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## **Millennial Traversals**

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## Millennial Traversals

Outliers, Juvenilia, &  
Quondam Popcult Blabbery

PART I: TRAVERSALS WITHIN CINEMA

**JOEL DAVID**



Indexed in the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America

*Millennial Traversals:  
Outliers, Juvenilia, & Quondam Popcult Blabbery  
(Part I: Traversals within Cinema)*

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the Young Critics Circle,  
and Kritika–

“...người ta thôi nghĩ về sự may mắn trong hạnh phúc.”  
(from a Vietnamese proverb)



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# Introduction to the UNITAS Print Edition of Part I: TRAVERSALS WITHIN CINEMA

*Note: Millennial Traversals is divided into two parts. Each part shares the first portion of this print-edition introduction. If you have read this same five-paragraph opening section in Part II: EXPANDED PERSPECTIVES, please skip these paragraphs and go directly to the portion subtitled Reading Strategies.*

The codex edition that you are reading represents a unique publication trajectory that might only be the first of several other possible samples in the newly arrived age of the internet. The 2015 copyright year represents the actual date (July 23, to be exact) that *Millennial Traversals* was announced on my blog, *Ámauteurish!* The fact that the original digital edition persisted for a while meant that I was able to tinker a bit with it – correcting errors, providing updates, repositioning certain articles – based on my own and its readers’ responses. My earlier books, which came out right before the internet became a global medium all its own, were the first to benefit from the essential corrigibility of any self-owned internet posting.

With the then-impending appearance of my first book *qua* book (a monograph, rather than the anthology format of the previous volumes), I strove to come up with one final collection, premised on a theoretically permanent online existence. Unlike my earlier books, *Millennial Traversals* would benefit from an always-amendable condition. The advantage of its open-access nature became immediately apparent when the Canada-based

monograph editors requested that one of the interviews in the original draft be pulled out for inclusion as an appendix in the book of mine that they were working on. In proofreading the other articles before uploading them, I would occasionally write an introduction and/or append a note as necessary, but sometimes the need to provide corrections or modifications would arise after the article gets posted (the internet equivalent of getting published) – and it was always a matter of logging into the blog and fixing the material as many times as it required, a luxury entirely unavailable to any print-published author, as anyone old enough to remember predigital media will attest.

I was grateful enough for these twists in publication possibilities. But the present development was something I had never anticipated: a published version that not only succeeds but also affirms the original digital edition. It were as if the goddess of multimedia decreed that my books needed to mirror one another's formats regardless of which format preceded or succeeded the other(s). I sought to maintain as much of the original edition as I could. In the case of my originally print-published volumes, some degree of editorial intervention on my end could not be avoided. For the original digital posting of *Millennial Traversals*, I attempted to anticipate possible queries or qualifications by providing introductions, endnotes, postscripts, and/or references.

I thought these measures would suffice, since the gap between digital and print editions would be far shorter – a few years, compared to the several decades in the case of the print-first books. Another disadvantage I discovered is that digital books rarely get reviewed, and those that exist open-access style are virtually (pun intended) ignored. Since the print edition would require a two-volume output (serendipitously conforming to the digital edition's two-part structure), I checked out the number of pages of each part and attempted to work out a more-or-less balanced proportion. This was when I discovered that a design and concomitant content that could function satisfactorily in interactive format may stump, annoy, or confuse readers who were following the linear trajectory of a book publication. On a website, HTML links would enable users to jump from one article to another (or back to a contents list), or even within various sections of a long article, using whatever their needs of the moment happened to be: information, analysis, curiosity, pleasure, or combinations thereof.

This is my means of explaining why the print edition slightly departed from the original digital edition. Paradoxically, since the digital edition of this book will be migrating to the publisher's website, I also had no need to maintain the original format that appeared in my blog, *Amauteurish!* Will there be a further modification when the current book version reverts to digital? Aside from the fact that it would no longer reside on my archival blog and that it will remain open-access, I have no way of predicting *Millennial Traversals'* further millennial traversals.

### Reading Strategies

*Millennial Traversals* was intended to showcase my output as a film and culture specialist, so the basic division was between those two (overlapping) areas. Part I, focused on film, opens with my answer text to myself, specifically the first article of my first book. Where in *The National Pastime* I had claimed, after the fact, that another Golden Age for Philippine cinema had just ended, the article in the present book contends that the Golden Ages approach is a minefield underlying a garden: for all the marvelous blossoms that hang on many an auteur's name, one could easily wreck some carefully cultivated products just because they happen to appear outside the period and locale; just as urgently, issues that may have less or nothing to do with beauty may be shunted aside for the sake of the narcissistic appreciation of texts that may or (more usually than supposed) may not survive the test of time.

To be honest, as I claimed in several places including in the article itself, my takedown of the Golden Ages concept in Philippine cinema was not as thorough as it could have been – which was why I embarked on one final, possibly ultimate canon-formation project (so far titled *SINÉ*) as soon as I finished drafting it. I was also aware that I had enlarged on my self-maligned Second Golden Age article, once more in the opening article of my next book *Fields of Vision*. The next section in Part I of *Millennial Traversals* demonstrates the process for laying the groundwork for the limited-period canon projects I engaged it: intense coverage (with multiple screenings for major entries), evaluation via reviews and criticism, and summations of specific periods – quarters, years, decades, and festivals.

From general to specific: three review sections of local films and two of foreign ones, all of them periodized. The local-film reviews are further

divided into two sections defined by before and one section for after the current millennium. The premillennium reviews are further separated between those I wrote prior to my designation as *National Midweek's* resident film critic and those I produced during and after my stint at the publication. The foreign-film reviews are divided between “warm-ups” and “exer-tions,” which only means that I remember being distinctly more confident in drafting the latter set. I provided some explication for hesitating in including the foreign-film reviews in my previous print volumes, and why I finally concluded it was high time I presented them.

One might be able to see how it might be possible to proceed according to various approaches. The first two sections are self-contained, but the reviews allow a whole lot more play. Within the basic division of local vs. foreign, one could check out films seen, not seen, or possibly missing. The new-millennial (digital-era) titles may all be intact, as would the foreign films, but of the twenty celluloid titles, nearly half would be possibly missing or extremely difficult to source at this time. There would have been no way of knowing if a then-current title would turn out lost (possibly for good) later, and a critic tasked with a once-weekly article would have the luxury of picking titles according to interest and/or competence. But it's precisely the rejected titles – the ones I'd deemed insignificant, or even deplorable – that often spoke directly to their historical moment. The delight I have in discovering some once-dismissed local movie would be in reverse proportion to my dismay when I ask around about some barely remembered release and hearing my archivist friends describe it as “officially lost.”

I'd picked out a better-rounded selection of reviews for my sampler *Book Texts* (available as an open-access volume at my archival website, *Amauteurish!*), but these were compiled as much on the basis of my growth as stylist and reader as they were representative of the achievements of their specific moments and practitioners. And the reviews collected in my previous volumes similarly adhered to trends and themes that played themselves out via the intertextual relations between commentary and product. So the choices in the present volume will be as close to living through the release period of each specific title. I should have had more care and reverence in undertaking these projects, but such is the regret induced by hindsight.

# Introduction to the Original Digital Edition

*Millennial Traversals: Outliers, Juvenilia, & Quondam Popcult Blabbery* is my first book of the new millennium, and like most contemporary claims, that one can be deconstructed at every point: the millennium's no longer that new, I've done other books since 2000 (mostly as editor, but also as dissertation author), and ... the present volume is not, or not yet, a book, at least in the printed dead-tree sense that my previous solo-authored ones were. Moreover, aside from my diss, I've never really written, much less published, an extensive monograph, which would be the type of book I'd prefer to uphold. Although I expended conscious efforts to ensure that my previously published compilations had as much internal consistency as they could handle, they were still essentially anthologies, as this current one is; and maybe the distinction of *Millennial Traversals* is that its pretensions reside elsewhere, no longer in trying to appear like a deliberately planned and duly parsed product. My rationale for insisting that the present exercise is still part of the continuum provided by my previous volumes is simple (shaky maybe, but simple): *The National Pastime*, *Fields of Vision*, and *Wages of Cinema* all exist in revised and updated form on my archival blog, so *Millennial Traversals* merely skipped the paper-and-ink stage and got to be introduced to its readership in digital format. (I'm still planning to have "publishable" PDF versions of all the texts I've mentioned here, but I can't foresee right now how soon I'll be able to work that out.) In this manner,

virtually all my non-academic (and a few academic) film and culture articles will have been compiled in book form.

The positive aspects of creating a strictly open-access book revealed themselves in separate stages. I knew that I wouldn't have to deal with publishers' and editors' and readers' quirks, which for some reason assume creative dimensions when they confront popular culture material; that included the corollary advantage of having the longest manuscript text I ever compiled, nearly double (in terms of number of articles) that of *The National Pastime*, my previous longest book. When I cooked up a title, I realized I could formulate something that any sensible publisher (or her accountant) might faint upon hearing, and I could lump together anything I wanted without worrying about possible objections like *why foreign films? why incomplete period coverage? why the shifts to other media and even to non-media? why the wide divergence in analytical approaches?* I could improve on the texts at any time and place, although I do hope to minimize my tinkering once the manuscripts go public. I won't need to strengthen an opening essay that I knew was too lame by my standards, since I felt when I was writing it that it just needed to be placed out there in order to temper, if not overturn, my very first book's unexpectedly influential first essay. The foreign-film reviews still seem rather perfunctory, which was why I had no problem eliminating them from my earlier books—but they somehow assumed increasing usefulness the longer I kept at them. The local film reviews similarly dropped out from the pre-millennial books because of their uncertain significance in relation to the rest of my output, although they still could function as markers of an era; in *Millennial Traversals* they serve to indicate my interest in as wide a variety of film types as Philippine cinema makes available.



# First Closure

## **The Golden Ages of Philippine Cinema (A Reassessment)**

*Philippine film observers use the “Golden Age” approach as a way of periodizing artistic developments in Philippine film history. Generally, contemporary critics agree that there had been two Golden Ages, one during the 1950s’ studio-system era, and the other during the martial-law period of Ferdinand Marcos (early ’70s to mid-’80s), although the government’s arts encyclopedia insists on a third, occurring during the 1930s. This article will present the arguments used by the proponents of the “Golden Ages” in Philippine film, and also attempt to evaluate the heuristic value of such a device.*

To look at most available histories of Philippine cinema, one would get the impression that the country has been blessed with several periods of sustained creative activity or Golden Ages—at least two, by standard reckoning, or three if we accommodate a government cultural agency’s account, or four if we include the self-valorization of independent (now synonymous with digital) contemporary film artists. The drive to continually celebrate the filmic achievements of popular culture in the Philippines, or in any country

for that matter, may not always be motivated by pure aesthetic ideals, but given the industrial and monetary components of film practice, it would be understandable, unavoidable even. This article will seek to delve into the Golden-Age periodizations of Philippine cinema using a basic two-part structure that will inevitably (as it must) resolve in an open ending: first, it will recount the Golden Ages divisions using originary texts; and second, it will attempt a deconstruction of the Golden Ages concept as it had been deployed in Philippine film discourse.

### Déjà vu

It is a measure of the success of Golden Age idealizing when the present generation of drumbeaters for the “resurgence” of Philippine cinema unanimously herald (or, at the very least, suggest) the current ascendancy of such a system, without feeling the need to justify their assertions or define their terms. *We’d had Golden Ages in the past, their logic seems to maintain, so why should there be any question about one more occurring today?* This makes the present-day Golden Age, if it ever even does exist, unusual in the sense that it is the only one so far recognized even while it is still ongoing. More important, the prevalence of such a widespread, possibly uncritical evaluation of what purports to be a critical summation (i.e., so many proofs of excellence allowing us to conclude that another Golden Age holds sway today) makes it even more imperative to inspect earlier accounts that claimed the prior existence of past Philippine-film Golden Ages.

What might also be of interest in looking at the Ur-texts of Golden Ages in Philippine cinema is the fact that the articles setting the claims were clustered more or less within a single critical generation, the first in 1972 and the last in 1994. (As a matter of personal disclosure, one of the articles was written by the present author, whose name will hereafter be cited as a matter of historical necessity, per the Foucauldian principle of the author-function.) Even more curiously, the chronology of the articles does not observe the succession of Golden Ages in Philippine film history: if we exclude the present-day Golden Age as so-far unhistoricizable because of the lack of closure, then the first (Golden Age) was actually the last (article).

The first article, Jessie B. Garcia’s “The Golden Decade of Philippine Movies,” originally appeared in *Weekly Graphic* in 1972 and was subsequently

anthologized in an *Experimental Cinema of the Philippines* publication. The second, Joel David's "A Second Golden Age," was first published in *Kultura* (October-December 1989), a journal of the Cultural Center of the Philippines, and presently appeared in the author's first book (*The National Pastime* 1-17). The third, "Classics of the Filipino Film," was a "historical essay" in the film volume of the *CCP Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*, thus bearing the equivalent of a governmental imprimatur. Garcia's article referred to the post-World War II reconstruction decade of the 1950s. David's, the one that was published closest to the period it defined, dealt with the martial law and post-martial rule years of Philippine President Ferdinand E. Marcos, or 1975-86, with the "people-power" uprising cutting short the dictatorship as well as the Golden Age. The CCP encyclopedia article is the most problematic, in that it acknowledged the Golden Ages that had already been declared, as it were, and insisted on a third one, roughly the 1930s, prior to the other (now-subsequent) two. This has resulted in terminological confusion for the negligible few who subscribe to the CCP's version. The term "First Golden Age" has taken hold in referring to the 1950s, while the Marcos years have been known as constituting the "Second Golden Age," mainly because of the earlier articles' impact and in defiance of the CCP's reformulation of the aforementioned Golden Ages as essentially a second and a third respectively, in light of the existence of an earlier one, supposedly the original first, before the other two had occurred.

### Impure gold

The difficulty that besets a consideration of the 1930s as a Golden Age in Philippine cinema applies to the other periodizations—is, in fact, a feature inherent in a medium that was invented and developed in countries with colder climates. Although a significant number of prints from the martial-law period may be gone, and the remaining number of copies of the 1950s' studio system has been dwindling at an alarming rate, virtually nothing remains from the 1930s except for what a small circle of observers of highly advanced age can remember. The three still-available 1930s feature films (Eduardo de Castro's *Zamboanga* from 1937, Carlos Vander Tolosa's *Giliw Ko* from 1938, and Octavio Silos's *Tunay na Ina* from 1939) are often mentioned as part of the tragically minuscule number of extant pre-World War II Filipino

films (the only other titles would be Silos's *Pakiusap* from 1940 and Vicente Salumbides and Manuel Conde's *Ibong Adarna*, 1941).<sup>1</sup>

In fact, the 1930s "first" Golden-Age section in the CCP article comprises seven medium-length paragraphs, barely a tenth of the article's total length. It cites six long-unavailable films as proof of the period's quality achievements, yet two of the films (*Dalagang Bukid* and *La venganza de Don Silvestre*, both by Jose Nepomuceno) precede the 1930s—produced, in fact, in 1919, and it includes none of the still-surviving pre-war prints. (The remaining titles mentioned in the article are Nepomuceno's *Noli me tangere*, Carlos Vander Tolosa's *Diwata ng Karagatan*, Tor Villano's *Ligaw na Bituin*, and Ramon Estella's *Huling Habin*.) The article also cites two other filmmakers, Joaquin Pardo de Tavera and Lorenzo P. Tuells, without mentioning any of their significant films.

The difficulty—impossibility, actually—in confirming through any available audiovisual form whether or not Filipino filmmakers excelled during this early period has precluded most observers from adopting the terms of the CCP article. This article will therefore be following suit in regarding any claims made about the 1930s as strictly hypothetical, pending more intensive presentation and analyses of data, and referring to the First Golden Age (without quotation marks) as comprising the 1950s and the Second Golden Age as constituted by the period of Marcos dictatorship.

### Only two so far

Proof that the First and Second Golden Ages (respectively the 1950s and roughly the mid-1970s to mid-'80s) are more defensible in scholarly terms lies in the fact that not only do certain film titles still exist as confirmation, but also productive follow-through studies based on these assumptions have been made. In relation and as response to Garcia's "Golden Decade," Bienvenido Lumbera's "Problems in Philippine Film History," now regarded as the first useful comprehensive periodization of this long-overlooked field, divides what may be called the studio system era between pre-war and post-war periods, and considers the end of the 1950s as the start of a new, more problematic period. Lumbera describes the (roughly) pre-martial law years of the post-studio system (1960-75) as an era of "Rampant Commercialism and Artistic Decline" (Lumbera, "Problems in Philippine Film History" 181-84),

and thereafter as marked by “New Forces in Contemporary Cinema” (184-86). In fact the more significant insight is that Lumbera’s essay, although necessarily shorter, rectifies several weaknesses in Garcia’s article. Lumbera provides before-and-after context, institutional explanation, explication of internal dynamics, and over-all signification where Garcia’s celebratory piece focused on a seemingly subjective enumeration of highlights.

On the other hand, Garcia’s insistence on personalities and projects conformed to the canonizing requirements of such periodizing efforts, whereas Lumbera only managed to come up with a short list of names: Gerardo de Leon, Gregorio Fernandez, Lamberto V. Avellana, Ramon Estella, and Manuel Conde, with “new directors like Eddie Romero, Cesar Gallardo, Efrén Reyes, and Cirio Santiago [showing] great promise” (180). Many succeeding elaborations of the First Golden Age, including those of Lumbera himself, would follow Garcia’s lead in pointing to the projects that made an impact in foreign festivals: Conde’s *Genghis Khan* at the Venice Film Festival, and the films that dominated the Asian Film Festival: de Leon’s *Ifugao*, Avellana’s *Anak Dalita* and *Badjao*, Fernandez’s *Malvarosa*, Manuel Silos’s *Biyaya ng Lupa*.

David’s “A Second Golden Age” uses Garcia’s strategy in announcing the recent conclusion of a productive filmmaking period, combines it with Lumbera’s systematic presentation of empirical and analytic concerns, and suggests the titles of films and names of auteurs (including scriptwriters and performers) that could constitute the basic canon, most of which would still be familiar to anyone with a passing familiarity with recent Philippine film history: Ishmael Bernal and Lino Brocka and their city-film projects (*Manila by Night* and *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* respectively) in addition to a large body of work; Celso Ad. Castillo for *Burlesk Queen*, *Pagputi ng Uwak*, *Pag-itim ng Tagak*, and *Paradise Inn*; Mike de Leon for *Itim*, *Kisapmata*, *Batch ’81*, and *Sister Stella L*; Eddie Romero, a straggler from the First Golden Age, for *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?*; plus the first significant female filmmakers, Laurice Guillen (*Kasal?*, *Salome*, and *Kung Mahawi Man ang Ulap*) and Marilou Diaz-Abaya (*Brutal*, *Moral*, and *Karnal*). David named Nora Aunor (star of Bernal’s *Himala*) and Ricardo Lee (author of *Himala*, *Salome*, and Diaz-Abaya’s canonical films) as the outstanding performer and script-writer respectively of the period, and pointed to then-emerging filmmakers

such as Peque Gallaga (*Oro, Plata, Mata*), Chito Roño (*Private Show*), and Tikoy Aguiluz (*Boatman*) as people who might be able to sustain quality output even beyond the end of the Second Golden Age.

*Fields of Vision*, the book by David that followed the one where the Second Golden Age essay appeared, may in fact be considered the first Filipino volume premised entirely on the recent conclusion of such a period. It starts out by echoing Lumbera's still-to-be-concluded observation of the emergence of what he called a "New Philippine Cinema" (cf. "The 'New' Cinema in Retrospect," *Fields of Vision* 1-36), thus connecting a first Golden-Age follow-up study with a second one. Necessarily *Fields of Vision* covered film releases since 1986, but several of its major-length studies, including aesthetic assessments of Philippine film products (highlighted by a so-far definitive ten-best film survey), served to focus attention on both Golden Ages, with the second Golden Age regarded as triumphant enough to have overshadowed the first: a per-category all-time best-of (mimicking an awards report), for example, asserted that the best picture, direction, script, performance, and technical achievements in Philippine cinema were, with only one exception, products of the Second Golden Age (see "One-Shot Awards Ceremony," *Fields of Vision* 137-42).

## Deconstruction

At this point, the issue of the usefulness of what we may call the Golden Ages approach in studying Philippine history ought to be confronted. There may be positive and negative ways of responding to this issue, but most of the advantages would have been elucidated in the preceding discussion: asserting the existence of a Golden Age brings about scholarly and creative excitement, as may be gleaned in the belief (whose validity is a question that will have to be deferred) of so-called independent filmmakers that the current period is such a one. The faith of academic and film practitioners in an ongoing Golden Age functions as a self-fulfilling prophecy, compelling scholars to devote serious attention to the study of film phenomena and film creators to carry on with innovative and relevant productions.

Yet the practice of lionizing selected periods also requires that certain other periods be excluded, and it is here where the inadequacies of the Golden Ages approach are as obvious as they are overlooked. Between the

First and Second Golden Ages, for example, lies the entire decade of the 1960s and the first half of the '70s, and in order to point up the remarkability of the favored periods, evaluators wound up devaluing the intervening years. Lumbera had set the tone by describing this period as characterized by “Rampant Commercialism and Artistic Decline” (Lumbera, “Problems in Philippine Film History” 181-84), and all succeeding Philippine film historians followed suit. One by-product of the anti-1960s bias is the fact that, while useful resources covering the beginning of Philippine cinema to the 1950s, and critics’ anthologies listing films from the 1970s onward, are available to the public, no comprehensive filmography of the '60s is available. The problem stems from the practice of subjecting only aesthetic material (films and auteurs) to critical analysis and neglecting to extend its application to the study of structural phenomena.

The First Golden Age, for example, is ascribed to the stability enforced by a limited number of studios—i.e., since they were assured of full control over local releases, their annual profits were permanently guaranteed; as a result, they could afford to fund prestige projects geared toward local-awards and foreign-festival competitions every so often. Studies that mention the insidious underside of such a monopolistic system—the blacklisting of unruly talents, for example, or the marginalization of competitors who could not match the vertically integrated resources of the majors—were often relegated to biographical write-ups on specific participants, never in relation to discussing the problems of Golden-Age production. The end of this studio system, brought about by the busting of the production-and-distribution monopoly (following the Paramount decision in the US) and the rise of actor-moguls (representing a more powerful type of independent producer), did result in the “rampant commercialism” decried by Lumbera, but the question of “artistic decline” is another matter altogether.

### The lost decade

In fact the decade of the 1960s was characterized by an impressive, pioneering, taboo-breaking, politically charged vulgarity, of a sort never seen before or since in the country, and that would be essential to explaining why the Second Golden Age held far more promise and managed to meet more expectations than the First. Moreover, most filmmakers who made their mark during the

First Golden Age actually produced what a number of people would consider their best products during the subsequent non-“golden” years<sup>2</sup>—Gerardo de Leon with *The Moises Padilla Story*, *El Filibusterismo*, or the long-lost *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api*; Avellana with *Scout Rangers*; Cesar Gallardo with either *Kadenang Putik* or *Geron Busabos: Ang Batang Quiapo* (starring former President Joseph Estrada); Eddie Romero with *The Passionate Strangers* as well as producing and writing Cesar J. Amigo’s *Sa Atin ang Daigdig*; and Leroy Salvador’s remarkably overlooked Cebuano-language masterpiece *Badlis sa Kinabuhi*.<sup>3</sup> The sheer proliferation of innovation alone would be worth a compendium all its own—transformation of actor-producers, as already mentioned, into auteur-moguls, triple-digit annual production, transitions to color, regularity of Cebuano production and international co-production (including links with US blood-island and blaxploitation films), eager bandwagoning by politicians (including then-presidential aspirant Ferdinand Marcos), depictions of heretofore unseen images of graphic screen violence, musical-teen-idol unruliness, social turmoil, and straight and queer pornography.

A highly qualifiable additional item may be mentioned as well—the emergence of the leading lights of the Second Golden Age, Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal, with the latter producing what is arguably the best debut film by a Filipino filmmaker, the reflexive *Pagdating sa Dulo*. More significantly, at least three other talents—Elwood Perez, Mario O’Hara, and Gil Portes—who would be active during the Second Golden Age but some of whose major achievements would be produced thereafter, also made their presence felt this early. Like the First Golden Age, the second was marked by a measure of stability brought about by the entrenchment of studios—three at a time, same as during the earlier era, but this time with independents occasionally claiming a share of the market and the government providing a mostly supportive, though occasionally threatening, intervention.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, the current (potentially) Golden Age of digital productions shares with the Second Golden Age all of the latter’s institutional features, with two crucial modifications: most of the government’s subsidiary functions have devolved to private agencies; and digitalization has taken over, with the major studios focusing mainly on television and only occasionally on film projects, and the independents entirely utilizing video format.

## Dynamix

The explanation for how such a mix of factors could facilitate artistic productivity would constitute material for a separate study in itself, but once more the question of why what may be called the “wilderness years” (between one Golden Age and the next) should never be dismissed once more proves urgent. If we grant that the digital period in Philippine cinema (roughly since the turn of the millennium) might be eventually celebrated as the Third Golden Age, then the years since the 1986 revolution through the entire decade of the '90s and early 2000s raise the question of any similarity with the 1960s.<sup>5</sup> And the most significant response—that certain practitioners came up with their peaks during the interregnum—once more, perhaps not surprisingly, becomes arguable.

Several aforementioned pre-Second Golden Age practitioners were able to present impressive, perhaps career-best, work: Elwood Perez with *Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit* and *Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.*; Mario O'Hara with *Bagong Hari*, *Tatlong Ina*, *Isang Anak*, *The Fatima Buen Story*, and *Pangarap ng Puso*; and Gil Portes with *Andrea*, *Paano Ba ang Maging Isang Ina?* (all but *Fatima Buen* and *Pangarap ng Puso*, interestingly, starring Nora Aunor—arguably the country's first-rank pop-culture performing artist, who also emerged during the “rampant commercialism and artistic decline” period of the '60s). Several other Second Golden Age practitioners came up with works equal to, if not exceeding, their Golden Age output: Lino Brocka with *Orapronobis* and *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak*, Ishmael Bernal with *Pahiram ng Isang Umaga*, Marilou Diaz-Abaya with *Milagros*, Peque Gallaga (with Lorenzo Reyes) with *Tiyanak*, Chito Roño with *Itanong Mo sa Buwan*, *Bakit Kay Tagal ng Sandali?*, and *Curacha: Ang Babaeng Walang Pahinga* (a sequel to *Private Show*), Eddie Garcia with *Saan Nagtatago ang Pag-ibig?*, Tikoy Aguiluz with *Segurista*, Pepe Marcos with *Tubusin Mo ng Dugo*, Augusto Salvador with *Joe Pring*, Wilfredo Milan with *Anak ng Cabron*, and Mike de Leon with *Bayaning Third World*. Finally, just as during the Golden Ages, several filmmakers emerged during this non-“golden” period, quickly creating material that rivaled the best of any age, including their own subsequent output: Carlos Siguion-Reyna with *Misis Mo*, *Misis Ko*, *Hihintayin Kita sa Langit*, and *Ikaw Pa Lang ang Minahal*, William Pascual with *Takaw Tukso*, Lav Diaz with *Serafin Geronimo: Ang Kriminal ng Baryo Concepcion* and *Batang West Side*, and Jeffrey Jeturian with *Sana Pag-ibig Na*, *Pila-Balde*, and *Tuhog*.

What all this indicates up to this point is that any Golden Age may be a necessary, but also necessarily illusory, romantic ideal supportive mainly of auteurist and aesthetic ambitions. The production of “great” work (definable first and foremost in the context of any specific filmmaker’s oeuvre) may take inspiration, and more significantly funding, from the ferment that invariably obtains during these celebratory periods, but creative inspiration may also happen without any structural preparation, and may even be the more impressive for all that. What this article recommends, by way of a provisional conclusion, is for scholars to leave any Golden-Age hoopla to producers and artists, and evaluate all available periods and their products with equal fairness, rigor, and thoroughness ... so that in effect the hope that Philippine cinema itself might constitute an unbroken Golden Age could be realized.

## Notes

1. An extensive study by Clodualdo del Mundo Jr. pointed out that none of the still-available 1930s films may be considered as rising above the level of entertainment and therefore fail when compared with Hollywood masterworks (121-23)—a potentially problematic framework that nevertheless holds value in any consideration of aesthetic worth. The *Facebook* page “Casa Grande Vintage Filipino Cinema” posted an “Excerpt from *Tunay na Ina* (1939)” video post (December 22, 2017) but excluded *Zamboanga* in the posting’s enumeration of “four (so-far) pre-WW2 Filipino films that have survived”; queried about the oversight, Mike de Leon (or someone who claims to be him) states, problematically and without clarifying his terms, that *Zamboanga* “has been transformed into an American B-movie and that is its present and permanent state. Are we so desperate that we have to quibble over such unimportant matters?”
2. The late critic-historian Agustin Sotto maintained that the 1960s “was also the period when the top directors shot their best works”—Ninth Period, “History of Philippine Cinema (1897-1969)” (n.pag.).
3. *Scout Rangers* was selected by the late film critic and director Pio de Castro III as superior to the rest of Avellana’s output; in a conversation regarding the selection of Avellana for the Philippine critics circle’s life achievement prize (see *Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino*), de Castro claimed that Avellana had

expressed surprise and agreement with his choice (interview with author, Quezon City, June 1981). Bienvenido Lumbera cited *Kadenang Putik* as among the local releases worth studying for its deployment of the “logic of irony” (“Critic in Academe”). Joel David listed *Sa Atin ang Daigdig* in his contribution to a canon survey (David with Garduño). In the same survey, *Daigdig ng mga Api* was top-ranked twice. All four films are considered lost.

4. 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, “Studios Studios,” *The National Pastime* 126-28. For a first-hand account of the machinations of the Marcos-era’s “umbrella” film agency, the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, see David, “A Cultural Policy Experience.”
5. In fact in the official award-obsessed critics’ anthology for the decade of the 1990s, the decadal introduction described the period “as one of the darkest... in the development of the local cinema” (Tiongson 2). The article remarks that “It does not take a genius to see how or why the decade of the 1990s could very well be called ‘the worst of times’ in the history of the Filipino cinema because it was the decade when greed, attended by opportunism and compromise, reared its head and ruled in practically all levels and institutions of the movie industry” (35). Revealingly, the article points to trends in the 1960s in order to further condemn the output of the decade, referring to “the slavish and often pathetic imitation of Hollywood blockbusters and directors in order to take advantage of the popularity of the Hollywood originals” and singling out the local industry’s carnivalesque mimicking of James Bond, “Gringo cowboys,” and Chinese martial-arts successes (9).

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## Period-Enders

*Like my reports on film festivals, these summations helped me record my impressions of the period under review; collected here, however, they also demonstrate a careful veering away from institutional preferences, starting with award-giving critics circles. In a few instances I noted where my opinion of certain specific films ultimately departed from even my own initial assessment. I remember looking forward to film festivals since I'd be able to write shorter commentaries per film and still wind up with a complete article. In compiling my film-festival articles, however, I realized that, first, having less space to write is potentially a disadvantage, and second, the range of style that this allows may be wide but also less useful. After my post-grad studies return to whatever periods I could free up for festival attendance, I discovered that I could not bear to tolerate equally each and every entry any longer; the prospect of griping about a movie that I should have known better than sit through felt like an unproductive activity.*

### **Local Cinema 1980-89**

The last day of the 1980s came and went, and Philippine cinema still had to realize a movie comparable to the first-league titles of the Marcos years. Even in using the decade as marker, one could come up with at least three

titles that enlarged their character-based premises into valid and vital social discourses, two conventionally successful period epics, and an armful of small but satisfactory productions, any of which could beat the best of the industry's output since the February 1986 revolution.

First and foremost among our '80s films is Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980), a hard-edged rumination on big-city perversion and brutality whose brilliance of conception and expansive scope render finical any quibbles about its surface inadequacies. Along the same lines of treatment are two technically superior titles with deliberately delimited concerns—Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Moral* (1982, on women in contemporary times) and Lino Brocka's *Miguelito: Ang Batang Rebelde* (1985, on small-town intrigues). Peque Gallaga overtook Celso Ad. Castillo as epic filmmaker of the decade, with a precocious debut in *Oro, Plata, Mata* (1982) and an even better follow-up in *Virgin Forest* (1985). Evident from this listing is the phenomenon of the quality of output observing peak years—1980, the turn of the decade, followed by 1982, the period between the only editions of the Manila International Film Festival (which was being legitimized locally through the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines), and an extended season in 1984-85, when the government and business sectors were distracted by the political storm then already brewing.

Among the other titles still worthy of first-time viewing, overseas export, and archival preservation are Diaz-Abaya's *Brutal* and Mike de Leon's *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?* from 1980; de Leon's *Kisapmata* and Laurice Guillen's *Salome* as well as Romy Suzara's *Pepeng Shotgun* from 1981; Ishmael Bernal's *Himala* and *Relasyon* and de Leon's *Batch '81* from 1982; Diaz-Abaya's *Karnal* and Bernal's *Broken Marriage* from 1983; Tikoy Aquiluz's *Boatman*, Mel Chionglo's *Sinner or Saint*, de Leon's *Sister Stella L.*, Mario O'Hara's *Bulaklak sa City Jail*, and Gil Portes's *'Merika* from 1984; and Bernal's *Hinugot sa Langit*, Brocka's *Bayan Ko (Kapit sa Patalim)*, Castillo's *Paradise Inn*, and Gallaga's *Scorpio Nights* from 1985. One last '85 production, Chito Roño's *Private Show*, was released in 1986, and by this technicality provided one of the worthiest film titles in the current dispensation so far. Other mentionables in the same and succeeding years belonged to other formats or media (and in this strict sense inherently disadvantaged relative to commercial 35mm. cinema), particularly de Leon's video-movie *Bilanggo sa Dilim* and Briccio Santos'

16mm. *Damortis* in 1986 and Nick Deocampo's super-8mm. *Film Trilogy on the Theme of Poverty and Prostitution* in 1987.

Two large-scale albeit uneven productions during the last year, Brocka's *Macho Dancer* and Gallaga and Lorenzo Reyes's *Isang Araw Walang Diyos*, contrast sadly with better-made but modestly proportioned genre pieces: sex-dramas like William Pascual's *Takaw Tukso* (1986) and Roño's *Itanong Mo sa Buwan* (1988); an action entry, Pepe Marcos's *Tubusin Mo ng Dugo* (1988); a fantasy, Gallaga and Reyes's *Once Upon a Time* (1987); and a horror film, Gallaga and Reyes's *Tiyanak* (1988). Final proof of how far we have declined lies in the expertise our filmmakers achieved in melodrama, the predominant genre of the 1950s, with the better examples comprising Chionglo's *Babang Hampsalupa* (1988) and Paano Kung Wala Ka Na (1987), Gallaga's *Unfaithful Wife* (1986), Eddie Garcia's *Saan Nagtatago ang Pag-ibig?* (1987), O'Hara's *Tatlong Ina, Isang Anak* (1987), and Carlitos Siguion-Reyna's *Misis Mo, Misis Ko* (1988). The Filipino (political) melodrama to end all melodramas was recycled in the form of a foreign non-movie, the Australian video production of *A Dangerous Life* (1988, dir. Robert Markowitz).

A ray of hope may well flicker in our projectors, and our hearts as well. Just as *Manila By Night* was completed in 1979 but released, courtesy of censorship complications, late enough to grace the '80s with its most outstanding title, a 1989 production, though already exhibited in other countries, is promising a similar beginning for the '90s. Brocka's *Orapronobis*, if we get lucky enough, could kick off another round of creative endeavor, the way the same director's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* did in 1975; that first salvo lasted more than a decade, and if another one succeeds, we might be able to close the '90s with the claim that a current Golden Age of cinema was never really cut off from a previous one, but in fact took off after a temporary interruption caused by disquietude in the political realm.

For sheer drawing power, nothing could beat the elderly December extravaganza mounted by our men in uniform: a coup attempt so near-successful that it necessitated the intervention of the US Air Force. Anyone who could tune in was likely to be doing so; one easy hypothesis why so many kibitzers were willing to risk their lives just to observe the proceedings first-hand could be the fact that our lower classes do not have superior playback equipment—if ever they happen to have access to any such equipment in

the first place. Nevertheless, the local movie industry learned the lesson of '86 well: react or die. Four years ago, when a similar spectacle succeeded beyond anyone's expectations, Filipino movie moguls, like the rest of the country, were too stunned at first to come up with their usual profit-oriented approaches; after all, it was a time for moralist reflection, and to even think of box-office remunerations seemed like an unrevolutionary thing to do.

