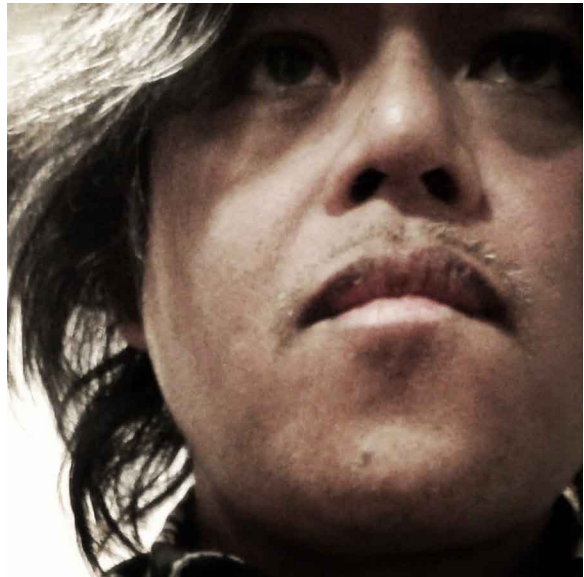


The Dreamlike Languor of the Supernatural

Interview with Dodo Dayao

Bogna M. Konior

Dodo Dayao, thankfully, cannot settle his mind on any one thing. He directs, writes erudite film criticism, creates installation films [*Memories of Places I've Never Been*, 2009; *Entropy Machine*, 2011] and comic books [*Noisy Blood*, 2006] and *Askals*, 2009]. His oil paintings have been featured in various group exhibitions such as in "2010: The Year We Make Contact." Before directing his feature-length debut, *Violator* (2014), the only horror film that screened in the main competition at



this year's New York Asian Film Festival, he co-wrote Khavn's *Philippine New Wave: This Is Not A Film Movement* (2010).

Over email, we pondered over the state of contemporary Southeast Asian horror, *Violator's* complex engagement with horror tropes, and the challenges of

filming demonic typhoons. Evocative, sensual, yet frightening, *Violator* (2014) expands the lines of Southeast Asian horror beyond a typical ghost movie. It revels in attentive, psychological terror and develops its own mythology around one stormy day in the Philippines, mere moments before the typhoon heralds a quiet Apocalypse. As Dodo labels it in this interview, the mood is distinctly “pre-apocalyptic.” Divided into parts meant to complement each other in charting the annals of evil, *Violator* balances non-linear mood pieces with character development.

Bogna M. Konior [BK]: Over the last two decades, we’ve witnessed an unparalleled rise of interest in Asian horror, largely due to Japan and Korea producing one cult film after another in the 2000s. Now the ravenous eyes of cinephiles and the industry as a whole are on Southeast Asia, anticipating a new wave of fright flicks.

Dodo Dayao [DD]: That was a heady, volcanic time. I fell hard for a lot of those films. Not just the Japanese and Korean stuff. There was a couple of Thai and HK ones, too. *The Blair Witch Project* (1999) was the only non-Asian horror film from that time period that was as game-changing. I mean, nearly all of the horror films we’re seeing now, certainly most of the ones that crossed over huge, arguably run on the modified engines of either *Ringu* (1998) or *Blair Witch* and in some cases, and you can include my own *Violator* here, a mixture of both. At the very least, they’re nicking their tropes. But I think the wave may have already crested and we’ve settled into some sort of status quo. Still, we may be sifting through a lot more *Ringu* and *Blair Witch* variants than we deserve, before we can find jewels in the muck, but there are jewels in the muck. I don’t think we’re flogging a dead horse just yet.

BK: Film critics are overly fond of labelling anything as “new wave,” but can we really speak of a unified aesthetic or recurring narrative tropes in contemporary Southeast Asian horror?

DD: Structurally and tonally and thematically, sure: the dreamlike languor, the casual surrealism, the sense that the supernatural is a matter of fact. I’m thinking all this has to do with how these cultures have a more pervasive spiritual firmament than, say, America.

