This Genre Which Is Not One

The Philippine Multicharacter Film

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Abstract

The use of multiple characters in film may sound like a commonplace occurrence, but by actual standard definitions of characters, most commercial movies have historically only featured primarily heroes, or at most heroes with partners or antagonists. The dismantling of this unarticulated rule, which insisted that the audience be able to identify with the same character throughout a film narrative, began to be explored after the collapse of Classical Hollywood and the influx of European influences in US and global cinema. The Philippines had its own mode of multicharacter presentation, sustained via the launching of multiple stars in distinctively named batches. The persistence of this mode of narrative film practice as a commercially recognized (and profitable) genre preceded the same handling of multicharacter films in the West. It also enabled local viewers and critics to perceive and appreciate formally grounded critiques of Philippine society and culture.

Keywords

smorgasbord movie; milieu realism; Ishmael Bernal; genre progressivity; Marcos dictatorship; Golden Ages

Movies with multiple lead characters had difficulty acquiring recognition in film practice—and, concomitantly, in film studies as well. Paradoxically, such films tended to persist in the guise of various generic categories: the love-triangle setup, for example, was more usually announced and marketed as a romantic comedy, while a narrative that featured a gangster, his gun moll, and the detective who hunts him down would be presented as a suspense thriller.

The preceding samples turned on the presence of three characters each for a crucial reason: triangulated relationships may be arguably considered as constituting the minimal number of characters essential in identifying a plot situation as "multiple": that is, neither heroic nor dual (which, observing critical convention, may be arguably one major character and her or his obverse). The tendency of these narratives to be unstable as equal-opportunity presentations often results in the triangle collapsing into one or two of the characters—the person torn between two lovers, for example, or the gangster and/or the detective. This may be the reason why conventional commercial cinema, especially during the Classical Hollywood period, was perceived less in terms of number of characters than in terms of other generic markers.

This article will be considering the reconfiguration of multicharacter cinema into a generic category unique for its time in the Philippines. It will track the origin of the genre as the successful marketing strategy of a studio associated with the country's First Golden Age, and its persistence into and transformation during the Second Golden Age ushered in by the pro-filmic martial law regime of Ferdinand E. Marcos. It will observe the parallel developments in European, American, and Third-World cinema that impacted Filipino practitioners, even as the recognition of multicharacter movies as a type of genre arrived later in the global scene. Finally, it will problematize the possible future scenarios for this filmmaking mode and genre, during the period when the technological conditions of production and distribution have been permanently altered by digital innovations.

Land of the Morning

Film was introduced to the Philippines toward the twilight years of Spanish colonial rule. The first chronophotographic screenings were held on December 31, 1896, the day after the execution by firing squad of José P. Rizál, the polymath patriot whom the Americans eventually declared the Philippines's national hero (Deocampo, *Cine* 47-53).[1] Typical of the Americans' intervention as colonial newcomers anxious to prove themselves better than their European counterparts, the US (among other things) dismantled Spain's clerically administered system of governance and replaced it with secular government, promoted public education and the use of the English language (in contrast with the Spanish friars' insistence on learning local languages in order to retain Spanish as a language exclusive to the colonizers and their compradors), and conflated the necessary militarization of anti-colonial strongholds with hygienic measures intended to control the spread of cholera and other infectious diseases (see Anderson).

Not surprisingly, one of the first film endeavors during American colonial rule actually constituted a race in 1912 between two US entrepreneurs to provide a feature film based on the life (and death) of Rizál, several years before the first film produced and directed by a Filipino, Jose Nepomuceno's *Country Maiden* (*Dalagang Bukid*, 1919), was released (Deocampo, *Film* 16, 261-93; see Figure 1). In effect, the US reintroduced to the Philippines the idea of the people coexisting with a foreign occupant as in much the same way, it also reintroduced film—and succeeded where the Spaniards had faltered. Part of the reason was external, since the US was in the process of dominating global cinema production and could easily facilitate its own citizens' production, distribution, and exhibition activities in its overseas territories.

Figure 1. A scene from *Country Maiden* (directed by Jose Nepomuceno, 1919). In *Manila Nueva*, 13 Sep. 1919, from Tofighian (79).

Understandably, Philippine film practice paralleled structures and trends observed by the US during the Classical Hollywood period, and allowed itself an increasing measure of non-US global influence at roughly the same moment that the US yielded to the libertarian and technical changes wrought by European art cinema, from the 1960s onward. By the end of the 1950s, the same vertically integrated system that was busted in the US by the decision, known formally as *United States v. Paramount Pictures Inc.* (334 US 131) or the Hollywood Antitrust Case, effectively ended an era dominated in Philippine practice since pre-War times by an oligopoly of three major studios. All three continued operating into the Second Golden Age, but were challenged by a glut of independent production companies, many of which were founded and run by stars headlining their own projects.[2]

Among the so-called Big Three, Sampaguita Pictures is of special significance, not just in terms of multicharacter film production but also in its participation in Philippine political history. Having been the outfit where beauty queen and aspiring starlet Imelda Romualdez screen-tested right before she became the wife (via whirlwind courtship) of a then-rising politician, Ferdinand Marcos, it was able to claim the right to produce the

Marcoses' biographical campaign-movie, Conrado Conde et al.'s *Destined by Fate: The Ferdinand E. Marcos Story* (*Iginuhit ng Tadhana*, 1965, see Figure 2),[3] as well as its sequel for Marcos's re-election, Eddie Garcia's *Heaven's Fate* (*Pinagbuklod ng Langit*,1969). Its owner's daughter and heir, Marichu Vera-Perez Maceda, became part of Imelda Marcos's powerful Blue Ladies circle and was appointed one of the directors of the Marcos regime's official film agency, the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines.

Figure 2. Ferdinand E. Marcos (second from left) celebrates winning the Philippine presidency with the personnel of *Destined by Fate*: Luis Gonzales, left (who played Marcos); Gloria Romero, second from right (who portrayed Imelda Marcos); and "Doc" Perez, film producer. From *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, 31 Mar. 2012.

Sampaguita Pictures modeled itself after Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios' "more stars than there are in heaven" motto (Carey 159). It was therefore no surprise that its founder, "Doc" Jose R. Perez, dared to embark on launching a significant batch of 10 new performers—the only First Golden Age outfit to attempt star-building after the 1950s. What was of longer-term import was the more commercially motivated announcement that the studio's movie projects would start featuring the new faces, collectively called "Stars '66" after the year of their launch. The film projects would also collectively be known as smorgasbord movies (after the Swedish buffet,

redolent of the *lauriat* but avoiding, following then-prevalent racist practice, any association with Chinese culture—see Appendix A).

