Lav Diaz's *Ebolusyon*

A Rearrangement of a Troubled Landscape

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> *Ekran* is proud to be the first to publish a wide and detailed analysis of ... Lav Diaz's latest film (at the same time this is—in the opinion of the editorial board—a successful experiment in overcoming the traditional (im)potence of the "Western" gaze), which is among other things the reason for publishing most of the texts in English, for the issue will also be distributed abroad. Because we believe that words and images still carry weight (Jurij Meden, editorial, *Ekran: Magazine for Film and Television*, 2005).

Perhaps it is by cosmic design that the writing of this essay on Lav Diaz's latest effort, *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (*Evolution of a Filipino Family*, 2004), should coincide with the broadcast premiere of Ramona Diaz's documentary *Imelda* (2004) in the United States.[1] (The two Diazes are not related.)

The two works, while they both deal with the Marcos years, either directly through the subject in the latter case or through a historical background in the former, assume contrary positions. *Imelda*, on the one hand, attempts to humanize Imelda Marcos, considered the other half of the conjugal dictatorship, beyond the notoriety of 3,000 pairs of shoes supposedly found in her closet when the Philippine People Power protesters stormed Malacañang Palace in 1986. On the other hand, the ten-hour film

Fig. 1. Elryan de Vera as Raynaldo, out to avenge the death of the woman who adopted him, in *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004).

Ebolusyon dramatizes the plight of a peasant family living in abject poverty amid the oppression and violence of the Marcos regime (Figure 1).

As both film writer and history student, I decided that this is the most opportune time to provide some basis for a critical assessment of Lav Diaz's work, so as to render an earnest judgment of the film. My intention is not to make a comparative evaluation of the two works—although I foresee one in the near future—but to comment on that period of my homeland's history with cinema as a medium of revelation. I must admit to a risk in doing so. Given my temporal and spatial distance from the subject in question—I have

lived in the United States for the past twelve years—I must recall past experience to be able to produce a thoughtful appraisal of the period and of the film.

True, the wounded psyche (Figure 2), as Lav Diaz is wont to describe it, wrought by the Marcos legacy of pillage and murder, still remains to be expressed and manifested fully in Filipino artists' creative works. (Ferdinand Marcos was elected president in 1965, then reelected in 1969. In 1972, a year before his second term should have ended, he declared Martial Law in his attempt to keep himself in power in perpetuity.) There have been various

Fig. 2. **Raynaldo (Elryan de Vera) buries his dead adoptive mother Hilda (Marife Necesito). (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)**

attempts, both then and now, in music, literature, theater, and visual arts that succeeded in conveying the sense of outrage and disillusion with state institutions.[2] In film, a number of film artists made films that contributed to popular debate, even at risk to their lives and careers: Lino Brocka (*Bayan Ko [My Country]*, 1984), Ishmael Bernal (*Manila by Night*, 1980), and Mike de Leon (*Kisapmata [In the Wink of An Eye]*, 1981; *Batch '81,* 1982).[3]

Regrettably now, no major work able to make a thoughtful and sober assessment of the Martial Law years in the Philippines has been made. The present historical distance, almost twenty years after the fall of the dictatorship, could have afforded us an opportunity to reflect on the slaughter of our citizens and the plunder of our nation's resources arising from the Marcoses' greed for power and wealth, thereby enabling us to learn lessons from it, in a way that Western artists ponder on the Holocaust years.

Attempts are at best, modest: there is one, through the revisionist cinematic interpretation of Lualhati Bautista's Martial Law classic novels, both of them directed by Chito Roño: *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa* (*Lea's Story*, 1998) and *Dekada '70* (*The Seventies*, 2002); and another, through an anarchist critique of Philippine revolutionary struggles in Gil Portes's *Andrea, Paano Ba ang Maging Isang Ina?* (*How Does One Become a Mother?*, 1990), Joel Lamangan's *Bakit May Kahapon Pa?* (*Why Is There a Yesterday?*, 1995), and Mario O'Hara's *Pangarap ng Puso* (*Demons*, 2000).[4]

It seems ironic to find another strand of creative impulse on the subject that is more recent: an outright denial of the "wounded" Filipino soul; if ever, it is capable of redemption, only if one forgives. This is exemplified by the religious incarnation of the domestic family drama in Laurice Guillen's *Tanging Yaman* (*A Change of Heart*, 2000) and the Christ-like representation of the hero in Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Muro-Ami* (*Reef Hunters*, 1999).[5]