The result—a truly panicky months-long stretch when no movie yielded any return on investments—raised the possibility that some things, especially in showbiz, may not have changed after all; a consistent turnout of hits afterward till now proved that the change, if it mattered, was for the worse (or the better, if you happened to be an investor): no more can there be real winners in terms of awards or prestige or even personal fulfillment, only in terms of box-office receipts. The setting of record profits continued in 1989, with two movies assuming the all-time blockbuster positions: first Tony Y. Reyes's *Starzan: Shouting Star of the Jungle* in the early half of the year, then Ronwaldo Reyes's *Ako ang Huhusga* in the latter. The *Starzan*, er, talents could claim to be the ultimate placers, though, if we take the succession of hit follow-ups (about a dozen so far, including *Starzan* sequels) they were emboldened to embark on. *Ako ang Huhusga*, for its part, was itself a sequel to an earlier hit, *Kapag Puno na ang Salop* (1987), thus proving that some good things are capable of getting better, regardless of whether they deserve to or not.

If there's any justice, though, 1989 could still be remembered for the re-emergence of world-class movie-making in the Philippines. Two items, already mentioned, stand out for lending superior talents to relatively big-budgeted treatments of relevant social issues: Lino Brocka's *Macho Dancer* and Peque Gallaga and Lorenzo Reyes's *Isang Araw Walang Diyos*. The fact that each acquired its own measure of controversy could be seen both ways—as either the pettiness of local reactors in responding to serious efforts, or the persistence of concern in having us return to an era (pre-revolutionary, actually) of unqualified triumphs in filmmaking. *Macho Dancer* suffered lapses in dramatic logic and stylizations, while *Isang Araw* could have been better performed and proportioned; in either case both titles could best be taken as directorial muscle-flexing prior to the undertaking of really major exertions, with the Gallaga-Reyes movie possessing the advantage of having animated a larger cast over wider terrain. Brocka's answer to *Isang Araw* has arrived in

the form of his latest international release, *Orapronobis*, but unfortunately, although a better entry than either title (or anything else produced since the revolution), the movie still has to realize a regular run in these here parts.

Meanwhile the year (and the decade) ended with no other praiseworthy product save for the usual well-made genre pieces: the action film *Walang Panginoon* (dir. Mauro Gia Samonte) for once, and the star-vehicle melodramas *Pahiram ng Isang Umaga* (dir. Ishmael Bernal) and *Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit* (dir. Elwood Perez).<sup>6</sup> The practice of risking production capital on less predictable projects like *Macho Dancer* and *Isang Araw* will take a lot of patience and good fortune, if not a time warp back to the halcyon years of the Marcos era; a more immediate procedure would be the solicitation of foreign investment, as Brocka managed with *Orapronobis*. But perhaps we could take a long hard look at the here and now, and hope that with the continuing success of mainstream movies, audiences might grow weary over the meaningless shootouts and sick humor, producers might have enough left over for a period epic or two, and Philippine cinema, this time minus the dangerous interventions of government, might continue its abandoned function of providing us with the most valuable articles of our cultural heritage thus far.

## Note

6. In the flurry of rescreenings for awards groups after 1989 was over, I was surprised to discover *Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit*, which had been preceded by two similarly profitable fan-oriented films featuring the same producer-director-performer team, pulling away from the pack, its deliberate affronts to high culture actually reinforcing its titillative charm, embodied in the paradoxically self-aware yet sincere performance of lead actress Nora Aunor. It was firmly entrenched in my list of fondly remembered releases by the time I assisted in drawing up *SINÉ* (Jo-Ann Q. Maglipon, co-author), a years-in-the-making canon project of Philippine films.

## Foreign Cinema 1980-89

Viewing an entire period's output would be a next-to-impossible task, even when delimited to the year-long efforts of a specific country. But since I've been venturing into year-enders (as well as my first decade-ender) for

Philippine cinema, I guess I could tread carefully on foreign areas, with a maximum of qualifiers up front. Aside from the difficulty of setting aside the rest of a short life to watch every film that comes along, one couldn't sometimes expect every film to come along in the first place, when even Filipino movies can't make it to local screens in good time. The advent of video has somewhat tempered this argument, but only to the extent of making possible the promise of coming up with a decade-end evaluation after a reasonable period—say, a year or two; by which time the decade may seem too far off in the past already.

On the other hand, I watch when I can, and sometimes even when I can't. When video technology was still unaffordable I'd attend the embassy cultural-service screenings and thus managed to get by with one free movie every day of the week; then I worked for the Manila International Film Festival and with the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, through which I saw a whole lot more foreign films, some of them eye-popping in certain unspeakable ways; finally I caught up (or is it the other way around?) with the video revolution in my access, as film teacher, to equipment and sources and grants.

Mostly it's the Hollywood (a synecdoche for American) titles (films, metonymically) that get released hereabouts, but even then.... Milos Forman's *Amadeus* (1984), the Oscar best-film winner of the '80s that more than any other such awardee could fully exploit any large-screened hi-fi-equipped theater, still has to premier in Manila. Among the other honorees that distinguished the decade would be similar exponents of the romantic epic, specifically Sydney Pollack's *Out of Africa* (1985) and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* (1987); ironically, the other type of Oscar winner, minor-scale achievements like Robert Redford's *Ordinary People* (1980), Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986), James L. Brooks's *Terms of Endearment* (1983), and Barry Levinson's *Rain Man* (1988), never fail to make it here.

Quite likely the world-class big-budget period project came of age in the '80s, with the "old-fashioned" Oscar winners plus possibly John Boorman's *Excalibur* and Warren Beatty's *Reds* (both 1981) and two Japanese products, Akira Kurosawa's *Kagemusha* (1980) and Shōhei Imamura's *The Ballad of Narayama* (1983), proving that the art of film had arrived at a glorious, if a bit smug, middle age. Critics' choices have meanwhile also included flawed

major-scale items like Kurosawa's *Ran* (1985) and Sweden's *Fanny and Alexander* (1982, dir. Ingmar Bergman), but for the moment the ones aforelisted, coupled with the advantages of state-of-the-art playback equipment, should suffice to convert doubters to the excessive, almost sinful pleasures of cinema.

Commercial (read: kiddies-mostly) efforts fared less fairly. Steven Spielberg's *E.T.: The Extra-Terrestrial* (1982) requires increasingly long stretches of time in order to recapture its original heartwarming function, while the *Star Wars* series (Irvin Kershner's *The Empire Strikes Back* [1980] and Richard Marquand's *Return of the Jedi* [1983]), of which the middle trilogy—God forbid any further inspiration!—ended during the '80s, turned out about and appropriately as nourishing as popcorn; Spielberg's *Raiders of the Lost Ark* (1981) had a more manic sequel (*Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* [1984]) and a somewhat affecting third installment (*Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* [1989]), which makes the series slightly more tolerable in the long run. After counting out such dubiously motivated efforts, including the ones initiated by Sylvester Stallone and slasher-film specialists, a curious case would be Robert Zemeckis's *Back to the Future* (1985), which seems to be the best of the commercial pack so far, and has recently had a wildly inventive sequel (*Back to the Future Part II* [1989]), despite a superabundance of loop-holes; the third part might yet be one of the '90s events worth the attention.

What could have been *the* American movie of the '80s, the continuation of *the* American series of the '70s, will now have to be relegated also to the '90s: Francis Ford Coppola's *The Godfather Part III*, currently in production. The most interesting Hollywood development during the past decade has been the unexpected combination of quirky intelligence with uniquely cinematic sensibilities evidenced in a lot of personal projects (and critics' favorites) such as David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* (1986), Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* (1988), Jonathan Demme's *Melvin and Howard* (1980), Brian De Palma's *Dressed to Kill* (1980), and what may be the ultimate mergence of epic scope and personal statement so far, Terry Gilliam's *Brazil* (1985). Woody Allen did *Zelig* (1983) and *The Purple Rose of Cairo* (1985) and two other comedies I (and Manila) still have to catch, *Hannah and Her Sisters* (1986) and *Radio Days* (1987), during a time when auteurism started running out of fanatic supporters. Martin Scorsese became the Johnny-come-lately among survey respondents, with his *Raging Bull* (1980) ranking number one in

both *American Film* and *Premiere* magazine polls; his cause célèbre, *The Last Temptation of Christ* (1988), as disturbing in its own imperfections as his Jake LaMotta biopic, must have contributed a lot to the last-minute increase in his credibility stocks.

The best '70s film, Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975), saw a reprise in two smaller-scaled (and situationally related) projects, John Sayles's *Return of the Secaucus Seven* (1980) and Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill* (1983). The milieu-realist format was better off exported to other countries, with two Italian samples, Liliana Cavani's *The Skin* (1981) and Paolo and Vittorio Taviani's *The Night of the Shooting Stars* (1982), representing some of the better First-World attempts, alongside a number of Third-World efforts: Turkey's *Yol* (1982, dir. Yılmaz Güney) for one, plus yes!, a number of Filipino productions. What have we to look forward to from hereon? More ambitious Hollywood series, possibly; conscientizing products (reminiscent of the '80s' Latin American movies) from the new democracies in Eastern Europe; more technically assured and artistically innovative (if we're lucky—with our government, that is—we could be it) Third-World titles; and the future resulting from rivalries between Americans and the Japanese in updating, exploring, and standardizing converged media and formats. The countdown, in case we haven't noticed, has already begun.

## **Metro Manila Film Festival 1976-86**

Purists may carp: the Metro Manila Film Festival may be traced to as far back as 1965, when the first Manila festival pronounced Gerardo de Leon's *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api* best picture. But truth to tell, the track record of city-wide film festivals doesn't seem comparable to that of the MMFF, the de Leon obra aside. The most to be had then were earnest entries, most consistently by Augusto Buenaventura, who later had difficulty measuring up to the competition in the MMFF; and though we may take note that Ismael Bernal, Lino Brocka, Celso Ad. Castillo, and Jun Raquiza had one entry each in various years during their period of emergence prior to the first MMFF, their titles then were not distinguished enough to make the grade within the respective festivals they joined—much less would those same titles be even considered for those same filmmakers' retrospectives. Once we distance

ourselves from the trauma of the MMFF's formative years, negating in the process the occasional results of its awards contests, we would have on hand a name-droppable and, more important, viewable list of films whose contribution to the development of artistic consciousness in the mainstream of the local movie industry cannot be discounted.

Held in 1976, the first Christmas-season MMFF<sup>7</sup> realized a coup—or, more accurately, a series of coups (how connotations could change in the span of a decade!): aside from the fact that the festival itself managed to absorb all the city-based festivals within the metropolis, it also acquired the lucrative Christmas season playdate—an achievement that was to be contested by lobbyists for foreign distributors as late as last year. Brocka proved how vital his second wind was with *Insiang*, coming as he did fresh from two consecutive-year triumphs with *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (1974) and *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975). Lupita Aquino Kashiwahara (then Concio) came up with *Minsa'y Isang Gamu-gamo*, widely admired for its open anti-imperialist stand (a rarity at the time), but less impressive in retrospect. The real winner was of course Eddie Romero, whose *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?* eliminated the has-been implication in the word comeback; the film went on to win the first critics' best-film prize, and set standards for overall quality that still have to be surpassed by subsequent MMFF entries.

Romero's achievement turned out a mixed blessing for the next year's (1977) festival. In no other year were the entries 100-percent serious, but the expectations generated by the previous year's edition led to so much strife and fury that the then First Lady stepped in and, in a move that should have been regarded as ominous, resolved the brouhaha by simply recalling the results. So much then for intelligent solutions; the line-up consisted of the best-film winner, Castillo's *Burlesk Queen*, a much-maligned work that, upon recent re-viewing, has unexpectedly aged well; Romero's entry *Banta ng Kahapon* and Mike de Leon's *Kung Mangarap Ka't Magising*, which along with Castillo's film garnered critics' nominations; Bernal's *Walang Katapusang Tag-araw*, Brocka's *Inay*, Joey Gosiengfia's *Babae ... Ngayon at Kailanman*, Mario O'Hara and Romy Suzara's *Mga Bilanggong Birhen*, and Gil Portes's *Sa Piling ng mga Sugapa*.

As a result, serious industry practitioners seemed to have shied away from the MMFF. The next year, 1978, featured Eddie Garcia's best-film winner

*Atsay* and a slightly better one by Brocka, *Rubia Servios*; the year after (1979) had *Ina Ka ng Anak Mo* by the persistent Brocka and a flawed *Ang Alamat ni Julian Makabayan* by Castillo. The incursion of out-and-out commercial products was to characterize the MMFF since the *Burlesk Queen* fiasco, but the 1979 event contained a more insidious development: strict adherence to the authoritarian regime's stipulation of a "developmentalist" criterion. The year's winner was a genuinely inconsequential population-control mishmash, *Kasal-Kasalan, Bahay-Bahayan*. The next year (1980) had another earnest Buenaventura effort, *Taga sa Panahon*, held aloft over two objectively superior titles, Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Brutal* and Brocka's *Bona*, as well as a number of relatively still-superior commercial works, specifically Laurice Guillen's *Kung Ako'y Iiwan Mo*, Danny Zialcita's *Langis at Tubig*, and most impressively Ronwaldo Reyes' first installment of his *Ang Panday* series.

In 1981 the practice of artistic compromise in award-giving was abandoned, at least for best-film winners. Mike de Leon's *Kisapmata* was the only noteworthy entry though, with less significant entries by Luis Enriquez (*Init o Lamig*) and Eduardo Palmos (*Ang Babae sa Ulog*); Zialcita's *Karma* ran second, in terms of quality and box-office appeal, to Reyes's *Ang Pagbabalik ng Panday*. The next year (1982) threatened to outdo the impact of 1976. Bernal's *Himala* was best picture, although Diaz-Abaya's *Moral* has proved more satisfying with the passage of time. Two other entries—Romero's *Desire* and Butch Perez's *Haplos*—were eclipsed by the grandeur of the first two, with a non-festival entry—Peque Gallaga's *Oro, Plata, Mata*, screened within the festival period at the Manila Film Center—making waves of its own. Diaz-Abaya acquired belated recognition the year after (1983), when her *Karnal* was adjudged winner; although not as accomplished a work as *Moral*, it still outdistanced the competition: Brocka's *Hot Property* and Gallaga's *Bad Bananas sa Puting Tabing*.

The previous two years were marked by correct decision-making that tended to leave out some innovative entries. O'Hara's *Bulaklak sa City Jail* and Castillo's *Paradise Inn* won in 1984 and 1985 respectively, with acceptable choices like Tata Esteban's *Alapaap* and Bernal's and Gallaga's segments in the omnibus *Shake, Rattle and Roll* acquiring recognition in 1984 and Brocka's *Ano ang Kulay ng Mukha ng Diyos?* for last year. A few others, specifically Portes's *Bukas ... May Pangarap* and Abbo Q. de la Cruz's *Misteryo sa Tuwa* in

1984 and Mel Chionglo's *Bomba Arienda* in 1985 served to demonstrate how the MMFF has come to require a strong commercial orientation not only within the festival itself, but even among the prospective winners.

This year marks more than just the first MMFF after over a decade of constant but on-the-whole commercial activity. It would also be the first one since the departure of former President Marcos and his meddlesome First Lady. Will it succeed, as most of the rest of the nation has, in effecting a break from usual expectations? Will it also sustain the uneasy mix of commerce and artistry amid the occasional awards controversy? Or will it recede further into the purveyance of escapism, as the movie industry has been doing since February 1986, oblivious to a political situation that purports to be revolutionary in nature? The moviehouses as well as our movie-addicted populace will hold the answer.

## Note

7. This was actually the second Metro Manila Film Festival, and also the last to be known as the Metropolitan Film Festival; the previous year's MFF was held during the anniversary of martial law in September 1975—which also happened to be Ferdinand Marcos's birth month. All subsequent editions retained the Christmas-holiday playdate.

## LGBTQ Filmfests

I am [ca. 2006] a visiting professor at Hallym University in Korea, but my affiliation is with the University of the Philippines (UP). I was an alumnus of the UP undergraduate film program, and on my return from graduate studies in the United States (where I was mainly a queer-filmfest spectator), I helped set up the UP Film Institute (UPFI) as well as its MA film program. As founding director of the UPFI, I was able to oversee a number of regular screenings and retrospectives, including one-shot gay-film events. Recently the UPFI just finished providing a venue for the third edition of the Pink Film Festival (subtitled International Gay and Lesbian Film Festival). The 800-seat UPFI film theater has the unique advantage of being exempt from censorship, so the incentives for using it as a venue are obvious.

As already pointed out in several responses in the previous roundtable,<sup>8</sup> the concept of an LGBTQ-specific film festival cannot escape being associated with the more-generalized practice of globalization. In a Third World setting such as the Philippines's, this gets played out mainly as an unfortunate alliance between queerness and a relatively privileged social standing, literalized in emerging indie-digital outputs where the filmmakers' entrepreneurial daring is contained by the attention they devote to middle-class characters.

There are several ways to argue how queer festivals may be ultimately superfluous in this type of setting. The Philippines' best-known film director, the late Lino Brocka, has a couple of foreign-released gay titles to his name, originally introduced to the world-at-large via gay filmfests. Yet Brocka's gay films remain fundamentally conflicted, riven as they are by the tension between the radical unruliness of queer lifestyles and the normativizing prescriptions of organized-leftist politics.

In contrast, the still-fairly active mainstream industry can occasionally still conjure up film texts whose queerness is sometimes compromised but also sometimes impressively enhanced by the circumstances of genre practice. The country's most celebrated censorship case dealt with such a product, Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980), while a recent city film festival showcased a film, Joel C. Lamangan's *Sabel* (2004), whose real-life-based central character transitioned from heterosexual promiscuity through nunhood, wifehood, and motherhood, finally winding up as a righteous guerrilla sympathizer with a lesbian spouse.

One further reason specialized festivals need reconsideration is the fact that local consumers have better ways to access quality products without having to masquerade, as it were, in an aesthetes-only venue whose social dynamics resemble that of a Chelsea singles club. With more genuine risk-taking, one could browse through the Muslim flea-market area of downtown Manila, risking police raids and petty criminality to purchase the widest possible range of contemporary DVD products, including straight and queer pornography.

The significance of such a phenomenon has not been lost on US Embassy officials and the International Intellectual Property Alliance, which placed the Philippines on its watch list of intellectual property violators. Battle lines

are being drawn with increasing belligerence—not just in terms of shootouts between vendors and raiders but also in the spectacle of film artists and scholars “coming out” in mainstream media outlets in support of this particular form of economic transgression. With videos selling at about US\$1, as low as 3 percent of the price of the same products in a “legitimate” Philippine outlet, the issue ought to be a no-brainer if not for the profit-at-all-costs machinations of foreign distributors—whose own products, we may do well to add, sell for significantly less in their home countries, as can be seen in the recently announced American line of one-dollar DVDs. Thanks to the pirates (or what I have called, in recent conference papers, anti-imperialist video-dubbing service providers<sup>9</sup>), ordinary consumers can now shop for and program their own personalized film retrospectives.

Finally—and this is where my argument faces a number of interdisciplinary overlaps—perhaps a queer film festival does not really add anything much to a culture that always-already partakes of queerness, not just in the film-consumerist sense where working-class porn viewers switch from straight porn to queer products without any compunction to justify themselves. What makes a movie like *Manila by Night* so effective, and still threatening, a quarter-century after its release is the fact that its depiction of polymorphous sexualities is recognizable to anyone who has grown up in a Philippine urban-working-class milieu. This is where the Philippines (and perhaps some of its immediate neighbors, but I dare not venture into this area for now) departs from being discernibly Asian in terms of its sexual mores and appears more and more like one of the Pacific Island groups and Latin-American territories with which it shares linguistic properties.

To reconfigure what value a gender-/sexuality-oriented film festival could proffer, and what shape it ought to take, one will have to look more closely at the sundry goings-on in Philippine bedrooms, restrooms, parks, theaters, and other semiprivate spaces, preferably without the binoculars supplied by North-American sexual ideologies. More challengingly, such a project will have to determine its scope of beneficiaries: the population at large first and foremost, of course, but then where should we position interested liminal groups such as Western sexual adventurers, cultural anthropologists, and, those odd-though-still-possibly queer specimens, alienated native indie practitioners?

In my years of shuttling between relatively developed countries and my Third-World home, the shifts always became more than semantic. When I wanted to watch a queer film, I would buy a ticket to, say, New York's Mix event. But if it was a queer environment I longed for, I would be more than happy if I could afford a trip back home, in a country constantly fucked over by economic and religious colonizations and learning, however slowly, to create and operate its own technologies of resistance. In this respect, any local festival, any film screening for that matter, could be as queer as it gets.

## Notes

8. Written as a contribution to the Queer Film and Video Festival Forum's Take Two: Critics Speak Out section, edited by Chris Straayer and Thomas Waugh.
9. Joel David, "Cutthroat Archipelago: Video Piracy in and around the Philippines," *Culture Industry and Cultural Capital: Transnational Media Consumption and the Korean New Wave in East Asia: Conference Proceedings* (Seoul: Institute for Communication Arts & Technology, 2005) 105-09; and "Condemned Property: Film Piracy in the Philippines" (paper presented at The Film Scene: Cinema, the Arts, and Social Change conference, Hong Kong, April 2006).

## Pinoy Filmfests ca. 2013

This year would be as good as—better, actually, than—any in many a Pinoy's lifetime to talk about local cinema.<sup>10</sup> This early (last quarter, as of this writing), 2013 will be remembered as one of the major watershed moments in Philippine film activity, of which the most impressive ones transpired during the Marcos dictatorship: 1976, followed by the even-numbered years of the early '80s: 1980, 1982, and 1984. Actually closer inspection of any of this era's readily available filmographies will support the argument that some of these "years" were in fact longer than 12 months. The first period, for example, began in 1975 with Lino Brocka's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, while the early 1980s was actually a sustained half-decade of growth, with the culminating year, 1984, extending way to the end of 1985. Sadly, for someone who had gone through those years, I'd tend to associate 2013 not with 1976 (when the country was benefiting from the then-recent

stability provided by the implementation of martial law), but with 1984, when Pinoy film artists were performing at their peak right at the moment when the nation was reeling from the economic trauma wrought by widespread corruption and civil disobedience, exacerbated by the US-activated global economic recession.

The disasters of 2013 may have been partly environmental rather than entirely political this time around, but it should never be too premature to call attention to the productivity of local filmmakers, again because of the way that the 1980s anti-dictatorship movement overrode most reasonable responses to Pinoy film achievements: the early '80s seemed impressive enough only in retrospect, mainly because what succeeded the Marcos era was several years of sub-quality productions followed by a spell of near-total inactivity and the studios' inevitable attempts at profitability via the desperate measures of infantile fantasies, toilet-humor comedies, and exploitative sex dramas. If one were to read mainstream film commentary during the late Marcos period, it would seem that nothing of import was being done then—an attitude meant to reflect on the decline of the regime as a whole.

Hence any responsible observer would be obliged to declare that the evidence of quality film production in 2013 has so far been solid enough so that, if nothing else gets released during the rest of the year except for the middlebrow romances and funny-face comedies that established studios had been leaning on for the past couple of decades, we would still have more than enough reason to commemorate the year. Fortuitously, the promise of interesting productions has not been entirely exhausted: the very last event, the Christmas season's Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF), has been attempting a throwback to its glory years via its "New Wave" module, a side event of lesser-budgeted "independent" projects.

## Festivities

In ironic contrast with the present, the MMFF's past role had been central to so-called Golden-Age activity, with 1976's first December edition yielding Eddie Romero's *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?* and Brocka's *Insiang*, and subsequent editions showcasing some of the best output of their respective years, all more or less deserving of canonical stature: Celso Ad. Castillo's *Burlesk Queen* in 1977, Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Brutal* and Brocka's

*Bona* in 1980, Mike de Leon's *Kisapmata* in 1981, Ishmael Bernal's *Himala* and Diaz-Abaya's *Moral* in 1982, Diaz-Abaya's *Karnal* in 1983, Mario O'Hara's *Bulaklak sa City Jail* in 1984, and Castillo's *Paradise Inn* in 1985 (two of the better festival franchises, the *Panday* and *Shake, Rattle & Roll* series, were also initiated during this period). From 1986 onward the MMFF had to struggle mightily but only wound up at best with also-rans, finally surrendering to the prerogative of stipulating box-office success as a major awards criterion about a decade ago, right at the point when it assumed a national character by appending "Philippines" to its name (MMFF-P). The process by which the event squandered its founding ideals should be an urgent problematic for any serious student of local cinema; unfortunately, the auteur-infatuated and canon-obsessed orientation of most local film scholars tends to preclude any initiative toward this end. Instead, the response of concerned individuals and institutions seems to have mirrored their reactions to the limitations of award-giving bodies: that is, first draw up a series of complaints about the flawed organization, then introduce a new award-giving system claiming to be an improved version of the earlier one—which in turn would be subject to the same dynamics that result in another process of deterioration, leading once more to the formation of still another group introducing its claim to award-giving validity.

Hence during the early 2000s, when celluloid film production had dwindled close to single-digit levels, there were actually more awards in existence than films produced annually;<sup>11</sup> similarly, there appeared to have been a subsequent trend toward the proliferation of film festivals, with 2013 marking the year when their numbers began to escalate. The critical response to the MMFF's problems was immediate, expressed as early as the year it first introduced commercial performance as a measure for artistic recognition. Yet the formulation of a solution to its problems arrived only after several other MMFF-inspired festivals had sprouted, and only as an apparent afterthought, with the December festival being required to showcase "digital indies" (à la Cinemalaya, Cinema One, and Cinemanila)—as a pre-festival side event rather than in direct competition with the main entries.

One may argue (persuasively, to my mind) that film festivals are more directly productive than award-giving activities. More films being produced is always good news, and I'd maintain that in the most progressive sense,

quality should become at best a secondary consideration: industrial activity always signifies that some people, few though they may be, are being gainfully employed, so no matter how loud the complaints against MMFF rise up, there will always be voices, belonging to the least privileged participants in the festival's film projects, who will have been grateful for the event's continuance simply because at the end of the day, they were able to earn an adequate living from a legal undertaking.

Yet the dangers of unreflective festivalizing (per Kanye West's useful coinage) ought to have been inferred from the problems that awards activities have faced: not for nothing has an award-giving component been institutionalized in standard filmfest arrangements. So when an innovation like the MMFF can be bowdlerized to the point where in its current phase it could never be recognized as a kindred spirit by any of its earlier versions, the first issue to keep in mind is a paradox: that its current failure actually proceeded from its earlier success. The current iterations of the project-subsidizing merit-conscious festivalization of noteworthy film output stand at a remove from (and assert their superiority to) the MMFF in large part because of their inability to amass the same amount of profits; i.e., their moral superiority is perceived by critical observers in direct proportion to these events' symbolic distance from filthy lucre. Once these admittedly enormous differences dwindle enough to relieve the seeming atrociousness of the older festival, there had better be mechanisms (not based on the personal preferences of their founding leaders) in the younger events to ensure that these do not follow the MMFF's disgraceful about-face.

### Sample "Fringe" Events

As long as the MMFF is around, any of the newer events can claim to be an Other type of undertaking: the "Cine" triumvirate of Cinemalaya, Cinema One, and Cinemania are only begrudged a limited measure of institutional support, while 2013's Juanas-come-lately share the earlier trio's troubles, plus they have to operate in their predecessors' shadows.<sup>12</sup> Yet, if I may beg the reader's indulgence, I would like to demonstrate how festival Otherness can never be pure, and can always be a matter of what anyone—organizer, participant, even observer—can be capable of imagining. In doing so we might be able to run through a few significant products of one of these events, so we'd

even be returning to the auteurist and canonical issues that I had attempted to shunt aside earlier.

The redundantly titled Sineng Pambansa National Film Festival, like the MMFF, is more overtly a government-sponsored undertaking than, say, Cinemalaya, which is run by a team of outsiders in a government agency. The Sineng Pambansa organizer's clout was demonstrated when the Film Development Council of the Philippines managed to wangle a full week's run at SM Cinemas, the country's top movie-theater chain. Also, all the names in its so-called All Masters Edition (hereafter AME) would be recognized by the relatively elderly among us as veterans of the MMFF, either as direct participants or as the latter's contemporaries, and with an early winner (Celso Ad. Castillo) represented posthumously. How then does this event become its own Other?

From the fairly basic process of tracking its participants' career trajectories. Inasmuch as the MMFF itself, as we noted earlier, had transmogrified into the very condition—excessively commercial film practice—that it had originally sought to rectify, the auteurs who had been its prestige era's most successful players would have had to give way to more mercenary colleagues or newcomers, or to their own less illustrious tendencies. Since the newer digital-indie festivals stake their reputation on the breaks they provide younger practitioners (Cinemalaya and Cinema One even reverse the MMFF's tokenism by allowing side events for masters—which in fact results in the same kind of Othering for the same group of people), we can provisionally conclude that at this point, it is the favored practitioners of yesteryears, the names that get listed immediately after the local Parthenon's top-ranked Brocka and Bernal, who get marginalized when it comes to festival film-production projects.

The AME's decision to dispense with the standard award-giving procedure (performed via the equalizing decision of declaring all the directors winners) has distinguished it further from both the MMFF and its "Cine" rivals. In a sense, this forces us to appreciate what this festival has been able to achieve that the others will be unable to: a throwback to the old MMFF, wherein even the least successful entries guarantee the mass-identified viewer that she or he is not going to be regarded as unworthy of understanding whatever statements the texts wish to make. In this instance, one's

disappointment will always be tempered by a personal longing, the same way one gets let down by a close friend; we are able to understand the intention behind the effort, and wish that the person had been up to the challenge, or had been capable of the kind of reflective and ego-free honesty that would have prevented this kind of waste of time and money. In terms of the type of disappointment one occasionally encounters in a contemporary digi-indie filmfest, where even an otherwise impressive display of school-trained skills could not mask the sense that the filmmakers would rather skip the local screening process and fast-forward to the Euro-filmfest circuit, I would be willing to rewind to a few decades back and slap around my younger self for having wished for more of this type of sensibility.

### Masters' Degrees

About half of the AME entries—a higher average actually than the typical local festival, except for the exception-that-proved-the-rule 1977 MMFF—may be regarded as noteworthy, in both the positive and the negative resonances that such a term conveys these days. In fact, in the case of Mel Chionglo's *Lauriana*, Chito Roño's *Badil*, and Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes's *Sonata*, the worst that can be said is that these filmmakers had done better work—capable of laying claim to lengthy lists that would be the envy of any directorial newcomer—in the past. In the case of Jose Javier Reyes's *Ano ang Kulay ng mga Nakalimutang Pangarap?*, Joel Lamangan's *Lihis*, and Elwood Perez's *Otso*, one could even make the more brazen assertion (beyond contention, in the case of Perez) that these were their respective directors' career best.

I had been able to focus on half of these aforementioned titles mainly because these were the ones I was able to rewatch, for highly subjective as well as pragmatic reasons; given a freer schedule and even freer budget, I would gladly reacquaint myself with the rest as well. Nevertheless, we could begin by taking note here of the manner in which two of these six constitute throwbacks to the debates on cultural politics circa the Marcos era. Gallaga, whose *Oro, Plata, Mata* launched the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines' production scheme (the mother of all quality-determined film-subsidy programs in the country) in 1982, experienced pushback from leftist quarters for his alleged empathy for the plight of the landed class in his home province. This perspective belies the arguably stronger sympathy

his debut film extended to the movie's underclass characters, including the disgruntled and sexually exploited *lumpen* gang whose (initially successful) response lay closer to anarchy than to principled revolt; this would conceivably have aggravated the critical perception of any concerned-though-Orthodox Marxist observer, enough to override the film's larger achievement as a triumph of naturalist cine-aesthetics.

*Sonata* references *Oro, Plata, Mata* in a literal manner, by setting the narrative not just in Bacolod but also in the very house, in the older film, where the extended family and their servants had their extensive idyll, before the incursion of the Japanese Imperial Army forced them further into the jungle and incited the behavior that one character described as *asal-hayop* or beastly. In contrast, *Sonata* presents a major character (played by the same actress who essayed the *asal-hayop* character, and who also happened to be the first female face to appear after the opening credits, in the earlier film) without the benefit of the perspective of secondary characters; the fact that she happens to be an eccentric crisis-ridden global artist—a middle-aged woman alienated from her society and culture, one eager to interact with social outcasts since she perceives herself as one—ought to have clued over-eager commenters to the warning that the narrative is not meant to be read as a “correct” allegory of class relations.

The Gallaga-Reyes command of feature filmmaking craft has reached a point where one may note the ways in which the filmmakers tread on possibly politically contentious territory yet revel in the seductive pleasures of high culture, scenic bounties, childlike innocence, and honest emotions foregrounded in the film, held together by the larger-than-life delivery of Cherie Gil, who in her prime has been towering over her gifted clan and who, in a just system, should now have several other bigger stars begging for her mercy and producers begging for her service. As a way of further qualifying my notions about *Sonata*, I decided to rewatch Behn Cervantes's *Sakada* (1976), which purported to depict the aspect of sugar plantation workers supposedly neglected by Gallaga (prior to and with Reyes), and a curious event took place: I witnessed a film where the harshness of *hacenderos* was received without humor or goodwill from otherwise sufficiently mature characters on both sides of the divide; the area they lived in was devoid of natural attractions, except for the grotesquerie displayed by the lords of the

place; and in its world no perversion, much less perverse pleasure, could thrive beyond always-politicized decadence. I would believe myself capable of accepting both versions of reality proffered by these two conflicting texts, but I might have to state that one of them might be closer to the real-life existence I had been able to observe in my peripatetic lifetime; and once *Sakada* eventually qualifies its political agenda by laying conflictual blame on middle persons rather than on the enlightened and essentially well-meaning plantation owners, I knew that at least in this regard, the Gallaga texts display a more progressive attitude.

Another AME entry, *Lhis*, set me off in another direction, this time the recent past through a still-to-be-realized future. Joel Lamangan had announced a few years ago that he had decided to embark on a series of projects that would constitute his legacy as Pinoy filmmaker: a coverage, via digital feature-film texts, of organized resistance to institutional repressions, as a means of commemorating (and in the process redefining) people power.<sup>13</sup> The few that I had seen among his half-dozen installments so far evince a mature artist seeking to grapple with new technology as well as material that walks a tightrope in bypassing the generic excesses of commercial practice while acknowledging its audience's entertainment expectations. In particular, one of the early texts, the Cinemalaya entry *Sigwa* (2010), goes to the extent of acknowledging the internal divisions that had effectively balkanized the once-monolithic Communist Party of the Philippines, although one's receptiveness would depend on what position one would take regarding the legitimacy of the organization's founding leadership.

*Lhis* allows for an externalized critique that may be shared by outsiders, a fact which might have enhanced its achievement as the most successful box-office performer among what we might provisionally term Lamangan's progressive film series. The primary reason for its appeal is its clever reconfiguration of the inseparability of the personal from the political, in situating a then-disallowed preference, homosexuality, within the setup of the still-disallowed New People's Army. From observing the mostly young and presumably straight mass viewers who watched it, I'd speculate that their shock of recognition lay not in the now-tolerated display of male queerness, but in the intense romanticism that it could engender, with the idealism of a liberation army, ennobled by its opposition to the fascist dictatorship then

ensconced in the country's seat of power, affirming the tendency's righteousness (per Foucauldian discourse) paradoxically by repressing it.

Thus, just as Marxist principles had to struggle against right-wing forces, so did queer desire set out to prove that an organization claiming to uphold radical change had its own limitations to confront. That it succeeded in doing so redounds to the NPA's credit, inasmuch as it soon thereafter opted to recognize same-sex marriage, and in fact preceded the US, the object of its anti-imperialist critique, in introducing this socio-legal innovation. *Lihis* primes an audience conceivably less sympathetic to the historically demonized options of communal commitment and queer love by relying on capable storytelling as well as strong performances; Jake Cuenca in particular had my memory scrambling for any previous depiction in local cinema of such an intense combination of male longing and frustration—and when I finally remembered an equivalent sample, it was (not surprisingly) Eddie Garcia's in Brocka's *Tubog sa Ginto*. The other means by which *Lihis* makes a connection with unaffiliated viewers is through its feminist advocacy, not just in framing the narrative via the investigative research of the daughter of one of the gay male characters, but also in allowing the daughter's mother, excluded by the inevitable fruition of her husband's same-sex relationship, to express her disappointment not in her eventually divorced husband's preference but in the hypocrisy of the movement's leadership in declaring the relationship wrong but condoning it anyway for militaristic reasons.