Star Wars

A few years after the declaration of martial law in September 1972, also marking the start of the Marcos dictatorship, Philippine film practitioners ushered in what has since been described as the Second Golden Age of Philippine Cinema.[4] Sampaguita Pictures became increasingly inactive and was superceded by the now-semi-active Regal Films, the most successful Philippine film studio of all time, with over 800 titles since its first regular production in 1976.

The smorgasbord-movie concept persisted in large-cast film projects, but without the production companies identifying the film type or its originating studio. Even Sampaguita Pictures dropped the practice of using the term, possibly because it no longer became profitable to do so. An even likelier reason is that the multi-episode multi-lead movie transmuted into a then-unnamed subgenre of melodrama, focused on fallen women, usually sex workers.[5] These hostess films (to belatedly adopt South Korean terminology) would have challenged any First Golden Age studio's carefully cultivated wholesome image. In fact, the major Philippine multicharacter filmmaker, Ishmael Bernal, directed a sex-comedy for Sampaguita's subsidiary VP Pictures (from the owners' family name, Vera-Perez), titled *Bad Example: I Have Seven Wives* (*Huwag Tularan: Pito ang Asawa Ko*, 1974), but was discouraged from working again with the outfit because of the meddling by "Doc" Perez, "who replaced scenes in [the film] against his wishes" (Bernal et al. 102).

That Bernal's self-described first sex-themed film with Sampaguita was also his last (Bernal et al. 101) is of symbolic significance, in terms of Sampaguita's abandonment of the smorgasbord format, or at least the terminology it used for it. Bernal would continue tinkering with multicharacter arrangements as well as with hostess-film assignments, and would finally manage to come up with the first recognizable Filipino multicharacter movie with *Pleasure* (*Aliw*, 1979), an interwoven narrative on three female

nightclub workers. *Pleasure* was his final film assignment for Jesse Ejercito (brother of deposed Philippine President Joseph Estrada), although they continued collaborating in other capacities. They had planned on one final project together, *Siyete Belyas* (which translates as both "seven beauties" and "seven [taxi] dancers"), featuring Ejercito's own update on Stars '66, comprising seven actresses collectively known also as Siyete Belyas.

Ejercito was known as both a risk-taking producer and a savvy star-builder, and had launched several actresses to capitalize on the so-called bold trend, a soft-core tempering of the pre-martial law's hard-core *bomba* (or "bomb") sex melodramas.[6] The aforementioned Regal Films, headed by Chinay (Chinese Filipina) "Mother" Lily Yu Monteverde, coined a new term, bold, for its highly profitable soft-core productions. Mother Lily also effectively preempted Ejercito's Siyete Belyas's film foray—which had reached only as far as a theater revue titled *The Belles Are Swinging*—by launching the Regal Babies, a more recognizable Stars '66 appropriation with three young women paired with three young men (Constantino). Regal's closest rival, Viva Films, introduced a more Siyete Belyas-type group, all-men rather than all-women this time, collectively named after their launching movie, Maryo J. de los Reyes's *Bagets* (1984).[7]

With the swing to a libertarian policy necessitated by the inauguration of the Marcos regime's Manila International Film Festival in 1982 (as a pre-event to be followed by the actual festivals in succeeding years), reinforced by the Marcoses' defensive posture following the assassination of opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino Jr. in 1983, several batches of women stars had to be launched in order to meet the demand for profitable sex-film productions, which once more crossed over from "bold" to hard-core. The most famous ones were the series of actresses introduced by Rey de la Cruz, who selected batch themes and renamed the women accordingly (David, "The Fantasy World of Rey de la Cruz" 12). In chronological order, these comprised the "softdrink beauties" (Coca Nicolas, Sarsi Emmanuelle, Pepsi Paloma, plus an "uncola," Myra Manibog); the "hard-drink beauties" (Remy Martin, Chivas Regal, Vodka Zobel, and Brandy Ayala); and, after the 1986 people-power revolt, the "revolutionary beauties" (Aida Dimaporo, Ava

Manotoc, Vanessa Ver, Lota Misuari, and Polly Cayetano—all named after then-controversial political figures). The satirical wordplay quickly became the template for all the other local star-builders—witness, for example, the early 1980s' so-called and nearly forgotten "street beauties" (Ayala Buendia, Aurora Boulevard, Remedios Malate, Lerma Morayta, and, in reference to the Pasig River's Jones Bridge, Bridget Jones).

Genre Complications

The main reason for the gap between the emergence of multicharacter films and their recognition as a distinctive genre is that film genres conformed to the popular practice of literature, rather than the original distinctions it made based on formal properties. That is, rather than defining genres using the filmic counterparts of poetry, drama, fiction, et al., film practitioners, scholars, and audiences relied on the classifications deployed by narrative literature (including theater), such as comedy, drama, musical, horror, war, Western, etc. Compared to the form-based differences that marked early literary practice, the popular idea of genre tends to induce complications in determining consistency across categories (Langford 4-5), although it admittedly allows for shifts in individual generic trends and the constant redefinition of samples.

Official (US Academy) recognition for the multicharacter contributions of American filmmakers arrived later—specifically, when the Oscars set aside its recognition of Ang Lee's initially favored *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) in favor of Paul Haggis's *Crash* (2004, Figure 3). As if to reaffirm its increasingly controversial decision, the Academy decided to give its life achievement award the next year to Robert Altman, who specialized in the form, and whose peak achievement, *Nashville* (1975), swept all the available major critics' prizes for its year of release but was cold-shouldered by the Academy in favor of a more conventionally plotted entry. The *New York Times* argued that it was time to recognize "movies with multiple story lines" (Farber), and quoted filmmakers Miranda July ("To me a single story seems like a very classical form, almost as if you're competing with the Greeks") and, more extensively, Stephen Gaghan ("Tolstoy said that the most important

element in writing fiction is your ability to master transitions. [A multiple-narrative film] turns out to be such a cinematic idea. You can cut from a radical cleric addressing disaffected young people to a massive yacht in the Mediterranean. There is a lot of power in those juxtapositions"). A later *Times* article reviewing a recent release, Ray Lawrence's *Jindabyne*, closes with a reference to "the kind of multi-stranded narrative that has become... the dominant genre of international prestige filmmaking" (Scott).

Figure 3. Officer Johnson (Kathleen York) provides a report on an officer shooting to Detective Graham Waters (Don Cheadle) and his partner Ria (Jennifer Esposito). A series of random events highlighted by an opening collision where Detective Waters and Ria were involved will culminate in another vehicular accident toward the end of the narrative in *Crash* (directed by Paul Haggis, 2004). Film still by Rialto Film, from Cine Image.

