

Philippine Experimental Film Practice: Influences and Directions through the Films of Roxlee

Anne Marie G. de Guzman

In Philippine experimental film practice, the role played by Roxlee is as singular as his name. Ironically, his singularity as a filmmaker rests on a multiplicity of artistic strategies that he utilizes with the ease of a master juggler: animation, dark humor, political commentary, unmitigated nihilism, among others. This paper attempts to tease out the sources of the multiple strands in Roxlee's versatility by locating them in the American avant-garde – not to make the claim that Roxlee actually derived his influences from the US, but rather to see, firstly, where these tendencies come from and lead to; and secondly, how this same set of tendencies may further be elaborated and enriched in local film practice.

“Acquired taste” defines how experimental film is appreciated. Our recollections of our first taste of pungently prized cheese, or first stammered sip of wine dictate to us that these initial encounters were testy, the succeeding ones pleasurable. Through it all, these experiences remain intriguing and stimulatingly difficult. Our experience with experimental films is no different.

Experimental films are not meant to be easy. They offer their viewers freedom – an unusual abundance of space to define what is viewed; and they are created with exploration and initiation foremost in mind. Filmmaker Godfrey Reggio (2002) describes metaphorical films such as his *Koyaanisqatsi* (1983) as films that “are meant to provoke, they’re meant to offer an experience rather than an idea, or information, or story about a ‘knowable’ or fictional subject...[and] it is up to the viewer to take up for herself what that [experience] means.” The difficulty of watching films such as these arises from the freedom and responsibility they offer. Such leniency can be daunting and confusing, particularly to a viewer whose cinematic experience and orientation have been mostly formed by mass-market commercial films. Experimental films can be hard to bear for they require a change of habit, which often constitutes an imposition on one’s free volition.

Mainstream cinema and experimental or avant-garde films are complementary facets of our cinematic experience as prose and verse are of our literary language. Each is significant for together, they furnish us a full spectrum of understanding.

Narrative films chronicle the perceived “logic” and “order” of things, while the avant-garde cinema interrogates human realities that exist without contention, abiding in their contentment.

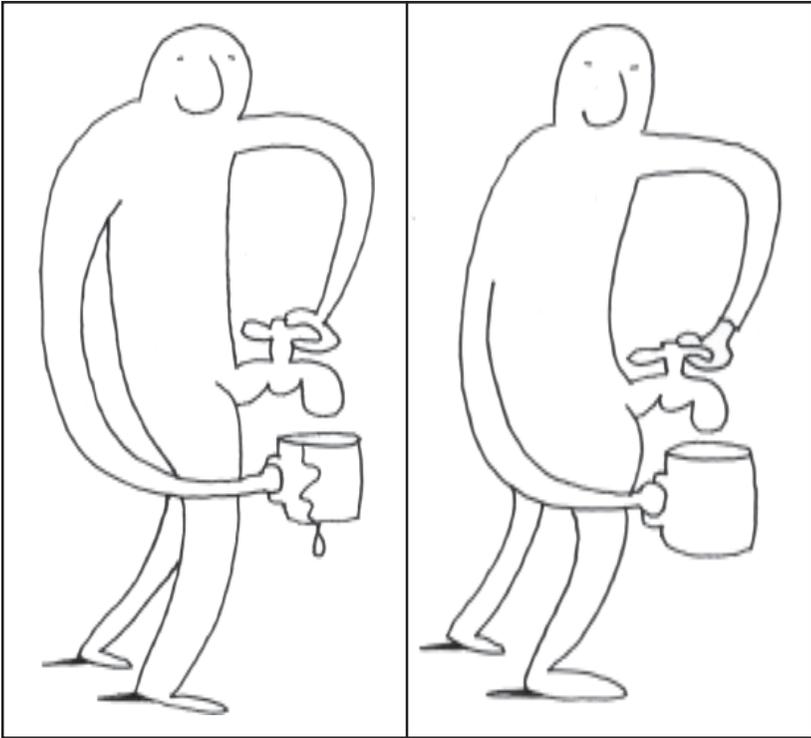
To view the parameters of our experience is to realize its depth. Our inquisitiveness forces us to seek ways to express it. Experimental films manifest the inquiries, and provide the space to visually affirm the various levels of our reality in ways the narrative cannot and will not, as its structure is securely bounded in its dogmas of linearity and logic. Simply, there are things too difficult and awkward for a narrative to visually adopt and realize.