Lamangan continues to earn flak for having once been extremely successful as a commercial player in the industry. In this regard, he has risked his own recuperation as Pinoy film artist by selecting material that requires the very opposite of flashy style—the cinematic “value” that over-schooled critics and aspirants regard as proof that one is not (or is no longer) profit-oriented, as if wasting producers' currency and consumers' patience were the whole point, or even a major part, of justifying one's participation in industrial activity. A major local filmmaker, Ishmael Bernal, had been similarly penalized for resorting to aesthetic strategies that were more apt for Third-World contexts, and it would be tantamount to critical arrogance to maintain that Lamangan's previous modes of practice and the stylistic decisions he makes for his progressive film series belong in the same realm just because they share the same credit. One could be disabused of this notion

by watching the series chronologically; a still-forthcoming but already completed entry, *Burgos*, might soon be available and boasts of an even more subtle command of what may be described as a resolutely stylish stylelessness, with the same clutch of strong performances (Lorna Tolentino first and foremost playing against type, to surprisingly effective results) that help propel the narrative toward an open ending filled with grace and wonder.

### Power of Two

With Elwood Perez and *Otso*, the AME could claim that it has performed a signal intervention in the historical narrative of Philippine cinema. *Otso* is the kind of work that incites observers to return to the filmmaker's early output, usually in order to search for evidence of how she or he had been dropping hints of the genius that had lately just bloomed and taken everyone by surprise. Allow me to simplify the hunt by stating that it gets easier the closer we get to the present. In his early years Perez was identified, whether rightly or wrongly, as part of a circle of "camp" filmmakers that, in its most basic configuration, included Bernal, Joey Gosiengfiao, and (later) Cloyd Robinson; not only was the group mislabelled (they used some elements of camp and were therefore campy in style whereas camp, in contrast, could never be deliberate by definition), the membership was not one of equals, with poor Robinson the least significant of the lot. Gosiengfiao peaked early and came up with at least one successful genre satire; those puzzled by the current cult devotion paid to *Temptation Island* (1980) can rest easy, since it's *Underage* (from the same year) that I'd champion, for its gleeful skewering of the poor-little-rich-kids tearjerker movie without having to resort to easy misogyny and sloppy execution.

More relevant to the issue of reception, Gosiengfiao and Perez (and, why not, Robinson) were generally ignored, if not reviled, by serious commentators of the time for indulging in what were perceived as frivolities—humor, soft-core sex, reflexivity, genre send-ups, avoidance of or cynicism toward political issues—and, even worse for the critics though obviously not for the producers, profiting considerably from these attempts. This was the period when martial law was starting to worsen, after all. The price extracted from Perez must have stung since, after the Marcos regime, when Robinson and Gosiengfiao were becoming less active, he came into his own, possibly by

accident, the same way that *Otso* appears to have been unexpected. In 1989 he completed the final installment of Regal Films' revival of the Guy-and-Pip musical romance and provided the definitive sample of how a genre that seemed irredeemable, for having been excessively profitable for so long that it had gone out of circulation and had to be forcibly revived, could be reconceptualized as an epically proportioned social melodrama. *Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit* ought to have had a continuing impact, especially in today's artificial separation between "artistic" indie practitioners and "commercial" romantic-comedy specialists, but it was downgraded by the critics' group during its annual recognition ceremony in favor of a decidedly minor achievement by the more highly statured Bernal.

*Bilangin ang Bituin*, unlike, say, Bernal's *Pahiram ng Isang Umaga* (the film that the organized critics preferred), exhibited a number of emotional high points, customary characterizations, plot coincidences, and anticlimaxes that might have doomed its chances for people still unable to appreciate the creative rigor required to pull off generic transformation. Its prefiguration of *Otso* can in fact be seen in one of its most audacious (and consequently heavily criticized) stunts, that of casting the same love-team performers to play their own respective children, who in turn attempt to form a love team of their own, and who assuage their heartbreak upon discovering their relationship as siblings by counting out 2,001 stars in the night sky and driving off a cliff.

Perez's movies thereafter seemed bent on insisting on such a predilection for the perverse, which he had been able to indulge previously only in his sex-themed films.<sup>14</sup> With *Otso* he had come across a kindred spirit in the film's writer and performer, Vince Tañada, and finally had an opportunity to bring together fantastic symbolism, absurd logic, slapstick humor, surreal developments, substantial in-joke references, and that intangible element, the ability to continually tickle and titillate the audience so that they wind up forgiving the movie's several flights of fancy and pretensions to meanings that often get overturned in the end. Who could have imagined that a Pinoy film could present a full character's conflicted existence and multi-levelled disputes with political and showbiz figures without requiring several hours' worth of footage, and without aspiring to deaden its viewers' sense of fascination and discovery?

With *Otso*, Perez brings himself, and the rest of Philippine art and literature, to what we might be able to hope would be one of several peaks in postmodern practice. It should be made required viewing for the filmfest greenhorn hoping to impress occasionally even more clueless jurors on who should be the actual appreciators of cinematic achievements, just as mainstream filmmakers need to study it closely to learn how they can provide entertainment and still wind up with artistic self-respect. Tall order, I know, and it would be far easier to simply begin revising the assessment of Elwood Perez's significance. And if works with *Otso's* quota of audacity, substance, and pleasure can be ensured in future film festivals, then I'd be willing to revise my doom-and-gloom assessment of their future possibilities: let a hundred filmfests bloom.

## Notes

10. The author wishes to express gratitude for help extended by Mauro Feria Tumbocon Jr. and Patrick Flores; Peque Gallaga, Joel Lamangan and Ricardo Lee, Elwood Perez and Vince Tañada; Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil; Ronald Arguelles, Tammy B. Dinopol, and Nestor de Guzman; and Leloy Claudio.
11. The late Johven Velasco, author of *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2009), pointed this out to me in 2002, when I first returned to the country from graduate studies in the US. Since the movie press and original "academy" had not yet split up into schismatic rival blocs with their own award-giving mechanisms, and the academe- as well as the internet-based organizations still had to emerge, I wondered how he could say that the dozen-or-so award-giving bodies could exceed the few dozens of local titles being released, even if the non-celluloid productions were then still being excluded from the award-givers' major prizes. He replied that I was thinking in terms of singular "best film" trophies, when in fact each awards entity would have several other prizes at stake, with the smallest number, those handed out by the Young Critics Circle, starting at six (film including direction, screenplay, performance, "cinematography and visual design," editing, and "sound and aural orchestration").
12. Among the newly launched or relaunched occurrences are: an additional digital independent event (Cine Filipino); a few local-government revivals; a number

of regional fests; auteur retrospectives; and foreign screenings of Pinoy products, highlighted by the twentieth anniversary of the Filipino Arts & Cinema International (FACINE) in San Francisco, California.

13. Apart from the movies discussed in this section, the films that Joel Lamangan set out to direct as part of his legacy project are *Dukot* from 2009; *Patikul* from 2011; and *Migrante* from 2012. In an interview with the author, Lamangan stated that he has no plans so far of determining at what point the series will end, and that he hopes to be able to focus on the plight of rural workers in future assignments.
14. Another distinction that Elwood Perez had, relative to his “camp” buddies, was his willingness to depict ambitiously narrated sexual kinks and anomalies, thus aligning himself with such innovators as Ishmael Bernal and Celso Ad. Castillo. *Disgrasyada* in 1979 solidified Regal Films’ status as purveyor of the “bold” trend, and supposedly instigated a dressing down of producer Lily Monteverde by Imelda Marcos (in her infamous though possibly apocryphal “bamboo” speech castigating “Mother” Lily for being, in effect, un-Filipino); *Shame* launched Claudia Zobel in 1983 as the hottest sex kitten of her time, her career cut short in the next year by a fatal car accident; *Silip* (1985) rode on the censorship-exempt Manila Film Center’s propensity to offer increasingly extreme material.

## Old-Millennium Pinoy Film Reviews I: Various Sources

*Several reasons account for these entries' absence in any of my pre-millennial anthologies. The overarching excuse (or shall we say pretext) is that they made an awkward fit, but there's no reason to deny the obvious: they may have been, to my judgment, too makeshift, half-baked, juvenile, or just plain poorly written, starting from their impressionistic approach through their inconsistencies within each auteur's body of work, aggravated by the lack of a useful framework. Not that a few other of my anthologized articles weren't; but the ones here would have stood out—which means that, procedurally, I first attempted to cram everything I had on hand in previous book manuscripts, then eliminated those that didn't serve whatever point the adjacent articles were supposed to be supporting. I do not venture to explain why other anthologists actually accommodated some of these pieces, sometimes even mangling them further—but if any of these had to be consulted, for whatever reason, I prefer that the current "correctest" versions here be the ones that researchers look up.*

## Birds of Omen

### **Pagputi ng Uwak, Pag-itim ng Tagak**

Directed by Celso Ad. Castillo

Written by Celso Ad. Castillo, Iskho Lopez, and Lando Perez Jacob

James Joyce once said that he expected students of literature to devote their lifetime to studying his works. It wouldn't be much of a feat of the imagination to picture Celso Ad. Castillo sitting up straight and saying, "Well I can make the same demands too!" Indeed wind-raising has lately come easy for the craftsman behind *Burlesk Queen*: one need only read movie scribes' (nonsensical) write-ups to confirm Castillo's conceit. But nothing will illustrate his self-indulgence better than the movies he makes. The latest you might still catch downtown, *Pagputi ng Uwak, Pag-itim ng Tagak*.

Compared to *Burlesk Queen*, *Pagputi ng Uwak* is less of a technical mess. Particularly exceptional are the shots of rustic religious rituals; unfortunately their use does not progress beyond the literal level. This makes for increasing predictability toward the picture's end, as when the preparations for a military massacre are intercut with recitations of the tribulations of Jesus Christ. Attempts at authenticity appear to have been assiduous, but the project may have also proved too ambitious in this aspect. Thus one can find high-tension wires and Scotch-tinted car windows, not to mention recent beautification accomplishments, making their way into a 1950s period movie.

Performance-wise *Pagputi ng Uwak* leaves a lot more to be desired. Among the cast, only Mona Lisa manages to pull off a convincing characterization as Bembol Roco's mother. Angie Ferro and Adul de Leon, as Vilma Santos' spinster aunts, are no better than caricatures: funny maybe, but quite incredible. Joonee Gamboa has mellowed since his rudimental portrayal of an impresario in *Burlesk Queen*; his role, however, is far less significant this time, reduced as it is to playing the intermediary between star-crossed characters.

Executive producer Vilma Santos does better outside camera range. Her production is financially and artistically liberal, the sort the local audience has been deprived of since the dissolution of the previous censors board. Her performance though is about as effective as that of a drama guild's star

performer: she renounces her lover like she would a final exam, and later professors love for him like she would a teen idol. The same applies to Bembol Roco, about whose character more will be said later; suffice it to say that he still has yet to employ under-acting once more to his advantage. Meanwhile he and Santos are the industry's star couple, and there one has the trappings of the star system at work again.

Is there nothing at all to be said in favor of the movie? Come to think of it, *Burlesk Queen* did have a saving grace, and it is this same virtue—intention—which redeems *Pagputi ng Uwak*. In his works Castillo the artist seeks to depict the Filipino as only a fellow Filipino will understand, particularly in terms of pride and sentiment—values associated in Western aesthetics with melodrama. Which is what makes Castillo easy prey for local culture vultures: with technical excellence as a basic requisite for deserving favor, he barely makes it at first try; infatuation with alien modes of behavior further ensures their alienation from the obviously progressive statements he wishes to make.

Finally, Castillo takes the other half of the blame—for overcomplicating his vision, for leaving it tottering between individualist and populist morality, for attempting to say too many things in one go. Two and a half hours may be tedious for a commercial movie, but insufficient for lessons in two distinct and occasionally clashing camps. As in the case of *Burlesk Queen*, it is the subplot of *Pagputi ng Uwak* which promises more potential than the main story itself. Unfortunately it is also the subplot which is insufficiently developed (else it wouldn't be called a subplot).

*Pagputi ng Uwak* is set against government efforts, essentially insincere and often blundering, to win over Huk rebels during the administration of President Quirino. Dido (Bembol Roco), after realizing the losses his family suffered from landgrabbers—who happen to be his sweetheart's aunts, so the plot thickens—and the brutality dealt him by society for being lowly, enlists in the revolutionary movement. Once there, however, he longs for another rendezvous with Julie (Wilma Santos), by whom he has sired a daughter, and manages with the first encounter courtesy of her music maestro—who happens to be her father, so the situation solidifies, more so since the latter was rejected by his late common-law wife's sisters for conflicting class interests. Dido finally meets Julie and as they have sex, military elements sniff him out and gun him down, along with his sweetheart, mother, and comrades,

though not necessarily in that order. Only their love-child survives, but that should belong to another story.

Dido's decision to join the Huks should have logically proceeded from the impact of property divestment, as conveyed by his mother. In spite (or is it because?) of Mona Lisa's understated delivery he goes through the whole trouble of first furtively meeting and then eloping with Julie, without the slightest notion that he might be able to regain his family's estate thus. In fact he eventually appears to have been catapulted into the people's army by sheer circumstances, after his rebel uncle saves him from certain annihilation in the hands of police assassins.

Castillo apparently intended to temper the silliness of Dido and Julie's love story by contextualizing it in an explosive historical era. In doing so he failed to take into full account the fact that ordinary love cannot develop on its own in an extraordinary context. Still and all, by the very rarity of the movie's sympathy for a much-maligned development in Philippine history, Castillo has proved himself more daring than local filmmakers more adroit than himself. Given more expertise in similarly promising material (for which humility would be a helpful requisite), he may yet realize his delusion as the country's greatest filmmaker. At the moment, one will have to be content with the many lows and few highs of *Pagputi ng Uwak, Pag-itim ng Tagak*.

## Commercialism Triumphs Again

### **Bongga Ka 'Day**

Directed by Maryo J. de los Reyes

Written by Jake Tordesillas

*Bongga Ka 'Day* is director Maryo J. de los Reyes' vindication of his commercial prowess after his first and so far his only box-office flop *Disco Madhouse*. More important, it provides another argument aggravating the allegations that de los Reyes can do no better than his first effort, *High School Circa '65*. The story of *Bongga Ka 'Day*, to begin with, is nothing much: a bunch of college students undertake a Hotdog concert tour to be able to raise funds for subsequent projects. In the course of their activities, they all realize the

need to carry on with whatever they have accomplished—in terms of work, play, and love.

Such a broad premise has to be complemented with depth—a treatment which de los Reyes forsakes for the sake of pulling off well-executed individual scenes. This is best embodied by the lead character, Freda (Nora Aunor), who is supposedly hung up on being the sister of a renowned literary columnist and an aspiring architect. Naturally she takes advantage of her position as class president to slave-drive her classmates into fulfilling her (unspecified) personal ambitions. But even before her classmates point out her weakness to her, she readily acquiesces to their clamor for disco dancing, and even sings for them. Hence after the revelation of Aunor's trim bearing and confident dancing is appreciated, her usually sharp characterization is sorely missed.

Then she is made to fall in love first with Ruffy (Rolly Quizon) and then with Dave (Lloyd Samartino), a singing duet which breaks up without having once sung; but if only because of Quizon's inadequacy in acting and Samartino's stiffness in dancing, their singing may not be that badly wanted anyway. To create the semblance of a pattern, the rest of the cast take the cue from Freda and the duet, and fall in love with whoever is blocked nearby. The pairings are then finalized in the wedding of Bernie (Roi Vinzon) and Yogi (Debraliz), for whom love triumphs after a series of metaphysical doubts. During the ceremony, however, Freda indulges in an over-extended fantasy sequence with Dave through a garden frolic, a roll in the grass, another wedding, and two separate disco scenes, before returning to the reality at hand.

The list of similar confused developments, like Freda's fantasy, could go on and on. The audience is made to watch, for example, a transition from San Fernando to Olongapo to Angeles City, and made to listen to such lines as "*Kahit anong gawin natin, kaya nating gawin*" [Whatever we want to do, we'll be able to do] and "I don't really give my full self into it"—both of which may have been the intentions of the movie's makers. Indeed commercialism seems to have been *Bongga Ka 'Day's* primary concern. This inevitably results in the subordination of logic to saleable staples.

A blatant instance in the movie consists of the forced insertion of Hotdog numbers. After Glen (Dandin Ranillo), the queer classmate, discovers his father's death in Angeles and consequently realizes the futility of seeking a

father image, he launches into a fantasy sequence comprising a Hagibis and Paper Dolls spoof. The number in itself is tolerable if only because of its attendant music; but in no way does it reasonably fit its immediate situation without sidetracking the audience from the rest of the movie.

Even the title song, a smart sally on conditioned consumer preferences, is not pursued as a theme anywhere in the movie. Neither is there any character who is at least fond of *bongga* or who is an *Inday*. Instead there are remarks like “*Bongga siya, 'day*” and “*Bongga ka na rin, 'day*” which wrench the song from its intended context. This (mis)treatment calls to mind the non-realization of the social commentary on disco as an escapist fad in *Annie Batungbakal*: the movie (also by de los Reyes) chose to dwell instead on the well-worn theme of unrequited love.

The same charge of commercialism helps explain the movie's technical weaknesses. Whatever passes off as editing only serves to force the next episode into view. Even the challenge of capturing local rusticity has been abandoned in favor of conventional shots and injudicious use of slow motion and zooms. On the whole, *Bongga ka 'Day* is slovenly and incoherent, unworthy of the promise de los Reyes has been holding forth for over a year now. But if commercial success is all he has been after, then he can be content, even this early, with his achievements, and spare his audiences further frustrations.

## Effective Satire

### **Kontrobersyal**

Directed by Lino Brocka

Written by Tony Perez

*Kontrobersyal* so effectively satirizes the shortcomings of members of the movie industry that those who have been spared, movie critics included, should be relieved. The movie comes on with a rage so relentless that it renders its factual incidents stranger than fiction. Publicity stunts, exploitative arrangements, media corruption—all these and more appear with sufficient logical consistency to dishearten any well-meaning newcomer to the field.

The darker side of moviemaking in *Kontrobersyal* is embodied in a character, Mers Madsen, a shrewd and heartless producer-director-star builder. Upon desertion by her signature star, she chances upon a hopeful extra from among the latter's rushes. The discovery, it turns out, is perfect for Mers's purposes: young (16 years old), poor (Baryo Mandaragat resident), and willing. Mers renames her latest property Karina da Luz and signs her up for a minimal fee with an exclusive three-year contract. She then proceeds to initiate Karina in the tricks of her trade; the latter, for her part, though sometimes having to be forced to cooperate, nevertheless always manages to catch on.

The Mers character raises the movie's most disturbing issue: are intelligence and artistry in local cinema incompatible? If, like Mers, those entrenched in the system could afford to publicly profess that they couldn't care less about critical reactions as long as their movies make money, where does this place those who do care? Certainly not in the successfully satirical world of *Kontrobersyal*, whose questions are posed not for its inhabitants but for its audience—which should, like it or not, include those of the movie itself.

Profundities aside, the movie is also worth watching if only for Charo Santos's performance as Mers, particularly in several scenes where she undergoes total emotional reversals in a matter of seconds. With her performance Santos raises the heretofore unconsidered possibility that her past performances could have suffered from the inadequacy of role or direction rather than her capacity as performer. Karina, on the other hand, is portrayed persuasively enough by Gina Alajar up until her transition from innocence to corruption; thence her performance suffers from an imbalance in the development of her character. She cracks up after the abortion of her child by Mers's live-in lover Alain Soriano, then attempts suicide after Mers videotapes her drug-induced sex scenes; right after her hospitalization, however, she demands of Mers her independence in terms of pay, choice of projects, and romantic decisions. The transition is not helped in any way by Alajar's assumption of her show-must-go-on stance in a manner that is more dolorous than decisive; furthermore, she is made to interact with the least credible character in the movie: a self-righteous boyfriend who readily gives Karina up while, as he himself put it, thousands of other men would readily exchange places with him as the object of her affections.

The Karina character prevails in comparison with Alain. Phillip Salvador in the role has a harder time than the rest mainly because he is made to hold up to Santos's self-assured performance. Although Alain, for example, is the only character capable of making Mers cry by leaving her, his stare is about as clueless as Karina's during one of the latter's emotional breakdowns. This is most unfortunate when one considers that some of Salvador's performances in other Brocka movies—as Poldo in *Jaguar* and Gardo in *Bona*—rank among the best in recent memory. Nevertheless he is considerably aided by Brocka's flourishes in *Kontrobersyal*, notably in his walkout from the hospital where Karina is confined. Here a succession of images—of Karina cadaverously made up for noisy movie reporters in her room, of an emergency patient being wheeled in the corridor, of a mother sobbing over her baby in the elevator, and of more reporters crowding outside the hospital door—all help drive home, in impressionistic fashion, Alain's alienation.

In these and many other scenes Brocka gets able assistance from his ever-reliable cinematographer Conrado Baltazar, whose use of garish and colorful lighting enhances the excesses in Tony Perez's material. Current commercial scores are also parodied in Max Jocson's music, which is as deliberately crude and calculating as the titles of Mers's movies: *Darling*, *Wild Girl*, *Rape Victim*, *The Betamax Queen*. Such virtues virtually negate lapses like the continuity in Karina's nicotine habit or the sudden public anonymity of Alain after his falling out with Mers. After all, any movie which dares to decorate a devious director's office with industry statuettes deserves, by any means possible, to complete what statement it wishes to make.

## Oversimplifying Class Conflicts

### **Burgis**

Directed by Lino Brocka

Written by Jose Dalisay Jr.

A socialite mother blames her son's propensity for trouble on the lifting of martial rule; when later he gets mauled, she demands that a certain "Johnny" be called in to bring round justice. Such is the politicized approach that attempts to

distinguish *Burgis* from the usual run of youth-oriented movies. Yet this one, like the rest, succeeds only in so far as it struggles with the stolidity of its material.

*Burgis* starts out by cashing in on the recent popularity of pretty-faced Gabby Concepcion in the role of an aimless scion who finds direction through a consciousness of class differences. (In the process Concepcion gets to deliver some of the movie's flattest jokes—one on the death of Magellan a week after his introduction, another on the simulation of the sounds in a Central Park mugging). Concepcion plays Juanito Locsin, Juni for short, a consistent elite-school dropout who is brought by his parents to the (fictional) Eastern Colleges of the Republic prior to his leaving for the United States. At the decidedly lower-class institution Juni stands out because of his breeding and accessories. He falls in love with classmate Nedy (Amy Austria) to the point of eventually breaking off with his girlfriend Cheryl (Isabel Rivas). In the end he decides not to proceed to the US, to face the challenge of living as a Filipino first.

The lack of narrative logic is further compounded by a subplot involving Bogart (Rez Cortez), the school bully who gets to bully Juni by first defacing and then de-wheeling his car and mug him afterward; in turn Juni refuses to squeal on Bogart but instead works out then befriends Bogart by defeating him in a square match. A more substantial twist consists of Juni buying back Nedy's good graces, after humiliating her in front of rich friends, by selling enough ballots for her to win the school's beauty contest. When he starts getting serious with her, however, she turns him down.

The standard complaint concerning Lino Brocka movies for their oversimplification of class conflicts again applies herein. To represent the rich, Elvira Manahan was cast in the role of Juni's mother, apparently to exploit the authenticity of her poise and gestures; yet she merely manifests a self-mocking approach which works against the case for her side of the class war. This is not to say that the poor are pretty perfect in *Burgis*. Backward material has been injudiciously imbued with progressive complexities, resulting in the misdirection of issues, as when the aforementioned refusal to reconcile class differences prevents the celebrities, as built up through the Juni character, from partaking of the flexibility of youth.

Evidence that such inconsistencies span various classes can be found in the dialogue: Nedy's roommate, a Makati employe, spouts swardspcak

without having been presumably exposed to a lower-class gay milieu, while Cheryl speaks sometimes straight Filipino, other times Assumpta lingo. As usual Conrado Baltazar's cinematography makes the movie more interesting than irritating through competent use of conventional techniques—excepting a gimmick-laden credit sequence, that is. Unfortunately the sound, which in some parts consists of crudely engineered live recordings, does not match the movie's visuals.

Initial reports indicate that *Burgis* did not do well as the box-office, where the previous Brocka movie, *Kontrobersyal*, made a killing. *Kontrobersyal* had no highly bankable stars, but it had artistic integrity where *Burgis* has none. That should provide a lesson of sorts for those who sunder the commercial from the artistic in film.

## Naked Debut

### **Hubad na Gubat**

Directed by Lito Tiongson

Written by Ed Maranan

No objections to *Hubad na Gubat* on the level of the ones raised against Ed Palmos's *Ang Babae sa Ulog* (1981) are likely to result from a casual comparison of the two. For *Hubad na Gubat* has sufficient logic and loftiness of purpose to elevate it from the usual run of tribal movies intended to capitalize on the subject's exemption from censorship of breast exposures. Initial viewings of the film will readily demonstrate that the people behind it have made the difficult but commendable decision to meet the movie industry's commercial exigencies only half-way in the casting of Tetchie Agbayani as a major character.

Having settled the more mundane issue thus, the film failed to resolve the next set of contradictions that proceeded therefrom. This involved the question of whether to present the tale of Aniwas (Agbayani's character) either as a legend with its roots in reality or as a realistic story which gives rise to legendary material. Such confusion emanated from a multiplicity of incompatible devices employed in the telling of the story. Aniwas, for

example, turns out to have been the daughter of Linongan, a Balitok who the elders believed was abducted by their version of the bogey-man, Kumao, but was actually raped by a lowlander, Sauro (Charlie Davao) and, having lost her senses, mortally delivered under the care of a hermitic forest dweller.

Here the potentially powerful parallelism which ensues from the rape attempt by Sauro's son Jake (Raul Aragon) on Aniwas is mitigated by the fact that the latter, instead of Jake's father, was originally mistaken for Kumao. The irony, on the other hand, would have led to a conflict of sympathies: Jake's rape attempt, unlike his father's, fails. But to have gone further than the failure would have necessarily negated the foregoing portrayal of the lowlanders as the villains in the story.

The most significant instance of this inconsistency of vision lies more in the final scene, rather than in the anti-climax of Aniwas's origin being traced without the benefit of point of view. The climax consists of Sauro's attempt to divest the tribe of its wealth being thwarted by Balitok warriors. In the light of the realistic treatment of the Kumao legend (the personification of which is eventually embodied in Sauro), such a development demands further clarification of not only how the tribe managed to overpower a martially superior unit but also how the new legend that arose from the conflict might be tempered by another realistic turn of events.

Debuting director Lito Tiongson seems to have exceeded his reach in less lofty senses as well. His use of the hand-held camera, coupled with a reliance on editing for build-up, has resulted in some dizzying establishing shots. (In the first place a hand-held would not have let itself to ideal tacking shots in mountainous terrain.) Also his performers could have contributed to an easier visual understanding of the story, but, with the exception of Phillip Salvador (as Aniwas's tribal suitor) and Charlie Davao, did not. Agbayani played both mother and daughter without a hint as to whose turn it was to be ravished onscreen, while Aragon tackles with inhumanity an already inhumane role.

Still, the failure that is *Hubad ng Gubat* compares favorably with the successes of most local directors. If only for this reason Tiongson has made himself worthy of further attention.

## A Halfway Sample

### **Maestro Bandido**

Directed by Reginald King

Written by Bonnie Paredes

Of late a curious type of action film has been filling the void caused by the inhibition of the local stock of serious filmmakers whose creative energy has been diverted by the need to respond to arbitrary and capricious censorship (a redundancy in terms, considering that censorship is in itself an arbitrary and capricious undertaking). The commercial and critical lapse of the last release by a prestigious Filipino director—Lino Brocka's *Strangers in Paradise*—has in a long-drawn sense been mitigated by the appearance of several action releases which provide hope for directors previously regarded as significant only for box-office purposes.

Some in fact can be confidently counted as their makers' best efforts so far: Carlo J. Caparas's *Pieta* indicates astute judgment of extremes of character; Danny Ochoa's *Sa Bawa't Tunog ng Kampana* exhibits a casual appreciation of storytelling values; Nilo Saez's *Sumuko Ka, Ronquillo!* demonstrates a willingness to tackle grand-scale social issues. All these, of course, pale in comparison to the capabilities of, say, Lino Brocka again, who with *Cain at Abel* and *Jaguar* can hardly be doubted as a true master of gangster films. Even initial viewings will readily reveal the absurdity of plot developments in *Pieta*, the inadequacy of production values in *Sa Bawa't Tunog ng Kampana*, and the shallowness of characterization in *Sumuko Ka, Ronquillo!*

If a common denominator for these failures must be pointed out, some sort of half-way approach to serious action filmmaking will emerge as the likeliest culprit. Thematic gravity characterizes most material with sociopolitical ambitions. Yet the reluctance of financiers to invest in such ventures tends to abort the committed observer's total appreciation of the finished product. *Maestro Bandido* is a case in point. It is director Reginald King's 10th project, a refreshing improvement over the kung-fu fantasies which helped establish—and the cowboy creations which helped sustain—its lead star Rey Malonzo's bankability.

The story conforms to the terms of one of the most difficult sub-genres in the action repertory: vendetta. *Maestro Bandido* contributes no innovations

to the formula of the angry young man who sets out to avenge himself on the socially advantaged culprits responsible for his losses. However, this does not negate the film's own good intentions. The superiority of *Maestro Bandido* to run-of-the-mill local releases lies in several precious insights, executed often in a humorous vein. Most memorable are the instances when the lead character's superior, in a case of mistaken identity, almost shoots him down, and when the same lead is refused entry into the villains' territory by a terrified tricycle driver. Both cases play upon weaknesses in the psyche of characters who get involved in gangland affairs, while providing subliminal linkages to the tragedy about to erupt.

These virtues, in any case, hardly detract from the film's several basic deficiencies, particularly its failure to evoke its intended era (pre-martial rule) and the incredulous developments, including the relegation of females to decorative digressions. In fairness to the filmmaker, such creative gaps abound even in foreign productions, no doubt sanctioned by pressures to conform to generic requisites—the shootout, the chase, the love scene, the showdown, etc. Given this condition, the Filipino filmmaker could do one better over her or his foreign counterpart by relying on tighter story construction instead of technical flourishes and shock effects.

The most discomforting manifestation of these defects consists of complications arising from the introduction of political outlaws led by a ridiculously psychopathic commander. The apparent eagerness to appease censorship officials by depicting rebel leadership as outright crazy works against the main conflict's efficacy by providing a justification for the character's criminal excesses. *Maestro Bandido* may yet be remembered for the pitfalls it did not stumble into, notably the usual indulgence in martial-arts action choreography, as well as the exploitation of more sensational than substantial material. If only for these, plus the promise of fluency in film style as evidenced in several spots, Reginald King—who is actually one and the same person as Rey Malonzo himself—should, like the rest of his colleagues recently converted to the pursuit of quality, derive encouragement from having made an otherwise lean stretch in Philippine film history worth noting more intently.

## Repression and Rebellion

### Pedro Tunasan

Directed and written by Celso Ad. Castillo

The recently released *Pedro Tunasan* is an occasion for broad encouragement on the part of observers and participants in this lean stretch in Philippine filmic history. Among institutions, none should be more elated than the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, which wisely acted upon the opportunity of financing the project through the Film Fund and granting it a 50-percent tax rebate by awarding a “Class A” distinction through the Film Ratings Board. That the film in many ways surpasses even the most outstanding outputs of the past year bespeaks well of the much-maligned capabilities of its director Celso Ad. Castillo, who in several senses contributed to the misimpression through his indulgence in ego and soft-core pornography. Yet *Pedro Tunasan* may not have proved too imposing for Castillo. The issue of feudal class relations he has already handled adequately in *Pagputi ng Uwak, Pag-itim ng Tagak* (1978), while the film’s basic plotline resembles that of *Ang Alamat ni Julian Makabayan* (1979).

Nevertheless *Pedro Tunasan* succeeds where the latter two do not: it is coherent where *Pagputi ng Uwak* was garbled and complex where *Julian Makabayan* was one-sided. Technically, though, it does not measure up to the cinematographic superiority of the other two, which were shot by an extremely capable Romeo Vitug. Castillo, however, makes up for some glaring shortcomings in terms of lighting and costuming in *Pedro Tunasan* through the confident exploitation of his remarkably astute visual sense, as evidenced in compositional values—i.e., camera angles and movements.

More important, the film has been bolstered with the most solid script ever enjoyed by a Castillo movie since the underrated *Totoy Boogie* (1980) and the most inspired since *Burlesk Queen* (1977). Most of the director’s recent significant films—*Pagputi ng Uwak* and *Julian Makabayan* plus *Aliw-iw: Ang Dalagang Pinagtaksilan ng Panahon* (1979)—were circular in structure, where the cyclical nature of repression and rebellion is driven home through the suggestion (often literal) of birth and renewal toward the end. Castillo’s restless eclectic style, however, is better suited to stories that break

free of the desperate situations which he so effectively delineates, as in his urban-centered items: the suicide of the hapless stripper in *Burlesk Queen*, the realization of class limitations by the social-climbing dancer in *Totoy Boogie*.

In *Pedro Tunasan* a triumphant finality is evoked in the face of the massacre of the lead character by Fil-American forces when his mestiza wife gives birth to a boy. The child, it is implied, will not have to undergo the same hardships that Pedro and his father before him went through owing to social and intellectual inadequacies. The true and final liberation of the Filipino from colonial encroachment and local collaboration will be attained not through a rejection of progress but first an acceptance and then a transcendence of it.

Such a premise is more radical than what big-time oppositionists might allow and, paradoxically, too conciliatory to serve the purposes of functional conservatism. It is the conveyance of such satisfactory ambiguities that only the mature artist can be capable of. Celso Ad. Castillo might come up with a better work before his public and colleagues adjust to his artistic sweep and political daring—such is his propensity for self-redemption during the least hopeful of situations (for the industry as well as himself). Meanwhile, he has made what may be his most momentous contribution so far in *Pedro Tunasan*, the closest he has come to perfection on an epic scale, a singular instance of no mean achievement which has done the ECP proud to be associated with.

## Missed Opportunities

### **Dope Godfather**

Directed by Junn P. Cabreira

Written by Eliseo S. Corcuera

Occasionally an exploitation vehicle, propelled by the crassest commercial considerations, completes the cultural crossing from script to screen, reminding the collective consciousness that nothing can ever be perfected in any industry-scale undertaking. One such item is Junn P. Cabreira's *Dope Godfather*, a film offensive enough to convince any first-time observer

that no progress is being done in the local action genre—a notion which betrays recent accomplishments of the likes of Carlo J. Caparas in *Pieta*, Jose (Pepe) Marcos in *Sumuko Ka ... Ronquillo!*, Danny Ochoa in *Sa Bawa't Tunog ng Kampana*, Nilo Saez in *Pepeng Hapon*, Pablo Santiago in *Kapag Buhay ang Inutang*, and most impressively Celso Ad. Castillo in *Pedro Tunasan*, a vindication of its director's much-maligned capabilities.

In contrast with the foregoing, *Dope Godfather* is an all-out exploitation vehicle, an item whose interest lies solely in its indication of the deplorable conditions incumbent upon contemporary filmmaking in the country. All levels of production serve to point out this assertion, but the most crucial aspect can be derived from the irony of its acquisition of extra-creative support precisely through the flaunting of its artistic compromises; referred to herein is the participation of the military in terms of facilitation of approval and, more apparent onscreen, provision of manpower and locales.

Such readiness to indulge in self-congratulatory undertakings is aggravated by the difficulties undergone by other projects which, in the long run, contribute to the enhancement of the country's image as a democratic setup, especially among foreign and local intelligentsia. For in the long run, it is these people who have to be won over to the image of a libertarian system stable and intelligent enough to allow self-critical explorations of its machinations, instead of a smug elite whose paranoia reveals itself in the indiscriminate allowances given to misdirected assurances like *Dope Godfather*.