I don’t think it’s a frivolous label, that it has legs, so much so that we could be here for hours picking this apart. It’s the sort of thing you could write a dissertation on. I’m drawn to the genre’s spatial displacement, overhangs of dread, dubious realities, a brutal lack of closure. That’s why Southeast Asian horror has this much pull with me. These specific varieties of unease

are rough ordinance with most of them. Most American horrors traffic in serial killers and Indian Burial Grounds—even writing that sentence was a bore.

BK: Bore or not, horror has always managed to seduce a sizeable audience. A quick glance at the ten highest-earning Filipino films could be dread-inducing in itself—all top spots are currently taken by rom-coms. Is there no appetite for horror among mainstream audiences?

DD: The optimistic answer would be “Yes, there is!” But the more rational answer is “Who the fuck knows what an audience wants anymore?” I think it’s the dense media bath swirling around studio films these days that has re-wired consumers everywhere. Horror used to be one of the staple genres of domestic mainstream cinema, back when domestic mainstream cinema was the whole of Philippine Cinema. There’s a two-week embargo on Hollywood films here that starts on Christmas Day, a black hole to most of hegemonized Manila, who get antsy when they can’t worship the ground America walks on, but a season of plenty for the domestic studios because they get to parade their tent-poles before a captive holiday audience with a festive spirit to quench, time to kill, and cash to burn. Usually there’s a couple of horror films in the lineup. It’s the only time of year they lure traffic—a rather impressive traffic at that. The rest of the year, not so much. Not that studios make that many horror movies the rest of the year anyway, and the ones that they do make, let’s just say no one’s going to hold most of them up to argue that bad box office doesn’t always mean bad cinema. Come to think of it, I’m not sure you can blame the consumers. The domestic romantic comedy, meanwhile, has gone from a decent cash cow to an unstoppable juggernaut of insane profit, nothing less than a license to print money. You’d be an idiot to tussle with it and an even bigger idiot to think it’s going away anytime soon.

BK: One fascinating trait of Southeast Asian cinemas is how art-house or independent filmmakers are willing to try their hand at genre pieces or horror films. After the ban on horror has been recently lifted in Malaysia, celebrated international artists such as Amir Muhammad or Woo Ming-Jin were lured into the pool of dread with satisfying results. Anything parallel happening in the Philippines?

DD: Off the bat, I’m thinking Khavn’s *Three Days of Darkness* (2007), Erik Matti’s *Pasiyam* (2004), Richard Somes’ *Yanggaw* (2008), Brillante Mendoza’s *Kinatay* (2009), Pam Miras’ *Pascalina* (2012), Raya Martin’s *How To Disappear Completely* (2013)—all from filmmakers who don’t normally do horror but who probably should, more than those who actually do. Sherad

Sanchez is currently editing a found-footage horror film. I'm stoked to see that one. Rico Ilarde may be the only domestic filmmaker whose stock-in-trade is horror, and every single one of his films is unlike any horror film produced by any studio. The pulpy vigor, the loopy Lovecraftian dementia...I love it, obviously. Horror has become a sandbox filmmakers in the Philippines all seem to want to play in. I'm not sure if all of them should, though.

BK: So there is this large audience with usually mainstream sensibilities that loves to consume cinematic horror, and then you have the small art-house crew. To horribly generalize, one likes to get lost in the heightened emotional experience, the other appreciates experimental forms and intellectual undertones. *Violator* tries to appeal to both, and it's always a risky move to make an art-house horror, let's call it that. In the 1990s, when the economic crisis hit Asia, ghost-movies became box office hits. This relation between horror and mainstream aesthetics often goes unchallenged. Yet, your investigation of film form reminds me more of the experiments Lav Diaz conducts than typical horror.

