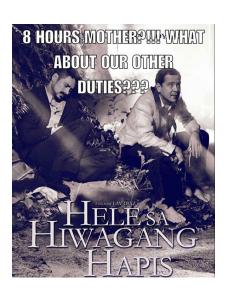


A Lullaby to the Sorrowful Mystery

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Actually I'm not sure whether this is a fiiiiiiiilllllmmmm or a moooovieeeee, I just know it's lloooooonngg as in. One of my friends had similar doubts. She asked, "Is this an art film? Why isn't there any gratuitious male nudity? I don't think it's an art film." Kidding.

Full disclosure. #helenghiwagan-ghapis is my first #lavdiaz film. Yes, until last Black Saturday I was a Lav Virgin, just like everyone who lined up at the screening at Robinsons Galleria Cinema. Yes it was a Virgin Lav Fest. Kidding again.

Thankfully, the hubby was not a Lav Virgin so we came prepared to weather the projected eight hours of the movie marathon. Our weapons of choice: pillow, jacket with hoodie, a thermos of coffee, another thermos with water, two large-size Lay's potato chips. We also planned to have a barbecue but the guard didn't allow us to bring the grill. Kidding again.

I must admit that at first I didn't know if I could accept those extended scenes where nothing much happens. Hello ADHD generation. And since I was a TV person for whom time is money, I got used to the rule of starting the scene as close to the action as possible and ending it just as quickly. So while watching, I was making my own edit points ... beat, beat, o here's where we can cut, ayyyy it goes on ... all right, beat, beat, beat yet more ... fine we can cut here ... ayyy it still continues what the, hey?!!!

I thought people were joking when they said that when you watch a Lav Diaz movie and you see a water buffalo entering to walk across the screen, the camera will wait until it exits before the scene is cut. IT'S ALL TRUE! There's a scene where Susan Africa, Alex de Rossi, and Hazel Orencio are climbing a hill. They start from below, we run the roll forever until they disappear from view. No way the camera followed them, no cut to closeup to show how they emote. We just waited for them to walk forever where our view consisted of soil and the hem of their skirts disappearing into the horizon. What's the cinematic meaning? That they walked a long time and distance? Search me! I couldn't make out the reason.

And just wait until there's a musical or poetic interlude. Let's stop the flow of the story and milk the moment of everything it's got. Sing the song entirely, recite the poem completely ... no matter how many times these were performed earlier. I got the idea that secretly, this was the natural break in editing that Lav was giving the audience as in, "OK you gurls, you know that the song will be sung again, that means you can go take a pee or buy some snacks, when you return, you won't miss much."

In fairness to me, after a few moments where I zzzz'd slightly, it didn't take too long before I got into the rhythm of the movie's pace. I didn't feel so frustrated within because of edit points. I just accepted what I got. Lav never forced me to watch his film didn't he? I knew it was a Lav Diaz movie, I knew it was eight hours, I bought my own ticket. So what should I complain about? Just shut up and eat more potato chips.

Anyways, I applauded the film's premise wherein Oryang, Jose Rizal, Andres Bonifacio, Emilio Aguinaldo existed in one universe along with the fictional characters of El Fili comprising Simoun, Isagani, and Basilio with three Tikbalangs and Bernardo Carpio on the side.² Ayyy what imagination! Aylaykitt! Go ahead and run with it!

The movie's narrative proper begins after the failure of the fictional massacre-by-bombing attempt by Simoun [in Fili], but right before the very real execution of Rizal at Bagumbayan via firing squad ... someone emotes while strumming a guitar ... JLC strains to practice the recitation of a poem in the dark ... Sid Lucero buys a rice cake....

...wait should I continue the detailed narration of events? This runs for eight hours mother. How about our other duties? Kidding.

Actually I thought of issuing spoiler alerts about certain plot points but then you should really be aware of the general turn of events, right? Meaning you should have read in your history book about what happened and you should also have read the Fili right? Right? RIGHT??? It's like announcing a spoiler alert about the ending of Jesus of Nazareth. 4 Hello! He was nailed to the cross and gave up the ghost! The end.

Anyway, forget about it, it's too exhausting to recount.

Here's all I can say for now.

Lav's got a pulse on the limits of his audience's patience. He'll push the temporal extent of a scene, but right before the moment when I'd journey to dreamland, he'll cut to another scene. For the most part. In other scenes, brother please clip your footage, you can't milk anything more from it.