The film itself exhibits weaknesses which actually work against its purposes. A blatant rejection of creativity could merely turn off the uninitiated while at the same time instill confidence in the enlightened opposition. Most of these contradictions are embodied in the lead character, who is depicted as a narcotics agent reliant upon the system which employs him yet impatient with its natural sluggishness. In Don Siegel's right-wing paean *Dirty Harry*, this approach was heightened by turning the system into the antithesis of the character, thus making him sympathetic in spite of his abrasiveness. Of course the forces behind *Dope Godfather* could not bear to witness the establishment as a hindrance (even if unwittingly) to the execution of its own functions; hence the unrelieved antipathy conveyed by the lead character, which is hardly helped by Tony Ferrer's facial twitches as markers of emotional upheavals. The casting error does not stop here, for

pitted against the goon-like lead is a clean-cut villain, an artistically interesting situation which is thematically ignored.

The rest of the movie takes the cue from the above deficiencies, piling up one incredible development upon another until the viewer gets totally underwhelmed by the bald-faced dishonesty which informs the entire production. An adolescent character whose excessive intake of drugs has made him insane enough to attempt suicide turns out to be sane enough to deconstruct family problems with his parents in front of the entire neighborhood. An arrested pusher undergoes point-of-view visions of the evil effects of drugs on the youth, yet remains unrepentant enough to resist his execution. Villains consistently (not to mention conveniently) carry dope-filled attaché cases when they get arrested, although no such incriminating possessions can be found on their persons during less tense moments. Den raiders never learn to block off all exits in spite of repeated escapes of a few gangsters each time.

On a pettier level, everyone talks the same way—i.e., mouthing inane dialogue, verbalizing what are already visually obvious, with tokenistic humor thrown in. Characters wear coats and jackets under the tropical sun, though some attempt at consistency by topping them off with cowboy hats. The tackiness of the entire production has not even been mitigated with enough stylishness to at least pass off as camp. *Dope Godfather* is a mean-spirited mishmash of missed opportunities, a repulsive undertaking which sensible movie-goers concerned with the development of Philippine cinema would do well to avoid.

## Mysterious Pleasure

### **Mistryo sa Tuwa**

Directed and written by Abbo Q. de la Cruz

After having been kept in the can for some time, the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines' production of *Mistryo sa Tuwa* is finally being released. During a year which has seen several outstanding productions succeed one another, *Mistryo sa Tuwa* is, technically speaking, the best of the lot so far.

The material alone ensures that the film is not just another outstanding commercial exercise, but a courageous and exciting foray into filmmaking of a borderline experimental nature.

Perhaps this accounts for the initially controversial reception to the film. For the issues in *Misteryo sa Tuwa* are treated in such a manner as to make it more of a universalized parable on human nature rather than on specifically Filipino quirks and peculiarities, its misanthropic vision very nearly upended by its out-of-place acknowledgment of military heroism. The plot revolves around the discovery by poverty-stricken peasants of a cache of money from the wreckage of a plane, and the efforts by various other social elements either to recover or to steal the literally newfound wealth. The less scrupulous among the latter do not hesitate to resort to the most heartless and murderous improvisatory tactics to acquire what they want. This provides the movie's centerpiece—a torture sequence which may be considered the most excruciating ever depicted in a local production since Gerardo de Leon's 1961 landmark *The Moises Padilla Story*.

*Misteryo sa Tuwa*, however, progresses even further after this singularly arresting highlight. In fact, the movie is structured in a manner which can only be called, for want of a better term, symphonic. The allegro opening depicts the plane crash right off, then subsides into the establishment of dramatis personae and the exposition of their respective concerns. This is followed by the conflict, whereby the negative elements decide on an utterly inhuman scheme to wrest the money stumbled upon by the central triumvirate. No let-up follows the torture highlight, with the movie ending on a scale both grandiose and edifying—granting of course that one welcomes the sudden and untoward intervention of its *militus ex machina*.

Director-writer Abbo Q. de la Cruz, who has never made a feature film before, provides an all-in-one justification for the continued existence of ECP. It is disturbing to ponder how many such talents have been passed up through the generations by a primarily commerce-oriented industry. His direction of a screenplay, already illuminating in its simplicity, is at once both masterly and confident, relying upon none of the grandstanding or overstatement typical of first-timers. Even more impressive is his handling of performers. The trio of Johnny Delgado, Ronnie Lazaro, and Tony Santos, along with their partners Alicia Alonzo, Amable Quiambao, and Maria

Montes, could easily be regarded as sympathetic in their roles as desperate and haunted slash-and-burn farmers.

The most remarkable aspect of *Mistryo sa Tuwa*, as mentioned earlier, is its high level of technical accomplishment. No other director could have made a more impressive splash, just as no other outfit could have supported such a daring experiment. It's a pity that the film was only provided the status of a guest entry instead of being allowed to compete for awards in the ongoing Metro Manila Film Festival, where its definite technical merits and possible cinematic accomplishments might have been tested against standard mainstream fare.

## Historical Lessons

### **Virgin Forest**

Directed by Peque Gallaga

Written by Rosauro Q. de la Cruz

*Virgin Forest* displays in an amplified manner the strengths and weakness of its filmmaker Peque Gallaga, which were manifested in his debut film *Oro, Plata, Mata*. Immediately discernible is a surface naturalism which bespeaks of a fascination with and skillful command of the audio-visual properties of the medium. This merit, coupled with an approach which comes close to the Italian-bred operatic scheme, makes for truly exciting film viewing. As in *Oro, Plata, Mata*, however, *Virgin Forest* suffers from an apparent class prejudice on the part of its filmmaker. Unlike the former film, in which period was used for atmospheric reasons, *Virgin Forest* employs a more definite historical context—the betrayal of Gen. Emilio Aguinaldo during the turn of the century to American invaders by mercenary members of Macabebe town—as a commentary on the story at hand—i.e., the political awakening of a Spanish mestizo, a native fisherman, and a Filipina sold as a sex slave.

The progression of the characters' concerns may be too predictable for the filmmaker's always-surprising capabilities, but it is the treatment of the historical context that in fact weakens the triumph of the entire undertaking. Noteworthy in particular is the choice of the Aguinaldo incident as

a framework for what is essentially a discourse on nationalist consciousness: since the film's resolutions are catalyzed by the arrest of Aguinaldo by his American captors, it advances the mistaken impression that the general fought along a consistent nationalist line (on the same order as, say, Macario Sakay).

One means by which this fallacy may have been mitigated would have been the expert exploitation of the ironic angle in the betrayal by the Macabebes of their own compatriots. Unfortunately, the members of the said ethnic grouping are absolved of dramatic guilt by being portrayed as unthinking brutes led on by the machinations of their sly foreign employers and the latter's local collaborators. The further development in which the Macabebes eventually turn against some of their leaders, motivated as they were by the mute desire to return to their homes rather than a rebellion against the injustice they were made to commit, confirms this point.

The choice of historical context for *Virgin Forest* therefore demanded a more sophisticated treatment on the part of its maker, at least in so far as attention to the ironies in the politics of betrayal is concerned. On the other hand, the aforementioned achievements of the film, especially within the context of the local industry's panicked situation, must be appreciated properly. This is one period film that rises above the general run of such entries by daring to take a controversial stance vis-à-vis the objective interpretation of history. The impressive production values alone would distinguish *Virgin Forest* from most other Filipino films, but its attempts at insightful significance, whatever the outcome, are deserving of serious critical attention.

# Old-Millennium Pinoy Film Reviews II: *National Midweek & After*

## Secret Love

### **Mga Lihim ng Kalapati**

Directed by Celso Ad. Castillo

Written by Rei Nicandro

That Celso Ad. Castillo possesses a sensibility unique among the ranks of local filmmakers requires no proof more eloquent than his body of work during the preceding decade. That his sensibility has not amounted to much becomes the dismal conclusion with the release of every subsequent Castillo opus with the start of the same period in question. *Mga Lihim ng Kalapati*, as has become typical of its filmmaker, presents premises that may or may not be conceivable in terms of the immediate reality it depicts. More to the point, if we observe the line of thinking from which Castillo's concerns have branched off, is that the imperative of verisimilitude, the recognition on the part of the viewer that film (or at least certain aspects of it) may have some

bearing on subjective contemporary experience, should not matter in this case. For if the filmmaker were possessed of a reasonable amount of artistry in his skills then he'd be able to evoke a viewing experience that, though non-existent for our knowledge of what has been, is, or will be possible, will be real unto itself.

Castillo's particular perception takes this still-radical dogma on filmmaking too literally, exclusive of the fact that all successful cinema—in fact, all successful works of art—by virtue of the process of subjective creation, are necessarily lacking in perfect correspondences with known reality. Film is the most misleading medium in this regard, since its raw material, unlike those of all other art forms, is reality itself. And yet the very process of capturing this reality (presuming that one has not made any deliberate choice) and arranging the captured bits into an artistic whole for presentational purposes, already subverts the original existence of the raw material—transforming it, as it were. A misguided artist who therefore believes that to be unique, she must make sure that her presentation will never be mistaken for a segmentation of familiar occurrences (which might be tackled by other artists anyway), will like Castillo keep striving for material and treatments that result in products that are offbeat at best, and irrelevant at worst: *Paradise Inn* and *Payaso* respectively, to cite recent Castillo efforts.

*Mga Lihim ng Kalapati* falls somewhere between the two, and only because the lesser item was terribly insignificant to begin with. Otherwise *Mga Lihim* deserves an embarrassingly bent-over commendation as an exercise in basic visual fluency—no mean achievement a few years back, but now an empty exploit in the wake of the dispersion of similar capabilities both within and without commercial film formats. Such indulgence in what has come to be called “pure” film expression has its advantage though, similar to the benefits any writer will derive from engaging in wordplay, no matter how frivolous. A few years back, Castillo unexpectedly returned to the same terrain covered by *Pagputi ng Uwak*, *Pag-itim ng Tagak* and, considering the constraints, did amazingly well. Unlike all his others films in the 1980s, *Pedro Tunasan* was highly conventionalized in its treatment, structure, and save for extremely compromised production values, execution. One wonders what Castillo will make of an even more inspired earlier work, *Burlesk Queen*, the story of a fallen woman healthily balanced in terms of its moral, social, and psychological perspectives.

As for the disadvantage, one need not point out the painfully obvious unless the subject were as hardheaded as Castillo. The medium in which he practices is an expensive one—hence the danger of being completely locked out is ever-present. It's been ten years since *Burlesk Queen*, a work which the objectivity of temporal distance has made more charming than it first seemed to be, but whose over-all valuation has already been exceeded by the output of latter-day practitioners. The irony is that Castillo may have already possessed the capability of making epic “bold” films even before the likes of *Boatman* and *Private Show* came out, just as he has exhibited the potential for creating a truly grand revolutionary film-story. But if he continues to subsume the evolution of such skills to the self-conscious pursuits of the allegedly unique in filmic realism, he will only discover (not too late, for his sake we should hope) that there is no such thing, and that his attempts in the same vein will yield no ultimate value.

## Grave Burden

**Pasan Ko ang Daigdig**

Directed by Lino Brocka

Written by Rene O. Villanueva and Orlando Nadres

Funny how one can easily lose sight of original intentions. I had entered the moviehouse meaning to lap up whatever entertainment *Pasan Ko ang Daigdig* seemed to be holding forth, serious film observation be damned. I looked forward to what I imagined could have been the first product of our national cinema definitive of the February 1986 revolution: no shallow literal censorship of eyesore locations, no flinching from the downtrodden as major characters, yet typically post-'86 escapist in an insistent, even vengeful manner. Well, the serious component was around all right, but the other side was nowhere evident beyond casting and material. Sure, Sharon Cuneta was up there, looking none the worse for all her real-life parallelisms, and she did do a lot of singing in the midst of playing a game of, uh, musical chairs among several leading men with strong claims to her pitifully singular and singularly virtuous self. How then could such an easy winner lose? I'd like to venture

forth an argument along the lines of over-confidence, but I'm afraid the real reason might be more offending than that.

There was real cynicism in *Pasan Ko ang Daigdig*, the sort that makes you wonder why its creators ever bothered with the project in the first place. The expected convolutions of story were all present, but not reasonably accounted for. Overall you get the feel of having been taken along for a ride, but without any appreciation of your tolerance for downright, bald-faced manipulation. The story traces the rise of a media celebrity from literally dirt-poor squalor to moral-cum-professional triumph. I wouldn't exactly dismiss this sort of material per se since you wouldn't have to look far into the movie system itself to find examples of how easy social mobility in show business can get: Nora Aunor, of course. To a limited extent, Sharon Cuneta even.

But where a more considerate filmmaker would take pains to fill in certain gaps, in storytelling terms or, granting the usual demands of a too-meddlesome studio system, by technical means at least, *Pasan Ko* has only surface gloss with which to endorse itself. So okay, to get down to specifics, your lead character has grown up in the worst possible living space in the metropolis but she has to make an overnight stab at legitimacy as a completely credible performer, and not just in the Rey de la Cruz sense either—now what do you do? I can only speculate how various other filmmakers would have done it, from revising an aspect of the exposition to adding a dimension of Otherness to the performer's attack, but in this particular instance all you find is a brutalized denizen inexplicably transformed into a classy singer, without the aid of even a magic *camison* or a *blusang itim*.<sup>15</sup>

By this measure other more advanced elements in the story, like the now-respectable songstress suddenly cracking a whip with all the fury of a Batang City Jail sadist, get appreciated for the original intentions of presumably sensible craftsmen (*I'll make you see how ridiculous this development is, see, so your laughter in the moviehouses is my way of taking revenge on those unenlightened money-bags who made me do this junk*); but the potential of drawing respect rather than mere titillation for a job well done in the face of the odds all goes to waste in this case. Too bad then for the talents involved in this enterprise, and most specifically Lino Brocka, for whom the thematic and psychological concerns of slum-dwellers should have proved familiar territory by now. I always thought Smoky Mountain was as scenic as it appeared in *Pasan Ko* (I've

seen it captured better elsewhere; that's another story), but never for the leery life of me have I imagined how it could ever become so antiseptic.

## Note

15. The magic *camison* was a white chemise that supposedly enabled a movie to become a box-office hit if its leading lady wore it (presumably as a means of titillating male audiences); Emmanuel H. Borlaza's *Blusang Itim* (1986), which means black blouse, was a blockbuster romance-fantasy made by the same studio, Regal Films, that propagated the myth of the magic *camison*. No confirmation exists as to whether the actress who starred in the latter wore the lucky white underwear.

## Earthbound

### **Pinulot Ka Lang sa Lupa**

Directed by Ishmael Bernal

Written by Racquel Villavicencio

*Pinulot Ka Lang sa Lupa* is the second Ishmael Bernal movie to have been released this year, and the third since last year (*anno revolucion*, by way of easy reckoning). So far this is the closest the director has come to his record output during the early years of the current decade, when in one prodigious year (1982) he could treat his audiences to the likes of *Ito Ba ang Ating mga Anak?*, *Relasyon*, and *Himala*, and still have enough creative juice left to squeeze out at least one well-made movie annually afterward. Of course, Bernal is the genius who came up with *Manila by Night* (1980), but anyone who understands the singular significance of that work will also understand why I avoid singling it out for comparison with any other Bernal output. I'd rather much see where his works fit in a career that doesn't seem to have a comparable parallel anywhere in his field and, granting that comparisons with other forms are valid, possibly with those of few other Filipinos working in other media.

The one undeniable certainty in our doubt-ridden movie scene is that no other Filipino director's filmography can stand up to intense aesthetic

scrutiny the way Bernal's does. This may be getting close to pleading immunity to the constant alarums that plague our film historians, who it seems would love to outdo one another and themselves in seeking to enthrone one dead black-and-white movie director after another as the sole claimant to the title of greatness in film art. After allowing myself to get caught up in the frenzy, I'd find myself conceding to perhaps one or two significant titles every other master—and the rest of the opera consignable to historical footnotes, if not Christmas toy-horns.

By this measure you'll understand my trepidation in dishing out facile conclusions about the latest Bernal: how many of the critics outraged by *Nunal sa Tubig* (1976) were able to see how it led to *Manila By Night* (1980), with *Menor de Edad* and *Aliw* (both 1979) as intermediary, experimental try-outs? The answer is ... none. Not one, painful as it sounds. And after three disturbing consecutive outputs in *Gamitin Mo Ako* (1985), *The Graduates* (1986), and *Working Girls Part II* (1987), the director has returned to form with *Pinulot Ka Lang sa Lupa*. It would be safer to say that Regal Films has finally appropriated the melodrama formulae of its current rival, Viva Films, although that distinction better belongs to the previous Regal movie, Mel Chionglo's *Paano Kung Wala Ka Na* (1987).

I suspect that Ishmael Bernal is working on more ambitious modes of cinematic storytelling, while catching up at the same time with refinements in the plastics of his craft, for which he had often (and unfairly) been penalized by commentators and award-giving groups at one time or another. This places works like *Pinulot* on the same plane as *Broken Marriage*—i.e., as an exercise in competence that simultaneously provides a full-proof means of recaptivating the mass audience. As for the work itself, missing is the occasional working-over that Bernal used to lavish on genre-movie assignments. *Pinulot* is arguably the first successfully minor Bernal movie that doesn't have any humor to it; recall his previous throwaway efforts like *Isang Gabi sa Iyo*, *Isang Gabi sa Akin* or *Pabling* and you'll get the drift.

Of course, melodrama, to be tolerable, should first be taken seriously, on its own terms. But with a filmmaker who had taken further steps in the direction of courting the thinking viewer's appreciation by providing the dramatic distance that comedy affords, *Pinulot* constitutes an apprehensive step backward. So much for the larger scheme of things. Less bulgy-eyed

observers would have pointed out by now the commendable production values, plus the admirable second-wind performance of Lorna Tolentino (after her previous Viva movie) and a remarkable step-up in the screen presence of Gabby Concepcion. The less considerate ones would have commented on the grievous miscalculation of Maricel Soriano in her attack in the expository passages of the film. Cross then your heart and your fingers on what M. Bernal might spring on us in the near future, which, in his case, should be just exactly what comes up next.

## Image-Building

### **Huwag Mong Itanong Kung Bakit**

Directed by Eddie Garcia

Written by Emmanuel H. Borlaza and Gina Marissa Tagasa

After a series of perfunctory melodramas (with equally perfunctory box-office results), Viva Films seems to have taken a serious accounting of its audience preferences, not to mention its archival potential. The outcome is *Huwag Mong Itanong Kung Bakit*, and although every other local movie observer must have had her turn by now in wordplaying with the title, I can't resist my own contribution: I won't ask why the movie turned out the way it did, but I'll have to raise some questions about the system that led to its eventual production and release. And before you start wondering and venture another dreadful pun, let me hasten to answer that although *Huwag Mong Itanong* could use some narrative repair, it stands up pretty well to the average local melodrama—which, as I tend to mention too often, is virtually synonymous these days with saying “the typical Viva movie.” For that matter, it's the most serviceable Viva story ever put out since the Presidential Commission on Good Government came along, and that doesn't reflect too well on both the outfit itself as well as the rest of the industry.<sup>16</sup>

I wouldn't say that it's the executors of the dramatic framework—that is, the performers—who provided the crucial factor in maintaining a semblance of realism, although they do hand in some of their best work here. Armida Siguion-Reyna and Ricky Davao as a mother-and-son Oedipal tandem attack

their roles with theatrical relish, and it's a relief to behold Cherie Gil doing a lot of reacting for a change. But in the active characterizations of the romantic leads, the material betrays its crossed purposes. The hero is the usual noble-hearted scion who bleeds for the downtrodden, specifically those whom his brother abuses, one of whom turns out of course to be the heroine. It's still disconcerting, though perhaps inevitable for this type of film, to find the moral inclinations drawn right down the middle of the hero's upper-class family (across the brothers' mother, in fact), but it's even more disturbing to find that no such divisions obtain in the heroine's lower-class origin.

The statement, if I could force one, is clear: as audience member, you may enjoy all the onscreen opulence and ostentation, but just in case you wind up hating your own deprivation afterward, we'll obviate your condemnation of our participation by throwing in this blessed-are-the-poor angle; after all, if it worked for the church.... I'd like to beg off, though, from pursuing this controversy in the direction from which I originally approached it. I think the contradictions in the Viva setup were manifested all too clearly in *Huwag Mong Itanong* precisely because of the movie's inherent accomplishment: it's a fine visual sample actually, too much for the treatment the material deserves, but just enough to make the entire project literally appear valid. I can think of only two other instances where the Filipino cinematographer's hand has practically perfected an otherwise dismissible undertaking—in separate works by black-and-white specialist Mike Accion and the more contemporary Conrado Baltazar. With *Huwag Mong Itanong*, Romeo Vitug has completed his portfolio for cinematographic deanship, and whatever else anyone, including myself, can say about the movie, his reputation as a master of the local movie camera should be sealed and delivered, once and for all.

But I'll have my say anyway. This notion of steadying a shaky dramatic foundation by resorting to plastic polish is a rather old one. From the very beginning filmmakers have been enthralled by the challenge of proving they can do magic any time—*gimme any story, or even no story at all, plus total financial resources of course, and I'll give you a Work of Art, or my name ain't Genius*. The matter is complicated by the fact that a movie has to be experienced through a definite time span—hence the track record, unique among all art forms, of successive *coups de maître* in cinema, where too much premium is placed on first impact (which is usually all one gets of most works anyway).

In the Philippines this plastic-coverup approach has been institutionalized, at least so far, by the Viva production machinery, but before we start calling for the dismantling of the studio, it would serve us well to keep in mind that selling technical competence per se to the local audience was formerly considered an impossibility.

I submit that the Filipino moviegoer's standard needs to be constantly upgraded. But at the same time we better have some output that could serve to remind us all that technique isn't everything. Our Hollywood imports supply us the prime example, on one level the state-of-the-craft which we may aspire to, and on another the paradox of running out of things to say or figure out, just because the system can run itself into perpetuity on a technological basis. Is this something to be desired at all cost? I'd like to register a strong dissenting opinion and maintain that ... aw, all right, *huwag mong itanong kung bakit*.

## Note

16. After the February 1986 "people-power" uprising, the post-Marcos government, as its first "revolutionary" act, created the Presidential Commission on Good Government to investigate shortcomings committed by the previous regime and seek appropriate measures of redress or recovery. Viva Films was suspected of having been organized with the support of the Marcoses, specifically Imelda, with funds allegedly funneled via the Cultural Center of the Philippines. A few years after a series of investigations, the order sequestering the company was lifted, with a prominent Marcos oppositionist, Lino Brocka, directing some of his last few projects for the outfit.

## ***Komiks Without Pain***

### **Saan Nagtatago ang Pag-ibig?**

Directed by Eddie Garcia

Written by Armando Lao

At the tail-end of the series of screenings for the Film Academy of the Philippines's annual awards ritual, I managed to watch one last 1987 title

that reliable acquaintances claimed had been left out of my best-of-the-year listings; as a counter-defense I pointed out that one of my choices, Mario O'Hara's *Tatlong Ina, Isang Anak*, wasn't in the FAP's listings either—but then they don't have the benefit of intensive personal discussion in print just as I don't have the publicity mileage their awards night generates, so there really isn't any basis for mutual exchanges. Anyway there I sat, viewing a Viva production that I avoided during its regular run because it was *komiks*-sourced, it had Vilma Santos in another of her living-saint roles and Tonton Gutierrez as a retardate, and to a certain extent my misgivings about its limitations were confirmed. For possible “persona” reasons, the lead characters were rendered so chaste that they could have been walking around with halos on their heads and no one would have been outraged by the physical incongruity.

In contrast, the immediate peripheral characters ultimately made the entire outing worth the effort of sitting it out to the end. Instead of the usual moral balance of supplying the sweetmeats with carnivores through which their aromas could surface, the film took the relatively radical option of providing the *contravidas* with that rare and elusive property called motivation. As a result, none of the characters succeeds in posing as antagonist—honest compliment; of course, there's a quibble of a qualifier in the, er, person of the family matriarch, who for all practical purposes stands for the pragmatic materialism that the leads are up against. Fortunately she comes on too infrequently to develop as either theme or character, and finally gets rejected by the other women in the movie (in academesse, the act signifies nonsymbols rejecting a symbol).

Which brings us back to the problem with the leads. The main female character is made to marry the mentally challenged brother of the lover who impregnated her, so the family can get the best of both worlds: the virile scion would account for his misdemeanor by giving his family name and a technically invalid union to someone he could marry later, while the family could pay off its debts once the same son fulfills his grandmother's condition of passing the bar without walking the aisle. The said son turns out to be well-meaning yet immature, the mother who accedes to the arrangement reveals a deep-seated fear of her in-law derived from a sexual guilt that resulted in her now-damaged child, and the proceedings are complicated by

two other women: a self-righteous daughter who becomes humiliated by an unwanted pregnancy and an old-maid aunt whose bitterness with the mother's actuations (the boy's father was originally her betrothed) gets dispelled by the disabled son's efforts to reach out to everyone. By a twist that's logical in the reckoning but still surprising considering the chauvinist traditions in melodrama, the men get edged out—the handicapped son dies, his brother is spurned by the widow, and their overbearing grandma is told off by the wife with the mother-in-law's support—and the women even get to act out a farewell scene that's the movie's most moving portion, its power derived from as much the foregoing emotional buildup as the cultural connotations of women in black ritualistically bonding together.

The two leads team up for much less reason than had provided the rest: the guy's too disadvantaged to decide for himself, while the woman's too nice to resist caring for the man she was forced to marry, telling off the brother who had not only gotten her into this predicament but who also becomes jealous when her attention gets distracted. How could such a partnership lose? The consequence may have been tragic, but the audience is left with absolutely no other option except to grant its sympathy. One possible solution, probably the easiest, would be something that the late Gerardo de Leon, a master of the pulp cinema form if there ever was one hereabouts, would have resorted to: interlacing the development of the leads' attraction to each other with a nourishing eroticism. This way they share in the guilt of the other characters, but their rising above it becomes all the more poignant and innate. With this in mind I admittedly half-wished the drying-out scene between the wife and her "husband" could have progressed beyond the Madonna-and-child blanket-draped composition accorded it, into a discovery of the real reason why film characters, like their human counterparts, connect with one another.

The other aspects of production tie in nicely with melodrama's current demands. The plot has largely been confined to the concerns of the decaying-rich family, so the subdued elegance so often misrepresented in movies of this type is both justified and exploited in the positive sense. Romeo Vitug's cinematography is one step away from his holistic achievement in a later movie, *Huwag Mong Itanong Kung Bakit* (also by Eddie Garcia), but this subordinate approach to visual technique works best in strong stories. I

appreciate his control here; and when he lets go, as he did in the victim-son's wide-awake fantasy sequence, his calling attention to the camera's prowess in covering plotoles actually has the reverse effect of pointing up deficiencies in storytelling, coming as these do amid comparatively solid progressions.

Where then does *Saan Nagtatago* fit in my yearend evaluation? Were it not for the problem with the main characterizations, I'd place it among the likes of *Tatlong Ina*, Mel Chionglo's *Paano Kung Wala Ka Na*, and Peque Gallaga and Lorenzo Reyes's *Once Upon a Time*. But then I had a secondary ranking as well, and I wouldn't mind seeing it between these first three and the also-rans. *Saan Nagtatago* brings to mind those seemingly lost years when *komiks* adaptations didn't necessarily connote excesses, particularly in the case of de Leon and the early Lino Brocka films with Lea Productions. I'd also concur with earlier reactions calling the movie its director's and production outfit's best work up to this point. And if it could serve to usher in another era of sensible *komiks*-into-film attempts, I guess that would be sufficient reason to hope it figures prominently in the FAP awards derby.

## Balancing Acts

### **Hati Tayo sa Magdamag**

Directed by Lupita A. Kashiwahara

Written by Armando Lao

More than a decade, the promo materials pointed out: it took a period of self-exile, the murder of her brother, and a people's phenomenon before the country's first major female director could come back and catch up with her sisters in the field. And though the ballyhoo over who she is may seem all out of proportion to her latest work, that may only stem from the fact of her having been away too long. For from a more sober perspective, it appears that her early films were the ones that required reputations out of all proportion to their actual worth. The critic's dilemma lay in the responsibility of pointing out that *Minsa'y Isang Gamu-gamu* wasn't even worthy of being called a film, vis-à-vis the larger social need of shoring up symbols of protest against the now-ousted dictatorship. As every dedicated film observer knows

(or at least ought to know), the painful secret in Lupita Kashiwahara's director's closet was that for all the limitations of her first film, *Magandang Gabi sa Inyong Lahat*, she hadn't done anything better since.

That is, until *Hati Tayo sa Magdamag*. As Kashiwahara's first truly filmic enterprise, it also stands as another commercial-but-passable product from the local melodrama factory, Viva Films. A study ought to be undertaken as to how far this production outfit's ventures into sensible presentations could go, considering that the only previous cases of successful film quality in these parts have so far come from studios that allowed free rein in creative treatment. Meanwhile we've had, in the space of less than a year, entertainments like *Saan Nagtatago ang Pag-ibig?* and *Misis Mo, Misis Ko*, and now *Hati Tayo sa Magdamag*—items that try their best to minimize insulting intelligent members of the audience while providing the requisite elements that the masses expect to find in films of this kind. Part of the formula seems to be the hiring of writers who share this sort of concern: *Misis Mo* had Bibeth Orteza, who did an admirable job in an earlier Lino Brocka movie (*Palipat-lipat, Papalit-palit*), while both *Saan Nagtatago* and *Hati Tayo sa Magdamag* share the same scriptwriting credit, Armando Lao, first known for winning during the last scriptwriting contest of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines and best known for *Takaw Tukso* two years back.

Careful scripting does all the difference in melodrama, and *Hati Tayo* proves it. This doesn't seem too far-fetched a notion when we consider that melodrama is essentially a matter of making movie characters go through one plot development after another—and therefore a writer predisposed toward this sort of approach will be able to make an implausible premise, as in *Saan Nagtatago*, or perfunctory developments, as in *Hati Tayo*, go a long way with both critical and box-office responses. Not surprisingly, both Lao-scripted films are *komiks* in origin. After the early Brocka films, and right before *Saan Nagtatago*, this used to be tantamount to saying that the writer had been either too destitute or too naïve to avoid the assignment. An admirable mechanism must be at work in the Viva offices, for having been able to tolerate a sensibility that would be considered compulsory in academe but the height of audacity in the movie industry.

But don't get me wrong here. The way the movie goes, the writer's contribution to *Hati Tayo sa Magdamag* seems to have been only the first stage

in what has turned out to be the only recent Viva quality output that retains the frame of mind crucial to an explication of the commercialist imperative; meaning among the three aforementioned titles, it is *Hati Tayo* that masks its narrative intelligence most effectively. The dedicated melodrama observer will be treated to not only the requisite scenes of confrontation, breakdown, and reconciliation, but even lurid lovemaking and externalized monologues!

More often than not the attempts to pander to the so-called mass viewership get too barefaced for comfort, but then the accumulation of decent developments promotes acquiescence aided in no small part by the performance of the by-now redoubtable Jaclyn Jose. In theory the formulation may sound valid, but aside from the case of Jose (and to a certain extent Gina Alajar), I still have to recall another instance in our local movie scene where the consistent rejection of a stylized approach to acting could result in a series of effective performances. The other two leads in the love triangle obviously gave their best, manifested primarily in their willingness to deglamorize themselves; but then an ensemble-type of group performance never really takes off, ironically because one performer happens to be far superior to the others.

As for Lupita Kashiwahara, it's as if she'd never done a movie before—and this, expressed as a compliment. I guess any reaction of disappointment may be due to the romanticism acquired by her familial association with her late brother and now more-famous sister-in-law, plus the fact that we don't really have any passion for reevaluating events in the past. No one promised us a utopia with the expulsion of the previous dictatorship, but a dictator-less existence might somehow do for the moment; and in the case of Kashiwahara's detractors, I suggest a forcible re-screening of the works she did when she was known by another surname—and better yet, more projects and greater creative freedom if these can be spared.

## Roño's Rondos

### **Itanong Mo sa Buwan**

Directed by Chito Roño

Written by Armando Lao

### **Si Baleleng at ang Gintong Sirena**

Directed by Chito Roño

Written by Bibeth Orteza

When the local movie industry attains an acceptably decent degree of professionalism, serious Filipino film directors will not have to go through the humiliation of doing blatantly commercial projects after having proved themselves capable of better challenges. Such has been the trend observable in the body of works of every filmmaker who emerged with the late arrival (circa '70s) here of the French New-Wave influence. Take Ishmael Bernal, for example, with his 1971 debut *Pagdating sa Dulo*: his well-received domestic dramas and revolutionary milieu films were several years away then—and all that intervened were the likes of teen-star musicals, *kung-fu* films, and comic capers. But while Bernal et al. have survived with sufficient dignity, a lot of other serious first-timers have not. How many still remember that Elwood Perez first came up with *Blue Boy*? Perhaps more tragic is the growing record of directors whose first attempts were respectable enough, but who never since had (or accepted) follow-up offers.

Industry apologists could counter that Bernal himself has become an outstanding commercial director—a direct result of this kind of system. The loophole in their argument is that no other local director can be placed in Bernal's category, even within this narrow commercial classification; the only possible heir apparent, more than a decade thereafter, would be Chito Roño, but then the issue here is a matter of available opportunities, not numbers. In almost the same period, Roño has made a pair of commercialized outputs that compare favorably with the most engaging dismissibles of Bernal. Were the past year-in-movies not so discardable, his festival film *Itanong Mo sa Buwan* would not in fact have been among the better titles in competition. As it turned out, *Itanong Mo* was even the yearend festival's best entry, contrary to the perception of the board of judges.

This syndrome of subjecting ourselves to formal evaluation was once regarded as a possible remedy to the industry's ills; in the end, it has only served to aggravate the situation, since local evaluators couldn't seem to be objective enough. In an industry as perversely cynical as the current movie scene, the result has been nothing short of anomalous, with a redundancy of award-giving bodies vying purportedly for credibility but really just for PR. Roño, who ironically was once connected with one of the least controversial local evaluative bodies, the now-defunct Film Ratings Board of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, immediately had his share of short-change with his first four films—his biography so far. His debut, *Private Show*, was passed up by the critics' group for major nominations, even if it may have deserved the best-film prize for its year of release. His follow-up *Olongapo: The Great American Dream*, at least won First Best Picture in last year's Metro Manila Film Festival—but Roño's directorial contribution, which in the end could have been its only merit, went unrewarded.

*Itanong Mo sa Buwan*, though a better movie than *Olongapo*, suffers from a crudeness of details, especially in a number of dangling developments. Moreover, its main ontological contribution could only be inferred rather than derived directly—from the ending, wherein the main character proceeds to tell what seems to be a replica of her contradicter's story, rather than something that would be consistent with her propensity for sleazy fantasy. Curiously, the main objection in the media to *Itanong Mo* happened to be a non-issue, or at least a non-filmic issue: that it was patterned after the Japanese classic *Rashomon* (1950, dir. Akira Kurosawa), as well as the latter's local tribute, Laurice Guillen's *Salome* (1981). The ignorance in this regard seems to be more forgivable than the festival judges' oversight of the film, but then the recent history of similar fiascoes proves that more profound cultural forces are to blame. *Salome* was itself a victim of charges of plagiarism, and the fact that the creative forces behind both local products are more than acquaintances—Guillen appears in Roño's *Si Baleleng at ang Gintong Sirena*, while *Itanong Mo* writer Armando Lao once finished a script-writing workshop under *Salome* writer Ricardo Lee, who also wrote Roño's early filmscripts—won't help any.

It all boils down to an awareness of the absence of an indigenous culture complicated by the consciousness of a colonial past: what amounts to a

socio-cultural neurosis, an obsession with originality. Local observers don't bother to realize where *Salome* and *Itanong Mo* differ from *Rashomon*; what concerns them is the similarities, and the possibility that copying had been committed has driven them to frenzies of denunciations. Meantime, Roño has come up with *Si Baleleng*, which almost became a festival entry, though it really is too insignificant to be taken seriously—else expect a flurry of comparisons with Ishmael Bernal! *Si Baleleng*, however, is closer to Bernal's mid-period comedies than *Itanong Mo* is to *Rashomon*. Here Roño salvages an utterly compromised undertaking through the use of multi-levelled composition and, more precious and Bernalian, a strangely developed brand of comic sensibility, part morbid humor and part social commentary in its observance of off-the-wall everyday lunacies.

*Si Baleleng* serves as reminder that any commercial project, regardless of degree of anti-creative impositions, will be able to get by on the strength of its creator's intelligence. At the very least, the viewing experience, which after all is what moviegoers really pay for, won't be as painful as the recollecting afterward.