The predicament for anyone interested in studying multiple-character films is that narrative studies of character (as a theory, not as any specific literary entity) are not as abundant as studies of, say, plot or story. Jonathan Culler describes character as "the major aspect of the novel to which structuralism has paid least attention and has been least successful in treating" (230), while Roland Barthes critiques the valorizing of character in the practice of

New Criticism as "an individual, a 'person,' in short a fully constituted 'being' ... [who] stopped being subordinate to the action, embodied immediately psychological essences" (104); he describes this modification as an attempt to step forward from the notion of character in Aristotelian poetics as "secondary, entirely subsidiary to the notion of action: there may be actions without 'characters' ... but not characters without an action" (105). Barthes upholds structural analysis's "utmost reluctance to treat the character as an essence, even merely for purposes of classification" (105), and points out the futility of privileging a "class of actors" by citing as an example the existence in many narratives of

> two adversaries in conflict over some stake; the subject is then truly double, not reducible further by substitution. Indeed, this is even perhaps a common archaic form, as though narrative, after the fashion of certain languages, had also known a *dual* of persons.... If therefore a privileged class of actors is retained (the subject of the quest, of the desire, of the action), it needs at least to be made more flexible by bringing that actant under the very categories of the grammatical (and not psychological) person. (Barthes 108-09)

Eventually, and possibly inevitably, it was US film scholar David Bordwell who addressed the issue of what he termed "network narratives," in *Poetics of Cinema*. In a stand-alone article, "Mutual Friends and Chronologies of Chance," he noted how from the 1990s onward, several Hollywood films went beyond the single-protagonist or dual (romantic and/ or rival) protagonists in their narrative construction, maintaining that the three-or-more characters' interactions were controlled by happenstance (chapter 7). Bordwell provided exemplary readings of large-cast samples, starting with Robert Altman's *Nashville*, but he made no distinction between the latter film and those with fewer protagonists beyond noting how more characters would result in more complexity. His insistence on perceiving these films' characters as isolated enabled him to conduct atomized microanalyses of specific samples in his survey of the field. More productive for this project was Bordwell's recommendation, in his introductory article, "Poetics of Cinema," to be aware of three possible approaches in providing a poetics of any filmic phenomenon: the analytic method, which describes

the material; the historical method, which situates it in a specific period and setting, to better understand its practitioners' motives and preparations; and the audience response, which grasps the viewers' receptiveness and reading strategies (chapter 7).

A book-length study, María del Mar Azcona's *The Multi-Protagonist Film*, came out within the present decade to enlarge mainly on Bordwell's discourse. The text, from its title onward, identifies the form as a genre unto itself and attempts to solve the predicament of identifying what type of character appears in multicharacter movies; on the other hand, many types of lead characters may not necessarily be technically protagonistic—antagonists, for example, or romantic interests, or narrators; in an extreme instance, in *Nashville*, a nearly invisible character, Hal Phillip Walker, makes his presence felt throughout the film solely via his voice recordings. Azcona usefully defines the film-texts as marked by a "wider" group of characters without a strict hierarchy among themselves (2), brings up overlooked commentators such as still-to-be-translated scholar Margrit Tröhler and scriptwriting manual author Linda Aronson, and echoes the importance Bordwell imparts to editing as a means of providing "intensified continuity" (39).

Like Bordwell, Azcona regards an increase the number of lead characters as resulting in greater complexity, and considers the globalized multi-character sample, emblematized by Stephen Gaghan's *Syriana* (2005), celebrating its demonstration of the so-called butterfly effect and its use of an open ending as "recurrent convention" rather than as a means of enabling sequelizations (140-43). It is in these terms that the practice of multicharacter cinema in the Philippines departs from US discourse, aside from its earlier designations as a genre.

Audience as Starting Point

A number of factors can be marshaled as possible explanations for the receptiveness of Filipino movie-goers toward multiple lead-character films. Perhaps too literal, one observation would be the close resemblance in the Philippines between film theaters and Spanish-era Catholic churches. For

local audiences to look front and upward while seated in rows in regular attendance, one need only replace altars with screens in order to complete the analogy. The element of multiplicity comes in when we consider the spectacle available in the major traditional churches: the *retablos* (see Figure 4), or altar pieces, reminiscent of Mexico, where "the foci were the niches containing the *santos* [icons of the saints]" (Javellana 156).

Figure 4. The *retablo* behind the altar and Mass assemblage, at the Chapel of the Holy Guardian Angel at the Holy Angel University in Angeles City, Pampanga Province. Photographed by Robby Tantingco, used with permission.

Such feudal ideals lay behind the Marcos dictatorship's plan to repackage Manila as a larger entity—a metropolis encompassing over a dozen cities (originally only four), with Imelda Romualdez Marcos appointed by

her husband as its governor in 1975. Replicating the Spanish-era rural town model, the area was named Metro Manila after its crown jewel, Manila (known during the colonial era as the "Pearl of the Orient"); Manila itself would be further distinguished by being called the City of Man, with the reclaimed area, known as the Cultural Center of the Philippines Complex, serving as the equivalent of the town plaza (Lico 83-126).

In attempting to track the origin and development of the Philippine multicharacter film genre, we also wind up with a taxonomy and a set of terminologies distinct from those used by US practitioners. Only one name, the smorgasbord film, referred to the productions (of a specific studio) that featured multiple lead characters. Other specialized types of multicharacter films, usually with the minimum of three, centered on love triangles or what may now retrospectively be termed the hostess films. Yet except for omnibus-episodic features, these types of films were "multiple" in conception only, since the commercial narrative tendency to focus on singular heroes or (romantic or antagonistic) couples was difficult to avoid, and required conceptual skills that practitioners still had to develop.

One Sampaguita star, Eddie Rodriguez, set up his own studio to specialize in love-triangle films, starring himself as actor (and essential hero) caught between the romantic desires of two women. He had hired Ishmael Bernal for a project that would have been the artist's directorial debut, but he had insisted on too many comedic innovations; as reported by Petronilo Bn. Daroy, "Although his name was retained in the credits as director, Bernal, on the first day of the showing of the film, was compelled to disown it" (Bernal et al. 6). Bernal maintained the triple-character structure throughout the early part of his career, mostly via love triangles. However, after Altman's *Nashville* made a splash among the intelligentsia, his friendly rival Lino Brocka came up with a nominally similar attempt with *Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday* (*Lunes, Martes, Miyerkules, Huwebes, Biyernes, Sabado, Linggo*, 1976), a hostess movie where an entertainer represented each day of the week in a nightclub in the US naval base's red-light district, but whose narrative eventually focalized on a young man

who visits the club in search of his mother (who turned out to be one of the older entertainers).

