

Prosthetic Hysteria: Staging the Cold War in Filipino/American Docudrama

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This paper explicates docudrama about the Cold War in the Philippines produced during the 1950s. The films, a documentary and a feature film, both funded and scripted by Washington but staged by leading Filipino filmmakers and actors, fabricated Cold War panic by hybridizing the transnational codes of melodrama with the discursive truth claim (i.e., evidentiary force) of documentary cinema. The resulting syncretic cinematic practice, to which the contemporary term docudrama may be productively applied, is in many registers both doubled (e.g., double-voiced) and split (e.g., stylistically bifurcated), and thus riddled with both ideological and formal issues.

At the end of the Second World War, the United States, citing the Communist threat to the fragile, postwar world, embarked upon the ambitious task of creating a geopolitical zone of influence – a political, geographic and, equally important, mental territory – which it awkwardly named the “free world” (Curtin 1992; Whitfield 1996). Along with dispensing vast amounts of aid, the US expanded and secured the frontiers of this new world by engaging in an immense and long-lived media campaign to export its alarmist discourse of the Cold War. The once minuscule publicity arm of the State Department was dramatically upgraded to the United States Information Agency (USIA) in 1953, its budget reaching a high of \$120 million following the outbreak of the Korean War. “Informational” media were created in the US and overseas, in partnership with private contractors from different target nations.¹

Given its importance to American presence in Asia, the Philippines figured consistently as both site and subject of the State Department’s documentary activities, becoming a target audience of its films as early as 1952 (Shalom 1990). Because scant documentation exists, it is difficult to determine the exact number of films produced for the Philippine audience. In mid-January of 2002, the database of the United States National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) listed 48 productions by USIA and the United States Agency for

International Development (USAID) for or about the Philippines. About 25 additional titles can be found in the catalogue of the Philippine Information Agency while several more are mentioned in documents from various agencies of the US government but are not held by the NARA or the Library of Congress.²

The anti-Communist films from the 1950s comprise an especially significant corpus for study. Important Filipino filmmakers, such as Lamberto Avellana and Manuel Conde, made at least one film each (*Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay* and *Give Us This Day*, respectively) and it is possible that they or other notable figures had a hand in other films that do not have credits or catalogue information pointing to their authorship. Additionally, some of these films were produced with considerable proximity to flashpoints within the Huk insurgency, thereby boosting their persuasive force and audience appeal. But, as a scholar of documentary film, what interests me the most about this corpus are two fundamental dualities/doublings at the heart of these films: their dual/doubled voice and their dual/doubled genres.

Funded and “scripted” by Washington and executed by Filipinos, the dual authorship of these films translates into a double articulation of ideas and thus into a practice of enunciation that is vulnerable to both contradictions and, worse, slippage (which would reveal that there are two rather than one distinct voices: that of the foreign speaker and the native accomplice). Similar problems lurk within these films’ attempts to generate Cold War hysteria by deploying a hybrid pairing of melodrama with the (typically) sober discourse and medium of nonfiction film.

The contemporary term docudrama – defined by film theorist Bill Nichols (1991: 160) as “stories based on fact but performed by actors and scripted from both documents and conjecture” – may be productively applied not only to the corpus at hand but also to many of the US-government produced Cold War films. In theory, this combination of the melodramatic narrative’s stylistic excesses with the authoritative truth-telling apparatus of the documentary seems especially suited to the task of both staging and legitimizing the hyperbolized, totalizing rhetoric of the red scare. Melodramatic narrative naturalizes the hysteria of Cold War panic while the discursive power of nonfiction film – which Filipinos recognize from watching newsreels and educational films – carries the

potential to contain such histrionics within the placid, sturdy and thus credible shell of (pseudo) historical discourse. In practice, however, survey data from other countries indicate that the docudrama hybrid was not only ineffective as a persuasive tool but also sorely lacking in melodramatic interest (Curtin 1992). It might be productive to theorize this failure as a problem that is also rooted in the very strategy of doubling - in the fusing of genres that results in a syncretic cinematic practice that is at once, paradoxically both doubled and split, and thus riddled with ideological fissures and stylistic inconsistencies.

In my discussion of two films from this corpus - the documentary short *This Is My Home* (ca. 1953) and the narrative feature *Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay* (1952) - I shall attempt to locate and explicate the symptoms of this double-and-split enunciation in relation to the fissures within the forms and discourses of the two films.