Experimental films exist not simply as alternatives to narrative or commercial cinema but as ground to employ the film medium as a means “to minister directly to spiritual needs in a way music often does and abstract painting attempts to do” (Mac Donald 1993: 3). Such an orientation can be attributed to the fact that the roots of experimental or avant-garde film can be traced more to modern and postmodern art than to the history of film itself (Mac Donald 1993).

Avant garde or experimental films disturb our quiet submission to the conventions of mainstream cinema. Experimental filmmaking is “filmmaking without story, characters and plot – or in which these elements, considered so essential to cinematic form, are put into new and critical relationships” (Rees 2002: vi). Here, the flickering image is not meant to merely perpetuate ‘normal’ vision or be an extension of real time but to function as metaphors for the ineffable, a function too impractical for conventional films.

Filmmakers who have elected to use the medium and visually author under its conventions create for us expressive films, or as someone else aptly described it, “living paintings” – an amalgamation of images that delineate intuitive recognitions of a truth. In these films we feel by seeing, unlike in conventional films where we know through viewing. In experimental films, the understanding is not about the subject but about the experience of an encounter.

In Philippine experimental film, the cinematic landscape is quite different from its progenitor in the West. The local experimental scene came forth, and more significantly proceeded, in less definitive and dramatic conditions. Its emergence may have arisen from similar philosophical examinations engendered by political circumstances like those in the West (in the Philippines during the 1960s to the early 1980s, and in the West, specifically Europe in the 1920s).



Roxlee's 2004 sketches based on the animation film *Spit*

However, the effect of the political periods of unrest stirred up mainstream cinema or narratives more than it did experimental films in the country, unlike in the West. Nor did local experimental films come into existence and continue because of the economic viability the film medium achieved, as happened in the US in the 60s. In the Philippines, the film medium to this day has remained exclusively costly and economically restrictive. Support from government and foreign institutions exist but can be, at times, ambivalent and vague,¹ reaching only a very few favored filmmakers. Most often well intended, the assistance still sputters and is not always forthcoming. It is the related visual media, such as video and computer graphics, that have become more accessible or obtainable. As a result, video has technically superseded film as the medium most employed to produce and create experimental works. Ironically, most experimental films in the Philippines are in principle, videos.

However, film as medium and material for experimental productions still has an advantage in yielding filmic manipulations that the structural composition of video cannot absorb. The stimulating effects of direct-filmmaking or emulsion manipulations constantly applied and challenged in experimental works can only be simulated not replicated by video, making some of the results of the cinematic endeavors in video too formalistic and antiseptic.

These difficulties notwithstanding, experimental filmmaking remains relevant and viable in the Philippines because there always exists the “necessity of redefining the cinematic experience” (Mac Donald 1993: 2).

One experimental filmmaker who has constantly stirred and confronted our cinematic assumptions is Roxlee. His films conceive a tradition expelled through an idiosyncratic manner. Patriotism is his constant theme. His convictions are incessantly protective of the Filipino’s inherent voice.

His varied films, particularly those created in the 80s such as *Words, Spit, Optik, The Great Smoke* and *Tronong Puti*, manipulate live action and traditional animation through extreme filmic experimentations, such as lapse-time photography, cinematic discontinuities (of flickers and pixallations), intense filtering, loops and emulsion alterations. Through these intense cinematic processes, Roxlee enunciates a cinematic language that constantly paraphrases his patriotic fervor in a watchful but firm and urgent tone. He deliberately conceives an intensely frictional visual space that is both messy and beautiful, bringing to mind the “Trash” style of the experimental film movement in the US during the 50s-70s. The “Trash” style uses fundamental elements of Hollywood moviemaking to achieve a deliberate trashy look. Its aim is to provide a commentary on the values implied by conventional or studio movies (Mac Donald 1993). However, it must be said that Roxlee’s cinematic sensibilities can be traced more to European than American influences (he has worked with the Goethe Institute in most of his films).