From this point onward, Bernal began introducing destabilizing elements to his love-triangle assignments, such as banishing the central male character in *Mole on the Water* (*Nunal sa Tubig*, 1976) or allowing all three to accept a polyamorous arrangement in *You Are Mine* (*Ikaw Ay Akin*, 1978). With a triple-character hostess film assignment in *Pleasure* (1979), Bernal managed to interweave the women's narratives without favoring any single individual as exemplary or as representative of the others, instead of having each character's story unfold one after the other (per the standard episodic "hostess movie" procedure), the filmmaker could maximize their interactions in their workplace and resist favoring any one of them (see Figure 5). Each of the characters (the minimum of three) could have a series of lovers as a requisite of her profession; but with the narrative constantly returning to the working woman, none of the relationships needed to be valorized over the others. With Bernal's literary background, he was still able to devote some attention to characterization so that the central "hostesses" in *Pleasure* manage to have distinctive (if standard) developments. Their individual resolutions build up to a variation on the personal-as-political principle, where their private and professional concerns overlap, and require a benevolent dressing-down from their nightclub manager.

Figure 5. Three triple-character exercises from Ishmael Bernal (left to right): *Mole on the Water* (1976), a male-centered love triangle where the man recedes from the conflict he created before returning to resume his responsibilities; *You Are Mine* (1978), another male-centered love triangle where the man persuades his lovers to arrive at an understanding between them; and *Pleasure* (1979), where the male figures become secondary to the concerns of nightclub workers. From the *Pro Bernal Anti Bio* group on Facebook, used with permission.

With the triumph of *Pleasure* as both a commercial attempt and a triple-character narrative, Bernal effectively ushered in an era of multiple-character film production in the Philippines—a mode of practice that complemented the studios' and talent managers' strategy (recapitulating the Stars '66 tradition) of launching new stars in identifiable batches. Bernal immediately followed through with increasingly larger numbers of lead characters—*Underage* (*Menor de Edad*, 1979—see Figure 6) with six women and *Manila by Night* with 13 lead individuals. Although the "smorgasbord" term was no longer in vogue, producers, practitioners, and critics began to use the term "milieu movie" to refer to the multicharacter format. A specialized area of application, drawn from the "city film" properties of *Nashville*, *Manila by Night*, and a few other samples from global cinema may be induced from the generic recognition and "milieu" terminology used by progressive Philippine artists.

Figure 6. Four of the six women characters in Ishmael Bernal's *Underage* (*Menor de Edad*, 1979; another Filipino film with the English title *Underage*, also with multiple women characters, came out in 1980). The release print was forced to append a textual coda (opening awkwardly with "Having lived through these restless years, the *menor de edad* found the right way to adulthood," translated by the author); observers could readily deduce that it was imposed by the Board of Censors for Motion Pictures, which then comprised military personnel and their underlings. Inadvertently such an ending made the film reminiscent of an earlier Hollywood release, George Lucas's *American Graffiti* (1973). From the *Pro Bernal Anti Bio* group on Facebook, used with permission.

Social Reality

The method by which *Manila by Night* et al. permit, so to speak, the prolifer-ation of multiple characters would be familiar to people who have seen any of the several multicharacter movies that have virtually become the "official" narrative format of American independent productions. A major character is presented, along with other major characters who may happen to be in the same setting; then the character(s) encounter—sometimes intensively, some-times merely by chance—a previously unintroduced major character, whom the narrative will proceed to follow, and so on, reminiscent of Max Ophüls's previously mentioned *The Roundabout*, based on Arthur Schnitzler's play *Reigen*, written in 1897 (published 1900 though not performed until 1920). This narrative strategy of following one character after another, however, yields a text that introduces and possibly develops a group of people without allowing the viewer to find out how their social relationships function beyond their incidental connections with one another.

The way to genuinely facilitate the depiction of relationships is by having the characters interacting with one another as often as possible, in the manner of contemporary US indie films that center on groups of friends within a community. This permits us to witness a social group with the simultaneous satisfaction of following the development of a number of major characters. One possible disadvantage here, as evident in what we may call the BFF (best friends forever) movies, is that the social group comprises more or less similar social types. A political awareness may be fostered in the characters by their circumstances, as manifested in Lawrence Kasdan's *The Big Chill* and John Sayles's *Return of the Secaucus Seven*, the movie to which *Big Chill* paid tribute (Ryan and Kellner 272-79). Yet the depiction of social mechanics is still not facilitated by this method; at most, what we might be able to study definitely is a demonstration of group dynamics via each character's attendant social aspects.

Would the addition of more characters, representing as wide an array of social types as the text can sustain, provide us with the necessary kind of realism that we are asking for here—complexifying rather than (as Bordwell acknowledges) complicating the presentation? That appears to be the case

in Robert Altman's *Nashville*, but Azcona ventured to add another device, all present in the last three films mentioned: many scenes of social gatherings where several, if not all, of the characters are present. *Nashville*, for example, features a number of circumstances (mostly concerts, but also an airport arrival and a highway pileup) where several characters get together, and builds up to the final outdoor concert where everyone (save for one character who announced his departure from the city the night before) shows up.

With an unexpected proliferation of lead performers, *Manila by Night* succeeded where smorgasbord movies could not but, like *Nashville* and a few other exemplars in world cinema, proceeding from a paradox in classical film narrative (Appendix B). The paradox turns on the presentation and development of character: the less "crowded" a lead character is by other characters, the more she or he can be developed. For this reason, secondary characters are understood as conforming to types or, at best, character sketches (i.e., well-developed types). The challenge in creating a small-group narrative, comprising at least three major characters, is the ability to develop each one to the point where she can be distinct from the others; this development, in fact, can be enhanced by each character's interactions with the others, so the crowding, in this case, works to provide opportunities for any character to be advanced in conjunction with at least one other character. Having two or more characters' dramatic arguments simultaneously advanced in the plot was made possible with the perfection of the deep-focus technique in classical Hollywood, plus an equivalent use in sound, perfected in Robert Altman's Lion's Gate system (Schreger 350).