The formal schizophrenia characteristic of docudrama's hybridized genre is evident from the opening titles of *This Is My Home* which announce a paradoxical goal of depicting a speculative vision of rural Philippine life "under a democracy...and as they might be under Communist rule" but in a manner that is, paradoxically, also "not fiction." The film, using a well-established American formula for Cold War documentaries, follows a before-and-after scenario contrasting an impossibly idyllic rural existence in the present with an oppressive, mechanized regime in the possible future.³

The opening sequence initiates a synchronization of a hyperbolic rhetoric with melodrama's heightened level of cinematic expression. To the impossibly cheerful strings of native music fades in a dreamily diffused image of a straw hut nestled in the middle of a rice paddy. The film's voice-over narrator, who speaks in accented but otherwise grammatically-sound English, introduces himself as *Mang Tasyo* (Mr. Tasyo), the man of the house. As he introduces other family members and expounds on the platitudes of their frugal but deeply fulfilling rural bliss, picturesque images of their pastoral existence are delivered in succession. Tasyo's wife, Doray, glances lovingly at her sleeping family before rousing her husband from his sleep. Tasyo smokes a cigarette and pets his fighting cock. Although "it's the beginning of a hard day's work," the family is happy because there is food on the table, he says, for "our land is bountiful - there is always plenty of food."

The film extends a similarly idyllic vision to the larger society in which Tasyo's family functions. First of all, domestic conflict is preempted by a secure patriarchy, as described by Tasyo thus: "My wife does not work for pay; her place is at home. From the sweat of my hands, the thoughts of my brain, I support my wife and children. That is the Filipino way."

Genres and Discourses, Doubled and Split

The place of the landlord is equally secure, with farmers like Tasyo content with their "own small cut of land" which "under our democratic system, all are free to win more...[of] by hard toil." Tasyo's world is in such perfect order, he argues, that he would be remiss not to acknowledge his blessings profusely: "To me there is no more joy than working under our bright Filipino sky, breathing the clean air of the fields, feeling the rich black soil beneath my feet. For these things, I thank God and will repay him by making his earth bountiful." As if his constant expressions of contentment were not enough, Tasyo once again reassures himself of his good fortune at the end of the film's first section: "Yes, I, *Mang* Tasyo, am father and husband to a very happy family!"

Communism, the pin that could burst the bubble of Tasyo's utopian existence, is introduced in the second half of the film. Instead of "documenting" the insurgency problem that was raging in the Philippine countryside when the film was being made, *This Is My Home* presents a scenario of a Communist takeover that is as imaginary as Tasyo's deluded vision of his perfect existence. The second part begins with a thunderous burst of discordant music, followed by the image of the hammer and sickle on a Communist soldier's armband. Stern-faced soldiers march, pose and sneer like genuine silver screen villains in order to properly signify their evil disposition. The narrator, affecting a strange accent – perhaps an attempt to sound Filipino-Russian or Soviet-Chinese – indicates that he is no longer Tasyo but the "commander in the province" of Comrade Tasyo's prosperous barrio in "greater Philippines."

Tasyo's life under Communism is conjured as a vision of near-apocalyptic wretchedness. The straw hut he built with his own hands, which the narrator reports has been sequestered by the state, falls into severe disrepair. He is isolated from his family and taken into a "faraway collective farm." His fighting cock, Puti, is locked up in a small bamboo cage and kept away



Two scenes from the USIA-sponsored *This Is My Home* showing the “oppressive” conditions after the imaginary Communist takeover of the Philippines in the 1950s.

from him, for ideological reasons (“...stupid middle-class sport. Ah, Communism does not tolerate such frivolous pastimes!). His son is sequestered by the state for brainwashing while his daughter is assigned as a hostess in an army mess hall (where she is regularly harassed by soldiers). The destruction of the nuclear family, which is clearly indicated as a proxy for the nation, is completed by the forced severance of the family’s and the community’s ties to Christianity. In one of the film’s most excessively dramatic scenes, Tasyo’s wife continues to pray at the spot on the wall where the picture of the Holy Family used to hang before it was confiscated by the state. Following the presentation of the doomsday scenario, the narrator poses a rhetorical question to Tasyo and to the Filipino people: “All the Communist regulations dictated by our Soviet leaders will improve the Filipino way of life. Don’t you agree, Comrade Tasyo?” Tasyo’s voice, suddenly recovering the narrator’s position, strongly dissents: “No, I, *Mang* Tasyo, do not agree! There are still two ways of life open to us. It is for us Filipinos to choose.”