## Film on Film

### Big Flick in the Sky

Directed and written by Kenneth M. Angliongto

Film education in the Philippines had another sort of coming-of-age marker during the outgoing academic year's recognition ceremony for the College of Mass Communication of the University of the Philippines. Still the only film-degree-granting institution in the country, the UPCMC handed out its usual graduation-day awards, with the overall academic excellence prize being copped by Melanie Joy C. Garduño, who also happened to be the five-year-old film program's first *magna cum laude* graduate. The year proved to be the most prodigious so far for the college in several senses: the broadcasting and journalism top-notchers also belonged to the same rank, while 30 other students were proclaimed *cum laude* and 20 finished as graduate students, five of them with PhDs. The real innovation, however, lay in the first-time

recognition of the production thesis as another sample of academic achievement. Alongside the traditional award for research thesis, the UPCMC faculty decided from among several possible entries in photo exhibition, slide-tape production, video documentary, and super-8mm. short feature to proclaim a video short feature: film major Kenneth M. Angliongto's *Big Flick in the Sky*, the year's outstanding production thesis honoree.

Angliongto, 23, was the surprise quick-bloomer of his batch of 25. In one year he did a promising directing exercise titled *Mine*, then completed a special project (an elective I'd been handling) with what he called a "graphic novel," *Bundavarre*, finishing off with *Big Flick*. *Mine* was essentially a silent video short feature (with a no-words soundtrack) that depicted a painter struggling with his canvas, finally drawing inspiration from memories of his childhood; what distinguished it from the products of Angliongto's contemporaries was a compassion for its one-man subject—an attitude which young intellectuals seem to have difficulty mustering when engaged in artistic production. *Bundavarre* was a far more ambitious attempt in terms of moving inward to its subject and outward of audiovisual media: a comics artist gets into his wholesome general-patronage world and therein discovers his long-suppressed depravity in the form of another set of characters, who eventually take over his output; the presentation combined drawings with photographs in frames of varying sizes, with logical shifts from color to black-and-white, and exhibited with an ominous mature-audiences-only warning.

Angliongto's self-referential concerns finally came to a head with *Big Flick*. The hero was this time a film student whose social and academic life arrives at a standstill because of a creative block. The resolution is satisfyingly even-handed—the protagonist forges a truce with his Muse (paralleled in his real life by a conciliation with his friends and a potential girlfriend)—but the journey toward it is liberally embellished with jokes and sight gags on films within films, or actually videos within videos, and surreal developments. Much of *Big Flick's* impact derives from what Angliongto himself, during a discussion with his defense panel, called serendipity: whatever script he may have prepared was obviously set aside in favor of improvisations that could maximize the advantages (or minimize the dangers) of using nonprofessional actors as well as verisimilar middle-class locations. Halfway through my role, almost a self-impersonation really, as a high-minded faculty

member, I recalled to the filmmaker that I had a similar subject matter for my undergraduate directing exercise, in super-8mm.

The *Big Flick* premiere during Angliongo's thesis defense, however, immediately made clear how much I was disadvantaged by my choice of medium: no way could my film camera "enter" a movie in the plot, given the usual technological limitations of our state-dependent university. In *Big Flick* the video camera fixes internal video material, played back on ordinary television monitors, in relation to the circumstances of the screening, thus complementing the cut-ins from live action to video-transferred footage. What this simply means is that the notion of filmmaking characters interacting with their own and others' works is pulled off with sufficient credibility, with Angliongo's offbeat sensibility rounding out the impression of reality at play. "Actually," he said in an informal interview, "I targeted the UPMC people—my own primary audience. In fact, I had to tone down a lot of the, uh, strangeness in relation to myself, because I didn't want people to appreciate *Big Flick* in proportion to how well they knew me."

Traces of the tension evident in production—drawing from personal reality to relate recognizable truths, employing familiar faces and places, and working under a thesis-film record of below Php 5,000—can be seen in several spotty instances, especially in the post-production aspects of dubbing and sound mixing. In a larger sense, this also reflects a longtime UPMC controversy between the extremes of skills training vs. those of ideological awareness. If anything, *Big Flick* weighs in heavily in favor of beyond-technical values—in this case, inspiration, sympathy, even the modesty of remaining within the bounds of the artist's personal experience. Angliongo acknowledges *Big Flick's* dismissal of Pinoy mass culture. Nevertheless he candidly dreams, along with most of his batchmates, of actively working within the local movie industry. Quoted verbatim: "If I had the resources at this point, I'll revitalize Darna, but this time she'll be fighting *tikbalangs* and aliens from outer space; she'll be recruited by Marcos and her brother Tengtung would die. Why stick to goody-goody heroes? She'll be a die-hard Marcos loyalist, charging into Cory's inauguration and helping coup plotters. But she'll be anti-American: I won't compromise on that, that will be her redeeming value. I'll be also cooking up a new origin for her, something more relevant than swallowing a stone..."

## Black & Blue & Red

### Bayani

Directed and written by Raymond Red

Not much has already been written about *Bayani*, considering its significance in the local context, but what we've got may be enough to start off a long round of discussion. I don't think the debate could center on its merits as film, since even a first screening could yield some pretty obvious (and painful) lessons on the nature and purpose of cinema, or any cultural vehicle for that matter. One also has to lay aside of course the arguments of the film's apologists, who may be seen to come from a direction similar to most religious or political fundamentalists—namely, that the film is automatically validated by the very fact of the nobility of its origin and its maker's intentions. The difficulty in assessing the achievement of *Bayani* from a strictly formalist standpoint lies precisely in its conformity to a long-outmoded notion of cinema as art, one that ascribes the medium to its technological parent, photography, and thence to its spiritual forebear, painting, by way of the realist mode.

This is not surprising considering the filmmaker's background, but it also serves as a commentary on the difficulty (or perhaps futility) of film study and training within academically prescriptible methods. As it stands, *Bayani* is an impressively realized work of visual art, and it just-as-impressively struggles toward cinematic realization, but it somehow falls—not flat, but short. Considering its impossibly minimal (by mainstream industry standards) Php 2-million budget, as well as its unwieldy technical process (35mm. blown up from 16mm.), one simply ought to give it to Raymond Red et al. for turning natural light sources and field recording into a semblance of acceptable competence and occasional brilliance.

Yet one has to deal with the experience of *Bayani* as film, and without even counting in the Filipinoness of the material and its audience, the work urgently requires a *raison d'être* bigger than itself. Which fortunately exists: for, if nothing else, *Bayani* can rest on the historical claim of being the first assault of a highly vocal (and critical) circle of authentically independent film practitioners who, it now turns out, do possess aspirations to supplanting

the mainstream after all. This may account for the holy-as-thou response of those who purport to represent the “popular” side of the conflict—a response that could backfire if one takes into account the actual potential of the group, or even of Raymond Red alone.

I would agree with the consensus of those in the know that Red has done far better work in the short format, but I would hasten to add that it’s actually misadventures like *Bayani* that provide clearer lessons and incentives for growth, especially for those who stake their reputation on art above all else. Red was totally ill-advised to venture on a historical feature with nothing more than technical prowess under his hat, even if it were (and this I could believe) the biggest hat of its kind in the country at the moment.

What *Bayani* has resulted in can therefore be attributed to the greenness of Red’s preparation in two crucial areas: history and drama, which conspired in rendering the end-product no different from an action-genre sample, complete with strictly observed moralistic judgments (Bonifacio and his followers on the saints’ side and “Heneral” et al. on the sinners’) and the requisite tragic bloodbath. Typical of Red’s self-captivity is his refusal to enjoy what is after all a formula for entertainment, as well as his perception of gender roles according to subjective heterocentrist positioning: the good guys are wholly masculine, Bonifacio most of all (with smashing looks for safe measure), while the bad guys are performed with theatrical drag-queen flourishes—fie on them for not knowing, unlike Gregoria de Jesus and her friends, where women ought to belong.

Yet to castigate *Bayani* for its incapability to understand what Philippine cinema, historically speaking, has been all about (not to mention a whole heap of identity-politics complications), may be drawing a bit too much from the lessons of what is after all our model industry, Hollywood. Not that Red didn’t promise a lot in the first place; but if we look forward to whiz-kids conquering our industry before their maturation (as Steven Spielberg and the Hollywood brats had managed in the US), we may just be consigning ourselves to a future of nothing but terrifically prepared and packaged popcorn fare. It says a lot about *Bayani*’s choice of subject matter that Red would refuse to settle for such an easy triumph. And perhaps the last laugh belongs to those who would hesitate to conclude, *Bayani* notwithstanding, that local cinema’s Red scare is over.

## New-Millennium Pinoy Film Reviews

*My millennial reviewing activity was necessarily intermittent, owing to the lack of a regular outlet, the difficulty of accessing niche-market digital products, my foreign-country semestral responsibilities, and the need to attend to “higher” scholarly pursuits. My old-school orientation is also part of the baggage, since I once tried relying on a screener submission and found the viewing experience inauthentic, to put it kindly; I also took note of blog-originated material for regular media outlets to pick up (or, more accurately, was alerted to it by concerned filmmakers) and realized immediately that I could engage in this kind of writing for most types of editors and imagined readerships except myself. Where this set of goals and obstacles will lead me to is the still-to-be-resolved question.*

### Heaven in Mind

**Sabel**

Directed by Joel C. Lamangan

Written by Ricardo Lee

*Sabel* is the type of film, now rarely produced, that ought to serve as reminder to local commentators that film criticism is more than just a matter of collecting their share of booty from annual awards-night telecasts. The movie presents difficult analytical and ethical challenges in a deceptively lyrical, bittersweet, and compassionate manner, a throwback to the original ideals of the French New Wave and its immediate aftermath in Prague Spring cinema.

What enables the film to withstand critical scrutiny is its daring plunge through the thickets of radical gender politics. Where it winds up is as far from a politically correct normative position as it's been possible to depict onscreen in local cinema. (Warning to those who prefer their film surprises unspoiled: a few revelations are coming up.) The eponymous central character undergoes an odyssey that takes her in directions even she could not anticipate. Such unpredictability, coupled with the filmmakers' refusal to pass judgment on her decisions, may be the key to the largely belligerent responses of film reactors so far.

How far does *Sabel* (the movie's lead character) wind up from the norm? To modify the response of a character made famous by the late Marlon Brando, how many norms have you got? I managed to count class, gender, sexuality, legal status, social respectability, ethnic affiliation, even nomenclature, as the character we first encounter as *Sabel* insists in the end on being called by some other name. Her extreme self-transformations of identity mark her journey as more than queer, a concept that originally drew from feminist and gay ideals but now stands independent of and occasionally opposed to them. So more-than-queer, in fact, that she embodies the most radical position possible in the identity-political game, that of lesbian theory and practice.

At some point in the past I attempted to articulate how, in refusing the reacceptance of norms (also known as mainstreaming) undertaken by the feminist, gay, and now even queer movements, lesbian activism has proved to be the most resistant to civil-rights containment—i.e., the willingness of liberal authorities to provide a place at the table, so to speak, in exchange for good behavior. Although the film-text I was then reading, Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980), literalized its queerness by fragmenting its narrative structure, *Sabel* performs an even queerer reversal by intertwining two

strands that I did not imagine could be integrated in the same young-Pinoy body: the sexual and the political.

In short, where I had simply observed that the political lesbian, by embracing her historical “lack” and exploiting what has been regarded as her weakness by precisely insisting on her right to constant mutation, can be equated with a similar long-running revolutionary, the Third-World guerrilla, the film *Sabel* presents both options within the same person. And although the twists and turns in the main character’s story could amaze—or dismay—those seeking full understanding from the get-go, the signposts are all in place, ready to be acknowledged if one grants the movie a second screening: the character’s volubility, her bouts of inarticulate rage, her insistence on solitude, her reliance on the support of “sinful” men, her capacity for strategizing, and her recognition of the variable uses for one’s body, starting with her decision, early enough in the narrative, to undress in order to calm down a hysterical male prisoner.

In fact, the potentially explosive feminist issue of rape is what provides the film with its most carefully calibrated distinction: although as a nun, Sabel allows her own rape to take place (which, by most legal definitions, decriminalizes the act), she refuses to forgive the land-grabbing lawyer who ravages her lesbian lover. Rape, in this sense, is separated from rough sex by the fine line of personal consent, in much the same way that Freud described the inevitable interrelatedness of pleasure and pain. In this way the movie takes a position regarding the standard American feminist debate on pornography, wherein the right-wing pro-Moral Majority camp insisted on its synonymity with rape and the queer wing took the broader view of considering women’s sexuality a potentially enabling and liberating force.

So what have we got so far from the film? A clutch of ironies, actually: a teen slut who falls deeply, near-suicidally, for one of her casual pick-ups; a rebellious daughter who protects her neurotic mom from an abusive husband by setting up his downfall; a nun who turns out to be complicit in her own sexual violation; an absentee wife who admits genuine love for the father of her child; a life-long urbanite who finds solidarity with oppressed tribespeople; an exonerated prisoner who had actually committed the crime she was imprisoned for; a sexual sophisticate who rejects the fashionable trend of lesbian chic in favor of a butch-femme arrangement. Such a head-spinning

combination of contradictions makes sense only if we accept that a character could be radical on her own terms, and *Sabel's* Sabel proffers terms that are as unorthodox as they come.

In comparison with other feminist Filipino films, notably the same scriptwriter Ricardo Lee's early '80s output for Marilou Diaz-Abaya plus her more controversial though still indispensable later output (especially *Sensual* [1986] and *Milagros* [1997]), Sabel unequivocally demands to be taken as an integral part of the canon. It improves on *Brutal* (1980) by first seemingly reversing the gender of its investigator, from female to male, then ensuring that this person is sufficiently de-masculinized—as an ex-prisoner castigated by his fiancée's mother and rendered reverential (feminist, in a sense) by the sacrifice of the nun he thought he had raped and by the love of an ambitious and capable woman—prior to allowing us to share his gaze. More important, it corrects the only sour note in the otherwise pitch-perfect *Moral* (1982)—the depiction of a minor character, one strong woman, among other strong women, whose only “fault” was that she happened to love other women.

Per the Internet Movie Database, this is the director's and writer's eighth collaboration. Most of the Joel C. Lamangan films I have seen evinced an admirable willingness to tackle ambitious themes with the heavy-handedness of a self-consciously classically oriented artist. *Sabel* is that wondrous creature, a work that pulls in issues from all over the map with the skill of an accomplished raconteur, one unafraid to deploy standard-issue devices (jump cuts and quick dissolves, flashback indicators, dramatic echo effects, etc.) for the sake of easing the narrative along. When the genuinely subversive resolution becomes apparent—the conciliation between the less-patriarchalized straight man and his former lover turned lesbian avenger, one accused of murder and the other getting away with it—it registers first as a warm, feel-good moment, sustained by the closure of the other characters' stories, before the shocking implications take over.

Past Lamangan films, whatever their limits, could not be faulted for his direction of actors, but in *Sabel* he elicits career peaks from all the major performers. Wendell Ramos appears to have correctly judged how to attack his role by utilizing a childish affect during his emotional highlights, instead of the now-hackneyed (and predictable) sensitive-male approach, while Sunshine Dizon demonstrates authority as a medical professional and

confidence as a soft-spoken butch lesbian. Most impressively, Rio Locsin turns in a radiant, witty, and mercurial performance as Sabel's mother, all raw-edged neurotic tenderness that threatens to exterminate anyone unfortunate enough to share screen space with her: when she turns on the charm for her daughter and prospective son-in-law, then turns on him to express her unmitigated disapproval, one can completely understand how he can be spellbound enough to smile through her insults and later consult with her on how to find her missing daughter.

How does the lead actress fare in relation to such expert deliveries? It would be nearly impossible to find reference points for evaluation, given the singularity of the character in local cinema. One could attempt a commutational exercise by imagining how, say, the young Nora Aunor could have further enriched the role by lending it the discursive wealth of her persona or how the young Rio Locsin could have added a crucial measure of sensuality, but this also indicates how Judy Ann Santos's achievement as Sabel is worthy of comparison with our very best talent. I was first appreciative of how unconcerned she was about her looks, considering how far from conventionally beautiful her features are. As she continued to immerse in the difficult metamorphoses of her character, I realized how hard-working this young talent was, and how much justifiable pride she manifested in a job well done. And yes, she does manage to hold her own before the force of nature that is Rio Locsin. If ever, and if only, unapologetically transgressive women characters become a staple in local fiction, Santos's performance will serve as yardstick not because she was first, but because she made it memorable.

One final female auteur has to be cited: she shares story credit for the film, and is its producer as well. Lily Yu Monteverde has never gotten her due as the most productive mogul in our country's colorful film history, largely because she also has a contradictory reputation as a disruptive producer. But now that even the trashy products of Regal are developing cult reputations, people better start rethinking whether, like Sabel's, "Mother" Lily's success wasn't well earned after all. I'd say, on the basis of previous prestige projects (Mike de Leon's *Sister Stella L.* [1984], Lino Brocka's *Makiusap sa Diyos* [1991]), the main character's nunhood phase was her contribution. But the larger contribution was the production itself. When Sabel insists

that everything is part of a larger design, one that she later admits she herself could not completely discern, which creator could the filmmakers be referring to?

## Domestic Worth

### **Serbis**

Directed by Brillante Ma. Mendoza

Written by Armando Lao

*Serbis's* reputation as an international *succès de scandale* ironically precedes its mass reception in its home country—that is, if the local censors will ever even allow it to have any semblance of wide release. It generated derisive responses (most notoriously from *Variety*) during its screening as competition entry at last year's edition of the Cannes Film Festival, then reaped generally favorable comments from American film critics after it was picked up for distribution, plus a clutch of awards in a number of festivals closer to home. In certain respects it managed to avoid the spectacle of utter financial collapse that a controversial major release of the so-called Second Golden Age, Ishmael Bernal's *Nunal sa Tubig* (1976), sustained, simply by circulating long enough in the international circuit to pique the curiosity of a number of film marketers.

On the other hand, it missed out entirely (so far, at least) on the fierce critical exchanges that *Nunal sa Tubig* engendered during its time among some of the best minds in local culture. Those who weighed in on the earlier release were almost entirely members of the film critics' circle, but all that *Serbis* can hope for today by way of high-profile commentary will be its performance in the same group's annual awards ceremony, a dispiriting and unseemly prospect for such an ambitious piece. For given the extreme responses that works like *Nunal sa Tubig* and *Serbis* foster, a year's worth of shallow rumination, summed up in the comparative evaluation process that award-giving confines itself to, will prove inadequate at best, inutile at worst.

The fact that *Serbis* suggests a comparison with a Bernal opus is more than just coincidental. Director Brillante Ma. Mendoza, like mid-period

Bernal, has been prolific lately, leans toward contemporary material, and evinces a willingness to try out various genres and formats to the point where none of his films so far resembles any of his others. But where Bernal occasionally trained his expertise on the (then-still-numerous) members of the local middle class, Mendoza has consistently kept focus on the country's social Others. More significantly, Bernal opted to innovate in terms of storytelling, eventually becoming a still-to-be-recognized world-class master of the multicharacter film narrative, while Mendoza, even this early, is already arguably the country's most eminent film stylist, designer, and colorist.

*Serbis* also raises the issue of how moribund the local film industry actually is. Mendoza himself has been able to maintain steady exposure for an impressive stable of talent, and actually provided a highly unlikely lead actress, the luminous but un-star-like Cherry Pie Picache, with opportunities to deliver a string of the most accomplished Filipino performances since the 1980s heyday of Nora Aunor, most memorably in her previous Mendoza project, *Foster Child* (2007). *Serbis* itself abounds with a wealth of such intelligent detail—thespic, most obviously, but also cinematographic and sonic (if one allows that dialogue acquires added dimensions when it is nearly overpowered by background “noise”).

Where it treads on contentious territory is its decision to rely on a thematic approach to its material. As propounded by the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, a theorem is any internal mechanism that enables a film to achieve consummate, even mathematical, rigor, but it also potentially disadvantages the work in question unless a problematic (defined as a connection with “the outside”) can be worked out just as assiduously. The universe that *Serbis* depicts dwells on a decrepit film palace, thus providing the rigidly reflexive logic of a film that mainly shows the showing of films. Almost instantly one can infer that the Family Theater functions as a metonym for the Philippines as a once-but-no-longer developing country: traces of past wealth and glories remain, not just in the labyrinthine passageways of the building, but also in the still-beautiful though irrevocably damaged faces and bodies of its main characters.

The film takes loving—detractors might use the term “perverse”—care in showing how this fallen institution's denizens manage the terms of their survival, even occasionally filching instances of pleasure, mostly carnal in

nature, as the opportunities present themselves. The film's refusal to judge its characters' and setting's condition, redolent again of Bernal in *Nunal sa Tubig* and 1982's *Himala* (also rural-set narratives), seems calculated to exasperate, upset even, those eager to embrace a moralistic comeuppance. Bravely enough, the film insists on its reflexive theorem, first highlighting the inevitable queering of its characters' sensibilities as their economic desperation intensifies, then eventually finishing with a sudden celluloid combustion, as if to tell us all, *This is as far as any movie can get us to any truth, and how dare we even hope for more.* With its narrative open ending (where the scriptwriter plays a patron who seeks queer pleasure in the streets) literally interrupted by an onscreen flare-up, *Serbis* attempts a formal equivalent of the apocalyptic free-for-all at the similarly open-ended climax in Bernal's masterpiece, *Manila by Night* (1980).

The Family Theater's "outside" (its Deleuzian problematic) comprises descriptions by the theater-owning matriarch of the failure of both her movie-house chain and the court case she filed against her adulterous husband, augmented by a few on-screen forays by some of the other characters into the streets of the town, all of which appear to share the dilapidation and despondency of the film palace. The fact that the said main character's descriptions are more powerful than the actual exteriors that get shown testifies partly to the effectiveness of Gina Pareño's delivery, but also implies that certain questions remain unanswered. In a globalized situation, the majority of business interests struggle or crash so that a privileged few may endure. What were these competing entities, how did they engineer the ruin of such magnificent and seemingly infallible structures as the Family (the theater and its residents), and how well are they doing in comparison? A glimpse into the so-termed other half would have given us a firmer estimate of the price that the Family Theater's community has paid for the sake of progress elsewhere.

As it stands, perhaps the only way we have of comprehending the larger phenomenon that *Serbis* has discursively plugged into is by looking again at its foreign critical reception: it was the Americans who understood, and appreciated, what it was all about—namely, the near-complete devastation wrought by the specter of globalization that their country foisted on its neocolonial territories. Such a paradoxically enlightened response coming

from an otherwise oppressive culture would have embarrassed old-school nationalists, including the type that Bernal eventually metamorphosed into. Whether *Serbis* will serve the function of elucidating this dismal state of affairs for the current generation of Filipino viewers is something that history will have to play out, well beyond the deadline of any forthcoming film awards or festival ceremonies.

## Survivor's Guilt

### **Boses**

Directed by Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil

Written by Froi Medina and Rody Vera

*Boses* is not the first noteworthy film shut out of awards recognition in Cinemalaya—anyone ever heard of Arah Jell G. Badayos and Margaret G. Guzman's 2006 *Mudraks?* It joins a long and still-lengthening list of works, local and foreign, film and non-film, overlooked upon initial release, whose reward(s) would arrive, sooner or later, in the form of belated acclaim, discursive attention, extended shelf-life, or, best of all, a mix of all three. What distinguishes *Boses* is that it also serves to indicate a peak in the Cinemalaya ideal: the hope that talent from the margins could eventually overrun the mainstream even while playing by the latter's rules.

This may be the reason why the festival jurors may have felt alienated, embarrassed even, by *Boses's* accomplishments. *Boses* takes a grim situation (child abuse), matches it with high-art therapy (classical music), and unfolds the narrative with a strong dose of pleasure, as startling in its effectiveness as it is unexpected, given the nature of its material. In this manner the film betokens not just some of the best moments of the local industry, but also that of Classical Hollywood—the dominant 20th-century film movement that the rest of world cinema attempted to topple, with the European New Wave finally managing the feat just a few decades ago.

But what became *Boses's* liability also turned out to be the source of its instant turnaround: already the current Cinemalaya top-grosser, it appears capable of attaining blockbuster status, with repeat viewership boosted by

word-of-mouth commendation, occasionally hysterical responses even in the staid venues (Cultural Center of the Philippines, University of the Philippines Film Institute) it has graced so far, and star-is-born adulation lavished on its gifted and charismatic child performer, Julian Duque.

The trouble with *Boses's* context of emergence is that it requires critical observers to weigh the film's merits vis-à-vis those of the other Cinemalaya entries, especially this year's winners. One strategy would be to point out the weaknesses of the prize-winners, but this would imply that the goal of figuring out a single "best" film is correct and satisfactory, when all it is, in a situation overwhelmed by an excess of achievements, is individualist in the worst tradition of auteurism (the New Wave "theory" that posited that films can be evaluated according to singular creative contributions, rather than collective efforts). In pursuit of this exercise, a circle of fellow cineastes helped me figure out what ailed the major winners (and, possibly by extension, the current crop of indie practitioners): a valorization of technical supremacy and over-reliance on deconstructive methods by the best-film winner, an endorsement of bourgeois middlebrow ambitions by the best-direction winner, and an infantilizing of outsiders (literalized by depicting them as children, with characters from the nation's capital providing conflicting versions of modernist enlightenment) by the special jury prize-winner.

Yet this type of winner-take-all exercise presents its own form of danger, in the sense that *Boses*, for all its counter-acclaim, also partakes of some of the winners' weaknesses. In fact our position as responsible observers makes it necessary to point out that a more radical handling of its material would have us understand, to the point of empathy, the abuser's dramatic condition, the abused child's reason for willing to have remained a victim for so long, and the tensions in the social worker's position of class privilege in relation to abuser and abused. And we still have to bring up its filmmaker's admission that she had to significantly sanitize the situation, not to mention the language, familiar to real-life child-abuse perpetrators, victims, and therapists. Plus it appears to uncritically question the pro-choice option.

With all the ways it might have fallen short, why does *Boses* remain the favorite of many, me included, anyway? One clue lies in the movie's first end credit: a dedication to Johven Velasco, a film artist, teacher, and scholar who languished in academe until his sudden and tragic demise about a year

ago, unknown to the rest of the world except for a handful of students and friends who swear by his selfless dedication and willingness to share everything he had, even at the expense of his own welfare. The fact that Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil makes this connection between the lives of her characters and that of an actual acquaintance indicates that she recognizes and upholds the power of love, a value that, even more than film pleasure, tends to upset film experts, used as they are to the constant and facile ways it gets exploited in the medium.

Indeed the core relationship in *Boses*, between the young survivor of parental abuse and the violinist who awakens the former's talent and in the process attains his own closure from a personal tragedy, is what provides, for want of a less corny metaphor, the film's heartbeat. Not only does the interaction start cute and end passionately, complete with initial misunderstanding, close calls, near-breakdown, and bittersweet separation, it also occasions bravura performances by the actors involved—as thespians and as musicians. Even more surprising, though perfectly logical, was Ongkeko-Marfil's onstage acknowledgment, during the film's UPFI screening, that Coke Bolipata and Julian Duque are violin mentor and student respectively in real life.

Though *Boses* benefits immeasurably from the chemistry between the pair's star turns, the high level of quality displayed by the rest of the film's cast proves that Ongkeko-Marfil's background in stage arts (specifically the Philippine Educational Theater Association, where she and Johven Velasco started out) has helped complement the impressive evolution of her cinematic skills. Her earlier films, *Angels* (2001) and *Mga Pusang Gala* (2005), already generated appreciative buzz among indie-film observers. With *Boses*, she hewed close to what Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal, misrecognized among indie filmmakers as foreign-festival and anti-mass audience innovators, struggled to achieve throughout their extensive careers: the unapologetic provision of spectatorial pleasure alongside their inevitably intelligent handling of material.

The mode that Ongkeko-Marfil chose constituted her gravest challenge to serious film evaluators: melodrama, a type of genre that belongs to the larger group of "body" films, so-called because of their ability to provoke corporeal, as opposed to cerebral, responses—i.e., tear-jerking in

this instance, goose bump-raising in horror, sexual arousal in pornography, laughter incitement in comedy. Feminist critics, for the greater part of the last couple of decades, have been spearheading the campaign to recuperate these much-derided genres, but their uphill movement shows no signs of reaching level ground in high-art (and therefore essentially conservative) culture, the indie-film scene included.

*Boses* evinces a systematic working-through of the elements peculiar to the local practice of melodrama, but the mechanisms, subtle as they are, become evident only upon further viewing. I even managed to jot down, in the dark of the screening venue, the Pinoy terms used by native practitioners: *kilig*, *tampuhan*, *tawanan*, *kantahan* (with violins instead of voices), *habulan*, and *pagwawala*,<sup>17</sup> in chronological order as well as according to increasing level of involvement. The penultimate sequence—spoiler alert!—between the teacher and student protagonists encapsulates the film's earlier depiction of the shifts in their relationship: from farewell bonding, to panic, to relief, to hysteria, to music-making, to a brief comic exchange, to a final display of open-air (and -water) exuberance. One might wish that the performers had been seasoned enough to allow Ongkeko-Marfil to use a single take (a much-abused property of digital technology), but my first impression was that the scene had unfolded in one continuous action covered by multiple cameras (another advantage of the new technology)—such was the brilliance of the said sequence's nearly wordless conception, grand in its romantic dimension yet sad in its recognition that the just-bonded individuals will never be this close again.

In fact the musical number that ends the narrative succeeds precisely because it refuses to provide definitive closure for any of the characters: the teacher will have to contend with his newfound dependence on the validation provided by his prodigy, the child will have to work out his loyalties toward his two needy father figures, the biological father will have to face the reality of his son challenging his vulnerable manhood, the social worker will have to start worrying whether her decision to reconcile the family would work out for the kid, the young girlfriend will have to find a way to attain sexual normality ... just as people who have experienced these lives will have to return to places they call home and rethink the relationships they might have taken for granted up to this point.

A few films (even Filipino ones) may have incited revolutionary change, but the inward turn that *Boses* inspires, at a time when many of us have learned to muddle through with severely lowered expectations, ought to be fulfillment enough for the talents behind it. Most local digital practitioners will continue to aspire to attain festival honors in foreign lands, but this is the first movie made by a colleague of theirs that, more than anything else, truly belongs nowhere else but home.

### Note

17. The Filipino terms may be translated, in order of enumeration, as follows: titillation, sulkiness, laughter, musicality, pursuit, and rampaging fury.

## Sighs and Whispers

### **Biyaheng Lupa**

Directed and written by Armando Lao

The much-ballyhooed emergence of digital film production in the Philippines has brought with it several paradoxes. On the one hand, while it has enabled critics to celebrate the revival of local cinema, the fact remains that genuine industrial-scale production has remained moribund, save for the occasional ultra-commercial event movie that would always, and continues to, embarrass the said critics (on which more later). On the other hand, largely because of the still-evolving shape of the dynamics of production and exhibition, more and more individuals are able to come up with their own releases, here and now, without having to go through the old eye-of-the-needle difficulties posed by then-prevalent but too-expensive celluloid production. Yet, also a consequence of such a sanguinary situation, too few of these would-be innovators see no problem in going over the heads of the local audience, as evidenced in nearly everyone's eagerness to attain personal artistic validation by opting to make a mark in high-brow, preferably foreign venues.

These are problems whose solutions demand immediate attention, if only those in a position to attend to these issues could themselves take a

step beyond self-aggrandizement. But one further paradox must be pointed out first, since it may be the most relevant in terms of *Biyaheng Lupa*. This proceeds from the preceding one, wherein digital production has provided an ever-growing number of prospective filmmakers with directorial breaks—so consistently, in fact, that eventually there might no longer be such a creature as a frustrated filmmaking aspirant. As in writing, where the fairly easy access to a typewriter (now a computer) nullifies any would-be author's material excuses, so does digital film technology provide any auteur hopeful with a dwindling number of reasons to hesitate in taking her or his first directorial step.

Yet the now-unlamented tyranny of monolithic celluloid-dependent production was in fact capable of instilling in some of the best filmmaking candidates certain qualities that today's film institutions, eager as most of them are to prove the worthiness of their respective trainees, wind up only paying lip service to: a solid grounding in the humanities, a thorough grasp of classical traditions, a philosophical engagement with issues both current and past, an enduring respect for the exigencies of financial risk-taking, and a willingness to engage the mass audience by entertaining and challenging them in turn, or simultaneously whenever possible. For this reason most old-school filmmakers, like today's young Turks, could come up with creditable first projects ... yet the old-timers could also sustain life-long careers by virtue of their intense personal commitment to complete artistic preparation, prolonged by the years, sometimes decades, of awaiting their respective breaks, whereas most of the names populating contemporary Filipino filmographies will be known mainly for the films they first came up with, and will be overstaying their welcome sooner or later.

It therefore also makes sense to maintain that the best local debut film, Ishmael Bernal's *Pagdating sa Dulo* (1971), had not been surpassed for the past three decades, even in the face of the wild proliferation of first-timers since the turn of the millennium. *Pagdating* signaled the emergence of a talent distinguished by precociousness, reflexive criticality, intensive interest in social issues, and empathy for Otherness, with comic distance from profound institutional tragedies providing the equivalent of icing on the cake. And it also makes just as much sense to aver that *Biyaheng Lupa* shares all of *Pagdating's* merits and then some, considering the fact that its

director-writer, Armando Lao, has had close to a full career in scriptwriting—over a quarter-century, in fact—and had even then already embarked on an unrelated career or two elsewhere beforehand, much like many of the celluloid-era filmmakers once did.

A final similarity shared by both debut films resulted in an outcome that should not have happened then, and that has even less justification for occurring today: both display a sense of innovation so thoroughgoing yet so nonchalant that film evaluators have wound up taking the films' presence, then as now, for granted. It would be newsworthy in itself if any influential institution were to recognize *Biyaheng Lupa* as the best Pinoy film debut of our time, just as *Pagdating sa Dulo* held that distinction for decades once people woke up to the fact. What will prove the current weakness of, say, the local critics' group's dynamics would be the inadequacy of its current screening methods—a reliance on individual video screeners, mainly, rather than the theatrical exhibitions that once guaranteed that complex film texts would have the potential to maximize their impact by approximating actual viewing experiences.

Like no one else except Bernal, Lao has infused his very first outing with a recognizable and fully developed aesthetic philosophy. Those who had been able to follow his scriptwriting career will be able to trace where he had been headed, and how he had managed an extensive self-revaluation and, at the same time, a welcome return to his roots. One could form one's anticipation based on, say, the earthy handling of William Pascual's *Takaw Tukso* (1986), the time-based experimentation of Chito Roño's *Itanong Mo sa Buwan* (1988), the tragicomic national allegories of Jeffrey Jeturian's *Pila-Balde* (1999), and the reflexivity of Jeturian's *Tuhog* (2001), but *Biyaheng Lupa* would still prove more surprising than what any of these major works could presuppose.

Per the filmmaker's own account, *Biyaheng Lupa* departs from Lao's utilization of real-time presentations, notably in his collaborations with Jeturian and Brillante Mendoza. Lao's real-time narrative strategy was itself a coping mechanism, after the commercial failure of his epic-scale project with Jeturian, titled *Minsan Pa* (which, like *Biyaheng Lupa* and Jeturian's *Kubrador* [2006], was produced by MLR Films, whose executive producer, Joji Alonso, may yet bid to be the Jesse Ejercito of Pinoy digital productions). Lao has described *Biyaheng Lupa* as reliant on poetic time, where cosmic principles

impinge on the unfolding of the narrative, as opposed to the duration-dependent real time and his earlier deployment of character-based dramatic time. Originally intended as a dramatic-time type of narrative focused on one of the present film's main characters, the project hibernated, so to speak, as Lao went through his real-time storytelling phase, and re-emerged in the poetically inflected mode it has assumed at last.

Lao and his collaborators had endured varying measures of acclaim and grief—sometimes within the same project, as was the case with Mendoza's 2008 Cannes entry *Serbis*. Curiously, *Biyaheng Lupa* both embodies this materialist orientation and transcends it at the same time, via its initial fragmentation of a close-quartered social unit, the passengers of a southbound bus, and the subsequent revelation of the artist's motive: an amazing reconstitution of this same unit within the terms of the characters' inner lives and often in spite of their individual selves, to such a degree that when one of them remarks, "My life is not alone," it serves as a confirmation of what everyone had refused to accept until the fateful end.