Hence, when the group onscreen is numerically expanded to the point where full individual character development becomes impossible within a standard screen-time limit, and the film continues to refuse to uphold a hero or even valorize at least a small sector (in effect reducing the narrative scope to focus on a group), the logical expectation is that the movie will fail to advance a character; it would, again at best, be a "mere" conglomeration of successful types. Why, then, does the complaint regarding this shortcoming in characterization never arise in critics' responses to films such as *Nashville*

or *Manila by Night*? The answer is that the perception of a character is never really abandoned. When a filmmaker enables types to flourish within the context of a progressive social critique, an opportunity to develop a different, singular type of character becomes available.

This character does not reside in any of the narrative's actors, but operates on an abstract level. It is, in fact, society that becomes the character—possibly a society defined by the geographic and temporal circumstance that the movie inspects, but a character in dramatic terms nevertheless (David, "Primates in Paradise" 89-90). The society in question experiences a crisis, attempts to seek solutions that in turn generate new crises, and reaches a point (of no return) where a resolution becomes inevitable. As an example, "Manila" in *Manila by Night* attempts (via its characters) to pursue romantic happiness in the course of survival, but these essentially bourgeois-aspirational attempts inevitably lead to frustration and duplicity, so that after each character, unawares, violates a personal commitment, she or he winds up damaged and abandoned by everyone else, most painfully by the very person that they had counted on for love and support. The film narrative distinguishes individual characters by clarifying the degree of pain and heartbreak—and occasionally even hopefulness—that they experience.

Progressive Turn

The last point to make about multicharacter film design would be its most potentially controversial one: can we consider this form radical, or transgressive, or (put another way) queer? As mentioned earlier, Michael Ryan and Douglas Kellner attempted to prescribe what for them constituted progressive cinema—including the "group" or multicharacter film—as well as other characteristics like open-endedness, distantiation, generic playfulness, and attempts at demythologization (269-82). They take care to warn that "the criterion for judging such matters should be pragmatic, one that measures the progressive character of a text according to how well it accomplishes its task in specific contexts of reception" (268).

The approach I would propose comes from an earlier mode of practice, one whose once pre-eminent significance was eventually downgraded, if not

dismissed altogether, by the argument presented by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni's influential *Cahiers du Cinéma* editorial, "Cinema/Ideology/ Criticism," in which films with political content but conventional (realist) form are considered less productive than those that use form to expose the machinations of ideology (31-32). Comolli and Narboni's categorization of films according to their combination of formal and ideological properties validated the revaluation of classical Hollywood auteurs and consequently led to a more critical regard of social-realist texts. The opprobrium regarding films that had once laid claim to political awareness and social discursiveness might have been well-deserved, if we consider how Third-World cinemas (including the Philippines') tended to observe the predictable dichotomy between "commercial" genre production and "artistic" social-realist projects. The modes of reception manifested the filmmakers' lack of fuller social commitment: the genre products were created for local mass audiences, while the serious outputs were exported to assuage the consciences of foreign-festival jurors and audiences.

If we ascribe the realist property of a film like *Manila by Night* to its specific grounding in time and space, we can see how its depiction of the existence and interaction of types of characters signals its presentation of a cross-section of society. The only additional factor is the infusion of a progressive perspective, in order for us to be able to claim that such multi-character films are social-realist in the way that older attempts (following the *Cahiers du Cinéma* critique) could only hope to be, but were hampered in their observation of conventional film heroics. In Philippine film production, as in Hollywood, only a select few could pull off the multiple-character film format. Among Filipino practitioners, the term they used to describe their projects was "milieu"—a word that recalls the "social" in social realism.

Thus, with the elements of commercial profitability, formulaic description, spectatorial recognition, and some names (milieu movies in general, milieu realism in exceptional cases) coined by practitioners to describe the activity, we can definitively conclude that the multiple-character movie, during the period that it remained a format in Hollywood and elsewhere, was already a distinctive film genre in the Philippines. It reminded Philippine

audiences of their then still recent familiarity with smorgasbord films, and attested to their capacity to follow multiple lines of action along with in-depth compositions and simultaneous delivery of dialog.

At the risk of over-idealizing the milieu-film genre, I'd like to suggest that subtle and transgressive forces were at play. The Philippine Third-World audience, like many elsewhere, attended film screenings in order to amass their store of knowledge and pleasure. In the case of foreign films, the typical viewer would be made to identify with an idealized representation of herself onscreen, enacting the enchantments of material prosperity in fabulous, if not fantastic, locales. With a milieu movie, the viewer could witness a representation of character close to herself—and more than that, she would witness other types playing out conflicts and issues recognizable to her and other members of the audience. Although the Western or Westernized film would be typically bigger-budgeted and consequently feature bigger stars, the comparatively less-affluent nature of the milieu movie, with its compensatory accretion of lead actors, would paradoxically have a grander effect on the native viewer; it were as if she moved from an austere, though well-appointed transept chapel that featured one saint (the Western-style movie star) to the center of the cathedral, facing the *retablo* with its impressive proliferation of icons.

With *Manila by Night*'s combined notoriety (nearly a year-long ban, with the release version marked by a title change as well as the longest list of cuts and deletions ever imposed on a Filipino movie) and prestige (a sweep of the critics' prizes as well as the distinction of the first local film invited to compete at the Berlin International Film Festival—disallowed from participating by the military censors ban), milieu filmmaking became code among practitioners and critics for politicized production. The multicharacter projects required by commercial outfits, usually featuring teen talents or sexy stars, were actually exceptions that proved the rule, since some of these supposedly politically harmless projects would also occasionally (and mystifyingly) encounter censorship troubles, notably in the case of Maryo J. de los Reyes's post-*Bagets* return to Regal Films with *Schoolgirls* (1982).

Slings & Arrows

One may be able to attempt to track the development of the milieu movie via the connections made by its primary innovator. In 1980, the same year *Manila by Night* was released, Ishmael Bernal volunteered to mentor a young woman director, the then-twenty-seven-year-old Marilou Diaz-Abaya. She had just released a feminist ensemble film titled *Brutal* (1980), whose plot was echoed in Marleen Gorris's debut film *A Question of Silence* (*De stilte rond Christine M.*, 1982) in which a woman is arrested for committing a crime but refuses to speak to anyone about it. In *Brutal*, the woman, along with her conservative mother, her promiscuous best friend, and the female journalist covering the case, all function as lead characters. The journalist's investigation serves as the framing device, and the plot utilizes flashbacks to reveal clandestine acts and hidden motives. Ricardo Lee, the scriptwriter of *Brutal*, was one of the script consultants for *Manila by Night*.