The film fades once again into a picturesque sunrise at Tasyo’s homestead. Tasyo and his wife cuddle on a bench inside their straw hut. Outside the house, his daughter, Celia and her suitor exchange sweet nothings under a fruit tree, following a cliché of Philippine romance films. Later, Celia (sans boyfriend) joins her parents and her little brother on the bench inside their hut, flashing an ear-to-ear smile, looking away from the camera as a slowly closing door secures the family inside their haven of perpetual bliss. The narration and the triumphant closing music affirm Tasyo’s commitment to the “Filipino way”: “I chose the right to work under a free democracy for the great happiness of my wife and children. Whatever its faults, that is the better way, the *Filipino* way of life. For only under a democracy can this truly remain our home!”

The last paragraph of the film’s narration reasserts an idea that is laboriously repeated throughout: the notion that the essentially democratic Filipino way of life is under serious threat and yet also secured by the strength of family, community and religious bonds. This constant repetition of what is (supposedly) already known about the Philippine situation is just one symptom of the fundamental insecurity at the heart of the film’s confident rhetoric.

One also finds in the closing scene signs of the precarious suturing of the film's melodramatic and documentary modes. As Tasyo affirms his allegiance to the "Filipino way of life" in his overwrought voice-over narration, we see the image of his family looking far into an unseen horizon, oblivious to his rhetoric, already performing a cue of closure even as the narration continues to escalate steadily. The split and lag between sound and image denaturalizes the camera's gaze, the narrator's voice, and more crucially, their relation to each other. The refusal of the Filipino figures to look in the appointed direction signals a separation, albeit momentary, from the narration's rhetoric (and, by extension, to its American concerns), constituting a figurative gesture of looking away from the film – and America's – fabricated vision of the Communist menace. The lag between sound and image, particularly as manifested in the characters' unsustainably prolonged gaze, also signals the artifice of the film's image – its fundamental unreality and instability, especially in relation to the ever constant, comparatively authoritative sound track. It is here that we might find a symptom of the rupture between the synthetically conjoined genres of documentary and melodrama: the words within the film (both titles and narration) claim truthfulness and, in documentary mode, directly reference the historical world, and yet the surface of the film's images evokes the idyllic, illusionist skin of narrative cinema and its self-referential, make-believe world.

The precarious ties between the two genres is further threatened by the variable processes involved in their decoding: while narrative cinema demands only emotional plausibility (which the film may satisfy), documentary film engenders the evaluation of a cinematic representation in reference to the viewer's experience of the historical world (which, in the case of 1950s Philippines, bore little resemblance to the film's make-believe scenario, especially in the latter's magical containment of the insurgency problem). When the docudrama cannot be successfully decoded as documentary because of its suspicious insistence or of the wildly disproportionate magnitude of its hyperbole, the rhetorical sleight of hand at the heart of the hybrid mode is exposed: we see that docudramas such as *This Is My Home* are devised to "trick" their audiences into evaluating an argument about the "real world" based on how it operates within a strategically fictionalized world. When such a crisis of credibility erupts, the potency of docudrama's component



Jose Padilla (extreme right) starred in the award-winning LVN production *Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay* which was directed by Lamberto Avellana and produced by the US State Department. (Reprinted from *Doña Sisang and Filipino Movies*, 1977)

melodramatic mode is also lost in the process because the fundamental credibility shared by both modes is simultaneously depleted. Thus, instead of melodrama serving as a “back up” to documentary’s failure, deploying its affective power to paper over the fissures of its truth claim, the result seems to be a mutual cancellation of each component. A film that cannot be believed is both bad melodrama and bad documentary: and it is at the edge of these modes that docudramas, like *This Is My Home*, teeters. This is probably why, in retrospect, the films of the red scare seem so ridiculously naïve and hysterical.

Double Authorship and Half-truths

The US State Department commissioned LVN, a major studio, to produce a big-budget, feature-length action-drama based on the then recently ended “Huk” insurgency. As with *This Is My Home*, the State Department’s co-authorship was concealed, quite insidiously, under the banner of the bogus production outfit Freedom Films and its logo of a Philippine flag fluttering in the breeze. The film’s packaging as a typical Filipino film – the deployment of the respected filmmaker Lamberto Avellana and famous actors such as Jose Padilla and the film’s use of the national language and the idioms of Philippine narrative cinema – enhances the erasure of American participation. Despite, or perhaps more accurately, because of these deliberate efforts to bury the film’s American co-authorship, its symptoms haunt many aspects of the film, intimating its double-voiced, split and ventriloquist nature.