Though Roxlee never quite chooses to mimic studio films as implied in the “Trash” style, he does not expunge elements crucial to narrative films either. In a number of his films, there is evident inclusion of character, story and location at one time or another. What he never does is iron out the obvious wrinkles in his films. His utterance is not mellifluous. Therefore, he makes certain that his viewer spots the creases. These kinks are the unconcealed marks of his honest examinations, and constitute the gritty texture of his films.

Roxlee's patriotism or simple concern is urgent and feral. It shouts, he thrives, and we listen.

In *Tronong Puti*, Roxlee adopts a surrealist approach to express the senselessness and irony found in man's evolution. The toilet bowl, in his faith, stands as man's greatest invention; devoid of malice, its sole motive is, simply, relief. Roxlee's analogy of unarguable brilliance as unadulterated goodness is insightful, sardonic and funny. It is in his humor we realize the truth – which is, that that which is true and dependable is decidedly plain, and that which is insidious and injurious shows off its swagger.

In the film *Optik*, Roxlee distinctly dispels the notion that the film medium and its apparatus are “neutral technology” (Mac Donald 1993: 17). In this work, Roxlee uses film as raw material for his investigation. He dissects and vivisections the structural composition of the medium to create a visual language that betrays the phenomenon of illusionism (the impression of movement through stills) (Rees 2002). Roxlee, particularly in this work, both depends on and jettisons this principle. He makes his viewers aware that what they are seeing are flawed and manipulated motions. In the disruption of simulated movement, he conveys to his viewers his mistrust for the obvious and urges them to arrive at a deeper truth.

Through this method, another tenet founded in Western experimental filmmaking is made clear: i.e., experimental film centers itself on the passage of time, instead of the visual image. Experimental films express and underscore duration instead of the narrative way of shaping space through editing and omission (giving awareness to film construction and structure) (Rees 2002). The filmmaker utilizes looping to amplify the time by repeating his shot or visual pattern until this pattern ceases to be cryptic, but stops before it becomes prosaic. With this concept, Roxlee enables his viewer to travel at rest in the same way that silence is magnified when it reinstates itself as sound. By looking at the same image numerous times, the viewer is made aware that the image has finessed itself into an altered form. In looping, we experience the resonance of the reiterated. This understanding discloses the filmmaker's declaration to distrust those that are mindfully blatant, and reassures us that what is true is almost always misleadingly modest. Apart from this, Roxlee's personal approach of exposing and manipulating film as raw material is bared through his inclusion into view of sprocket holes and image jiggles, again pressing onto his viewer the complexities of a truth – flawed and purposeful.

Though there are evident influences in Roxlee's technique and vision, he does not exclusively subscribe to one specific experimental approach. As a result, he is not pigeonholed into a specific visual style within the experimental form itself. In the West, most experimental filmmakers are methodically committed to a particular tenet, at least at the time of a specific work. Roxlee either maneuvers from one approach to another or incorporates various principles all at once into a film – a spontaneity that may have been born out of the Filipino's inherent or intuitive sense of flexibility as well as his personal inclinations.

As earlier mentioned, Philippine experimental film elaborated itself quite differently from its Western counterpart. It did not undergo definitive periods wherein numerous experimental film approaches were defined and practiced. This implies that the domestic experimental film setting has behaved more as a scene and not as a movement. Filipino filmmakers who were drawn into the experimental film's dogma of provocation already had a movement, formed, founded and practiced in the West, to assimilate in its entirety. As a result, visual styles that developed within the experimental form fluctuated between forays and perused visual acquisitions. Most local experimental filmmakers were left to devise their own visual concoctions. Absent then was a defined style with devoted disciples, and an established progression within a style over a particular period of time. Visual methods culminated into unique and personal meshes of approaches, understood and perpetuated; or unsure unions of cinematic explorations, abandoned and disregarded.