DD: There's a term for this sort of mongrel in genre fiction—"slipstream." I'm not sure if there's an equivalent term in cinema. I can live with art-house horror—it has a nice ring to it. It's not without precedent, though. People like Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Lynch, Teshigahara, that Franju film *Eyes Without A Face* (1960), even Nicolas Roeg in things like *Don't Look Now* (1973) and *Track 29* (1988) you can shoehorn into this subset. But I know what you mean, and I get where you're coming from. You do run the risk of being neither here nor there, but most of the films I love tend to be neither here nor there anyway. I'm a nut for mash-ups in film, in music, whatever. At its worst, it's the currency of inane high-concept loglines, all that "this-film-meets-that-film" bullshit, but cross-pollination, as both process and product, is terribly intoxicating.

I don't resist the notion that it can be a lot of fun to play within the genre's margins. Verse-chorus-verse. Thinking *inside* the box. I mean, I had a blast watching *The Conjuring* (2013). I'm just not sure I'd have as much fun writing something as straight up. I'm not sure, to be honest, if I have the talent for it. For all we know, I could merely be playing to my strengths, or if you will, my limitations. I'm open to giving something more straight-up a shot, sure. Something more campfire, something more fun to watch with a drunken crowd, jump scares and talismans to ward off evil, all that. But then again, a part of me thinks that's what I'm already doing.

BK: More often than not, filmmakers call up spirits to commence vacuous

rituals of jump-scares and tense close-ups. From reading your blog, I know you're not so fond of local horror repetitively borrowing from folklore. Yet, when I viewed your *Violator* I was immediately reminded of Filipino superstitions related to the typhoons.

DD: I'm not aware of any actual superstitions attached to typhoons myself. I was drawing more directly from contemporary superstitions. Urban ghost stories, if you will.

BK: Perhaps some of the folklore stuff could have seeped in through to the modern tales. I read that typhoons were surrounded by their own mythology and it was raining demons whenever they happened.

DD: I used to work as a copywriter, moving from one ad agency to another. Every single one of them had its own spate of hauntings. I've never had a first-hand, incontrovertible experience, though, which is a bit of a shame, but maybe I should be careful with what I wish for. This isn't unique to ad agencies, of course nor, I suspect, to the Philippines. One theory goes that huge swaths of Manila used to be mass graveyards after the war. They probably were, sure, but that's a lame way to rationalize spooky goings-on. I don't buy all of them but man, do I get off on it. I've been collecting these stories for years.

BK: Hear, hear.

DD: A lot of them are the same, and I assume there's a lot of pattern recognition involved, apophenia, osmosis, all that. But man, some of them can be gloriously fucked-up and out-there and full-on creepy. I've always wanted to curate the best ones into a book. I still might. I have an unproduced short film screenplay that deals more explicitly with this. It's tangentially connected to *Violator*. Not so much an outtake, more like a B-Side. But yeah, the idea that ghost stories have become part of an urban oral tradition among people in the workplace, that there's this consensual psychic gunk we share between us—that's fascinating to me, and I think that's what *Violator* is obliquely about. That's where the chess scene [in *Violator*] comes from, too.

BK: Let's talk about *Violator*. As you know, I dug into it to the point of fandom, even proclaimed it "a new turn in Southeast Asian horror," to speak the film critic's language. It's an experimental horror, an elaborate mood piece, heavily reliant on ambiguous imagery and opaque dialogue.

DD: One of the complaints about *Violator* is how talky it is. But it's talky for a reason. On one hand, it's mood-setting, verisimilitude. Filipinos are a talkative lot, more so when they're stuck someplace and have nothing better to do. On the other hand, it was also a way to smuggle backstory and character nuance into the narrative without having to fall back on the clunky protocols of exposition. I cheekily called *Violator* "a mumblecore siege film in reverse," referring to how it was also riffing on John Carpenter's *Assault on Precinct 13* (1976) but I was riffing off on the film *Precinct 13* was paying homage to more, *Rio Bravo* (1959), which is essentially a film about men at work hanging out, talking at length and waiting for an all-clear. I was going for the same sense of mild *ennui* mixed with foreboding, the sort anyone who gets stranded after work because a typhoon has made roads impassable is likely to be familiar with, and in the Philippines, that happens a lot more often than you might think. At some point, the characters in *Rio Bravo* break into song out of boredom. A very early draft of *Violator* had a *karaoke* scene inside the police station that was meant to echo that.