As in the case of *This Is My Home*, the hybridization of melodrama and documentary constitutes one register of *Huk*’s doubled-voice nature. Although, unlike the former, the film’s melodramatic aspect and fictive mode are deliberately emphasized, *Huk* nonetheless invokes its (documentary) facticity. From the film’s opening credits, its ambitious ideological work is immediately set into motion. Although the real events and figures upon which the film is based were current and familiar at the time of its premiere, a disclaimer advises the audience that “any similarity of these characters to persons living or dead is purely coincidental.” This disavowal of the film’s direct correspondence to reality, undoubtedly necessitated by legal considerations, is complicated by a succeeding title graphic which boasts that the film’s final sequence was shot on location

at the actual EDCOR farm, a resettling community for real ex-Huks and their families. Here we can see how, in the same gesture, the film manages to simultaneously attach to and distance itself from the historical reality it references.

A second, and more evident, register of the film's double-voiced articulation is its use of both Tagalog and English in the film's Tagalog and English versions. Predictably enough, the English language is used to articulate a distinctly American perspective to reinforce – to secure – rather than to contradict the Tagalog voice's own articulation of the same ideological position.

A quick tour through the film's narrative shows that Avellana deeply internalized rather than consciously or unconsciously resisted the American Cold War mindset. The film begins at one of the last battles of WWII. The protagonist, a guerrilla named Carding, is nearly killed by Japanese soldiers but is ultimately saved by a comrade named Maxi, to whom he later professes gratitude and offers recompense. Upon Carding's return to his hometown after the war, he makes plans to settle down with his longtime sweetheart but later finds out from Maxi that the government is withholding the guerrillas' "back pay." Unbeknownst to him, Maxi, a Communist agitator in cahoots with both Chinese and American socialists, is pocketing the money in order to turn the ex-guerrillas against the state. The first two English-language scenes occur at a bar and at a safe house where Maxi discusses his plans with an American Communist named Nick. These scenes are emblematic of the ideology that the US State Department sought to purvey in the film: that superficial and foreign Communist agitation and logistics – rather than an absorption of socialist thought or the outrage of wronged peasants – propelled the Huk rebellion. This idea permeates every strand of Avellana's narrative.

The compelling social conditions that drove the Huks back into action are deceptively reduced to unfortunate individual circumstances that range from *force majeure* to personal greed. Each of these major social problems parallel plot lines within the film's narratives; and in an impressive sleight of hand, the problems are simultaneously and dramatically cured by the plot's resolution. As in the case of *This Is My Home*, *Huk's* protagonist, Carding, is a homesteader, not one of the many aggrieved sharecroppers who formed the bulk of the insurgents. In the film, Carding finds himself in dire straits not because of the oppressive tenancy system but because he

simply lacks the capital to plant on family land. He takes out a short-term loan from a local businessman named Mr. Vargas and, much to his mother's chagrin, offers his family's land as collateral. On the same night as his firstborn's arrival, a severe typhoon sweeps in from nowhere and batters the crops. Vargas returns the next day with his attorney to forfeit the land. In a fit of anger, Carding strikes him. Maxi, hearing about the situation, returns to agitate Carding by informing him that the government has denied their final appeal for additional "back pay." He tells Carding that they are left with one option: to fight in the hills. "Are you telling me you're a Huk?" Carding asks Maxi in Tagalog. Maxi answers, also in Tagalog: "That's what they call us, but more than anything else, I am a true Filipino. And if you, Carding, believe in anything at all, then you must find the strength to take a stand. I challenge you. Come with me."

The film follows Carding and Jesus in more Huk operations that progressively increase in violence and civilian casualties. He is captured only after his parents-in-law are killed in the crossfire when the Philippine Constabulary (PC) sacks the Communist headquarters. The scene in which Carding is interrogated by the PC is an excessively obvious – and awkward – reiteration of the film's US-formulated anti-Communist rhetoric. At the constabulary detention camp, a panel of officers cross-examines Carding about his ties to the Communists. The entire scene, transcribed below, is played in English, in both the English and Tagalog versions of the film.

OFFICER 1: During our investigation, you have never once admitted to believing in the Communist Manifesto but you have admitted to being a Huk. Now, I would like to understand your point-of-view.

CARDING: I never considered the Huks Communists. I always considered them as my fellow countrymen. That's all.

OFFICER 2: Your record is clean. We have no charges against you. If given a chance to start a new life, to work your land, to raise your family under the democratic principles, would you accept the offer?

CARDING: That's what I thought I was fighting for. It's all I ever wanted.

OFFICER 3: But would it change your mind about the Huk movement?

