda is the legacy of the postwar years of the 1950s, when then Philippine Commonwealth imported a US-made mass

media industry and “utilized [it] for the expropriation of the imagination” of its captive audience, the ordinary Filipinos (Beller 38; Ojano, “Myth” 23). In other words, the imperialist weaponization of media continues to this day, only that if in Rosca’s time the government was “waging [a] war with images” against media audiences (Beller 38), then in the post-truth phase of the twenty-first century, the political elite is now waging a disinformation war against digital media consumers.

As the saying goes, truth is the first casualty in any kind of war. We see this unfold in *MIM*, where Yap self-righteously employs digital film aesthetics and techniques to turn the truth of the dictatorship on its head. Depicting the dictatorship as a family drama with the dictator and his family as the protagonists, *MIM*, therefore, stands as a benchmark for mendacity in Philippine digital media in the post-truth age. On one hand, as an informed public, we see through the lies of movie propaganda like *MIM*, obviously intent on increasing the Marcos clout and on discrediting political rivals. As Ambeth Ocampo has argued in his review, *MIM*, justifying itself on the notion of history as *chismis* [gossip], has nothing serious to contribute to debates about Martial Law. But on the other hand, as Hyvönen claims, we cannot dismiss the extent to which “[m]edia... structures our reality” (45). Specifically, media constitutes our consciousness, including our emotional and social attachments. This way, it contributes to the creation of the social (Hyvönen 45) and, in this case, the political.

The 2018 investigative research of Jonathan Ong and Jason Vincent Cabañes, *Architects of Networked Disinformation*, cogently exhibits the Marcos social media disinformation campaign as a case in point for how politicians can confuse and deceive the public and, ultimately, change or discredit collective memory and history. According to Ong and Cabañes, even before the 2016 presidency of Rodrigo Duterte, the Marcos camp’s #IlibingNa Facebook campaign had already been underway as part of the Marcos political “rebranding.” The success of this online image rebranding contributed to the eventual burial of Marcos’ remains in the *Libingan Ng Mga Bayani* or Heroes’ Cemetery in the same year. Despite the strong, nationwide opposition, the burial of “a dictator... as a hero” became a reality as a result of this virtual infrastructure or this disinformation machinery between national politicians and the social media industry (Ong and Cabañes 57).

Subsequently in 2022, Ong and others came out with *Parallel Public Spheres*, another investigation that partly delves into the workings of what the researchers call “influence operations,” masterminded by

politicians who recruited personalities, celebrities, and creative workers in the social media and entertainment industry. The researchers argue that the artistic versatility and eloquence of the new digital content which came out of such “influence operations” not only polarized but also influenced the voting public in the 2022 presidential elections (Ong et al. 8). *MIM*, a result of the collaboration between Senator Imee Marcos and Yap, is a key example in this study. Building upon the earlier disinformation campaign, *MIM* brings to light the evolving tactics of the Marcos-Yap partnership in their venture into digital content and entertainment production which allowed them to side-step fact-checking measures (14). *MIM*, along with Yap’s social media promotional gimmicks for the movie, is a part of this “world-building” phase (Ong et al. 19) or stylizing a supposed “deep story” about Marcos and his family’s untold victimhood in the hands of the political opposition and activists during Martial Law (35). According to Senator Imee Marcos, *MIM* was only meant to let the public hear “their side of the story” (Roper; Ong et al. 35). However, all evidence tackled in this paper, so far, points to the contrary. This is to say that the gradual but complete return of the Marcoses to national politics, culminating in the installation of Ferdinand “Bongbong” Marcos Jr. to the presidency in 2022, was the result of the Marcos camp’s consequential deployment of digital media and entertainment to sway public opinion and legitimize their reclaiming of power.

And yet, not all is lost even in the proliferation of media disinformation that distorts and denies grassroots history in the country; even in the ubiquity of degraded speech in broadcast and social media that justifies the ethnic cleansing by white supremacists. In her solidarity message to Palestinians last February 2024 for the *FORSEA Forces of Renewal Southeast Asia*, Spivak conveys how academic scholarship can help achieve social justice, as elusive and impossible as it may be in the midst of the genocide in Gaza. She stresses, “To effect real change, we must take advantage of every opportunity to make genocide generally recognizable as a historical phenomenon” (“Colonizer’s Violence”). We can take a leaf from her work and, heeding her sobering call to action, continue to strive in making legible the patterns of cultural mendacity of the political elites in the practice of cultural criticism as a social engagement. The task must take on a collective nature, where layers of artifice that deceive everyday media consumers are unpacked and peeled off, revealing the accountability of the “chief architects of disinformation” (Ong et al. 57). “To effect real change,” we must regain our bearings and involve our

communities in the preliminary task of making such epistemic violence “recognizable as a historical phenomenon.”

Notes

1. This question or issue was part of UNITAS' conference concept for the *Ethical Literary and Cultural Criticism Conference* held at the University of Sto. Tomas in Manila on November 23-24, 2023. This paper is the outcome of the lecture-workshop that I delivered during the said conference. My deepest gratitude to the workshop participants especially to the Literature students of UST, UNITAS editors and reviewers, and the UST Literature Faculty for making this paper infinitely richer. I am also indebted to my graduate and undergraduate students in De La Salle University Manila who have greatly contributed to earlier conceptualizations of this paper. Finally, I also thank the workshop participants in the *Writing the Classroom 6: Never Forget: Teaching Martial Law in Art Classes* held at the De La Salle University, Manila on May 16-17, 2024, where this paper was also presented, with permission from UNITAS.
2. To be clear, Marcos lifted Martial Law in 1981 in response to the international community's pressure toward democratic "normalization." As such he would proclaim his post-Martial Law government to be a "new era" for his "New Republic" (Sodusta and Palongpalong 285). However, the change soon proved to be in name only as Marcos' control and power over the government and economy, civil liberties, press freedom, among others stayed the same. See Jesucita Sodusta and Artemi Palongpalong, "Philippines in 1981: Normalization and Instability." *Southeast Asian Affairs*, 1982, pp. 285-299.
3. The passages I cite here and in the subsequent section of this paper, which I mark with the parenthetical page references, are modified versions of parts of my chapter on Rosca's *Twice Blessed* in my doctoral dissertation.

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