All that had to happen for Bernal to cement his mentorship was to introduce Diaz-Abaya to his pre-*Manila by Night* producer, Jesse Ejercito; in 1982, the team (with Diaz-Abaya directing, Ejercito producing, and Lee scripting) came up with the feminist multicharacter film *Moral*, which features four unruly women characters, former classmates at the national university (Figure 7). They contend with forces of change, brought about by Western liberalism, that conflict with the military dictatorship's reactionary tendencies. By way of acknowledging Bernal's (specifically *Manila by Night*'s) influence, one character was a shoplifting druggie who slept around as her way of defying convention, another was an ex-wife who carried the flame for her now-out gay husband, a third a frustrated writer whose chauvinist husband insisted on keeping her pregnant, and the fourth an ambitious but untalented singer who readily bedded anyone willing to boost her career, including a lesbian talent manager at one point.

Figure 7. The women in Marilou Diaz-Abaya's open-ended *Moral* (1982): former college chums and now grown-ups with their share of joy, heartbreak, and trauma, bring their friend (seated front beside the driver) to the airport where she plans to migrate to the US. Screen capture by ABS-CBN Film Restoration, used with permission.

Lee also continued his scriptwriting assignments for Bernal, collaborating on the Regal Baby project *Are These Our Children?* (*Ito Ba ang Ating mga Anak?* 1982). The attempt to ascribe Third-World angst and ennui to middle-class youngsters begged a comparison with the genuinely subversive exposés of *Manila by Night*; the more recent project paling in comparison. As a result, Bernal's and Lee's subsequent projects—*Affair* and *Miracle* (*Relasyon* and *Himala* respectively, each starring one or the other of the country's rival top stars, and both released in 1982—observed the traditional linear-heroic narrative format and won box-office and critical acclaim.

Even before Lee ended his collaboration with Bernal over some professional differences (Lee 21-22), Bernal took another stab at a multicharacter film, with *Capture: Jailhouse Boys* (*Bihagin: Bilibid Boys*, 1981), written by a one-time collaborator, Deo Fajardo Jr. From then on, his occasional milieu projects featured other writers: *Working Girls* (1984, with a sequel in 1987, written by Amado Lacuesta Jr.), featured seven female office employees in Makati, the business district (now city), during the period of protest actions that led to the February 1986 people-power revolt; *The Graduates* (1986,

written by Rosauro de la Cruz), was about freshly minted bachelor's-degree holders seeking employment during the period of instability following February 1986; and *Street-Smart* (*Wating*, 1994, written by Floy Quintos), which happened to be Bernal's final film, depicted a new lost generation, reminiscent of *Are These Our Children?* and set during a period of post-authoritarian democratic space and developmental difficulties.

The directors who launched and maintained an early 1970s camp trend along with Bernal also flourished in Regal Films and made their share of box-office milieu projects: Joey Gosiengfiao with *Underage*, *Temptation Island* (both 1980), and *Story of Three Loves* (1982), and Elwood Perez with *Summer Love* (1982). Another filmmaker with an extensive output of multicharacter projects was *Manila by Night* script consultant, Mel Chionglo, who for Regal Films made the more mature Regal Babies films *Summer Holiday* (1983), *Teenage Marriage* (1984), and *What Happens When You're Gone* (*Paano Kung Wala Ka Na*, 1987). He also did a soft-core film, *Company of Women* (1985), and after Brocka's demise, he did the planned sequels to his colleague's single-heroic *Macho Dancer* (1988) with multicharacter texts titled *Midnight Dancers* (1994) and *Twilight Dancers* (2006).

Aside from his connection with Bernal, Lee was involved as the writer of several of Chionglo's projects. Another milieu practitioner emerged as well, Jose Javier Reyes, who scripted *Summer Holiday*, as well as *Gold, Silver, Death* (*Oro, Plata, Mata*, 1982) and *Bad Bananas on the Silver Screen* (*Bad Bananas sa Puting Tabing*, 1983), the breakout and second film of Peque Gallaga, another *Manila by Night* script consultant as well as its production designer. Gallaga's subsequent milieu movies included the prestige Regal projects *Virgin Forest* (1985), *Demon Foundling* (*Tiyanak*, 1988), and *One Godless Day* (*Isang Araw Walang Diyos*, 1989). As director, Reyes paid tribute to Bernal's *Working Girls* with his *Makati Ave. (Office Girls,* 1993), crafted the ensemble piece *Once There Was a Heart* (*Minsan May Isang Puso*, 2001), and directed a remake of *Working Girls* (2010). Bernal's erstwhile assistant director and bit player, Joel Lamangan, similarly did *Yesterday's Promise* (*Pangako ng Kahapon*, 1994, written by Lee), *Philippines* (*Filipinas*, 2003), and *Desperate Women* (*Desperadas*, 2007) as his contributions. Initially typecast as a flaming

queen, *Manila by Night* performer Bernardo had two multicharacter projects afterward: the gay-rights comedy by J. Erastheo Navoa, *The Outed Butterflies* (*Mga Paru-Parong Buking*, 1985), and the migrant-worker drama *Invisible* (*Imbisibol*, 2015, see Figure 8), whose director, Lawrence Fajardo, has specialized in the milieu format with *Amok* (2011) and *Handcuffs* (*Posas*, 2012), and the aforementioned *Invisible*.

Figure 8. Overseas Filipinos in wintry Hokkaido in Japan, in Lawrence Fajardo's *Invisible* (2015), adapted from a play and developed with a deliberate degree of improvisation, following the example set by Ishmael Bernal. Upper row, left to right: a same-sex couple (one of whom, Bernardo Bernardo, also performed in *Manila by Night*) worry over the elderly partner's declining health; a young arrival loses his job and consequently his legal status. Lower row, left to right: a migrant wife, who rents rooms to undocumented compatriots, worries when the young man confesses to accidentally killing a fellow worker; a middle-aged sex worker who squandered his earnings decides to turn himself in to throw police off the trail of the troubled young man. Screen captures prepared by Lawrence Fajardo, used with permission.

A number of other practitioners who were less directly influenced by milieu projects, but occasionally dabbled in them, include: Danny L. Zialcita with the queer comedy *The Manly, the Pretty, and the Shy* (*Si Malakas, si Maganda, at si Mahinhin*, 1980); Carlos Siguion-Reyna with *Your Missus, My Missus* (*Misis Mo, Misis Ko*, 1988) and *Three ... Together* (*Tatlo ... Magkasalo*, 1998); Mario O'Hara with *Three Mothers, One Daughter* (*Tatlong Ina, Isang Anak*, 1987); Jeffrey Jeturian with *Fetch a Pail of Water* (*Pila Balde*, 1999),

Larger Than Life (*Tuhog*, 2001), *Bridal Shower* (2004), and *Bikini Open* (2005); and Armando Lao with *Soliloquy* (*Biyaheng Lupa*, 2009), an impressive debut that, alongside Bernal's *Manila by Night* and Diaz-Abaya's *Moral*, belongs to an order of outstanding exemplifications of the practice. Not surprisingly, Jeturian and Lao were mentored by Lee, Jeturian had worked with Diaz-Abaya, and Lao wrote most of Jeturian's multicharacter films.