CARDING: I...I don't know sir. I have to try it first, to see if it works.

OFFICER 1: You see, Bautista, we feel that you are the kind of the man that would give it a chance to work, especially with the excellent recommendation of our fellow officer Captain Mendoza of the military area where you were captured. The army has a project called the EDCOR. There you'll be given a chance to live among settlers with your family. Do you want to go?

CARDING: I'll try sir.

OFFICER 1: God Bless you, Bautista.

All four actors struggle hard to deliver their lines in English, resulting in a lack of conviction that is true of all instances in the film in which the characters discuss the subject of Communist ideology. The effect, as in the case of *This Is My Home*, is to heighten the ventriloquist aspect of these Filipino articulations of American Cold War ideology. (Or is it simply the case that since Communism is distinctly un-Filipino, it cannot even be discussed in Tagalog?) But an interesting dynamic is introduced by the film's use of bilingual dialogue – a nuance that cannot be found in the all-English narration of *This Is My Home*. *Huk's* distinctly formal, if stilted, English dialogue, with its elevated mode of political discourse, functions as a double-articulation of points that are already made in the action of the film and in its Tagalog dialogue. The result is that the English dialogue in the Tagalog version seems to be addressed to a different audience, perhaps to the American sponsors of the film who are given a clear reassurance that the film is towing the party line to the letter. This notion is bolstered by the film's English version, which summarizes the events dramatized in Filipino in a language that fits the conceptual categories of official Cold War discourse.

Given left-wing liberal academia's predilection for locating resistance in the native's work, one would think that it would be easy to find "subversive" moments in the film's Tagalog version, but I find no basis for making such a claim. Avellana does not use this doubling of the film's address or its native coding as a space for resistance. Both the dramatic and the documentary devices of the film impart the same ideological

message, albeit in different modes of address. In fact, the ideological work of the Tagalog version is much stronger and, in my view, more ethically problematic. Avellana does the Huks a great disservice by peddling a historically recognizable but insidiously perverted view of the rebellion.⁴ By placing the blame on a few errant individuals, foreign agitators and the laws of fate, Avellana exonerates the oppressive tenancy system that engendered the insurgency. Moreover, Avellana's Tagalog version addresses the Filipinos with the force of affectation and showbiz glamour while the English version speaks to its presumably foreign audience in a sterilized documentary tone. Significantly, then, Avellana's technically polished double-authored, double-generic, double-language effort produces nothing but half-truths.

The film's critical success – it won all the major trophies, including best picture, at the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences (FAMAS) Awards – and its extraordinary fidelity to the American party line affirmed Avellana's favored place in the State Department's motion picture activities in the Philippines (Mercado 1977). He made at least four other films for the USIA. As Avellana later recounted in an interview, the numerous lucrative offers from the USIA momentarily lured him away from his distinguished narrative filmmaking career (CCP 1989). In the parlance of postcolonial theory, Avellana functioned as a sort of reverse native informant (an interpreter for the colonizer) who translated foreign rhetoric into the language of Philippine cinema. One may argue that he was an especially effective ally in the manufacture of prosthetic Cold War hysteria only because, as a great filmmaker, he was already so adept at making fiction, at telling unreal stories. Alternatively, one may heed the view of historians such as Nick Cullather who argue that the Huk rebellion, which at one time controlled most of Central Luzon, validated Cold War ideology, such that even Filipino statesmen formulating foreign policy at the time of the film's release “felt more, not less threatened by the Cold War in Asia than did their counterparts in Washington” (Cullather 1992: 2). Ultimately, the variably successful export of Cold War hysteria, which also consolidated the novel mode of docudrama in the US as in the Philippines, is ultimately unsurprising, for it was not a matter of selling *fact* using the techniques of *fiction* but of selling the *fiction* of Communist aggression using a fictive discourse fortified with the aura of facticity.

Notes

¹ For an extensive overview of the USIA's motion picture activities, see Richard Dyer McCann, "Film and foreign policy: The USIA, 1962-1967," in *The people's films* (New York: Continuum, 1982), 173-199.

² The information on the Philippine Information Agency's holdings is based on the undated catalogue of the circulating film library of the defunct National Motion Picture Production Center.

³ See, for instance, *Red Nightmare* (United States Department of Defense, 1962), which uses the same before-and-after pattern in imagining middle America under Communist rule.

⁴ A useful overview of the Huk insurgency may be found in the conclusion to Benedict Kerkvliet, *The Huk rebellion: A study of peasant revolt in the Philippines* (Quezon City: New Day Publishers, 1979), 249-269.

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