Along this line, what appears to be most disturbing is the tendency of a few filmmakers to put a so-called human face on the oppressor. This is exemplified by *Imelda*, where the filmmaker Ramona Diaz has not only succeeded in recuperating the Marcos cult but has entirely diminished, if not trivialized, the long years of suffering of our people under the Marcos dictatorship. Implicit in the project, because Imelda Marcos was granted a forum

to narrate her part in history (a few sound bites from a couple of progressive journalists do not suffice), is to exonerate her—or even the entire Marcos family and their minions—of the sins of Martial Law. One asks, "Whose sins were those then?"

In the film's final frame as the closing credits are rolling, we watch the Marcos children Imee and Bongbong, who are now public officials in their father's home province, make their entrance with glee into an auditorium filled with their political supporters. As if saying, "We are back!"

The effect is both scary and devastating. To this writer then, the act of completing this essay on Lav Diaz's *Ebolusyon* becomes a moral responsibility. It is in this context therefore that one discerns the true worth of Lav Diaz's ten-hour opus. In terms of sheer length, *Ebolusyon* has no precedent. However, it is the audacity of its vision—thematic and aesthetic—that makes it one of the most important films in the history of Philippine cinema.

The ambition of *Ebolusyon* is not merely to chronicle one Filipino peasant family's struggle for survival through the dementia of the Marcos Martial Law years but to document the Filipino people's own. The time period, 1971-87—assayed by archival footages, newsreels and the re-construction of actual events, e.g., interviews with the late activist-filmmaker, Lino Brocka, interspersed at various points in the film—corresponds to the events leading to the declaration of Martial Law through the upheaval that follows the People Power revolt. This provides a contextual framework upon which the filmmaker is able to dramatize the story of the Gallardo family against the tumult of the period, representative of the larger society (Figure 3).

Ebolusyon, shot in black and white, opens with Puring (Angie Ferro), the grandmother, and her three granddaughters on the farm, their drawn faces and bodies projected as shadowy figures obscured by the blinding rays of the sun. This sequence of shots sets the emotional tone of the film: pained, wounded, desperate. Nevertheless, because the men in their lives have been beaten down by fate or misfortune, this family of women remains the moral core of the narrative. Theirs are the lives, intertwined with others, that progress painstakingly through the length of the film, signifying the impoverished, almost dead-end existence of the Filipino, but punctuated only

Fig. 3. The rape scene of Hilda (Marife Necesito) by a drunkard (Joe Gruta). (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)

by outbursts of violence: The rape and murder of the mentally challenged daughter, Hilda (Marife Necesito). The maiming, incarceration and eventual killing of the son, Kadyo (Pen Medina). The savage abduction of Carlos (Erwin Gonzales), adopted son of Fernando (Ronnie Lazaro).

In-between, while the narrative bifurcates into two main arcs—one, Raynaldo (Elryan de Vera), leaves after he shoots his mother's

Fig. 4. **Angie Ferro as Puring, a grandmother fretting over the breakup of her family. (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)**

rapist-murderers, and the other, Kadyo, searches for Raynaldo in Manila after his release from prison—at the center of the film is the story of Puring and her three granddaughters: Huling (Banaue Miclat), Ana (Sigrid Andrea Fernando), and Martina (Lorelei Futol). It is in their uncontained rage and fear of an uncertain future—an overall tone of resignation and despair—that enables the viewer to understand fully the brutality of the Marcos years.

Fig. 5. Joe Gruta as a violently abusive drunkard and Marife Necesito as his mentally impaired rape victim, Hilda. (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)

Not a few may comment on the length of the film as an instance of directorial conceit. On the contrary, one has to make a case that it is the long novel format that affords us with occasions to reflect on the impact of Martial Law on our present lives. Moreover, it enables us to experience the past, as if exorcising ourselves of its demons.

There is pain in this process of recognition. A feeling of dread permeates even moments of quietude. The uneasy stillness of the rice fields, where one barely hears the wind, presages the savagery of the war between the government and the rebel forces in the countryside. The eeriness of the unhurried rain that accompanies Fernando's trek to the mountains in search for gold foreshadows the impending tragedy in his family. These are scenes that resist the idyllic, pastoral spectacle of rural life commonly seen in both contemporary art and popular culture.