*Biyaheng Lupa* sets out its contract with its viewers by asking them to accept its sole artificial element, the premise that people think in terms of words alone, rather than in terms of images or, more likely, in audiovisual stretches. Once we accept this, the film takes us on the journey of several characters—sixteen, if we were to go by the list of major performers, or seventeen if we include the anonymous, unseen ultimate determinant, the bus driver ... who may or may not be standing in for the author, but the film's ontological complications do not end here. At some point during the trip, the conductor operates the ubiquitous video player, and the *Biyaheng Lupa* producer's earlier film, the aforementioned *Minsan Pa*, unfolds. Here the filmmaker may be acknowledging the reduction of finances (from celluloid epic to single-set digital) alongside the increase in scale (from hero-centered love triangle to multicharacter dramatic discourse), even as the screen-within-the-screen characters, as stars playing "real" people, interpellate the bus passengers—who in turn "respond" by discussing the presentation, but whose comments reach neither the film being shown nor one another, but the film audience.

These polysemic valences come to a head with another video screening, this one more overtly interactive: a sing-along to Louie Ocampo's pop ballad

“Kahit Isang Saglit” [Just One Moment], where the passengers, without their knowing it, literally think of exactly the same thing, thus unconsciously-yet-deliberately forming an extemporaneous community of their own. The measure of Lao’s skill as documentarian is in how he demonstrates this occurrence without the usual humanist throwbacks to shared ideals or unified aspirations. In fact, the characters fall into singing along just as easily as they plot, bicker, judge, reminisce, fantasize, and regret, with one of them even developing at one point a funny-scary paranoid delusion that erupts in a knife-wielding outburst that just as quickly fizzles into abject surrender. One might remark here that, given the radical paring-down of scale and resources, *Biyaheng Lupa* attempts the same successful delineation of a recognizable Filipino social milieu that Bernal’s *Manila by Night* (1980) had done, but with more characters, and in reverse: where Bernal started with relative unity and stability and built up toward a monumental breakdown, Lao begins with the more recognizable self-absorbed individuals typical of a harried neoliberal Third-World existence, drifting in and out of their inner lives as they contend with the company of one another.

Yet even as they insist on the primacy of their lives prior to and possibly after taking the present trip, a question of haunting arises. The audience is never provided any assurance that the memories conjured up by any of the characters are real (one of them in fact worries that her illegitimate pregnancy will result in the delivery of a monstrous squid-baby, just like her neighbor did before her), which is why when the film follows some of them after they leave the bus, their situations acquire an uncanny quality that never became an issue when they were still taking the trip. On the other hand, most of them are so caught up in their other lives that the proximity of the other passengers results in intrusions that they dismiss, reject, misrecognize (especially in erotic terms), or at best tolerate; in short, while for us the characters’ pre-trip lives might just as well be fantastic, for the characters the other passengers might as well be specters that could dissolve once this transition in their lives has passed.

Such insights on transience, destiny, and the abiding power of memory are brought to bear in the film’s bravura climax, simple in conception, casual in execution, yet grand in the best possible way, heralded by a mystifyingly long take of the bus crossing a bridge then pausing in the middle. Without

giving away (too much of) this vital closure, I ought nevertheless to remark that we witness a series of rapturous textual ruptures and arrive at one of the most incredible final shots in cinema—and yes, I do include global samples in this declaration: a close-up of the last passenger, her face crowded by translations of the monologues of everyone else around her, building up to her final utterance, devastatingly simple, amusing yet heartbreaking, drawn from a fiction whose reality effect surpasses whatever documentations have been made of life in our wondrous, terrible, much-abused yet constantly hopeful existence.

## On the Edge

### On the Job

Directed by Erik Matti

Written by Michiko Yamamoto and Erik Matti

*On the Job* (hereafter *OTJ*) commemorates at least one milestone in the still-evolving narrative of Philippine independent cinema: it is the first digital-era action film to attain the genre's elusive combination of critical acclaim and box-office profitability, reminiscent of the local industry's social-realist achievements during the martial law period (roughly the '70s to the mid-'80s). From my sadly delimited perspective, the project seems to have benefited from a serendipitous confluence of its creative forces, director Erik Matti and co-writer Michiko Yamamoto, each attaining a peak in relatively short careers already marked by several high points.

One measure of the movie's impact lies in how it has been able to elicit commentary even from Pinoy reviewers who tend to focus on so-called mainstream releases. This is the key to *OTJ*'s significance as the latest in a still-rare series of independently produced films that fulfill the dream of a community of practitioners who seek to overrun the studio-dominated mode of production and exhibition. Unlike Aureus Solito's *Ang Pagdadalagang Maximo Oliveros* (2005), the first digital indie success that turned out to be the exception that proved the rule, all the rest were generically recognizable exercises, notably a pair of comedies (Marlon Rivera's *Ang Babae sa Septic*

*Tank* and Jade Castro's *Zombadings 1: Patayin sa Shokot si Remington* [both 2011]) and a melodrama (Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil's *Boses* [2008]). *OTJ* claims pride of place in being directed at the patronage-shy male audience while accommodating whatever combination of viewers (female, youth, intelligentsia) still manages to sustain theatrical screenings.

In fact the few negative responses to the film dwell on aspects that the movie had no choice but to observe in order to succeed as a genre sample. One might feel that the fact that a woman co-scripted the material might have been nothing more than a stroke of luck for the project, but that would belie the evidence that Michiko Yamamoto was also responsible for the aforementioned *Maximo Oliveros* and *Zombadings*, as well as Maryo J. de los Reyes's *Magnifico* (2003): if one were to imagine the men her fictions focused on, they would proceed chronologically from son to gay son to grown-up sexually conflicted teen, so there would be no reason to expect that she would be unable to deal (entertainingly) with mature conventional men.

What makes *OTJ* a qualitative leveling up, to use contemporary youth lingo, is not so much its close inspections of father-son relationships (also characteristic of the previous Yamamoto-scripted titles) as the proliferation of dramatis personae representing various social strata and performing diverse conflicting functions. The challenge of rendering these potentially schematic types as recognizable denizens of the urban jungles of Metro Manila was up to the director to realize, and Erik Matti proves himself equal to the task by relying (as Ishmael Bernal before him had been wont to do) on the tension that results from fusing a complex, raging narrative voice with a patient and keenly observed documentarian style, his on-the-prowl camera constantly encircling his major characters the same way that new media (in the form of CCTVs and satellites and camera phones, e.g.) ensure that our private moments might be shared by a voracious viewing public.

The icing on the cake is what probably proved irresistible to mass viewers, who are known to re-watch films that treat them to unexpected doses of pleasure: in *OTJ*'s case, this would comprise the nearly uniform sterling performances by an ensemble of actors who seemed to have been hungry for the opportunity to shine in sharply drawn characterizations, and proceeded to deliver quicksilver line readings, physically exhaustive maneuvers, and emotionally draining demonstrations. Actually it was only during

a second viewing where I figured out that it was mainly the performances that accounted for an impression that the movie had set out to tackle Oedipal conflicts in a failed state, despite the fact that of the three sets of fathers in the film, the least visible son was the only one biologically related to his dad, an upstanding (and therefore professionally unsuccessful) police officer. The pair of prisoners who get spirited out by their militarily appointed handlers observe a mentor-student relationship (that occasionally has the potential to virtually replace the student's own parents, as most teachers can attest), while the police detective that the Senate-aspiring general's campaign manager assigns to attend to a series of messy clean-up operations is actually an orphan "adopted" by his father-in-law, the campaign manager.

If the setup as presented sounds a mite too complex for a standard-issue actioner, that precisely is the contract the film proffers its media-savvy and issue-starved Pinoy audience, in exchange for headline-worthy acts of violence tempered with unexpected moments of gracious humor. That in itself would be sufficient payoff, but *OTJ* more daringly builds up its case against the state, where the lowliest character hints at the highest office in the land as implicated in unwholesome underworld skulduggery. The manner in which the father-son tensions are resolved is breathtaking in its cold-bloodedness, yet in both mass-audience and student venues that I attended, the viewers cheered at the end (as foreign-festival attendees reportedly also did).

A less forgiving observer might complain that the movie performs as entertainment machine too successfully, trading on its impressive skills display—and while I imagine that for some viewers that would be reason enough to be grateful, I'd hesitate to judge that desire as wrong per se. But I also think that the exchange between *OTJ* and its audience goes a bit deeper than that: by regarding the viewer as capable of following story threads as endless and labyrinthine as the alleyways and culs-de-sac that the characters keep navigating, hopeful for whatever reward they believe awaits them at the end, *OTJ* enables its primary audience to realize how Philippine society and its people are imprisoned in an insurmountable system of exploitation. Thwarted by electoral exercises, appalled by high-level corruption, distressed by the prospect of having to follow other people's commands just to be able to survive—we are what we witness in this sordid, bloody, soul-crushing, painfully funny portrait of the national condition.

## **A Desire Named Oscar**

### **Ilo Ilo**

Directed and written by Anthony Chen

### **Metro Manila**

Directed by Sean Ellis

Written by Frank E. Flowers and Sean Ellis

### **Transit**

Directed by Hannah Espia

Written by Giancarlo Abrahan and Hannah Espia

The present year (2013) will be memorable for Pinoys mainly for the succession of national traumas it proffered, from the usual showbiz decouplings and sex scandals to pork-barrel exposés, militia violence, and record-breaking natural disasters. On the other hand, those who wish to remember whatever positive developments occurred will have enough to account for beyond the first Miss World (and Miss Supernational) beauty queens and the nth boxing triumph of Manny Pacquiao. In fact the equivalent past year, for those old enough to remember, would be 1984, when the country was in the throes of dismantling a discredited (US-sponsored) dictatorship, yet graced with what may have been the most productive Golden Age year for Philippine cinema. As if to compensate for the greater concentration of troubles that befell the republic this year, 2013 supplied not just more wonderful films than usual, but also more festivals to showcase several of these achievements.

The rest of the world's film community must have been taking notes, since the Philippines not only claimed to offer "more fun" in its official tourist announcement, but also actually positioned its citizens in virtually all the inhabited areas of the globe. About one in ten Filipinos, or close to ten million in total, constitutes the official count; no other national economy depends as much on overseas income, even if three other countries (China, India, and Mexico) have, in absolute terms, more overseas citizens and consequently larger remittances. In this respect, the overseas Filipino worker or OFW possesses a status crucial to the survival of her home country, not

to mention her usually numerous dependents back home. This fact ties in with several other problems whose solutions lie beyond our reach for now: elected officials, for example, will always be confident about plundering the national treasury since the people in charge of the economy will no longer be able to hold off their money-making activities, the way they did during the Marcos era; if the OFWs withheld their remittances, the pork-barrelists may be frustrated—but only after the OFWs' families had gone without for too long.

Unlike Western and several newly prosperous Asian countries, therefore, the Philippine global presence is far less privileged, manifested by workers in some of the least-preferred stations in their destination countries, rather than by tourists and scholars or professionals on exchange programs. The fascination among foreign cultures with the Pinoys in their midst derives from a recognition tinged with embarrassment and guilt: in an earlier, less-developed period, they could have been us. Hence a lot of conflicted responses to the OFW presence can be explained in terms of how badly the foreign employers wish to deny this reality about themselves, or how sorry they feel for the people who might have been their equal, had history taken other turns (the global response to the victims of supertyphoon Yolanda/Haiyan can also be framed in this way).

Meanwhile, part of the pro-filmic renown that 2013 will be marking was the announcement that three official submissions to the Best Foreign Film category of the Academy Awards happen to deal with Filipino workers. The Filipino and Singaporean entries, *Transit* and *Ilo Ilo* respectively, are overtly about OFWs (with another country, Israel, as the setting for *Transit*), while the UK's submission, *Metro Manila*, is about a Pinoy worker's odyssey in his native land. *Transit* was the first to be screened locally, during the annual Cinemalaya Film Festival; *Metro Manila* was screened not long after, while *Ilo Ilo* will be in Metro Manila theaters by the time this article gets published. It is in reverse order of their Philippine release schedules that I will be discussing each one.

Anthony Chen's *Ilo Ilo* brings with it a number of well-deserved distinctions, including a trophy from Cannes as well as Taiwan's Golden Horse prize as the best Chinese-language movie of the year. It's better than what one could hope for, and strengthens the perception of how Singaporeans are

attempting to bridge the connections between their people and ours after the several difficulties the Philippines has had with the Singaporean government, from Lee Kuan Yew's disparaging remarks about OFWs to the Flor Contemplacion tragedy. The earlier OFW-themed Singaporean film, Kelvin Tong's 2005 horror entry *The Maid*, was similarly well-intentioned but too derivative and necessarily dualistic in its configuration of the "good" victimized OFW and evil-abusive Singaporean employers.

Since *Ilo Ilo* proceeds from a recollection of its filmmaker's formative period with his Pinay nanny, it manages to depict a system where harshness and even outright cruelty can be understood even by the purported victim, with the IMF/WB-induced Asian economic crisis of the late 1990s as the invisible monster that inevitably takes over the country, driving its citizens to increasing levels of panic and frustration. Chen maintains a humane grounding for the family at the center of his narrative, with the usually demonized character, the mother, revealed as the force that keeps the family, materially speaking, together, her jealousy at the developing closeness between her son and his nanny kept in check by her realization that the problems she has to solve are larger than all of them put together, since it will mean their survival as citizens. To its credit, *Ilo Ilo* is able to advance these potentially melodramatic developments in a subdued, humor-leavened manner, the heartbreak of the family (and their country) falling apart and losing the first "other" friend their son has ever had all kept in check and staying with the viewer long after the screening experience has ended. If you happen to be in the vicinity where the film's being screened, don't wonder that people are not buzzing excitedly about it, since it's not that kind of film; just rest assured that it will provide good old-fashioned substantive entertainment, and head to the nearest venue without delay.

Sean Ellis's *Metro Manila* is made of more ambitious stuff, the same way that Danny Boyle presumed that he was in a position to envision the slums of Mumbai as an Oscar-worthy film in *Slumdog Millionaire* (2008). Alas, just as *Slumdog Millionaire* could only hope to repackage a proletarian children's fantasy via all the razzle-dazzle that state-of-the-art Hollywood filmmaking could offer, so does *Metro Manila* falter in its attempt to portray the Pinoy underclass. The relationship between a British subject like Boyle and the post-colonial material that Mumbai represents can only work to the extent that,

say, an author like Rudyard Kipling could only partially (and problematically) succeed with, and do so by devoting his entire life to living in and writing about India. And just as *Slumdog Millionaire* managed to get by through appropriating elements of Bollywood cinema, so does *Metro Manila* attempt to make its case by demonstrating how closely its makers had studied certain Pinoy social-realist samples that happened to be accessible to foreign viewers.

What Ellis and his team missed out on was the home-based critique of this tradition. Even worse, they subject the Pinoy psyche to a distinctly Western temperament, when the movie's central figure (who's male rather than female) feels shortchanged by the trader who buys his harvest, and decides to trek from faraway Mountain Province to Metro Manila, where he knows no one, bringing his entire family with him. To make things worse, everyone who meets him treats him worse than his rural boss, with a room-for-rent swindle serving as the proverbial last straw; no one even thinks of extending a hand, much less uttering a sympathetic word, at the plight of an incredibly naïve rural migrant—who it turns out can even speak fluent English! Midway through the movie the narrative veers into film-noir territory, so if you can sit out the first hour, you'll finally be able to appreciate certain developments made more recognizable because of their generic properties.

Finally, Hannah Espia's *Transit* stands as one of the most impressive first films in an accelerating list of local films filled with impressive debuts, and more striking since she happens to be the only female filmmaker in this trio as well as the youngest. *Transit* may not have been possible had the filmmaker lacked extensive preparation in her craft, and Espia's status as a graduate of the national university's film program evinces how the faculty, along with the better students, might have been able to assess the errors of the program's earlier emphases on film plastics and found instead the more useful study materials on time, modernity, thirdspace, globalization, memory, and politics of gender and race. Apparently Espia reached into her own history as the child of Israel-based OFWs, and returned to this past in order to evoke it for people—her own, and others—who might find it less familiar than she does.

By focusing on a single episode, which may be roughly described as the effects of recent Israeli security policy of deporting the children of migrant

workers too young to attend school, and the responses of a small circle of OFW relatives and friends, *Espia* enables the audience to realize the human cost of such a harsh (through presumably necessary) official decision; like Anthony Chen, she also positions the OFWs' foreign employers as distinct from their countries' state forces, and one realizes how well she succeeds with the characters in her narrative when an Israeli employer, a generous and avuncular elderly fellow, suffers an attack—and an OFW child, left alone in the Israeli's house, now has to risk his resident status by running out into the open to seek for help.

The film's complexities derive from the characters' difficult relationships with one another, desirous of constantly expressing the warmth that Pinoy culture ingrains in its citizens from birth, yet wary of the way that this surrender to the dictates of the heart could trip them up in relation to their host country's wartime rules and regulations. The narrative structure is in fact so simple that it actually helps the "readers" (the film's audiences) to place where an individual character happens to stand in relation to the others, before her or his private moments reveal what thoughts or emotions she or he might actually be harboring deep inside. The same episode gets played out over and over, and in increasing length, from the perspective of characters who are ranged, chronologically, from oldest to youngest, until it ends up with a person directly affected by the country's policy, a child below the age of five, and attains full circle cinematically while insisting on an open ending, with the characters changing the resolutions of the stories that they exchange with one another.

Having once taught at the institute where *Espia* had studied, I never imagined that an undergraduate would be able to configure how film form can be invested with useful discursive valences—so either this is an unusually gifted person who was fortunate in having previously unexploited material, or we might finally be witnessing an end to all these tiresome shallow experimentations that look like painfully prolonged film theses. Like Anthony Chen (and unlike Sean Ellis), Hannah *Espia* focused on theme, character, structure, historiography, and politics, and never let go of gentle humor. She apparently used admittedly difficult recent readings to find ways to tinker with these elements, and presumably set aside the usual goofing around with lights and mics and lenses and reflexive references. There'd be no other

way for her and Chen to grow, full-grown as they already are, except by becoming fuller film specialists.

## Beyond Borders

### **Norte, Hangganan ng Kasaysayan**

Directed by Lav Diaz

Written by Rody Vera and Lav Diaz

In his keynote lecture at the recently concluded Philippine studies conference in Kyoto, Resil B. Mojares described scholars in the current era as involved in commemorating the output of practitioners in what another scholar, Vicente Rafael, described as the “long 1970s,” referring to the decade-and-a-half that the country unnecessarily suffered during martial law. The description provides a useful starting point in a consideration of *Norte, Hangganan ng Kasaysayan*, not only because the auteurs behind the film (and the local critics whom they might regard as its primary respondents) came of age during this period, but also because the martial law generation of Pinoy film-goers would be familiar with what its distributors label as unique: the screening of a longer-than-average release in regular venues. As a matter of record, though, epic-length movies would make an appearance every year or so during the height of the retrospectively titled Second Golden Age, with a few of them even setting canonical or box-office records (Peque Gallaga’s *Oro, Plata, Mata* [1982] and Eddie Romero’s *Aguila* [1980], respectively).

As proof that those times remain resolutely in the past (part of “the end of history,” which *Norte*’s extended title translates as), filmmaker Lav Diaz had been making much longer work than the current release’s four-hour running time, with three of his past films listed at nine hours each by the Internet Movie Database; if one were to watch his previous longer-than-*Norte* output, it would take over two days of non-stop viewing—all to cover a mere seven titles. For this reason I’m attempting a commentary with an admitted gap in my preparation: apart from Diaz’s first long-form film, 2001’s *Batang West Side* (at over five hours the shortest of the aforementioned seven), I have been unable to find the time and opportunity to catch a

screening of the intervening titles. In this respect, I'd still be faithfully representing the "long-1970s" type of audience if the only Diaz non-mainstream movie I'll ever see is *Norte*: I knew upon my first viewing that I'd be able to sit through it at least twice, in direct contrast with my response to *BWS*, and in vicarious contrast with my challenge to all those who claimed they loved the much longer films but could never find the time to watch them all over again with a first-timer like me.

In this respect we'd best proceed with a consideration of the audience-challenging extra-length film (as opposed to the audience-shunting five-to-nine-hour work), starting with the fact that the all-time global box-office champion (with figures adjusted for inflation, as they should always be) is still Victor Fleming's *Gone with the Wind*, a four-hour pre-World War II Hollywood release made in 1939. All this discussion so far points to the likelihood that, "long 1970s" or otherwise, the local audience will most likely be electing (via their peso-votes) *Norte* as the longest Diaz film they will ever watch. And it would not be such a dismal development, in the end. A few critics, as well as the organized critics' group, might insist that some-or-other longer Diaz work might be preferable, but at this point I'd find more useful the question of: whose interest are they representing? Certainly not the "average" viewer, elusive as that figure might be, but still-conceivable to the extent that most of us can readily identify with: laboring long hours for miniscule compensation, looking forward to an end-of-work diversion, resentful at being made to part with hard-earned income just to witness more of the same alienation and hardship that already confront us outside the theater.

While *Norte* proffers characters and themes that may be solidly situated in a possibly dated social-realist tradition, it distinguishes itself by adapting a model that has rarely, maybe even never, been surpassed since 1866: Fyodor Dostoyevsky's *Crime and Punishment*. (The last time that non-Filipino works were profitably adapted for local movies was during the early 1990s, and even then, the source texts were Classical Hollywood films based on English-language novels.) *Norte* maintains a qualified faithfulness to the original—including, unfortunately, its male-appointed universe replete with women characters presented as either strong but destructive ball-breakers, or loving but passive followers; for someone obsessed with (and increasingly expert at)

navigating the tricky depths of ideological complications, Diaz is bafflingly at sea when it comes to identity politics.<sup>18</sup>

Fortunately he fell in with a production team that appreciates the value of connecting with a mass audience, from a self-described “late-blooming” writer, Rody Vera, who has become the go-to person for politically inflected entertainment, to a producer, Moira Lang (credited as Raymond Lee), who had also first made a name for herself as a commercially successful scenarist; their account maintains that *Norte* was originally conceived as a reality-show tearjerker focused on a falsely accused prisoner who felt abandoned by his family. That was how my question about the parallels between pre-Soviet Russia and post-martial law Philippines got answered: people still find themselves on the wrong side of power, and have no other choice except to contend with the reality of despair when the only kind of relief is the one that obliterates life itself. This discursive direction might make *Norte* sound like another indie-miserabilist festival aspirant, but Diaz, whose masterly command of film resources became evident as early as *Hesus Rebolusyunaryo* (2002), his first “short” film after *Batang West Side*, makes sure that his latest makes its terrifying philosophical vision palatable to less-intrepid viewers via the use of gorgeous imagery, an arresting soundtrack, and performances, especially by lead performer Sid Lucero, that can only be described as “committed” in more ways than one.

Ambitious *Norte* nevertheless remains, and it does so by expertly melding *Crime and Punishment* with what appears to be the definitive miscarriage-of-justice tale by Leo Tolstoy, “God Sees the Truth, But Waits” (1872). The tension between the nihilist and humanist extremes in both authors tips over the already unstable psychology of the lead character, Fabian, to resolve in a manner that is transcendental in terms as much of the shocking degradation as of the spiritual uplift it depicts. Such scenes (and please discover these for yourself, when *Norte* gets its global release) are rare in Diaz films, much less local cinema. Outside of the predictably compromised output of religious-fundamentalist converts, the only consequential instances where spirituality had been acknowledged in Pinoy films were in Ishmael Bernal’s aptly celebrated *Himala* (1982) and Marilou Diaz-Abaya’s unjustly forgotten *Milagros* (1997), and if *Norte* were to be the present generation’s embodiment of “the soul of the Filipino,” that would mean a spiritualist-cinema text once

every two decades—always just in time for young people wondering about their place in the world and history and seeking answers in popular culture.

### Note

18. Since writing this review, I have seen *Florentina Hubaldo, CTE*, a 2012 film that renders this comment (regarding Diaz's limitations in handling women's issues) invalid.

## Antonio Luna's Fall and Rise

### General Luna

Directed by Jerrold Tarog

Written by Henry Francia, E.A. Rocha, and Jerrold Tarog

By now, any Filipino in any part of the world who has been extensively plugged into the social network of Facebook would have heard of *General Luna*, the celebrated blockbuster on Antonio Luna. Among several ironies, Luna (1866-99) was reluctant to participate in the uprising against Spain but led the revolutionary army, the Katipunan, in resisting American occupation; like the Katipunan's founder, Andres Bonifacio, Luna was assassinated by his own compatriots, possibly on orders (or at least with the compliance) of the self-declared "first" Philippine president, Emilio Aguinaldo.

The film, directed by Jerrold Tarog and scheduled to screen in the US in a few weeks, boasts of several accomplishments beyond provoking renewed interest in several unresolved century-old controversies: it marked the emergence of vital new players in the burgeoning Philippine film scene; it exemplified ways of reworking a difficult and nearly forgotten local genre, the historical epic; and it demonstrated the material potential of social-network activism, with the movie's box-office record actually increasing from one week to the next in direct proportion to the buzz generated among *Facebook* users. (Of special interest to social-science observers will be how this correlation between new-media activity and citizens' decision-making plays out in next year's Philippine presidential election.)

Only the most assiduous students of Philippine cinema will be able to assert that, contrary to the general impression, *Heneral Luna* is not the first successful local historical epic. Several other period films, notably Eddie Romero's *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (1976), are fondly remembered even though they do not purport to overtly depict any historical personage; Celso Ad. Castillo's *Asedillo* (1972) and Peque Gallaga's *Virgin Forest* (1985) deal with personalities involved in the Fil-American War and its aftermath; and several other titles, notably those of Gerardo de Leon, Marilou Diaz-Abaya, Mario O'Hara, and Mike de Leon, tackle the novels of Jose Rizal and/or the life of the national hero himself.

*Heneral Luna*, however, stakes a claim on Pinoy historical-epic production, and not only because it is the first well-received one made since the film industry's transition to digital format. It evinces careful study of the tradition of an admittedly outmoded genre, one that was much-admired during the early years of cinema but has since been regarded with a certain degree of embarrassment, if not disdain, for its indulgence in "surge and splendor and extravagance," as described by film expert Vivian Sobchack. By his own admission, Tarog reworked an already finished script not only by translating it from English, but also by adding several scenes and details, including a surprising amount of humor; in this way *Heneral Luna* manages to recall not just Romero's work, but an unfairly forgotten early film on Artemio Ricarte by Ishmael Bernal, *El Vibora* (1972).

Unlike Romero and Bernal, Tarog exhibits a fluency in film language that enables him to bypass several of the standard elements of the historical epic genre. He had managed to work around the more technical requirements—the use of recognizable performers (as *Asedillo*, for example, had Fernando Poe Jr.) and the distension of time and space—by casting appealing performers who were capable of larger-than-life delivery without losing histrionic credibility, and by covering so many sociopolitical issues over so much geographic space that the film actually seems to run longer than its barely two-hour limit and seems to be spilling out of the confines of the frame; by the time the American colonial officers congratulate themselves and mock the natives' attempt at self-determination, and face the audience to deliver their lines, the gesture seems to be so consistent with the film's disciplined use of post-modern devices that no one feels that some realist contract has been violated.

The more significant contribution of *Heneral Luna* has been in Tarog's refusal to follow the historical epic tradition of "writing History" (again per Sobchack), but instead opts to write a (version of) history, admitting to the use of fiction (as announced in the prologue) and even rumor (as admitted in a closing-credit notice). In so doing, the film manages to evade and even subvert the several forms of ideological baggage that encumbered Classical Hollywood samples: the rational humanism, bourgeois patriarchy, acceptance of colonialism and imperialism, and validation of entrepreneurial and corporate capitalism that typified early Oscar winners, for example. More than any previous sample of Pinoy historical epics, *Heneral Luna* comes closest to what may be termed the counter-cultural extravaganzas of post-Classical Hollywood and European cinema. It also reconnects with another moribund local genre, the action film, by repackaging the eponymous lead character as neither (strictly speaking) hero nor villain, but as a complex antihero: the responses of the secondary characters to his temperamental contradictions subtly mirror an audience dynamic, with the less "critical" mass audience more accepting, and appreciative, of the film, in contrast with pickier, logic-obsessed, PC-insistent commentators.

Hence anyone who scours the internet for every available response to the film would have eventually stumbled on dissenting commentaries, some of them harsh or outright dismissive. This would be understandable in any work of sufficient ambition and coverage: there will always be elements that will rub some people the wrong way, and in *Heneral Luna* these have arisen in the text's critique of parochialism (painful for those who happen to be associated with certain tribes or regions identified as the villains of this specific version of history) as well as in the downplaying of American complicity in the revolution's most contemptible tendencies. For a preferable corrective, I would refer such would-be critics to another fairly recent period film, ironically by an American, John Sayles's *Amigo* (2010), which should be viewed as the history-from-below intertext of *Heneral Luna*.

For it would be to anyone's future detriment to write off Tarog and his intention of completing a trilogy of filmic discourses on Philippine history. As a non-mainstream filmmaker, he had already come up with a personal series (which he calls his "camera trilogy"), and these indicate a willingness to delve into uncomfortable material via innovative strategies. With *Heneral*

*Luna* he has managed to be earnest about raising questions of patrimony and identity while remaining playfully distant and allowing the audience to figure out their own takes on the past and on the filmic future. It takes a certain type of commitment (or what the romantically inclined might call “love”) to embark on this kind of long-term project, so anyone about to watch the film better be prepared: displays of love can embarrass, and surrendering to it will be overwhelming.

## Roads Less Traveled

### **Lakbay2Love**

Directed by Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil

Written by Layeta Bucoy and Elle Marfil

In *Lakbay2Love*, three friends traverse diverse cycling routes, whether together, individually, or occasionally coupling up as (once or future) romantic partners or bromantic buddies. In the end we realize, contrary to the usual expectations in romantic comedies, that where they wind up (in their travels as well as their relationships) does not matter as much as the journey they took—which, in a sense, does not really end either. Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil, the film’s director, co-writer, and producer, has made her latest in a shortish string of advocacy projects, but one that resonates with a recognizably personal choice.

Significantly older than the typical indie filmmaker, Ongkeko-Marfil’s directorial filmography begins with the current millennium, after intensive preparation with some of the most celebrated Second Golden Age talents—Ishmael Bernal, Lino Brocka, Mike de Leon, and so on. Like these older names, formal film-school preparation was then-unavailable to her, so she honed her skills in literature and theater arts, in addition to the nitty-gritty of production work; also like the earlier talents, she emerged at a comparatively advanced age, but with a useful aesthetic and social philosophy that only required further refining as she went along.

At this point, a personal disclosure should be in order: Ongkeko-Marfil has become a close enough friend who, at one point, solicited my opinion

regarding the current film's material. This may be the occasion for me to point out some reservations I had with *Lakbay2Love*, especially in relation to her previous work, *Boses* (2008). *Lakbay2Love*, as I mentioned earlier, appears to be a more intensely personal project, and therefore its appeal might be more specific. The local biking community, which deserves to expand rapidly as a matter of survival, would be its most enthusiastic supporters; female (and feminine) audiences would appreciate its consistent focus on a woman, and mixed families would be able to relate to this female character's mother working abroad and her non-Filipino father raising another family; nature lovers would probably be pleasantly surprised to discover a number of accessible scenic spots in the metropolis as well as in the rest of the country.

This is not to say that *Lakbay2Love* leaves out everyone else who happens to fall outside its overlapping spheres of interest. *Boses* took on a social problem, child abuse and rehabilitation, which might already be extant in a system where uneven development, overpopulation, and overseas labor prove to be too stressful for indigent families. In contrast, *Lakbay2Love* operates with a similar social critique—this time of traffic congestion, administrative incompetence, and corrupt stewardship of environmental resources—but foregrounds an individually viable solution via the rejection of fossil-fuel consumption, and uses a woman's romantic dilemma as a way of suggesting that such a solution may be readily available, but will nevertheless require profound personal adjustments.

This also helps explain why local critical reception has been divided along lines that appear to be premised on class but in fact turn on gender difference. I had initially attempted to develop an argument that would explain why I felt excluded by the film-text, but the unmistakable presence of a rural working-class major character nullified this impression. When certain reviewers started whining about *Lakbay2Love*'s digressive developments, open ending, and frank acknowledgment of audience pleasure, I realized that I was similarly on the verge of capitulating to standard high-art fanboy prescriptions. In fact, as I had to admit later, the film operates best as a cinematic attempt at *écriture féminine* or womanly expression, in its valuation of feminine difference and upholding of the woman's body and prerogatives.

When inspected more closely, *Lakbay2Love* does not even push for biking as a preferable option at the expense of all other modes of transportation;

what it advocates for is environmental awareness, where biking happens to be the most feasible means of exploration, but not the only one. This is paralleled in the narrative by the choices Lianne, the central character, has to face: to move forward with JR, her beau ideal, whose ambition requires the pursuit of global assistance (a loss she might have to learn to accept); or to reconcile with Macky, her ex, who maintains as much cordiality with her as his wounded pride could allow, and who, like her, idolizes JR. Like the environmental question, Lianne learns by trial and error how to maintain her equanimity with these demands on her time and attention.

Most responses to *Lakbay2Love* have remarked on the ravishing natural scenery, captured by careful, documentary-like cinematography complemented with occasional graphic enhancements. What will impress more consistent observers of current local film is the transformation effected by Solenn Heussaff, who plays Lianne with an expertly calibrated mix of pain, naïveté, and desire, with an undercurrent of melancholy, instead of her earlier sexy-flighty persona. The histrionic fireworks of the JR performer, Dennis Trillo, will no longer be news, but the fewer appearances of Kit Thompson (as Macky) will definitely have observers awaiting his next roles; the male performers are given their now-expected beefcake scenes, but Heussaff holds her own beside them, and the luxuriant beauty of the Philippine tropics takes its inescapable diva-level star turn.

*Lakbay2Love* will prove rewarding for those seeking out an early Valentine's treat; be warned however that its nature scenes might wind up fostering a long-term crush, if not a permanent love affair, with the environment that we have long taken for granted.

## Ice with a Face

### Ma' Rosa

Directed by Brillante Ma. Mendoza

Written by Troy Espiritu

Brillante Ma. Mendoza's *Ma' Rosa* holds the distinction of being the second Filipino film to win at the Cannes Film Festival's main competition. Even

more impressive is the fact that the previous winner, *Kinatay* (2009), was also made by Mendoza, who won for direction. *Ma' Rosa* copped a “lesser” prize (best actress for Jaclyn Jose), but as any observer of Philippine movie awards will confirm, any performance award makes a bigger splash with the local public, because of the way it plugs into the star system.

Jose’s achievement has the additional allure of the unexpected: among a long list of respected actors, she had long been relegated to secondary status (“supporting,” in awards parlance), although she managed to land a well-received lead role or two every decade since the 1990s. She emerged as an already-accomplished talent in late 1984, and had Lino Brocka scrambling to cast her in as many fallen-women roles as he could commission; in a couple of years, she earned an enviable notoriety for dominating sex-themed films without any compunction about shedding off all her clothes while delivering performances that won her a series of critics’ prizes. (Several of these 1985-86 titles may be found, remastered but unsubtitled, at Jojo Devera’s *Magsine Tayo!* website.)

The standard procedure among Philippine film experts is to run a commutation test (following John O. Thompson’s prescription) imagining how the role would have turned out if it had been performed by Nora Aunor. Hard though it may be to believe, certain roles had always tended to lie beyond the reach of the country’s foremost film performer—sex roles, for example, like the ones that Jose once specialized in. Jose in *Ma' Rosa* acquits herself sufficiently so that by the end of the presentation, one might still be able to speculate how Aunor could have enriched the role, but one would have to be too much of a Noranian to deny that Jose succeeded in creating an iconic character, one that would have been the logical outgrowth of the poverty-stricken sex kittens that she used to portray.

Jose’s predicament is matched by Mendoza’s. After witnessing how he had a series of increasingly controversial wins (topped by Roger Ebert’s sustained tirades against *Kinatay*), people now feel righteous enough to point out that his latest outing proffers yet another variation on his “poverty-porn” material. Once more it is anchored by his long-time collaborator (and *Ma' Rosa* consultant) Armando Lao’s vérité-inspired found-story approach, focused on the dregs of society trying desperately to make ends meet, with the police force behaving as a sinister and ruthless extension of a negligent

state that leaves its vulnerable Third-World populace to be buffeted by the combined forces of postcolonial neoliberalism, climate change, and uneven development patterns.