BK: Could you reveal how *Violator* was received in the Philippines and abroad?

DD: The people who liked it seem to get it on a fundamental level, unorthodox structure and all, regardless where we showed it. Some liked the first and second acts but were disappointed by the more linear third act. For others, it was the reverse. There were a few people, in Karlovy Vary and Bucheon, who zeroed in on the socio-political underbubble. I'm particularly flattered and overwhelmed by the enthusiasm of the domestic response, though. I've met a few people who've seen it twice, thrice, some even for the fourth time. That's hard core. The backlash, I heard, was equally gregarious. It evens out, I suppose.

BK: Nowhere is safe in *Violator*. Man-made spaces of "culture," such as the workplace or ominously looming skyscrapers, even schools are as threatening as the forces of "nature." Men go into the forest, they self-immolate. Others are stranded in a claustrophobic space with a demon.

DD: Well, claustrophobia *is* both the geographical and metaphorical condition of the characters. It's also the desired effect. We were rigorously self-conscious about how we used space or manipulated space, if you will. Notice how the film tends to expand towards the middle then starts to constrict as soon as we get inside the police station? That was deliberate, if a little elementary. I

mean, horror films tend to constrict as a default, almost predatory really, in the way it maneuvers you into a corner you can't quite escape.

BK: *Violator* forces the spectator into an alert mode of viewing through its non-linear plot. Time is parcelled and scattered, rather than chronological.

DD: The first draft was a lot more linear, a lot more traditional, even if the ending was just as evasive. It read like a different film, though. I started paring it down, taking out the parts I didn't like until it read a whole lot closer to the film I saw in my head, only to realize the parts I took out were connective tissue. But it was a thoroughly organic process. I wasn't doing it for the sake of doing it. It just made sense intuitively.

BK: There's little character development in *Violator* until the second half of the film. Exceptionally interesting is that we only get to learn about the main characters *when* they talk to the demon. Is it important to you that it is in their interaction with evil that they manage to reveal something about themselves? Do we need to face the inhuman to learn something about humans?

DD: That's an awfully interesting perspective. To be honest, it was probably more important to me that they reveal themselves in their interactions with each other, the six of them I mean. Of course, who's to say they haven't been gazing at the abyss long before the perp gets hauled in? And that the abyss has been gazing back?

BK: Another fascinating thing I've discovered binge-watching Southeast Asian horrors is that monsters and ghosts often lack a dramatic backstory. So it is in *Violator*, too. This stands in sharp contrast to many western horrors, where the past of the ghost is often revealed and largely tragic.

DD: I like the idea that the perp was like this invasive trigger that merely activates whatever cancers lay dormant inside them. It would be disingenuous to say I'm opposed to backstory in horror because sometimes it works. But backstory in the service of rationalizing what should remain irrational is lame. Most American horror films tend to fall into this trap. But I've been seeing it in a lot of recent Southeast Asian stuff, too. It totally *and* obviously neuters the monster. Sometimes I get a little pissed off that they don't get that.

BK: Speaking of non-humans, *Violator* presents animality as horrific. There's a scene where one teacher finds a slaughtered student in the classroom wearing a pig mask. Then there's the masterfully edited scene where the demon reveals itself through violent, animalistic metamorphosis.

DD: The pig mask is allusive. In the Bible, the first creatures to be possessed by demons were pigs. In local folklore, too, a pig is also one of the shapes an *aswang* shifts into. What's the deal with pigs, eh?

Incidentally, an *aswang* is like the Philippine equivalent of a vampire, that is, if vampires dressed rattily, ate like a slob and liked to have some gristle to wash down with their blood.

I fashioned the demon in *Violator* after the trickster archetype more than anything else—a sly, impish trespasser. That's the peg I fed Timothy (Mabalot), the kid who plays him. The metamorphosis near the end was just me fiddling around with the anthropomorphic aspects of the myth.