Devoid of a commercial film's artifices—such as swelling music, special lighting, and stylized editing and design—and entirely reliant on the almost completely real-time enactment of events, *Ebolusyon* compels us to look at film in a wider cinematic context, as a form of resistance to mainstream narrative and style. Consequently, the filmmaker allows us to examine the subject of the tragic Filipino past with a sense of urgency, in a way that is more probing and thoughtful.

This duality of filmic vision—wherein film is both document and fiction—raises the issue of cinema as an aesthetic and cultural medium. The employment of what appears on the surface as either unrelated shots or diversionary narrative contrivance—one recalls the use of actual news footages of the massacre of farmers in Mendiola in the vicinity of the presidential Malacañang Palace, and the staging of the studio taping of the radio drama serials—serves to disrupt the process of fictionalizing; it thereby provokes us to comment, to see storytelling as a device to inquire into the larger issue of the human condition at a particular time-space (Figure 6).

The ubiquitous insertion of the radio drama serial, for one, provides a necessary break from the drudgery of everyday life—both for the benefit of the characters and the viewers—in the same way that they/we find solace in their songs and in their stories. Nevertheless, it is the use of the radio drama serial in its adherence to the conventions of storytelling—linear narrative, suspense-driven, hero-centered—that reminds us, observers and students of film, of the popular origins of the cinematic melodrama. Similarly, the frequent singing of "Sapagkat Mahal Kita" (Because I Love You, words and music by Felipe de Leon), a popular kundiman or Filipino love song, and the

Fig. 6. An exacerbation of the victim's trauma by making her witness the murder of her adoptive family. (*Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino*, Sine Olivia, Paul Tañedo Inc., Ebolusyon Productions, 2004)

jukebox playing of the then-current pop tunes of Eddie Peregrina and Rey Valera, underscore the use of music as an emotive device in conventional cinematic storytelling.

In *Ebolusyon*, however, radio drama—as well as music—serves both as critique and reconstruction of popular cinematic tradition and narratives. One points to the filmmaker's particular selection of materials. One drama serial titled "Habang May Pag-asa" (While There Is Hope) follows a young girl's dream of being a movie star, her way out of poverty, with her ending up in sex movies. The other, "Ang Lahat May Pag-asa" (Hope Awaits Everyone), tells of a young girl who gets seduced by her stepfather but is thrown out of the house by her own mother for her transgression. These drama serials represent two common narrative tropes in popular Philippine fiction as well as film melodrama, and serve to counterpoint filmmaker Lino Brocka's assertions on what ails Filipino movies in particular, and the larger

Philippine society. The typical closure that is characteristic of these narratives impedes any possibility of a critical assessment of the sociopolitical condition that defines them.

What Brocka suggests, in his words and in his more meaningful works, e.g., the aforementioned *Bayan Ko* and other films such as, *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila: In the Claws of Neon*, 1975), *Jaguar* (1986), and *Orapronobis* (*Pray for Us*, 1989),[6] which may also be Lav Diaz's concern, is the imperative to wage a sustained, even protracted, counterhegemonic offensive, both pedagogic and agitational, to alter/reconstruct attitudes and practices, eventually transforming society. Implicit in this effort are attempts to reconfigure film, not merely as a marketable product, but as an instrument for social change.

Significantly, *Ebolusyon*, by directly rejecting the formulaic conventions of popular film, is able to reimagine cinematic space for its viewer with a grammar that is liberative, and with a narrative that allows the interruptions and contradictions inherent in social realities to play out. *Ebolusyon* owes its potency to its consistent refusal to prescribe solutions, more or less letting opposing forces continually engage in a space of tension.

More than anything else, the eventual valuation of *Ebolusyon* lies not only in its repudiation of the formal characteristics of popular film, but in its courage to insinuate that film is what social critic Edel Garcellano refers to as "extension of the contemporary sociopolitical ferment of society."[7] The film, by acknowledging the issue of land as central to social unrest, suggests that it is only through the peasant class reclaiming ownership of their land that the nation will find its own redemption.

The failure of institutions to make changes in people's lives—be it government, church, or the revolutionary movement—constitutes the film's thesis. A visually powerful image of Kadyo's almost twenty-minute walk toward his death after being stabbed, is reminiscent of Christ bearing his cross to Calvary, thereby representing a collusion of these aforementioned institutions. The futility of his death—a senseless, nameless murder—evokes a feeling of unease because one does not find finality in it. There are no kin

able to reclaim his body. There is no closure. This, metaphorically, is the great Filipino tragedy.