Yet *Ma' Rosa* shares certain properties with some of Mendoza's best work. It has the suspenseful exposition of *Tirador* (2007), the warmth of *Foster Child* (2007), the technical expertise of *Serbis* (2008), and even casts an actor from his first film, *Masahista* (2005), to play the same role as a gay sponsor. Jose as the title character and Julio Diaz as her husband appeared as a married couple not just in *Serbis* but also in William Pascual's *Takaw Tukso* (1986), where Mendoza worked as production designer (and performs the same function in *Ma' Rosa*, as he did for a number of his previous films).

Even more unexpected is the easy way that the current release lends itself to a second screening. *Ma' Rosa* appears to promise further insights beyond what an initial viewing conveys, and dutifully manages to fulfill that promise. We see the worst of the policemen behaving tenderly toward a couple of youthful drug users, and the entire corrupt police force bantering playfully with a gay minor, Dahlia, who acts as their office maid.

*Ma' Rosa* herself comes across as an exemplary businessperson, with enough sense (unlike her good-for-nothing husband) to avoid using the very product she dispenses and to keep a detailed sales record that winds up incriminating her; indeed her strong-woman genes seem to have thankfully persisted, with her daughter (played by Jose's real-life offspring) the only one among her children still in school. Once we know *Ma' Rosa's* sub-rosa activities, and we see her purchasing instant noodles at the beginning of the film, we then find ourselves noting the irony of how certain products cause extensive health damage even though some of them can be acquired legally while others have to be handled with full awareness and acceptance of the risks involved.

An overlooked aspect of Mendoza's work is his handling of women performers, and Jose's Cannes prize serves as reminder for us to reconsider the several elderly actresses he had provided with rare opportunities to showcase their abilities: Aunor for *Taklub* (2015) and *Thy Womb* (2012), Anita Linda and Rustica Carpio for *Lola* (2009), Maribel Lopez for *Kinatay*, Gina Pareño for *Serbis*, and Cherry Pie Picache for *Foster Child*; an exceptional case would be Coco Martin, the closest to a Mendoza signature actor,

who burst on the scene with *Masahista* and has become a household name (while occasionally reappearing in Mendoza films) as Philippine digital-independent cinema's most vital contribution to the mainstream industry's pool of performing talents.

Jose's reading of her role is complemented by the high level of performance of the rest of the cast. Mendoza is one of the few indie filmmakers who can command people with leading-role backgrounds to play supporting characters, from Lopez's single-scene appearance as Ma' Rosa's resentful sister-in-law Tilde, to Baron Geisler and Mark Anthony Fernandez as police officers who look snappily elegant when they finally don their uniforms but with Ma' Rosa's (and the audience's) complete understanding of their monstrous potential, and Kristoffer King as Ma' Rosa's even-tempered drug dealer who grows increasingly menacing when he realizes how she had betrayed him to their neighborhood's criminal police gang.

The film's much-admired open ending, where Ma' Rosa nearly chokes on street food as she witnesses a fate she'd been trying to avoid (a homeless family with their ambulatory store) also turns on the several problems that await her: insurmountable debt, spiteful neighbors and relatives, military-sponsored enemies, the loss of her primary source of income. Her husband will seek more solace in his drug habit, her daughter will be unable to finish her studies, her elder son will complete his transition to street thug-gery, her youngest will continue selling his body to predatory gay men. The "ice" she sold merely represented a more extensive underlying sociopolitical and moral corruption, and all she had tried to do was keep her home and family together using resources available to her. Through Jose, via Mendoza's steerage, the cliché about the woman embodying the nation becomes a cold, hard, inescapable truth.

## Foreign-Film Reviews I: Warm-Ups

*I'd been attempting to integrate some of the pre-millennial pieces here in my previous book anthologies, but they always dropped out on the way to final draft. The reason may be evident in the first few samples: I treated foreign releases as exercises for themes and styles that I could take up in earnest when tackling Philippine movies. Foreign studies had the effect of reversing this dynamic, where I felt I had to explain Pinoy cinema to my colleagues, yet from what I could observe, my perspective on local films remained the same even as it inevitably deepened and expanded; it was non-Philippine cinema that benefited—from an emergent conviction that everything is interrelated, even though (contra the principle of the dispositif) one may prefer some modes, sources, and personalities to others.*

### **A Clockwork Yellow**

#### **The China Syndrome**

Directed by James Bridges

Written by Mike Gray, T. S. Cook, and James Bridges

*The China Syndrome* is more than just sheer entertainment. It is also a remarkably realized instance of committed art. Of course old-school critics would dispute the validity of such a category; but even outside its explosive social context, the movie remains reasonably well-made. By this is not meant the brand bestowed by a gala screening at the Cannes Film Festival or the numerous nominations by various award-giving bodies in the United States. Expectations generated by such accounts serve only to put off the average moviegoer.

*The China Syndrome* certainly does not deserve such dubious distinctions. Its celluloid nature, notwithstanding, is in many ways too true to be just good, constituting a minor achievement. The obvious showpiece to which it may be compared is Stanley Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), a "brilliant, stylized, unsparing treatment of the nuclear crisis," according to an ardent admirer. *Dr. Strangelove* anticipated elements of the Third World's perspective toward such a crisis nearly a decade before it was put to painful use by the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries. In the movie, both American and Russian super-powers were depicted as atrocious arms racers who eventually bring about doomsday. (Curiously, the film was broadcast fairly often on Philippine television until the anti-US bases movement was launched last year.)

More unfortunate circumstances attended the scheduled screening of *The China Syndrome* in local theaters, including a momentary ban by the board of censors for motion pictures (BCMP). Had it not had an influential distributor, it may never have been passed at all. This was because the Philippines is quite accustomed to the presence of nuclear power, starting with the nuking of an admittedly abusive neighboring country during World War II. Apart from the confirmed storage of nuclear arsenal in US bases, a \$1.2-billion nuclear power plant is almost certain to be constructed in Bataan.<sup>19</sup>

*The China Syndrome's* struggle with the BCMP paralleled that of the opposition to the construction of the nuclear plant: when the plant was under construction, the movie was banned; when construction was suspended, the movie was passed. It may not be safe however to go beyond these observations. Negotiations between the government and Westinghouse Electric concerning the plant were re-opened this month, and one can only hope these would not affect the current status of media commentaries, including the rather pointed statement made by *The China Syndrome*.

The movie is an account of an accident in such a plant and the series of events which follow. A TV reporter and cameraperson (Jane Fonda and Michael Douglas respectively) witness through a glass brightly the soundless panic of the plant's operators. In violation of relevant US statutes, the cameraman films the occurrence and fights for its appearance on TV. After he is overruled by TV executives, he protests and, antagonizing them further, he runs away with the film with the reporter's help but fails; he therewith turns to nuclear activist-experts.

The reporter, meanwhile, encounters the plant engineer (Jack Lemmon) while looking for her camera operator. Through his investigative initiative, the engineer realizes that a resumption of operations would prove dangerous for the public, the same conclusions arrived at by the activist group. They describe the possibility of a China syndrome—the spillage of radioactive material which would theoretically bore through the earth all the way to China. The worst part of it is that once the material reaches groundwater level, it would explode upward and render a territory the size of Southern California permanently uninhabitable.

Reporter and cameraperson arrange for a live testimony from the engineer, but are prevented from carrying out their intentions because of sabotage and harassment from businessmen whose interests are threatened by the plant's closure. In frustration, the engineer takes over the nuclear plant, demands media coverage, and is given more than what he asked for. The movie's ending is first tragic and then righteous in the grand manner, vivid enough to impress itself upon the average moviegoer. If it has to be faulted with anything, it would be along the charge of yellow-journalistic treatment: why present an already alarming issue sensationally and possibly incite the audience to immediate action?

By way of speculation, if the movie's propagandistic approach makes it less of an achievement, then one may as well dismiss all other political films except those which make nihilist or avant-garde statements. Even by standards of contemporary thrillers, the movie's production values meet the best expectations imposed by Hollywood on itself: glamorous performances, fast pacing, frenzied build-up with hopeful ending. The film's most praiseworthy attribute, though, lies in production rather than direction. This partly explains the discomfiture of critics accustomed to auteurism (the director as a movie's central intelligence) in appreciating *The China Syndrome*.

Director James Bridges, whose previous credits include trifles like *The Paper Chase* (1973) and *September 30, 1955* (1977), covers controversial ground for the first time, though as a promising director he remains still largely a promise. From Jane Fonda and Jack Lemmon we have sound delineations of character—more so from the former, who has always been careful in her choice of material. Michael Douglas, as producer, deserves the most returns he can get from *The China Syndrome*. He spent four years trying to get Milos Forman's *One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest* (1975) off the ground, was well-rewarded, financially and critically, for his efforts, and spent about as much time on the present film, this time as sole producer. May those returns go to similar, if not more worthwhile, projects, local ones included.

## Note

19. The Bataan Nuclear Power Plant was bedeviled from its inception to the present. Awarded to a bidder with a suspicious proposal, its price bloated to monstrous proportions (compared to what the builder charged other countries), turned over to the immediate post-Marcos government—which was forced both to stop its operation after the Chernobyl scare, and to pay the anomalous loan by a US court. Even the most positive note one can make about it hinges on a global-scale disaster: it was not in operation when a destructive earthquake in 1990 presaged an eruption of the long-dormant Mount Pinatubo a year later. Every few years a team of foreign experts would inspect the plant (maintained at a cost of millions of dollars a year) and declare it ready for operation after repairs that would cost billions of dollars. Nevertheless local science experts continue to discourage the resumption of plant operations.

## Kramer vs. Women

### Kramer vs. Kramer

Directed and written by Robert Benton

How can anyone resist loving *Kramer vs. Kramer*? This movie seems to have everything going for it: glamorous performers, domestic concerns, competent

direction, Oscar trophies. The movie is so disarming, in fact, that it is almost fashionable to gush over it and dismiss dissenting opinions as anti-social affectations. Based on a novel by Avery Corman, *Kramer* tells the story of a father and son, Ted and Billy Kramer, who were abandoned by Billy's mother Joanna. Realizing that he was responsible for what had happened, Ted tries to make up for lost time by becoming both father and mother to Billy, and loses his job in the process. Over a year later, a more affluent and self-assured Joanna comes back, claiming custody of the child. Inasmuch as Ted objects, the couple take their case to court, where the judge opts for a motherhood ruling. Joanna, however, becomes aware of the damage she might bring about and opts not to claim Billy for herself anymore.

Compared to Corman's novel, Robert Benton's movie is a commendable improvement. Extraneous plot development and excessive telegraphic dialogues in the novel were discarded—a sort of novelization-in-reverse. But fully falling for the movie would only be too easy for any earnest moviegoer: *Kramer vs. Kramer* should be viewed with the realization that its dramatic intensity derives from inaccurate representations of reality. The courtroom scenes, for instance, have been criticized by American lawyers themselves as unfaithful to the actual legal process. To begin with, no unduly influenced judge would rule so readily in favor of a parent who admitted having been guilty of abandonment; neither would such a judge desist from calling on the child in question to testify. In fact, as per contemporary legal requisites, the judge would be compelled to consider the child's testimony before delivering a verdict.

The worst oversight of all, however, lies in the movie's support for Ted at the expense of Joanna. Although Meryl Streep delivers a sympathetic performance, the movie makes no effort to clarify that feminism is not the issue at stake. Notwithstanding Benton's assertion that "the picture isn't mean to be a film about ... whether fathers or mothers are better qualified to raise kids," *Kramer vs. Kramer* reveals its own bias in its portrayal of Ted as victor—first morally, if not legally, then virtually. Such propensity for partisanship may not be as harmful as that of the previous Oscar awardee *The Deer Hunter* (1978, dir. Michael Cimino), in which American patriotism was evoked at the expense of the very same victims of the sentiment. Nevertheless for a society such as ours, which still has to realize the true

emancipation of women, misgivings on well-intentioned efforts like *Kramer vs. Kramer* should always occasion further discussion.

## Star-Crossed

### **Star Trek: The Motion Picture**

Directed by Robert Wise

Written by Harold Livingston

Critics can hardly be faulted for approaching so-called epic productions with wariness. Such an attitude was brought about by several historical or religious films whose artistic aspirations fall flat as the screen they're projected on. For a time a number of big-budgeted futuristic projects were considered relatively respectable. This was first made possible by Stanley Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* in 1968 and sustained by Steven Spielberg's *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* almost a decade later.

Then *Star Trek: The Motion Picture* lumbered along and nullified the notion that it is always best to set the sky, pardon the pun, as the limit in such undertakings. The movie takes off on the three-year TV series of the same title. A Starfleet station witnesses the annihilation of Klingon spaceships by an unidentified alien, which is soon reckoned to be racing toward earth. To meet the alien, a refitted USS Enterprise is reconscripted, its crew comprising the same characters as before, with the addition of Commander Willard Decker and his lover Ilia from planet Delta.

Upon nearing the alien, the ship is inexplicably incapacitated. Ilia is spirited away and a likeness of her, representing Vger (so-spelled), the alien, is beamed back. (The difference between Ilia and Vger can best be understood in the context of the biblical concept of the Trinity, with Ilia as god the son and Vger as god the father: the former, although a human counterpart of the latter, enjoys a separate, distinct existence.) The Enterprise dispatches a delegation, which includes Commander Decker and the likeness of Ilia, to confront Vger—which turns out to be a Voyager spaceship undergoing an identity crisis: its new name was formed when the “oya” on its nameplate was blotched out in the course of its travel.

The delegates deduce that the Voyager, which had fallen into a black hole, was invested with intelligence by whatever or whoever existed there and sent back into this universe to realize its reason for “living.” Commander Decker demands to merge himself with the likeness of Ilia and offer themselves to the Voyager, that it may acquire a human dimension. His demand is granted, the Voyager is appeased, earth is saved, and another viewer’s intelligence is extinguished.

Entertainment-wise, *Star Trek* is confusing although its emptiness is as vast as space itself. Director Robert Wise, in successfully demonstrating that what is ponderous can also be pretentious, winds up with a narrative that plods along toward its soporific climax, laden with every conceivable excuse to indulge in subplots or SFX displays. The characters exchange existentialist clichés and wind up as interesting as classical philosophers in one respect: those sages have, to their advantage this time, long been dead.

Campiness could have saved the exercise from absolute inertia; but apparently in keeping with the tone of the TV series, Wise decided to use a staid style throughout. Which wasn’t, well, wise at all, since how else could the interest equivalent to one hour be spread over about three times that length of time? Even special effects wizards Douglas Trumbull (*2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Close Encounters with the Third Kind*) and John Dykstra (*Star Wars*) were unable to surmount Wise’s propensity for profundity: what they have achieved in *Star Trek* are visual displays with predictable and pointless recurrence. The disappointment of *Star Trek*, however, should not deter local producers from spending more on their projects, so long as they keep in mind the realization that bigger budgets deserve proportionally bigger talents.

## Brainless Love

### Endless Love

Directed by Franco Zeffirelli

Written by Judith Rascoe

The most ironic development in cinema is the fact that, more likely than not, love stories constitute the most hated genre. This is easier to comprehend

than love itself, since nothing lends itself to manipulation more than the most positive human emotion there is. Not a few film directors have therefore not surprisingly succumbed to the lustful lure of love stories, if only to renew their run-down careers.

Among the latter, Franco Zeffirelli has arguably been the most successful lately. His 1977 tearjerker, a re-make of King Vidor's 1931 knockout *The Champ*, had audiences all over the world (Manila included) crying over the comeback woes of a has-been boxer. Critics cried too over the misuse of the thespic talents of Jon Voight as the boxer and Faye Dunaway as his separated wife. In any event, Zeffirelli's *Champ* established its director as a box-office, well, champ, and reminded his early followers of his skill at executing filmic elegance, if not anything else.

*The Champ* may have been a hard act to follow, but Zeffirelli has just landed another hit in his box-office bid for perennial presence with *Endless Love*. Based on the novel by Scott Spencer, the movie tells the story of David Axelrod and Jade Butterfield, two teenage lovers whose romantic ideals are challenged by society. The thankless plot begins when Jade's parents discover their daughter messing around with David in their own house, whom they forthwith (and understandably) forbid from further such trysts; the latter reacts by burning down their residence, which leads to his confinement in an asylum.

Unfortunately for the Butterfields, not to mention the audience, David is discharged earlier than his stipulated sentence. He seeks out Jade's whereabouts, and in the process he is seduced by the newly separated Mrs. Butterfield and pursued by her paranoid husband. Both, however, do not get him: wife gets jilted while hubby gets run over by a car. Meanwhile David finds and has a last fling with Jade, whose vindictive brother builds up a more solid case against David on the basis of Butterfield's death. *Endless Love* finally finishes with Jade making up her mind in David's favor.

Such pitfalls in the plot's development are betrayed by the perfunctory performance of the leads. Brooke Shields is as devoid of depth as she is of facial blemishes; by her, the already awkward role of Jade is further eroded. Martin Hewitt, for his part, has neither the talent to hold up to the complexity of his role as David nor the charm to hold up to the presence of Shields. Franco Zeffirelli could up his game by turning to honest money-making instead of

dishonest movie-making in the related field of advertising, wherein exquisite but endless bores like *Endless Love* would be more readily appreciated.

## Manila Event Short Take I

### Ragtime

Directed by Milos Forman

Written by Michael Weller

*Ragtime* the novel set a difficult precedent: it was both the most critically acclaimed novel and the best seller of its year of publication (1975). Critics of Milos Forman's cinematic counterpart could clinch their cases faster by resorting to the unfair practice of comparing the film to the novel. They would find that E.L. Doctorow's literary techniques do not translate as smoothly in visual terms. Forman has been too reluctant to employ conventional methods even if (or perhaps because) these proved effective in another medium.

This attitude is correct in so far as runaway successes are concerned. In the case of *Ragtime* the movie, however, such suspicion has resulted in undue emphasis on production values instead of human concerns—which was what the novel achieved despite its impressive historical context. Hence the explosive (literally and figuratively) story of Coalhouse Walker Jr. is developed without the attendant parallelisms provided by the breakdown between the white couple, Father and Mother, who get involved in his case. Furthermore, if we are to take the fully developed story of Walker as the movie's main concern, then all the other subplots should have been accorded more incidental treatment.

The story which culminates in the assassination of Stanford White, for example, has no immediate bearing to that of Walker; coming as it does before the latter, no tie-up is made the way that the other story allows (i.e., Mother's Younger Brother joins Walker's all-black gang). Problems in adaptation aside, *Ragtime* runs along the visual and aural lines of a Hollywood spectacular. The recreations of turn-of-the-century Americana move beyond accuracy to nostalgia, and the appearances of celebrities like James Cagney

and Norman Mailer are authoritative enough to impress those in the know. Would that the movie as a whole were at least equal to the sum of its parts.

## Manila Event Short Take II

### Man of Iron

Directed by Andrzej Wajda

Written by Aleksander Scibor-Rylski

*Man of Iron* is preceded by the disadvantage of comparison to its predecessor, *Man of Marble* (1977). Although almost a decade older, the latter would probably lose little of its initial impact, detailing as it does the rise and fall of a labor leader working within the confines of totalitarianism, as perceived by an initially naïve female filmmaker. The use of a female reporter's point of view is daring in itself, fraught with the irony of the profession's claims to objectivity compounded with the opposing gender's conservative credos. Nevertheless Andrzej Wajda has chosen not to rest on the triumph of this device, and has proceeded in *Man of Iron* to employ an even more challenging (not to mention controversial) means: the story of the filmmaker, who marries the son of the late labor leader, is this time tracked by a government informer.

Wajda presents the son as motivated by the murder of his father. The truly cognizant character, the filmmaker, is, throughout the present plot, incarcerated. To top it all, the informer is dealt with, right from the very start, sympathetically. Yet the film works more effectively than the best-crafted progressive tract possible, precisely because it is honest enough to face these contradictions and differences within the labor movement. Subjective leaders and likable villains are realities that only complicate discussions, but *Man of Iron* transcends these concerns by its convictions—of the nobility of the cause and the humanity of the characters involved.

By such means the argument against the incorporation of censored outtakes from *Man of Marble* into *Man of Iron* is rendered irrelevant. In the flashback, for example, where the murder of the hero in *Man of Marble* is depicted, Wajda shows how the son and the filmmaker are hindered by

gunfire from government troops so that they could not even catch a glimpse of the body, much less retrieve it. Here Wadja could have resorted to more visually impressive scenes, like the murder itself; instead he restrains himself by reserving such spectacles for the finale, where the fully developed ironies are seemingly resolved by the triumph of the workers. Even then the flush of victory is kept in check: an establishment spokesman assures the demoralized informer that the conquest cannot last. The latter's reaction—that of further disappointment—clinches the distinction of *Man of Iron* not as just another manifesto masquerading as a movie, but as a testament to the fullness of critical resistance.

## Epic Soapbox

### The Mission

Directed by Roland Joffé

Written by Robert Bolt

*The Mission*, a British movie, is this year's Golden Palm winner at the Cannes Film Festival. It is the second directorial effort of former producer Roland Joffé, who had previously scored with *The Killing Fields* (1984). Where the latter is structurally flawed but manages to compensate through the purveyance of a fierce, almost shrill, Cold-War political conviction, *The Mission* is more subdued, reliant on a more straightforward mode of presentation.

Its very neatness makes it easier, in fact, to pinpoint the central weakness in the film, a weakness shared by Joffé's initial work and therefore indicative so far of a blind spot in an otherwise exceptionally lucid visual consciousness: at the point where two male protagonists, each representing antithetical social positions, arrive at the contact crucial for dramatic discussions, the filmmaker pulls back and resolves the issue on a socio-historical scale. This strategy provides an opportunity for epic grandstanding, but invalidates the groundwork so painstakingly laid earlier. In *The Killing Fields*, the issue of guilt—as seen in the desertion of a hapless native by his circumstantially advantaged employer—is set aside to make way for a debate on the acceptability of two opposing political systems. The digression is admittedly more

profound than the original conflict, but it hardly justifies the reconciliatory resolution between the lead characters.

Similarly *The Mission* starts out on a trifle too obvious but still-valid problem. A slave-trader captures the converts of a Catholic missionary, but meets with his share of divine justice when he commits fratricide after his woman professes to love his brother. He imposes upon himself the penance of carrying his worldly goods to the priest's mission, until he should be set free by the very tribe he had victimized. Upon his unexpected emancipation, he undergoes a spiritual awakening strong enough to convince him of a calling to the priesthood—and here the extraneous influences intrude. Given a choice between the introduction of colonialism and the retention of the primitive state, the film suggests spiritual enlightenment as a worthy compromise, and then imposes this non sequitur on the freshly frocked character, the former slave-trader. The original missionary is next made to assume the voice of the Vatican, espousing the alternative of non-violence in the face of the dismantling of the mission camp by state forces.

In the end both the new and the original missionary lose out to military might, but win out with the conveyance of a parochial sympathy for the specific religious order that got caught up in this strain in church-state relations. In the end, too, I assured myself that I could take a false conclusion so long as it arose from faithfully observed propositions. On the other hand, why get too holy with the director who, apart from the Monty Python group's Terry Gilliam, seems qualified at the moment to come up with the next major British film? That is, once he finds a way to surmount what had turned out to have been a *Mission* impossible.

## The Stuff of Dreams

### Dreamscape

Directed by Joseph Ruben

Written by David Loughery, Chuck Russell, and Joseph Ruben

By this time an enterprising film scholar, obviously with a penchant for psychology, will have developed an aesthetic system based on the function

of film as demonstrator of the dream state. She would have a rich legacy of items to draw from, and I'd like to boost the credit of having suggested the entire body of work of Luis Buñuel; that pipe dream aside, however, our hypothetical expert, if she were to be more ambitious, would have to be comprehensive enough to include mainstream realist samples, perhaps even the ultrarealism of documentaries (also part of the Buñuel oeuvre), to accommodate any objections to her argument.

By being comprehensive she would also have to present a voluminous study, and if it were detailed (read: boring) enough, a footnote might refer to a Hollywood production, *Dreamscape*. Yes, folks, this entry does stand out at the moment only because the rest of the foreign releases are so frustratingly dismal. Here we have the titillating premise of how dreams, which are normally regarded as unreal, may on certain occasions subvert our accepted notions of reality by suggesting a verisimilar situation so urgent that in our other condition, wakefulness, we are impelled to intervene. In one instant the titillation assumes a thoroughly physical aspect, when the lead character projects himself into the dream of a hypocritically resistant beauty, the better to seduce her toward total submission.

That in fact was the only engaging sequence in a hopelessly awry latter half—and come to think of it, said portion could be capable of standing for what the entire work should have been: compact, appealing, logical according to its own terms. Its only shortcoming would be a lack of dramatic purpose, but then the movie as a whole leads toward such an earnestly misdeveloped objective, so much so that the value of the film-within-a-film appreciates within context. To go beyond abstraction, *Dreamscape* narrates the story of a man who is recalled to participate in an academically initiated parapsychic attempt to enter another person's dream, with the aim of exercising some control over the events that take place in that alien world. An earlier disappointment over the clinical approach of the project's proponent provides the conflict here, enough to sustain a modest movie—but not for the makers of *Dreamscape*.

Enter a child with a recurrent nightmare, then a female laboratory assistant with an outmoded sense of work ethics; each replaces the previous character as the embodiment of our hero's struggle for significance. Nothing wrong with this device, I daresay, except that instead of allowing the present

contradiction to proceed from the previous one, the movie winds up presenting a series of episodic sketches. Before you know it, the hero finds himself up against a similarly gifted psychotic, aided by sinister government agents, who both decide to scare fatally the President of the United States in his dreams of nuclear devastation so that the latter may be prevented from affecting a program for disarmament!

Needless to say our hero overcomes everything, except the audience's feeling of how total the movie's manipulation has been, how utterly inconsiderate of the sense of reality that returns after the filmic experience, when every single informed individual on this planet knows that such literally earth-shaking problems cannot be resolved in so facile a manner. Ah well, such is the stuff of dreams, and maybe our fantasy film scholar can come up with a more accommodating view, once she succeeds in protecting herself from fallout. Next notion, please.

## Bloody Fine

### **The Untouchables**

Directed by Brian De Palma

Written by David Mamet

Now that *The Untouchables* has made a well-deserved killing (grisly pun and all), a few observations on gangster films are in order. There's no denying the fact that the genre is as American as apple pie, arising as it did in an industrially advanced capitalist system that allowed for both Hollywood and organized crime. No proof could be more final than recent US films in the genre with a measure of ambition—specifically Francis Ford Coppola's *Godfather* (1972 & '74) films—plus countless titles that either have served as models for the style now known as film noir (as formulated by the best among the genre's imitators, the French), or continue to affirm the one unquestionable claim to significance of Hollywood in aesthetic, not to mention box-office, terms. *The Untouchables* is closer to the first category, the one occupied by *The Godfather* and its sequel; the latter is, of course, distinguished by structural innovations that transcend considerations of genre altogether, and the more

I view the pair, the more I get convinced that the reputation of the original is enhanced by the association.

By this time you might have guessed my sneaking preference for the Brian De Palma entry over its fifteen-year-old predecessor. It isn't so much the question of artistic seriousness that should be raised, as I see it, but rather the issue of honest approaches to the use of the medium. Simply (and dangerously) put, *The Untouchables* makes no pretense about exploiting its entertainment potential to the hilt, something that the original *Godfather* seems so defensive about in retrospect. The most obvious proof is in the films' comparative treatment of cross-references to film literature. Where Coppola's breakout movie sought to preclude any possible accusation of influences by earlier generic samples, *The Untouchables* integrates into its extended climax the baby-carriage detail in the Odessa steps sequence of Sergei Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin* (1925)—not in the fleeting, almost embarrassed manner that another recent release, Terry Gilliam's 1985 *Brazil* (as well as previous De Palma movies, in paying homage to Alfred Hitchcock), utilized, but in a situationally urgent way that justifies its presence in both *Untouchables* and *Potemkin*.

Not that the association between the two enhances *The Untouchables* the way the *Godfather* sequel does the original. The more defensible point, the one universal enough to demand applications even in our own national cinema, lies in the treatment of well-known nonfictional material. *The Untouchables* doesn't re-present the story of Al Capone at all, not even by a long shot the version of the Chicago cops who finally nailed him; it takes off from the story instead, not just flirting with so-called poetic license, but shamelessly fornicating, for all intents and purposes, and in full view of all shades and capabilities of moviegoers at that, without even the modesty of fictionalizing dramatic details the way the Coppola movies (and the Mario Puzo novel that spawned them) did. Even more brazenly, *The Untouchables* makes a stand that's downright defiant of the entire liberalist tradition laid down by the gangster genre's pioneer practitioners. Coming full circle from Howard Hawks and Richard Rosson's *Scarface* (1932) more than five decades back, the Al Capone character is this time not only identified by name, he's also posited as an out-and-out social menace.

God (or Marx or whoever) knows it isn't the ideology I appreciate here so much as the willingness and the ability to stand by it. This holds particular

and peculiar significance for our current action-film practice, in which we've taken a step from appropriating foreign models (particularly Western and martial-arts epics), to using our wealth of real-life (anti)hero stories. Not that the step has been forward in direction—this was where the state of local action filmmaking was before censorship forced creative detours during the early '60s. What I think we need to appreciate, or at least tolerate in these parts, is the necessity of questioning our modern-day candidates for movie-mythmaking. The statement holds even in reverse, for in the first place it's the belligerence of the real-life personalities that defines the filmmakers' interpretation of their stories. Critics, both of film and of society, need to be apprised as well of the potentials of film beyond documentation—which function after all is already becoming the domain of video. Too often do we hear of complaints about this or that work's near-perfection were it not for a deviation from verisimilitude in this or that instance, as if the very process of recording reality on film would have been free from subjectivity if not for its practitioners' interventions.

Documentary practice had already proved a long time ago that objectivity in film recording is plain impossible. Feature film practice shows what we may be able to get in return for giving up reality as we know it: art, that much-abused word that still manages to make argumentative arbiters of us all. Would that our writers on film, whether deserving of the title or not, cease harping on hopeless causes like technological limitations, or absurd expectations such as objectivity in the medium. That, if I may add, is one issue that will definitely turn out ... well, untouchable.

## **The Devil to Pay**

### **The Witches of Eastwick**

Directed by George Miller

Written by Michael Cristofer

Somewhere on my bookshelves lies a near-complete collection of the works of John Updike. Us budding writers way back in college were all quick to claim appreciation of the guy, though I doubt if we were all honest about

having read everything that we said we did. Today my John Updike books have all been thumbed through, and I must admit I keep adding to the collection more as a matter of nostalgia rather than affection—an attitude I find I could currently conjure up only for early Greek dramatists, 19th-century Russian novelists, or contemporary South American writers. My *Witches of Eastwick* edition's a hardbound one, the only such Updike book I've got. I bought it on the threshold of my (re)discovery of the above-mentioned groups of writers (simultaneously, honest), which means I was coming close to regretting the purchase. Then I read the book.

There's a certain characteristic of *The Witches of Eastwick* that overlaps with a certain type of local concern—the search for meaning in the past without compromising the lessons of the present. Three women in modern-day Massachusetts discover a supernatural ability to control their environment, so long as they wish for it collectively. They're unattached, bright, and lonely, so they ask for the impossible—a perfect man; by a brilliant application of Judaeo-Christian logic, they're sent the devil himself, fiendishly grateful for this excuse to assume human form and even implant his seed in three willing receivers. The nights-long carousing of these pulchritudinous sorceresses with their dreamboat-come-true doesn't need to match the extremes of porn-industry decadence to prove the pleasures of good clean sex. Besides, this isn't exactly Puritan-era America, Jerry Falwell and his televangelical ilk notwithstanding. The girls stand up successfully against the machinations of fanatic moralists, and when their, er, man takes this as an approval of his brand of pragmatic excess, they take him to task on that score as well.

The film adapters correctly presumed the new medium's experiential potential over the analytic capacity of literature. The essential issues of the novel are all in the movie, but will prove of value only for those who care to reflect after the viewing experience. Those who'd rather stand with the majority will be sure to get their tickets' worth of new-look editing and special visual effects, plus about the only value that nowadays sets superior fantasy pieces above the common run: humor, wit and irony specifically, in quantities that may suffice to beat, well, the devil. This preoccupation with entertainment seems to have been pursued at the expense of the novel's multi-layered achievements, in which a community's intricate social fabric

is held up for the reader to marvel at; one wonders what sort of classicism could have resulted had the filmmakers striven for an equivalent outcome in their work.

No matter for local practitioners though. What needs to be pointed out now is the fact that adaptations tend to work out better if they're oriented toward their new media rather than their original sources. We seem to have been fixated at the stage where veneration for individual accomplishments has refused to give way to exploration of new terrain, both within similar media and between disparate ones—hence film producers' preference for pretention-less materials (such as *komiks* and low-life stories) over quality literature. And no matter either if Hollywood, in representing its country of origin, can be taken as a symbolic cause of our domestic malaise. If the example of *The Witches of Eastwick* and similar others can be forced upon our practitioners, we could eventually wind up, as Hollywood has, with frivolous output drawn from sensible sources; but meanwhile we'll have a truly thriving movie industry, and the lesson gained from successful adaptations will surely prove indispensable for whatever stage of development we decide upon next.

## Foreign-Film Reviews II: Exertions

### Form and Function

#### **Silent Voice (a.k.a. Amazing Grace and Chuck)**

Directed by Mike Newell

Written by David Field

#### **Full Metal Jacket**

Directed by Stanley Kubrick

Written by Stanley Kubrick, Michael Herr, and Gustav Hasford

The beauty of a work inevitably raises the issue of the purpose of the effort expended in attaining it: the more powerful the result, the greater the call for a purpose. If Einstein had handed over his theory of relativity to artists, the nuclear clouds they would have created would still give rise to the military-industrial complexes responsible for the arms race that threatens the very existence of life at present; the sheer beauty of nuclear explosions

would have quickly become irrelevant. Such basic insights into the irony of modern existence aren't the concerns of the latest no-nukes film, *Silent Voice*. The movie follows the liberal bent of politicized Hollywood filmmaking that once gave us daring but ultimately unbearable moralistic pieces like John Ford's *Grapes of Wrath* (1940), Orson Welles's *Citizen Kane* (1941), and the Stanley Kramer titles of the 1950s. The late '70s saw a resurgence of committed films like Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* and *Being There* (1978 and '79 resp.) and Martin Ritt's *Norma Rae* (1979), with another but more shrill no-nukes effort, James Bridges's *The China Syndrome* (1979).

The trouble with too politically committed approaches to filmmaking is that the medium itself lies in danger of being regarded as not only divorced from, but even secondary to, the statement being made. Film therewith becomes a medium for essentially sociopolitical discourses, where the audience is expected to respond according to the requirements of mass education—hence the reduction of narratives to “scientific” principles that would yield results according to the greatest common factors. *Silent Voice* observes this tradition of sincere exploitation for political purposes. The sincerity is exuded right from frame one, but the exploitation becomes apparent only to those who've learned to love film experience for its own sake. There's no doubt in the minds of the filmmakers as to who the good types and the bad types are. To make sure that the arguments against nuclear disarmament get minimal airing, initially neutral elements like the lead character's father and the President of the United States, you better believe it, get converted to the cause.

I object to the treatment not because I disagree with the movement against nuclear weapons. It's just that film here is presented as an orchestration of disparate technical elements, and is thereby served with utmost competence. These days it's still surprising to realize that even in the most technologically advanced circles the actual dramatic potential of film cannot be treated with deference, much less appreciated for what it can achieve. The people you find in *Silent Voice* aren't made to act as individuals; they're all subject to forces beyond them, and so the bravery of the heroes and the villainy of the baddies get unintentionally exonerated in the end.

Aside from the obvious convenience this provides of doing away with intelligent characterization, the necessity of raising the obvious

philosophical question is dismissed in favor of a happy ending: once all those warheads are dismantled, what's to keep people of the same persuasion that gave rise to the military-industrial complex from going it on their own, under wraps if necessary? The pre-nuclear age of innocence has been lost forever, but in *Silent Voice* we are asked to believe that we could go back to it by simply feeling for it. The intention may be laudable, but the impracticality of it all may ultimately prove dangerous for dreamers, whichever side of the camera they may find themselves straddling.

The most effective no-nukes movie is still the one that ends with the world getting blown up, with a strong dose of black humor for the faint of heart and stylistic experimentation for the non-believers in the capabilities of film, to make the journey to the end easier to bear. The same brilliance that informed the said work, *Dr. Strangelove; or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Bomb* (1964), can still be gleaned from the same director's latest output, *Full Metal Jacket*. Unfortunately Stanley Kubrick manages to sustain this milieu-documentation approach for the extended expository portion of his film, then gives out to universalized points about the horrors of war that pale beside the older film's comparatively easy achievements in story and character construction. I suspect that adaptational problems (the present movie's based on the novel of one of the scriptwriters) had much to do with the turnout of what could have been the most innovative war movie yet.