Contemporaries of Bernal who were also considered critics' favorites include Celso Ad. Castillo, who deployed the format in the soft-core films *Virgin People* and *Snake Sisters* (both 1984), which starred the previously mentioned Softdrink Beauties, and the Viva Films melodrama *When Does Wrong Become Right* (*Kailan Tama ang Mali*, 1986). Mike de Leon, who like Lino Brocka (and unlike Ishmael Bernal) was introduced to Cannes Film Festival, bookended his Euro film presentations with multicharacter projects: the comic-musical surrealist fantasy *Are You Nervous?* (*Kakabakaba Ka Ba?* 1980) and a glossy melodrama, *Heaven Cannot be Sundered* (*Hindi Nahahati ang Langit*, 1985).

Finally, Bernal's friendly rival Brocka managed to catch up with the sex-themed *Caught in the Act* (1981) and *White Slavery* (1985), achieved his late-career peak with the postmodern political thriller *Dirty Affair* (*Gumapang Ka sa Lusak*, 1990), and *Father ... Why Did You Abandon Me?* (*Ama ... Bakit Mo Ako Pinabayaan?* 1990) before his accidental death cut short his career. The projects that Brocka had in the pipeline, some of which were completed by others (as either film or stage productions) all evinced his willingness to grapple with increasingly complex narratives and epic-scale casts of characters, convincing several observers that he had been aspiring to the same peak that Bernal had attained earlier.

Beyond Film

The emergence and triumph of Philippine multicharacter film projects preceded institutional appreciation of cinema, inasmuch as the then-incoming presidential administration of Ferdinand Marcos may have been appreciative of film, but deployed the medium (at least initially) for propagandistic purposes. Hence most of the initial efforts of Sampaguita Pictures'

smorgasbord movies, as well as prototypes attempted by filmmakers even in other studios, are considered lost. Succeeding work occasionally benefited from preservation by virtue of occasional favorable critical reception, but the vast majority of available texts exists only in far less satisfactory video formats.

Nevertheless a number of studies have been conducted on certain canonical titles (notably Gregorio Fernandez's *Malvarosa* and Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night*), while more intensive inspections and analyses of the genre and its impact on cultural and critical discourse will have to be further encouraged. As a sample, an intriguing historical quirk that occurred during the late-1960s period of social upheavals was evident not just in the extensive protests and demonstrations, but also in film theaters everywhere. In defiance of the first Golden Age studio practice of launching Euro-featured performers who were tall, fair-featured, Caucasian, and "classy," mass audiences insisted on stars who resembled them and ensured that only projects that featured these new types could be remunerative. The old-style talents (including several from Sampaguita Pictures) had to content themselves with the hard-core pornographic features that appropriated a term, *bomba*, from the violence that attended the open-air political events.

Several intriguing possibilities for further applications of the multicharacter approach can already be gleaned in the installment-based presentations of television series as well as film sequels. (Questions of progressivity may have to be deferred, however.) An even more challenging area would be the multiplot and multimedia real-life "global village" dramas that play out over the worldwide web, including social media. Philippine milieu practice still maintains its own significant intervention, via the attention it pays to social realism(s) as observed, propounded, and disputed in large-scale (actually large-cast) narratives.

The tools of big-data analysis may eventually prove helpful in facilitating observations and basic analyses for such future attempts in studying multicharacter narratives in new-media contexts. Understandably, these will require separate and intensive treatments in (initially speculative) research projects.
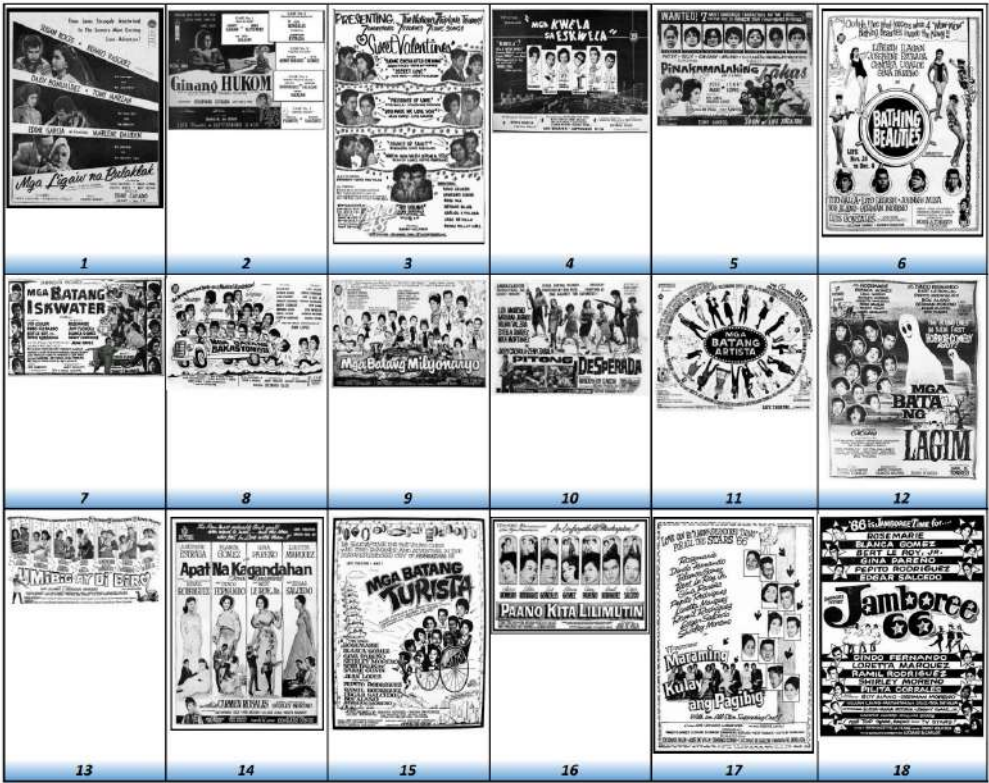
The smorgasbord movie and its predecessors, in order of release: 1, *Wildflowers* (1957); 2, *Madame Judge* (1960); 3-5, *Sweet Valentines, The Cool Kids of School, Biggest Escape (of 7 Helpers)* (all 1963); 6-13, *Bathing Beauties, Slum Kids, Vacationing Kids, Millionaire Kids, Seven Women Bandits, Showbiz Kids, Kids of Horror, Love Is No Joke* (all 1964); 14-15, *Four Beauties, Tourist Kids* (both 1965); 16-18, *How Will I Forget You, Love Has Many Colors, Jamboree '66* (all 1966).