The never-ending cough of Joel Saracho seemed contagious and at moments was already calling attention to itself. Halfway thru I started coughing myself. He must have been responsible for infecting Susan and this became the Myth of the Coughing of Susan Africa.

The handsomeness of Papa Piolo Pascual becomes more and more evident in black and white. In John Lloyd Cruz's case, not so much.

The movie deserves being shown with subtitles, to be fair to its multilingual dialogue. Aside from the use of florid Tagalog, it has scenes with dialogue in Spanish, English, Chinese, and Hiligaynon. Pak. I clapped for Papa P for his extended English-language scene with Bart Guingona. Their discussion was outright philosophical but Papa P never faltered. Intense

throughout, though he'd shift accents from neutral Pinoy English, to English with a twang to Hispanized English. But I didn't mind.

Between this film and Heneral Luna, Emilio Aguinaldo's image was completely ruined for Filipino audiences no?⁵ His bones must be tumbling and pirouetting about at this time. BTW how come in the whole movie, characters were made to call historic figures by their full name, surname and all? It seems awkward to be face-to-face with Oryang but still addressing her as Gregoria de Jesus. Same with the other historical characters. I felt it was deliberate and done for a reason, but one I couldn't determine [why exactly].

I laughed at the scene where Alex [de Rossi] as Cesaria Belarmino was asking for forgiveness from Oryang, and calling herself "the most beautiful maiden of the East"... Well you go girl. A bit later Oryang would smash Cesaria's skull with a rock. In my mind was Oryang saying, "Bitch I'm the muse of the [revolutionary] Katipunan and you dare to call yourself most beautiful maiden?!!! Not today bitch, not today!!!" No big deal except to lighten my mood.

What I couldn't take was the too-easy forgiveness that Oryang granted Cesaria on behalf of other people for the latter's betrayal of the revolution that caused the deaths of many. Forgiving [Cesaria] for herself, OK fine, if that's your bag. But for you to assume the right of those whose loved ones perished, to avenge themselves WELL WAIT!!!! In the same vein that the film vilified Aguinaldo, it seemed to be whitewashing the image of Cesaria. Wait a minute bitch! OK you're a victim of circumstance but it was your choice to double-cross your comrades. If you ever felt guilty, you deserve that, bitch.

Angry? Not really, just something I opted to bring up.

Papa P outshone JLC considering JLC was in full acting mode while Papa P just reclined on a hammock and sighed.

Have I mentioned that Papa P's handsomeness is enhanced in black and white? Huwell, it bears repeating.

I'm not hating on JLC huh but the universe sez NO! And JLC, that barong with cuffs, that was appropriate for godfathers at baptisms during the 1990s, not the 1890s. Just off-putting. From his first moment he was already acting intensely. Correction, acting for TV. As if he was out to prove something.

Hello, you may have overlooked the memo, this is not an actor's movie, this is a Lav Diaz show, he's the star all the way. You'll notice, even in highly emotional moments, there won't be any closeup to see the tears and hear the moans. A full shot is all you'll get and sometimes with your back turned, all up to the actors to project whatever emotions they want to convey.

Another tidbit I couldn't swallow was with all the trekking about of Papa P/Simoun while sustaining a bullet wound, JLC/Isagani failed to find him a native doctor or herbalist. Hello, you were able to party with the Rizalists but you were unable to cure my Papa P?6

Yes I know that at the end JLC would admit that he wasn't enthusiastic about finding a herbalist and doctor because he was glad to see Papa P suffer. That was the problem, the need to verbalize his motivation for his failed action, instead of just conveying this visually via acting in the lengthy-lengthy-lengthiness of the film. Uhmmm show, don't tell?

I think the main problem is JLC was too old for the role. He's no longer an ingenue. While the role was asking for uncertainty and the unfocused anger of the youth, what we got was weakness of character because no one could deny that grandaddy JLC was no longer a spring chicken. Sorry about it.

Go #teamtikbalang, with Angel Aquino, Cherie Gil, and the revitalized Tony Mabesa, Bernardo Bernardo!!! They're the ones who awakened me and pulled me into the movie and basically sustained me to the end. I'm flabbergasted. Lav's imagination's so rich. And it totally worked. That section going toward the end of the film's first 1/3, I thought, how can Lav sustain this level of creativity for the succeeding five hours? The answer is, he can't. The last ²/₃ was totally uneven.