Roxlee's films do not, in any way, feel unsure. They might have been serendipitously considered but they have also been ponderously sustained. Watching his films, one is made



Roxlee's *The Great Smoke*, 1985
(Reprinted from *The URIAN
Anthology: 1980-1989*)

conscious of his sincerity. His techniques do not exhibit themselves as novelties nor mimicries. Those that have been made might have been influenced by Western principles, but they have been carefully adapted to the vernacular. They are imaginative responses to and judicious utilizations of foreign models.

Film artists like Roxlee, whose approach closely adheres to the convictions of pure filmic manipulations, are few and far-between. Experimental film practice in the Philippines can tend to, paradoxically, lean toward a more calculated disposition. Part of the reason may lie in the fact that the practical and logistical structure of the local film industry differs from the West, notably the US. As such, working with a medium that requires substantial cost outlays could lead its practitioners, specifically experimental filmmakers, to produce, to some extent, cautious and measured responses. But experimental filmmaking must be unmindful of all limits and incessantly push the boundaries; complacency and hesitancy are its adversaries, audacity and faith its allies. This confining situation can certainly incite adherents of experimental filmmaking to renounce the philosophy and/or the medium altogether. That may, likewise, account for the perception of a spluttering experimental film landscape in the country. At the recent Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video, no film entries in the experimental category were submitted, a trend that has existed for some time. In the Philippines, the intentions of experimental film practice may remain but technically, experimental film or, more particularly, experiments in film have withdrawn considerably.

Audience and space are other significant factors that have differentiated the contours of experimental film practice in the Philippines from that of the West. The local viewing audience has entrenched cinematic habits that are biased toward the narrative. Their viewing orientation is comfortably rooted in commercial and linear films. Further perpetuating this orientation is the fact that the spaces or venues allotted for conceptual art, such as experimental films, are limited. There exist few galleries and sites dedicated to the expansion of the visual perception we have of cinema. The call for an innovative cinematic experience has, in effect, been constantly stymied. This situation can only reinforce the traditional understanding the local audience has of film.

Notwithstanding the contrasts between the local and Western experimental film practice, one should not prematurely conclude that for experimental filmmaking in the Philippines, existence and function have become incongruous. The importance and significance of experimental film practice in the country is validated by Roxlee and his body of works, by the fact that film competitions continue to have an experimental film category and by the existence of scholarly studies on it.² The local experimental film scene cannot be expected to behave in the way it did in the West, particularly in the US. But experimental film will persevere, nonetheless, because it is in the nature of creative minds to constantly seek ways to impress and express imagination. After all, the essence of this film genre is ingenuity and discovery. To every experimental filmmaker in every experimental film landscape, what should remain steadfast are the persistence to ask and the commitment to innovate on the art of film.

Notes

¹ See Hernando (2004), Appendix 1, for more details on support and workshops extended by institutions, and additional remarks on the state of experimental filmmaking in the Philippines.

² See Hernando (2004), Appendix 2, for a list of selected experimental films and videos.

References

- Coppola, F. F. (Producer), & Reggio, G. (Director). (2002, DVD). *Koyaanisqatsi*. [Motion Picture]. United States: IRE Productions (1983).
- Cultural Center of the Philippines. (2002). *Gawad CCP para sa alternatibong pelikula at video*. [Brochure].
- Hernando, C. (2004). Appendices. [Personal Communication].
- Mac Donald, S. (1993). *Avant garde film: Motion studies*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Rees, A.L. (2002). *A history of experimental film and video*. London: British Film Institute.

Anne Marie G. de Guzman holds a Masters of Fine Arts (MFA) degree from the University of the Philippines. She is an assistant professor at the University of the Philippines Film Institute.