All were produced by Sampaguita Pictures and/or its subsidiaries, VP Pictures and Dalisay Pictures (from the name of Sampaguita's film theater); no. 10 was by Ambassador Productions, but its talents and stars were all also

identified with Sampaguita. All had multiple stars and (except for the first) were multi-episodic, with nos. 3, 15, and 17 (the first-declared smorgasbord film) featuring multiple directors. Newspaper layouts culled from *Video 48*, with permission from Simon Santos.

Appendix B

Some of the dozen-plus characters in Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980), in a chronologically arranged series: 1, Virgie nags her family so they could attend the folk-pub performance of Alex, her eldest son, which would be interrupted by gunfire; 2, Kano, a lesbian drug pusher, leaves the pub and goes to the massage parlor where her blind foul-mouthed girlfriend, Bea, is quarreling with another masseuse; 3, Kano brings her friends to the parlor rooftop where she shares some pot with Bea and Bea's girl Friday, Gaying; 4, the next morning, Virgie's policeman husband pleads for a quickie but their session is cut short by a visit from Miriam, a former colleague of Virgie in the flesh trade; 5, Manay, a gay couturier, brings groceries to his boyfriend Febrero and his wife Adel, a nurse who works the night shift; 6, Bea reminds her husband Greg to bring her and her kids once he arrives in the Middle East; 7, after selling some drugs Kano recommends Bea to Alex

and his friends (Alex will be asking Manay, his new lover, to find help for Bea's blindness); 8, Manay makes the acquaintance of Bea and Kano, with whom he talks about love and perception; 9, on their way to Adel's workplace, a psychic woman tells Bea that she used to be a coquette who broke men's hearts; 10, Adel meanwhile uses her nurse's costume to camouflage her profession as a call girl, although some of her johns are fed up with her promiscuity; 11, depressed from losing the chance to regain her sight, Bea is comforted by Kano with narcotics and sex; 12, Febrero is informed by his waitress-girlfriend, Baby, that she is pregnant—unwelcome news for the polyamorous beefcake; 13, Baby asks Adel to help her get Febrero back, but Adel informs her of Febrero's dalliances and advices Baby to get an abortion; 14, having beaten up and driven away Alex for his drug use, Virgie retrieves her son at Manay's atelier; 15, Virgie is still unable to invite Alex to join their family's Christmas dinner and scolds her daughter for being unruly; 16, victimized by an illegal recruiter in Bangkok, Greg tells Bea that he found work for both of them, but she resists violently when she realizes they'll be performing in a live sex show; 17, Baby tracks down Febrero and screams about his cowardice and how Adel's a call girl (a face he already confirmed); Adel is strangled in an alley but when Manay, with his friends and lovers, goes to the morgue, they find her corpse has been switched with that of an older woman—the final straw for Manay, who breaks down in front of everyone. From the published screenplay by Ishmael Bernal in *The Review*; used with permission.

Notes

1. Rizál's death jump-started the Philippine Revolution against Spain, the first anti-colonial uprising in Asia. The movement transmogrified into the Philippine-American War after the US sought to claim the colony for itself by paying Spain US\$ 20 million as one of the terms in the Treaty of Paris (ending the Spanish-American War) of 1898. The revolutionary army's leadership was riven by a schism occasioned by an *ilustrado* or elite wing wresting control from its proletariat founder and rightful Philippine President, Andrés Bonifacio.

2. Edgar Morin's *Les stars*, translated into English as *The Stars*, recounts the predicaments of star studies and argues that the term "star system" should be invested with more precision than the everyday pejorative usage of how serious political or art films may be compromised by the salaries and demands of popular performers (6-7); he points out that from 1920 to the early 1930s, a system that he described as a "glorious era" prevailed in Hollywood (6), just as a similar system emerged in the Philippines between the First and Second Golden Ages.

3. The Marcoses were possibly inspired by the skillful exploitation of mass media by John F. Kennedy in winning the American presidency. The then-incumbent President, Diosdado Macapagal, responded by commissioning talents associated with the other First Golden Age studios to produce his own biographical movie, Lamberto V. Avellana et al.'s *Triumph of the Poor* (*Tagumpay ng Mahirap*, 1965). During the Manila Film Festival where his challenger's movie was shown, Macapagal's favored entry, Gerardo de Leon's *World of the Oppressed* (*Daigdig ng mga Api*, 1965), showcased the government's land-reform program and was hailed by its viewers as possibly the best Filipino film ever made; unfortunately, no copies of it can be found.

4. Initially described as "New Philippine Cinema" by Bienvenido Lumbera and periodized at 1976 (to coincide with the founding of the Filipino Film Critics Circle, of which he was a member), the Second Golden Age was suggested by Joel David as starting from Lino Brocka's breakout in 1974 and ending with the collapse of the Marcos dictatorship in 1986.

5. South Korea, which had near-parallel periods of colonization, war, dictatorship, and democracy, also had a spate of films on sex workers during the Park Chunghee regime. Korean critics and practitioners, though, readily coined a term, "hostess films" (see Yu's article and Kim's dissertation), that may also be retroactively applied to the Philippine samples.

6. Ferdinand Marcos apparently allowed the relaxation of censorship rules during periods when he wanted to incite moralist outrage in the public and in mass media. The two periods when hard-core sex scenes could be witnessed onscreen were during the early 1970s *bomba* trend (when sex-themed films were produced

with soft-core scenes and subsequently screened with more explicit insertions) as well as during the mid-1980s anti-dictatorship protest period following the assassination of opposition leader Benigno S. Aquino; the latter strategy backfired, however, because the tide of public and US neocolonial support had turned away from Marcos in favor of the opposition, culminating in the February 1986 people-power revolt that deposed his regime.

7. "*Bagets*" is the gay-lingo conflation of the Filipino word "*bago*," meaning new (i.e. youthful), and the English verb "gets," used in the sense of picking up a potential sex partner. Variations on the term include "*pagets*," where the prefix "*pa*" describes someone who wishes to be picked up; "*nagets*," with the prefix "*na*" indicating past action (hence a partner with whom sex had already been consummated); and "forgets," referring to someone too old to still be desirable.

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