In fact I got the feeling that I was watching two different movies. The Oryang and the tikbalang storyline seemed to benefit from polished scripting, from its philosophizing through the florid lines that articulated Lav's beliefs. The Simoun storyline seemed to suffer from uneven writing. Many lines of dialogue seemed to have been conceived in English then translated verbatim into Tagalog. The impact was unwieldy.

I could somewhat understand and feel many of the extended scenes, but there were also prolonged scenes that felt masturbatory and unnecessary and that could have used some editing. Like the scene where JLC was emoting on a cliff while looking far away. Too long! Sure we know you were conflicted, feeling mixed emotions with young corn toward Simoun. But enough!

What happens next? A closer shot of JLC on the same cliff, giving the same stuff. More more mixed emotions with young corn. Come on?!!!

But then there were also loooong moments that were worth the indulgence, like the alternating recitations between Papa P and JLC of [Rizal's poem] "My Last Farewell" in the original Spanish and in the Tagalog translation.... IN FULL! THOSE MINUTES WERE WORTH IT!

And that silent breakdown of Sid Lucero after three long scenes where he did nothing except excavate (how can he come up with something when after a night of nonstop digging the hole he was working on remained shallow hmpf). In his final excavation scene, he fell to the ground, then we had long moments where only his fingertips would twitch occasionally, then finally he uttered one word.... One frikking word ... AND THE END!!! PAK!

Haiz. I know a lot more ideas crossed my mind while watching the film, the transformative lighting between characters, the fragmented timeline of the narrative, etc. But in the last few minutes, it seemed I no longer wanted to exert myself. Literally I felt I might barf from sheer exhaustion if the closing credits didn't start to roll.

So is *Hele* a triumph? It's an experience.

Is Hele successful? I wasn't repulsed plus there was a money shot of Papa P in an open polo shirt toward the ending.

Would I endorse Hele? I'm not sure if I would, but I'm also sure it wasn't bad. But then ... haiz, all right Lav you win. You perturbed me thoroughly, mentally, physically. You wore me down. I felt what Meryl Streep said that "he rearranged the molecules in my body." My own molecules haven't recovered vet.

Batman vs Superman: Dawn of Justice [directed by Zack Snyder, Warner Bros., 2016], you'll have to wait till next week, I need to recover from this.

Acknowledgment

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Notes

- The long-running one-act play theater festival at the Cultural Center of the Philippines is titled Virgin Lab Fest.
- Oryang was the nickname for Gregoria de Jesus, widow of the unlawfully sabo-2. taged first Philippine president, Andres Bonifacio, who suffered the additional trauma of sexual assault from the henchmen of her husband's political enemies. Jose Rizal was executed by the Spaniards after he had published his novels Noli Me Tangere (1887) and El Filibusterismo (1891); he was declared a national hero by the Americans. Emilio Aguinaldo, an ilustrado or privileged native, seized the leadership of the Revolution against Spain from Bonifacio, who was murdered along with his brother after a kangaroo-court trial; Bonifacio's body was never recovered, despite Oryang searching for it for days (part of the narrative of *Hele*). Simoun, Isagani, and Basilio are characters in Rizal's Noli and Fili. A tikbalang is a folkoric creature, similar to Hayagriva in Hinduism, with the head and lower body part of a horse, that gets married when rain falls through a clear sky, and is tamed when a mortal plucks out one of its golden hairs; Bernardo Carpio is a mythological superhuman who lives trapped in subterranean rocks, with earthquakes caused by his movements (Fig.1).





Fig. 1. Left: tikbalang illustration by Lorenzo Angel Bonilla (*The LAB Site*, October 5, 2010, lorenzobonilla.com/artwork/1894745-Tikbalang-October-5-2010.html); right: Alicia Vergel and Cesar Ramirez as the title character in a still from *Bernardo Carpio* (directed by Benjamin Resella and Artemio B. Tecson, Sampaguita Pictures, 1951).

- Republic Act 1425, enacted in 1956, requires all Philippine schools to teach the life and works of Jose Rizal, singling out his novels.
- Jesus of Nazareth was a TV series directed in 1977 by Franco Zeffirelli. 4.
- Jerrold Tarog's Heneral Luna (Artikulo Uno Productions, 2015) was a period film about Antonio Luna (1866-99), a contemporary of Rizal, whose assassination by his own subordinates was apparently condoned (though denied) by "first" Philippine President Emilio Aguinaldo.
- Rizalists are folk-Catholic cultists devoted to the worship of Jose Rizal as a messianic figure in Philippine history.