Come to think of it, discourses on the failed American involvement in the Viet Nam conflict were made possible through the same wave of committed filmmaking mentioned earlier. Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) may be considered the Godfather of them all, with Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) as something of a fairy godmother. (*Full Metal Jacket* could then be the love child that suffered disorder and early sorrow.) I guess filmmakers intending to make the definitive movie statement on war will have to contend with the propensity of cinema to work on surfaces—faces, bodies, objects, landscapes, etc.—and that war gives the impression of these surfaces opening up, but only literally and not necessarily in essence.

Meaning that in war, someone or something may get blown up, but this doesn't always provide an enduring truth except in the manner that everyone has become familiar with already. While watching *Full Metal Jacket* I acquired what I thought was a fanciful notion—why limit ourselves to treating war as

a real event? The raw material will suffice to fulfill the requisites of realism, but what's to stop an inspired film creator from breaking up the space-time continuum that's getting to be a scourge in imaginative presentations? Then I suddenly recalled having seen *Les belles de nuit*, a fairly old (1952) film by Rene Clair, in which some characters are endowed with the supernatural ability to move continually through time and space. The suspension of disbelief was made possible through the use of charming humor and song, but along the way some points about love and power were made.

The moral of it all? Nothing is ever truly new. It's what we make of things that provide them with the capability for transformation. Would that we manage to realize this principle even in such a mundane activity as film appreciation.

## Life After Life

### **Mississippi Burning**

Directed by Alan Parker

Written by Chris Gerolmo

### **They Live**

Directed by John Carpenter

Written by Frank Armitage

*Mississippi Burning* may seem to be a throwback to the heyday of post-World War II Hollywood social realism, which a number of observers tend to hold in a fondness that's easily dispelled by a casual acquaintance with any of the period's alleged masterpieces. A second attempt at social realism in the wake of the Viet Nam War was more successful, but by then more advanced formulations had overtaken such well-worn simplifications. The shift was brought about primarily in academic circles, the same community of scholars that attained a measure of prestige and influence with the success of the so-called Hollywood brats (Francis Ford Coppola, George Lucas, Steven Speilberg, et al.) during the '70s. Briefly put, post-social realist film thinkers figured out, correctly it seems, that the medium possesses a vitality all its

own, capable of enhancing or subverting any message according to how it (the medium) is handled.

The implications were quickly put to good use on the other side of the Atlantic, and applied, with much success, by American cinema about a decade after. What the new formulation meant was that politically acute or even radicalized content may be laudable but not enough. *Mississippi Burning* can be taken as one form of reaction to this challenge. The treatment—period, chronological, tragic in the classical manner—can hardly be called new, although it may have seemed that way when the Greeks first tried it. What's different in *Mississippi Burning* is the material, which is actually a re-working of earlier practice.

Racism is one issue that can hardly be contained with the same emotional and intellectual fervor that Martin Luther King Jr. and Nelson Mandela once commanded; in fact the recent internal criticism of Mandela's wife indicates that the issue of apartheid in modern-day South Africa won't resolve as neatly as did American civil rights in the '60s. *Mississippi Burning* takes stock of a more cynical but still-sincere perspective and transposes it to the earlier era. In the process it takes some liberties with the real-life setup on which the story is based—one of which, the heroic depiction of Federal Bureau of Investigation agents, has been castigated by well-meaning sectors. But viewed within the terms of the film itself, the use of J. Edgar Hoover's henchmen as god's gift to African Americans turns out to be consistent with the filmmakers' heightened sense of paradox.

In fact I was surprised to discover that a more damaging detail—the attribution of black people's misery to sheer cowardice and ignorance on their part—was let by, apparently because of the casualness of the presentation. All of which builds up to the ultimate contradiction: in the face of the Ku Klux Klan's decided advantage in its use of strong-arm tactics, the good guys finally agree to wage war on similarly dubious terms, and win. Along the way a number of notions cherished by American and, we can presume, Philippine academic intelligentsia get demolished like so many scarecrows before the storm: effete city types (FBI agents) hang tough when provoked, simple country folk (Klansmen) display a flair for evil, and for good measure, down-home Christianity (crosses and biblical verses) proves flexible enough to serve in justifying the oppressiveness of an irrational system.

*Mississippi Burning* acquires its power from making us believe that such a system is being questioned for the first time—and it is, although the movie’s presentation of “the system” is actually closer to the here and now than what its physical and temporal setting might suggest. *They Live*, on the other hand, deals with what seems to be a future, or at least a situation neither past nor present, in a most engaging science-fictional way. What makes the effort work is precisely its effortlessness, unlike the same director’s other futuristic hit, *Escape from New York* (1981). *Mississippi Burning* of course dispenses the very seriousness absent in *They Live*, but the rationale for the difference lies in what each is trying to convey. Where the former was updating ancient (or at least generation-old, which could sometimes mean the same thing) concepts of justice using ancient (or at least generation-old, etc.) material, *They Live* does the exact opposite.

This time around a sci-fi scenario, written pseudonymously by the director himself, is deployed to sound out an anti-totalitarian warning—something social realists could have done given the same fund of insights and technology. Ideological manipulation is ascribed to the machinations of alien life forms, which is all right by mainstream radicals I suppose, given the leeway by which the bogey of imperialism could be conjured, and the irony this presupposes in a country which has come to epitomize such prerogatives of power. What redeems *They Live* from the crunch of run-of-the-mill futuristic fables is its tongue-in-cheek attitude toward the whole enterprise. “Tongue-in-cheek” would be rather too close for comfort, considering the depiction of the invaders as physically human save for the skin-deep aspect that we tend to take for granted, disparage even.

The irreverence goes beyond epidermal layers though. The hero shacks up in a community whose montage of faces establishes it as international, with delegates from each major race and culture, all sharing the same poverty-stricken status and helping out one another in a spirit that would make the United Nations a billion-dollar superfluity; after the residents are brutally evicted by government personnel, the hero catches on to the obsession of the anti-alien underground movement seeking refuge therein, and our Third-World UN is forthwith forgotten, the remnants transformed into a guerilla army. The villains for their part engage in Big-Brother propaganda, made subliminal so as not to arouse the suspicions of religious fanatics and

working-class brutes—as if those types would be perceptive enough and the better-off citizens reluctant to collaborate. As it turns out, the hero, who, er, unearths the deception through the mediation of a technologically enhanced pair of shades, proves too combative for his own good, while a number of yuppieish earthlings sell out themselves and the world, ostensibly for the thrill of interplanetary travel.

The ultimate cop-out consists of the elimination of all the major characters, protagonists as well as antagonists, in a climax cathartic in many ways, leaving the viewer receptive to anything that should follow—and what does follow is a coda that confirms the put-on behind the foregoing businesses. In a series of parallel developments, the heretofore disguised aliens lose their cover and succeed in scaring most of humanity, which may be the first step in a retaliation of poetic dimensions. The final exposé in the plot comprises a female earthling making the discovery while sexually servicing an alien lover. The notion is at once funny though gross, with more substantial insights brought about by the very fact of its grossness. The masters of our fates may be so loaded that it becomes next-to-impossible to see them for what they are, but certain vital-though-unpleasant truths can still manage to lurk in the detritus of trash sci-fi.

## **...And the First Shall Be the Last**

### **The Last Temptation of Christ**

Directed by Martin Scorsese

Written by Paul Schrader

If Christ could have seen what his ministry would have led to, he might have become the world's first existentialist. Much of the worst (aside from the best) aspects of modern civilization are premised on the observance of what is supposedly the definitive compilation of his teachings—the biblical testaments. The irony began as early as Jesus Christ's own era: before and after the gospels which narrate what is undoubtedly one of the most moving accounts of any historical entity, we find fire-and-brimstone pronouncements alternating with manic-paranoid (and sometimes psychedelic)

formulae for “true” salvation. Anne Frank being coopted in the midst of Nazi occupation could serve as a terribly apposite analogy.

Modern times have served to heighten the extent to which people would appropriate nobility of the spirit for purposes of the flesh. The US’s Republican Party ethos thrives on the assertions of the ultra-Christian on the basis of a hierarchy—US citizen first, then male, then white, then wealthy, then heterosexual, and so on down the line, arriving last and least at poor black homosexual Third-World Communist woman, where such wondrously exceptional combinations could exist. *The Last Temptation of Christ* attempts to overturn conservative conventions by presenting Christ as poor, Third-World, possibly Communist, and unconventional in his sexuality, or at least definitely unhomophobic. Historical, including biblical, evidence tends to support these traits, plus one crucial thing left out by central casting—that Christ was in all likelihood dark-skinned.

The expectations that *Last Temptation* raises place it closer to a skeptic’s speculation on what the historical personage may have actually been, necessarily rejecting the traditional sources. This is where its problems, aesthetic and circumstantial, begin, departing from the usual celebrated censorship controversies regarding works with literary merits. *Madame Bovary*, *Lady Chatterley’s Lover*, and *Ulysses* all rested their cases on the skill by which their respective authors justified the use of then-disallowed language and subject matter. *Last Temptation* takes the cue from the subject himself by constructing itself as an intense if cryptic reflector—one that throws back on any objector her or his own inability to perceive its affirmation of faith in the Abrahamic deity.

The method is, of course, admirably postmodern: from Christ’s dictum that “no one comes to the father but by me,” the filmmakers create a “me” that’s exclusively an imaginative one—a literary character, in short, who determines his own course of resolving the challenge of giving himself up for the sake of humankind. Nowhere is the fastness of their faith more evident than in the movie’s most controversial (extended) sequence of the hero enjoying a conventional lifestyle, complete with an active-though-legitimate sex life, before dismissing the entire excursion as a fantasy, his last temptation, and returning to the reality of death by crucifixion.

Gifted individuals (real artists especially, I imagine) would agree wholeheartedly with the decision of the Christ character in *Last Temptation*—that

is, better the uncertainty of unconventional choices than the predictability of the normative. But the majority of nominal Christians have not been and can never be as daring, as Christ-like even, as *Last Temptation* exhorts Christ's followers to be, and it is in this demonstration of the difference between conformity and individuality as an essentially Christian issue that gets the goat of the chosen flock: how can we expect converts to, well, strengthen the church when such an interpretation of Christ posits that they must seek god's will not in terms of institutional prescriptions but as they believe they are called? This is the very reason why traditional Christianity is based on the life of Christ *plus* a surfeit of supposedly similarly holy writings that actually serve to temper, and in several instances overturn, the challenge of his example. Witness how as recently as a few years after Christ's purported ascension, the former Saul of Tarsus, claiming to have been converted, qualifies (though sets aside would be more accurate) his master's dictum of unconditional love by disparaging in no uncertain terms intellectuals, dark-complexioned peoples, women, queer folk, and a wide spectrum of nonconformists and nonbelievers alike.

Censorships are based on the same perversion of Christ's offer of salvation through faith: he never wavered in his, but he nevertheless answered all questions and went to the extent of accommodating Thomas. Today's so-called Christians would have banished such a doubter from the fold if it didn't seem like such an un-Christianly thing to do, so they perform the next best thing by keeping all possible sources of critical questionings at bay. Unlike its predecessors in literary-censorship cases, the film version of *Last Temptation* cannot flourish on artistic merits alone. Most of its individual scenes are impressively executed in state-of-the-art-house manner, with attendant emotional content. The entire presentation, though, meanders too much, especially in detailing the hero's angst and the aforementioned accumulation of a last temptation that doesn't really turn out all that tempting in the end. All cards were stacked, too safely it seems, in favor of a Christian, or more appropriately (seeing how Christian could refer as much to a televangelist as to a liberation-theology follower) a Christ-based, faith.

The next step in this Thomasic exercise of creative doubting would be a work that dispenses with faith altogether, at least for the duration of its presentation, something like *Last Temptation* minus the main character's

triumph in the end. This would elevate the test of faith to the individual viewer's personal capability in the face of a convincing testament to the contrary, and incidentally serve to correctly classify *Last Temptation* as an independent thinker's confirmation of belief—in a Christ who, like only the best of us and in another sense like no one else, conquers what no one thought would ever be possible before.

## Gloria in Excessus

### Glory

Directed by Edward Zwick

Written by Kevin Jarre

Considered one of the most important accomplishments of First-World Marxists is the influence they have managed to wield on education, specifically on the tertiary level upward (one American bestseller alleges that the educational system has been divided up between the Left and the Right, with the latter controlling the primary and secondary levels). The impact this has had on cultural discourse is reflected in the permutations of recent communication theory, which appears to keep changing on the principle of increasingly radicalized applications. The irony lies beyond methodological considerations though—right in the core of film practice. For when Leftist, or even liberal, imperatives were persecuted in the spirit of the Cold War, artists were compelled to resort to formalist innovations in order to package statements of social dissent according to the terms of “bourgeois” appreciation. Some time afterward, controversy and social consciousness became essential to all sensible evaluators, so much so that what was once dangerous became safe, and vice versa.

American movies during the preceding decade exhibited these disturbing reversals. Draw up a list of the most appreciated films of the period, and you'd be hard-put to locate them anywhere along the spectrum from Left to Center, outside of their successful experimentations in the medium; on the other hand, the big topical cinematic disappointments—Viet Nam, feminism, low-life stories (including exploitative prison biographies)—could

hardly be faulted for their political sentiment, their creativity quotients aside. The latest in this series of well-meaning exercises in film convention is *Glory*, which attempts to strengthen its horrors-of-war slant (a standard Viet Nam-movie thrust) with a dramatic framework of racial nobility, apparently trying to improve on two earlier opera which were denounced for not being radical (and were therefore reactionary?) enough: Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978), which dealt with the effects of the Viet Nam War, and Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* (1988), which attempted a revisionist view of a minor civil-rights development.

The trouble with such a righteous orientation is that the moralizing amounts to an overkill, which is facilitated in *Glory* through one of the oldest forms of cheating in dramatic assignments: don't bother with the baddies, just give the good guys the development they "deserve." Since all the major characters have been earmarked for slaughter, the rule prescribes that they be portrayed as pure as lamb; some try to be ram-tough, but what the heck, underneath the militarily imposed wolf's clothing, they'd still bleat when bled, so get out them hankies and prepare to be moved. The manipulation can be admired in several respects, specifically in terms of period authenticity and the performances of the African American members of the cast: in one instance the troopers (drawn from an account of the Civil War's first all-black unit) conduct an impromptu spiritual session, and it's at this point where the movie goes beyond the usual liberal bent, toward a reclamation by their race of the passionate fervor that had since been appropriated by white televangelists and pop singers.

The insight may be the movie's only truly original contribution; the context, however, aggravates rather than complements this segment. Only the white sainthood candidates have any real sympathy for the blacks (since Abe Lincoln, who never appears but interacts through official correspondence, would subsequently be assassinated, then he'd be part of the heavenly team as well); other blacks who still have to undergo the purification process remain in a state of savagery, compounded by the heartlessness of their white officers; most glaring of all, no enemy soldier is given a chance to even look decent, for chrissake. The perfectly in-step, nattily dressed blacks are never once confronted with the very reason why they required an about-face in character in the first place; you'd think, after seeing waves of white-trash

secessionist troops, that the exodus of colored refugees from South to North was occasioned by the poor fashion sense of the plantation masters and their flunkies.

As if to ensure that we get the point, a heavenly choir descends once in a while to envelop us with the musical strains of what must surely await our, well, unsung heroes. Only once, in Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, the Wrath of God* (1972), did I appreciate how a chorale assumed filmic significance, contrasting as it did its ascetic clarity with the sordid confusion induced by the main character's dementia. In *Glory* the choral music is assured a visual counterpart through the lyrical orchestration of the explosions of cannons and guns, as if to say worry not, see how their death is itself their own reward. This is certainly idealism of a brave kind. If only the movie itself were just as brave in confronting its central dramatic issues, instead of being content with holding aloft the banner of Left-of-Center right-mindedness.

## Frontline

### **Born on the Fourth of July**

Directed by Oliver Stone

Written by Oliver Stone and Ron Kovic

The quest for the prototypical American movie on the Viet Nam experience has finally found fulfillment, about two decades since it started, with the release of *Born on the Fourth of July*. The quest itself has been a source of wonder for film observers all over the world: how could such a country, the center of filmic expertise and enterprise, take so long to present a work that could exhibit even just the barest minimum of credibility on a topic which has constituted the core of its recent modern history? Whatever the possible answers are, they may have to be set aside in the meanwhile that the new Viet Nam War movie has to be appreciated first. *Fourth of July* is undoubtedly that long-overdue specimen, the successful mainstream filmic discourse on our neighboring conflict, and just to prove how easy an achievement it could have been, the word "successful" has to be qualified in this instance by its minimum requisites.

*Fourth of July* works primarily on the level of avoiding the omissions and excesses of its predecessors. In short, correctness is the key to understanding its contribution to movie lore: the Viet Nam natives are presented as victims, not rendered faceless or brutal as were the previous tendencies, or overtly pathetic as in *Casualties of War*; more important, the Central American figure undergoes a maturation within the proper perspective of his country's awakening to his (and presumably countless others') plight. For some reason, such a simple stance of objectivity could not be mustered by American movie-makers in the past. Viet Nam heroes were always presented larger-than-life, with Rambo as the logical extreme of otherwise admired presentations such as Michael Cimino's *The Deer Hunter* (1978) and Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979). Implicit in these works is the stagnancy of the core of American society in response to the realities of the war: the most anyone had previously suggested was that a handful of others had seen the light, as in Hal Ashby's *Coming Home* (1978), but in general the attitude was that Viet Nam vets were bringing home something no other American ever had.

The better previous Viet Nam War movies modified this approach by reversing the value of the experience—depression and decadence, rather than Rambo's moral and physical vitality, were the homecoming gifts—but this only served to reinforce the singularity of American consciousness vis-à-vis the unarticulated possibility that something was also being done to those on the other side. *Fourth of July* doesn't go far in depicting the war's Other, just as it stops in acknowledging that upheavals were also taking place on the home front. At a certain point in the narrative, the lead character, based on real-life Viet vet Ron Kovic's bestselling self-portrayal, is disabled by an injury sustained during his last battle, and his temporary passivity allows him the realization that his sector of society has outstripped him (and its political leadership) in its repudiation of interventionist policies in Viet Nam.

By this means we are granted the spectacle of witnessing a social turmoil that surpasses its participant's limitations. In this context does the Kovic character's flight to proletarian pleasure resorts in Mexico acquire significance. *Fourth of July* director Oliver Stone makes sure that we get Kovic's point of not returning from Viet Nam by appropriating the handheld style used during the battle sequence during the other crucial turning points in the person's life. This is a rather literal attempt at demonstrating a message

already assured by the narrative itself, but an impression of sincerity is conveyed nonetheless by the utter subjectivity of camera usage (which effectively violates the traditional technical discipline exercised in the “omniscient” portions), plus the stops-out delivery of an ensemble led by an appropriately deglamorized Tom Cruise. The parallelism suggested by the movie—of the masses of Americans opposed to militarism just like their counterparts across the Pacific—will suffice at this point in assuring *Fourth of July*’s primacy in the Hollywood Viet Nam War film genre.

A ticklish sub-issue is raised in the process, however, and no matter how one mulls over the dialectics of the work, it seems like so much unnecessary provocation left unresolved. This occurs when the story’s element of reaction is embodied by the lead character’s mother, whose conflict with liberal values is brought to a head when she throws her son out of the family residence. The point is underlined by the lead’s moving reunion with his father and male buddy, and the subsequent marginalization of women in his life (due mainly to the sexual debilitation brought about by his paralysis).

The fact that Kovic’s story eventually ties in with the major political issues of his day—via his exploitation of media coverage during presidential conventions—still doesn’t answer why this other, more sensitive form of exploitation had to be necessary. Perhaps in the final reckoning, no one can argue with the retort that that was what actually happened to him, and this whole enterprise was based on his life, remember? Yet I suppose this instance of misogyny detracts from the appreciation of a work whose value rests primarily on its political correctness.

It’s of course a minor objection to a minor achievement that assumes major proportion in the context of its origin. We can tentatively pose the issue, but only for the benefit of some future creative work: for all the common struggles against dominant political and ideological structures, are the Viet Nam and feminist issues essentially incompatible with each other? The blacks, the poor, the non-Americans, all male, all go down famously with Kovic in *Fourth of July*. So to reformulate the question: what were the (internal, external, and cross-cultural) sexual tensions attendant to the Viet Nam controversy, and why do such issues lead to such cataclysmic changes?

## Wet Noodles

### I Come with the Rain

Directed and written by Trần Anh Hùng

As a scholar of global culture, I was intrigued by a recent release, probably still screening in some theaters. The movie sports at least four titles as of the moment, three of which are translations of its English title, *I Come with the Rain* (나는 비와 함께 간다 in Korean). The cast list also reads like an actors' assembly convened by the United Nations, complete with that august body's usual marginalization of women: an American (Josh Hartnett), Japanese (Kimura Takuya), Korean (Lee Byung-hun), Canadian (Elias Koteas), Chinese (Shawn Yue), Spaniard (Eusebio Poncela), token-female Vietnamese (Trần Nu Yên-Khê, the director's wife), plus a handful of gun-toting Filipinos and a roomful of naked Filipinas presumably standing in for all the other nationalities left unrepresented.

Trần Anh Hùng, who wrote as well as directed, had done a few films earlier, mostly set in Viet Nam (including *The Scent of Green Papaya* [1993], actually shot in France), and generally well-received by art-film connoisseurs. *I Come with the Rain* appears to be his bid to acquire hit-maker status, drawing on his ability to interweave a wide array of characters in fascinating Oriental locales. Unfortunately, the attempt misfires so resoundingly that only a marvel greater than what Kimura's miracle-working character can conjure up will enable the film to achieve wider release elsewhere before it shows up on video and the internet.

*I Come with the Rain* isn't wanting in good intentions, so I found myself rooting for it to take off even after its hopelessly anachronistic climax. The challenge of maintaining exclusivist high-art aesthetics must have clashed with the thriller genre's requisite of catering to as wide a viewership as possible, and while this may have resulted in an occasional masterpiece—witness Michelangelo Antonioni's *Blow-Up* (1966) or Jonathan Demme's *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991)—in this instance what emerged is an indeterminate hybrid comprising several arresting concepts that fail to coalesce in the end.

The movie's narrative signals its problems from the get-go. After a cleverly misdirected opening, where Kline, a detective, is overpowered

and vampirically bitten by an angst-ridden serial killer, we flash-forward to a couple of years later, where Kline, now permanently traumatized, is summoned by someone who claims to own the world's biggest pharmaceutical company. This man is never seen by Kline or the audience, preferring to convey Kline's assignment via a menacing lens and speaker set.

We learn that the CEO's son, Shitao, has fled to Asia, and Kline has to track him down in his last known whereabouts, an orphanage in Mindanao. Upon reaching the place, Kline is informed by another detective that Shitao had been killed by the henchmen of a powerful mine operator, but Kline replies that he has evidence that Shitao has turned up in Hong Kong, where he intends to go next. Why Kline does not fly directly from Los Angeles to the former crown colony is anyone's guess—I thought at first that the director was preparing to link the US with its neocolonial stronghold, the Philippines, as well as with its war-on-terror campaign on the country's Muslim minority.

As it turns out, Mindanao's main function is to provide scenic contrast with the First-World settings of the US and Hong Kong: jungle foliage and fauna, muddy roads, congested slums, sleazy expats, sapphic go-go girls, youthful killing machines, oh my. Far be it for me to espouse political correctness and positive images for any group, but one wonders what a fellow Asian might have in mind when he insists on depicting misery in the Third World: just in case the people living there had no idea how underdeveloped their condition is, perhaps?

*I Come with the Rain* sustains this impressive display of cluelessness upon reaching Hong Kong. The major Asian characters, presumably long-term residents if not natives, speak mostly English even to one another (Lee Byung-hun valiantly compensates with well-timed outbursts of rage, from all those Test of English review sessions maybe). And if Trần Anh Hùng had any symbolic purpose in casting a Korean to play a sadistic Chinese gangster who literally crucifies a supposedly genuine faith healer played by a Japanese—well, these bouts of against-the-grain inspiration are just beyond me.

Trần may have also missed out on the lament of most Hong Kong film scholars—that recent movies made by their own *enfants terribles* tend to portray a universalized space that is no longer recognizably Hong Kong in character. This is a trend increasingly being manifested in national cinemas that have

succeeded in appealing to a global audience, starting with the European-festival distribution circuit: filmmakers no longer need to connect with their own mass audiences so long as their output can be supported by a large enough number of fans in the West. The fact that *I Come with the Rain* isn't home-grown in Hong Kong points up this problem even more egregiously.

What makes thrillers and horror films ultimately worthy of attention is their willingness to face abjection, an all-too-human condition that more wholesome genres shy away from. *I Come with the Rain* provides its share of hair-raising situations, but winds up advocating a redemptive ending modeled on the passion of Christ. How Trần ever came to believe that such a resolution (an Asian Messiah, how radical-chic) would complement his too-precious notion of infusing a “low” genre hybrid with high-art values is a lesson on the dangers of intellectual inattention. Apparently the early-Church memo stipulating that salvation was meant for everyone (the secular definition of “Catholic”) missed him by a millennium or two. *I Come with the Rain*, sure, but I got trapped in the puddle of my own pretension.

## Two Guys, While Watching *Avatar*

### **Avatar**

Directed and written by James Cameron

At a screening in downtown Seoul.<sup>20</sup>

“I can't believe you convinced me to watch this movie again. It wasn't so great the first time we saw it.”

“You said you had nothing better to do, so I thought why not get another pair of tickets since we're already here anyway.”

“Yeah but don't you feel uncomfortable? I mean we're in a dark hall surrounded by all these foreigners.”

“You know you better stop calling these people foreigners. We're in their country, so here we're the foreigners.”

“I remember in my hometown the cheapest grocery was run by a bunch of these people, and we always called them foreigners. I only figured they were Koreans after I came here.”

“Quiet, the movie’s started. Aren’t you going to put on your glasses?”

“Thanks, but I got 20/20 vision.”

“They’re for the 3-D effect. Just put them on.”

“Oh, so that’s how they function. I thought they were meant to dim the brightness on screen. What’s the guy saying? These glasses are cool.”

“You mean the hero? He traveled almost six years in deep sleep and now when he wakes up it’s 2154.”

“That’s just like the time I went to high school. What kind of planet would you call Pandora anyway? Sounds like it was named by some tree-hugger.”

“I knew an ex-Marine like the main character, all stoic just like that, strong but quiet.”

“I envy that kind of manly, totally macho culture. What’s he doing now?”

“You mean my friend? It’s a she. Married, with four kids.”

“What a shame. I mean, why would they let women join that kind of outfit? It compromises American masculinity. Just like all these foreigners with their feminine culture, where even the guys wear pink.”

“I don’t think cultures have genders. And you better be quiet, or they might get offended.”

“Are you kidding? They hired us to teach them English, so as long as we talk fast I’m sure they won’t have a clue as to what we’re saying. Get a load of this character, the colonel. Last time we watched I thought he was going to be the hero.”

“Well he wanted to destroy the planet to get their resources, so the ex-Marine had to fight him in the end.”

“Wait a minute, now I’m getting the drift. The corporation calls in the military so they can acquire this unobtainium thingy, but the movie makes a hero of the guy who stops them, right? And he does it by joining up with these Na’vi people of color?”

“Actually everything’s just fictional, so the Na’vi aren’t real people of color because no one on earth right now has blue skin.”

“Whatever. Hasn’t anyone figured this out yet? It’s a pro-Taliban movie! No wonder the Na’vi language sounds like Arabic. I can imagine Kim Jong-il smiling while watching this.”

“North Korea isn’t Muslim, it’s Communist. They don’t believe in religion.”

“You mean there’s a difference? If you’re American, all your enemies are the same. They all want to destroy us, and they’re all foreigners like these people here.”

“One more time, they’re not the foreigners, we are, okay? And a lot of destruction in the US was done by locals. Some of them were even in government and the private sector.”

“Oh, I know what you mean—the liberals. Hollywood’s their propaganda machine.”

“Well this is a Hollywood movie we’re watching. Oh good, here comes my favorite character, the Latina hottie.”

“Yah, she really rocks. Too bad the colonel has to shoot her down. But it’s her fault, trying to save these Na’vi sympathizers. Hey, did you notice the resemblance? Na’vi, naughty, Nazi –”

“I think you’re over-reading. There’s some interesting psychology in the movie though. See how the colonel keeps calling the ex-Marine ‘son’? Makes it more ironic when they wind up trying to kill each other.”

“Just like that mythology guy, Narcissus. I did learn something in high school, after all.”

“I guess it’s worth becoming a Na’vi just like the ex-Marine does with his avatar, just to be able to ride one of those flying dinosaurs.”

“They’re dragons, man. And hey, they’re purple. James Cameron and his gang must have been ingesting some serious substances when they proposed this project. I mean, whoever heard of jellyfish and mountains that float on air? And trees that operate like the World Wide Web?”

“Now that you mention it, I kind of like the way the Na’vi communicate with nature by plugging in with special strands in their hair.”

“I do that all the time, with my USB flash drive. So that’s really how we’re supposed to feel? That the Na’vi are better than the Americans?”

“The invaders are called ‘sky people’ by the Na’vi, but in the future we can’t really be sure if Americans will be in outer space, or if the US will be around at all.”

“Don’t tell me you’re taking the side of these hostiles! The US of A has been here for over 200 years, so why shouldn’t it be around forever? It’s still the king of the world, that’s for sure.”

“That reminds me, do you think the movie will win the Oscar? Cameron’s up against his ex-wife, you know.”

“Yeah, but she made that anti-war movie, plus he should win because he’s got the bigger hit, and he’s the guy.”

“Movie’s over, let’s step outside and get more popcorn.”

“Omgosh, my celfone’s gone! It must have dropped out of my pocket on my way here! Great, now I can’t find out where I’m supposed to meet my students this evening, on top of having watched this lousy movie with a bunch of, of ... foreigners! What do you suggest we do this time?”

“How about we stay on and watch *Avatar* again?”

“What?! Okay.”

## Note

20. This was written to coincide with the 2010 Academy Awards, but proved to be too indocile for the opinion section of a conservative Korean newspaper. The situation and structure mimic (and commemorate) a now largely forgotten review by the too-long-inactive Raul Regalado.

## Hit in the (Multi)Plexus

### ***Wan-deuk-i* [Punch]**

Directed by Lee Han

Written by Kim Dong-Woo

The latest Korean blockbuster film is a departure from the disaster releases that had been dominating the local box-office since Bong Joon-ho’s *Gwoemul* [The Host] set an all-time record in 2006. What is even more surprising about the current hit, Lee Han’s *Wan-deuk-i* (hereafter *Punch*), is that it is nothing like its title at all—closer to an air kiss from a distant lover on a dreamy autumn afternoon.

Yet *Punch* also partakes of the same elements that marked the disaster-film cycle set off by *Gwoemul*: it is insistently and daringly populist, and it looks at Korea during an age of global interaction (on which more later). More important for practitioners of film everywhere, it demonstrates the admirable willingness of Korean talents to grapple with the exigencies

of genre production, constantly searching for ways to infuse difficult and complex material with accessible treatments. The manner in which *Punch* reconfigures melodramatic requisites, for example, exhibits its makers' expert grasp of the strategies of excess and containment—i.e., one should provide an unusual amount of the genre's primary element (chills in horror, laughs in comedy, tears in melodrama, sex in pornography, etc.), yet also ensure that the narrative eventually returns to a condition of normality in order for the viewer to achieve catharsis and closure.

Surprisingly, the element that *Punch* elects to overindulge in is the exact opposite of what its genre stipulates. Lee (drawing from a recent best-selling novel) provides a series of comic setups that serve to subtly foreground the pathos endured by the characters, so that toward the end, when the central tearjerker scene is staged, one could hear even male viewers unable to hold back their sniffles—a smiling-through-tears tactic more devastating than what manipulative Hollywood dreck like James Cameron's *Titanic* (1997), for all their outsize budgets, are able to achieve. The ending, happy but not (yet) triumphant, confirms that although the movie might have masqueraded for the most part as a comedy, it has remained true to its melodramatic ideals.

The plot concerns a street-smart young man, Wan-deuk (the Korean title is a jokey variation on his name). Generally well-behaved although unable to control his bouts of rage, Wan-deuk remains devoted to his diminutive hunchback father and struggles to maintain a decent performance in high school. Unfortunately for him, his teacher, Dong-joo, insists on singling him out in and outside the classroom, and harasses him even at home, since he lives across from the rooftop quarters Wan-deuk shares with his father and “uncle,” a mentally challenged man his father befriended and trained for his dance performances. As a child Wan-deuk used to wander the provincial cabaret where his father tap-danced, but since the father believed that his son will have a better future by studying in Seoul, he decided to move there (near Dong-joo's place, as it turned out) and earn a meager living by selling trifles at markets outside the city.

The turning point arrives when Dong-joo, also a minister at a church that assists illegal immigrants, discovers that Wan-deuk's mother is a Filipina who abandoned her family right after weaning her son from breast milk. The news traumatizes Wan-deuk, who already resents Dong-joo seriously

enough to pray in church for his teacher's demise. The process by which the narrative illustrates how these estranged characters manage to accept one another and discover reserves of strength in themselves is enabled by an impressive traversal of the delicate line separating humor from tragedy, without tumbling over into either extreme.

Key to the success of this type of undertaking is the performances. The title character is played by (from the perspective of world cinema) a newcomer, Yoo Ah-in, whose credibility as a mature-beyond-his-years teenager derives from parallel real-life experience as a high-school dropout. The actual lead, however—the character responsible for driving the plot forward—is Dong-joo, played with flourish and acute comic timing by Kim Yun-seok, previously identified with violent, even literally bloody films noirs. The supporting cast—Park Su-young and Kim Yeong-jae as father and “uncle” respectively, and Park Hyo-ju and Kang Byeol as Dong-joo and Wan-deuk's respective love interests—partake of the same bounteous reserve of colorful representation steeped in what hip-hop artists would describe as dope realism.

Even a seeming anomaly like the casting of Yoo Ah-in, whose character looks like neither of his parents (and better than both, actually—star-is-born alert, everyone), makes complete sense for people who marry interracially as a matter of course—not among Koreans, but among Filipinos. The fact that he is endowed in several other respects adheres to the biological principle, recognized in Philippine culture (and recently being acknowledged in the US), that positive traits tend to emerge more prominently in hybrid offspring.

Yet as mentioned earlier, a successful genre project also requires the curse of containment. In *Punch* this is brought about in the portrayal of Wan-deuk's mother, who functions more as cipher than as character, remorseful over her initial abandonment, resolved to make amends to her husband and son, relieved that through them she might finally find some ease over her hardscrabble existence. The rupture in this formulation derives from the fact that the role is essayed by Jasmine Lee, who in real life started as an immigrant wife in Korea but succeeded in becoming a national celebrity after the untimely death of her husband.

The source novel's character was actually Vietnamese, although the temptation to change her nationality to Filipino was understandable: the

Philippines has virtually become an extension of the southern island of Jeju-do, the primary warm-weather destination for vacationing Koreans, many of whom choose to stay longer (for English training and business investment), sometimes for good. Yet where most other Asian wives would have remained helpless, hampered by differences in both culture and language, the typically Westernized and English-speaking Filipina would have been able to clamber her way up the social ladder one way or another, especially if she'd had the "good education" that Wan-deuk's father quietly boasted to his son.

A kinder way of responding to this potential shortcoming is by answering that first, gender politics cannot be a national priority in a country that is technically still at war and whose economy lacks a Third World that it can exploit, thus situating its population in a perpetual crisis position even amid its First-World prosperity; and second, a culture whose pre-modern Confucian ideology is even more resolutely patriarchal than its current conservative-Western aspirations has no model for feminist enlightenment anywhere within itself. (Indeed, a previous all-time Korean blockbuster, Lee Jun-ik's *Wang-ui namja* [*The King and the Clown*, 2005], is an example of how internalized misogyny can inadvertently ruin any well-intentioned queer text.) Like *Gwoemul*, *Punch* compensates in the next best possible way, by presenting its male characters as society's Other, feminized in relation to the relatively powerful and wealthy majority. It remains then for Korea's Asian Others—Filipinos and other immigrant populations—to continue demonstrating how and why gender progressivity is not merely ethical, but in fact beneficial and indispensable in strengthening the strands of the social fabric.

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