APPENDIX 1
PHILIPPINE EXPERIMENTAL CINEMA - TIMELINE

by Cesar Hernando

- 1982 Cinema-as-Art Workshop in Super-8 at the UP Film Center; Facilitators: Nick Deocampo and Ernie Enrique; Outstanding product of the workshop: *Ang Magpakailanman* by Raymond Red
- 1983 Ateneo-Mowelfund Program for Artists in Cinema & Television (AMPACT) Workshop in 16mm; Facilitators: Surf Reyes and Fr. Nick Cruz; Product: *Tronong Puti* by Ted Arago and Roxlee
- 1986 16mm Film Workshop with Ingo Petzke sponsored by the Goethe Institut and Mowelfund Film Institute; Products: *Lizard, or How to Perform in Front of a Reptile* by Roxlee and Ludwig Ilio and *Boy Goto* by Luis Paredes Quirino
- 1987 Super-8 Film Workshop with Birger Bustorff sponsored by the Goethe Institut and Mowelfund Film Institute; Product: *Juan Gapang* by Roxlee
- 1988 16mm Film Workshop with Christoph Janetzko sponsored by the Goethe Institut and Mowelfund Film Institute (Janetzko showed to workshopppers his fine collection of 16mm experimental films from all over the world like Bunuel's *Un Chien Andalou*); Considered "golden batch" and shown in Berlin. Experimental films: *True Blue American Coconut Grove* by Luis Paredes Quirino and Donna Sales and *Magkakahoy* by Noel F. Lim, Teddie Co and At Maculangan
- 1989 Optical Printing Workshop in 16mm Film of Found Footages and Sound Collage with Christoph Janetzko sponsored by the Goethe Institut and Mowelfund Film Institute; Products: *Dung-arw* by Mario Guzman; *Kalawang* by Cesar Hernando, Eli Guieb III and Jimbo Albano; *Pilipinas* by Regiben Romana; *The Girl From Bikini Island* by Luis Paredes Quirino and Donna Sales;

Optik by Roxlee, Yeye Calderon and At Maculangan;
Mix 1 & 2 by Roxlee; *Unison* by Yam Laranas and At
Maculangan

1995 16mm Film Production and Sound Workshop with
Christoph Janetzko and Wolfgang Widmer sponsored
by the Goethe Institut and Mowelfund Film Institute;
Products: *The Preacher* by Tingting Calzo and
Tributaries by Tad Ermitano

All film workshops conducted and cosponsored for many years from the mid-80s to the mid-90s by the Goethe Institut were free of charge or by invitation. The result of these workshops is a flowering of experimental films during the period. To make experimental films without sponsorships is next to impossible and very expensive. Experimental filmmakers during the decade of the 1990s like Raymond Red, Robert Quebral, Yam Laranas and Lyle Sacris resorted to and applied their creative skills to making music videos and TV commercials. Independent filmmakers and students no longer use the film format, except in film schools which make it a requisite for thesis productions. However, even those schools are now beginning to use an alternative format – digital video – that is much cheaper in terms of production cost and editing.

**APPENDIX 2
LIST OF SELECTED EXPERIMENTAL
FILMS AND VIDEOS**

by Cesar Hernando

FILMS

Ang Magpakailanman by Raymond Red/Super-8/1983
1st Prize, 2nd ECP Annual Short Film Festival (1983)

Tronong Puti by Ted Arago and Roxlee/Super-8/1983
Best 25 Super-8 Films, The Quezon City International Super-8 Film Festival (1990); 3rd Prize, Kelibia International Amateur Film Festival-Tunisia (1987); 3rd Prize, Experimental Film Category, 2nd ECP Annual Short Film Festival (1983)

Ang Hikab by Raymond Red/Super-8/1984
2nd Prize, Experimental Category, ECP Annual Short Film Festival (1984)

Pelikula by Raymond Red/Super-8/1985
Best 25 Super-8 Films, The Quezon City International Super-8 Film Festival (1990); Mentioned in the Oxford History of World Cinema Book

Isang Araw sa Bangketa ng Kanto Katipunan by Fruto Corre/Super-8/1985
1st Prize, Experimental Film Category, 4th ECP Short Film Festival (1985)

Malay, Tao by Raymond Rune A. Layumas/Super-8/1985
2nd Prize, Experimental Film Category, 4th ECP Short Film Festival (1985)

Inserts by Roxlee/Super-8/1985
3rd Prize, Experimental Film Category, 4th ECP Short Film Festival (1985)