It is only through the agency of art, the filmmaker making his film, that we, the viewers, are only able to redeem ourselves. In *Ebolusyon*, Lav Diaz has to let his protagonist Raynaldo return to his cousins' fold. He also has to retell the story of the baby who was left in the dumpsite many years ago. It was presumably, Raynaldo. He has to create the tale of the two mothers: the mother who bore him, and the mother who saved him from the ants.

In the meantime, my country and my people continue to grieve.

Acknowledgments

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Notes

1. Ramona Diaz's *Imelda* was premiered on US public television on May 10, 2005, as part of the annual Asian Pacific American Heritage Month. In January 2004 it was honored with a cinematography prize at the Sundance Film Festival. Lav Diaz's *Ebolusyon ng Pamilyang Pilipino* was screened in March 2004 at the Pacific Film Archive in Berkeley, California, as part of the annual San Francisco Asian American International Film Festival.
2. Even during the martial-law period, artists and cultural workers produced works that conveyed their outrage against the US-propped government of Ferdinand Marcos, notably the works of underground writers Emmanuel Lacaba and Jose Maria Sison. But it was after the assassination of oppositionist Benigno "Ninoy" Aquino Jr. that a great number of artists—in music, visual arts, theater, and film—joined forces with the proletariat to protest the morally bankrupt Marcos government in the streets through their art. To cite a few: Lualhati Bautista, the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA), visual artists Jose Tence Ruiz and Antipas Delotavo, and the musical group Patatag.
3. Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, and Mike de Leon are widely considered the main figures in what critics often refer to as the Second Golden Age of Philippine cinema, 1970-90. Brocka's *Bayan Ko* (*My Country*, 1984), the story of a union workers' protest in a printing press, was shown at the Cannes Film Festival, where Brocka created some furor when he wore a "blood-streaked" Philippine map-designed barong shirt (the Philippine national costume). Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980) dramatizes the impoverished lives of multiple characters in Manila. The Marcos government forbade it from competing at the Berlin International Film Festival because it was allegedly a smear on Manila's reputation as premier city in Asia. De Leon's *Kisapmata* (1981), about an incestuous relationship between a retired policeman and his daughter, and *Batch '81* (1982), about the violence of a student fraternity hazing, are allegories on the authoritarian Marcos government.
4. Lualhati Bautista's popular novels *Bata, Bata, Paano Ka Ginawa?* and *Dekada '70* are considered feminist documents of the Martial Law period. Their filmization, both directed by Chito Roño, reduced their political significance by merely dramatizing the personal travails of a woman living through the tumultuous years of Martial Law. Portes's *Andrea, Paano Ba ang Maging Isang Ina?* and Lamangan's *Bakit May Kahapon Pa?* have a woman revolutionary as the protagonist, but presented her as too individualistic, emotional, and crazed. O'Hara's *Pangarap ng Puso*, while breaking some ground in non-linear storytelling, is really a pastiche of revolutionary iconography that is confused and directionless.

5. Laurice Guillen and Marilou Diaz-Abaya, in their earlier works, bore great promise and appeared to usher in highly valuable feminist perspective in popular cinema when they started making films in the early '80s. They left film-making toward the end of the decade—apparently in frustration over the state of the industry—and returned in the mid-'90s with an entirely different attitude to cinema. Guillen's work has since borne Marian (after the Virgin Mary) thinking in film, notably *Tanging Yaman* with a scene of the grandmother's seeming ascension to heaven. Diaz-Abaya's output, on the other hand, has tended to a metaphysical rendering of social realities, notably in *Muro-Ami*.
6. Brocka's *Maynila,* about life in the slums of Manila, was considered a landmark in Philippine cinema (cinematography was done by Mike de Leon). *Jaguar*, also screened at Cannes, tells of a lowly bodyguard of a politician, who gets involved in a crime. *Orapronobis*, the story of an ex-priest who tries to save the lives of his former lover and her son from the clutches of a demented paramilitary head, served as an indictment of the Corazon Aquino regime's continued human rights abuses.
7. Edel E. Garcellano, "A Choice of Film Review (Or, Reviewing the Reviewer)" in *Knife's Edge: Selected Essays* (U of the Philippines P, 2001).