BK: *Violator* is an end-of-time horror. It's not an apocalyptic film *per se*, but there are subtle hints: the characters mention the Rupture Cult, while a found-footage scene mid-film portrays a collective suicide. There's an interesting tension between apocalyptic films and supernatural horror. The former portrays the human species at large and is often relegated to the field of disaster movies, while the latter is more concerned with the fate of a few unlucky individuals who happen to interact with a demon or a ghost.

DD: I'm fascinated, narratively and aesthetically, with looking at cataclysms through a minimalist lens, from the peripheries. If anything, though, *Violator* is pre-apocalyptic, which is really the tenor of the times, isn't it?

BK: I love that. "Pre-apocalyptic." That's how we should start labelling the totality of contemporary culture.

DD: That anxious, neurotic tremble of being on the verge of collapse, tempered with the melancholia of these men whose cul-de-sac lives are slowly and inexorably closing in on themselves, men who've lived their lives marooned and wishing they were someplace place.

The typhoon in the film is more of a temporal presence than anything else. I mean, the country gets hit by one so many times in a year that it's become

enmeshed into the texture of our lives. But it does come freighted with all manner of apocalyptic threat and trauma. Not that I find apocalypse especially traumatic. I'm a bit more optimistic about it. There is a certain beauty in everybody dying at the same time in one flick of the switch, no one left behind, no survivor's guilt, no grief. It's elegant, merciful almost. But yeah, the typhoon is the most pervasive apocalyptic element for me.

BK: Right, so making typhoons the source of evil is not the easiest thing to film. How did you go about capturing ephemeral but ancient evil in its immateriality? I'm here thinking of sound design or camera angles, certain aesthetic operations that produce fear when the devil incarnate is not there yet.

DD: Limited resources forced our hand a little but not very much. I mean, coming in as far back as when I was writing, I knew how much I had to work with. I never adjusted the screenplay to the budget, no. The design and infrastructure of the film was always going to be minimalist, suggestive, obtuse.

Early on, even before we shot anything, I was talking with my cinematographers Albert (Banzon) and Gym (Lumbera) about creating this, well, "void" is the word Albert used, and it's a perfect word to describe what we were looking for, this deliberate mistake, if you will, in blocking, in framing, in lighting, whatever, particularly in the scenes that were meant to lull the audience into a sense of comfort. Nothing explicit, sometimes, oftentimes, almost invisible, but hopefully enough to disrupt the frame, make you feel slightly uncomfortable without knowing why. This was pretty much the same brief I gave Corinne (De San Jose), my sound designer. We talked for, oh, a half-hour maybe, then she went off and came back with what you heard, or thought you heard, onscreen. Between the four of us, I think we pulled it off, but I give the bulk of the credit to Albert, Gym and Corinne. For my part, I was just nicking wholesale from *The Val Lewton Playbook*.

BK: Horror scholars undoubtedly still stay up all night pondering the unanswerable: what is horror? Southeast Asian horror became almost synonymous with ghost films. Over the decades, some have argued that horror must include a supernatural element, while others stressed the instrumental role of atmosphere in creating terror. What's your take on the genre?

DD: Of all genres, horror is the most pliable in that you can stretch its definitions as far as you can with no immediate danger of turning it into something it's

not. It has wiggle room, lots of it. One of the earliest film texts I read was an interview between Clive Barker and Peter Atkins where they set out to define the genre and then try and expand it, settling on horror's intent to not only horrify but make us complicit in the perversity of that intent, perversity being the vital, transgressive strand. They go on to name-check *Taxi Driver* (1976), Fassbinder's *Fox And His Friends* (1975), Peckinpah's *Bring Me The Head of Alfredo Garcia* (1974) and Bergman's *Shame* (1968) as tangential horror films, which I agree with. I'd throw Mungiu's *Beyond the Hills* (2012) and Lanthimos' *Alps* (2011) into the mix, too. You don't gauge your responses to these films the way you would, say, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974). But anyone familiar with the genre is bound to taste similar flavours in the soup.

It's a second-hand take, sure, but I haven't stumbled on anything better since, so I'm sticking with it.

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