Lizard, or How to Perform in Front of a Reptile by Roxlee and Ludwig Ilio/16mm/1986

Best 10 Films, 7th Osnabruck International Experimental Film Workshop-Germany (1987); Honorable Mention, Experimental Film Category, 1st CCP Independent Cinema & Video Competition (1987)

Boy Goto by Luis Paredes Quirino/16mm/1987

Best 10 Films, 7th Osnabruck International Experimental Film Workshop-Germany(1987)

Botika Bituka by Cesar Hernando/Super-8/1987

Best 25 Super-8 Films, The Quezon City International Super-8 Film Festival (1990); 3rd Prize, 1st CCP Independent Cinema and Video Competition (1987)

Juan Gapang by Roxlee/Super-8/1987

Best 25 Super-8 Films, The Quezon City International Super-8 Film Festival (1990); Best Experimental Film, 12th Gawad Urian (1989); 3rd Prize, Experimental Film Category, 2nd CCP Independent Cinema and Video Competition (1988)

Moron's Monolog by Roxlee and Yeye Calderon/ Super-8/1988

True Blue American Coconut Grove (Gawa sa Pilipinas) by Luis Paredes Quirino and Donna Sales/16mm/1989

Best Experimental Film, 13th Gawad Urian (1989); Best Student Experimental, 8th FAP Awards; 1st Prize, Experimental Film Category, 3rd Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1989)

Optik by Roxlee, Yeye Calderon and At Maculangan/16mm/1989
2nd Prize, Experimental Film Category, 3rd Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1989)

Sewing by At Maculangan/16mm/ 1989

Magkakahoy by Noel F. Lim, Teddie Co and At Maculangan/16mm/1989

One of 3 Best Pictures, ASEAN Young Cinema Competition, Japan (1992); Honorable Mention, Experimental Film Category, 3rd Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1989)

Dung-aw by Mario A. Guzman/16mm/1990

Best Experimental Film, 14th Gawad Urian (1991); 1st Prize, Experimental Film Category, 4th Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1990)

Kalawang by Cesar Hernando, Eli Guieb III and Jimbo Albano/16mm/1989

2nd Prize, Experimental Film Category, 4th Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1990)

The Girl From Bikini Island by Luis Paredes Quirino and Donna Sales/16mm/1990

3rd Prize, Experimental Film Category, 4th Gawad para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1990)

Unison by Yam Laranas and At Maculangan/16mm/ 1990

Honorable Mention, 4th Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1990)

Pilipinas: What Do You Think of the Philippines Mr. Janetzko? by Regiben Romana / 16mm/1989

Best Student Experimental, 8th FAP Awards (1990)

Mix One and Two by Roxlee/16mm/ 1990

Ang Maikling Bubay ng Apoy Act 2 Scene 2: Suring at Ang Kuk-ok by Aureus Solito/16mm/ 1995

1st Prize, Experimental Film Category, 9th Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1995)

The Preacher by Tingting Calzo/16mm/1995

Tributaries by Tad Ermitano/16mm/1995

2nd Prize, Experimental Film Category, 10th Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1996)

Chicken Soup 2 (Nerd World Cinema) by R.A. Rivera/16mm/1998

VIDEOS

Kalamay by Roxlee and At Maculangan/Beta/1988
2nd Prize, Experimental Video Category, 2nd CCP Independent
Cinema and Video Competition (1988)

Death of a Butterfly by Yam Laranas/U-Matic/1989
3rd Prize, Experimental Video Category, 3rd Gawad CCP para sa
Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1989)

And Rain Fell in July by Yam Laranas/U-Matic/1991
Special Award “Prix Emile Cantillon” as Best Experimental Video,
1st Video Mondial-Brussels, Belgium (1991)

Voices by Neil Daza/U-Matic/1992
3rd Prize, Experimental Video Category, 6th Gawad CCP para sa
Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1992)

Agosto 9 by Neil Daza/U-Matic/1994
3rd Prize, Experimental Video Category, 8th Gawad CCP para sa
Alternatibong Pelikula at Video (1994)