

Two Films, New Direction

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The rise of what is characterized as independent digital cinema, premised on the technology and supposed sensibility underlying it, demands careful assessment. The lack of intervention from critics in this regard and the concomitant ascendancy of commentators who are themselves players in the field (programmers, bloggers, marketers, impresarios, fans, or even just groupies) have not helped in taking us there. It could be that independent digital cinema has occasioned a different tenor of review, one that tends to be as inchoate and anecdotal as the “art” of the moment, in many ways anti-intellectual and hipster, and belonging to the “ethnography” of experience of the neoliberal economy of consuming “film,” whether of the art house, festival, cult, Hollywood-derived, or alternative (if ever that sad word is still in use) variety. Thus, while there is a perceived preponderance of output with the emergence of both platforms (from the grassroots to the institutional) and pretensions, there is actually a scarcity of discourse, a vacuum ceded by critics by default to those who are most inclined to merely pick and pan.

These two reflections¹ on Brillante Mendoza’s films seek to initiate discussion on the possible social form of this fraught rubric and brand--“independent.” Needless to say, even this category, not a given but a problem, demands more intelligent elaboration. Mendoza may, indeed, be an important cipher in this scheme because he brings a range of tangents into the mapping.

Having achieved types of recognition that have eluded even the most celebrated stalwarts of Philippine cinema and as he continues to garner honors for his films wherever they are screened, he has become a vital Filipino figure in the global film scene, surely one of the most important in his generation. And that word “global” may, in fact, be salient because it shifts the index from the “national” and “international” to another level of translocality, a turn that Mendoza may have effected curiously without much support from the establishment in the Philippines. The fact that his success has been met with snobbery by some in the industry attests to the distinct validation system to which he has subjected himself, away from the outdated cabal of old guards and the arriviste clique of young turks.

In an interview with Mendoza on CNN, he argues that he strives for a style that is “spontaneous,” perhaps a cognate of “natural,” because he feels that structure “intimidates.” He believes, for instance, that performers need not know what will happen to their cinematic characters.² From this principle, we could begin to trace the trajectories of his form, and these brief notes on his two films wish to take part in a hopefully sustained conversation on his oeuvre, from his early forays to his Pampanga series and on to *Kinatay*, a searing look into “violence and the descent into the ordinary.”

Serbis

Producer: Centerstage Productions
 Director: Brillante Ma. Mendoza
 Story: Armando Lao, Boots Agbayani Pastor
 Screenplay: Armando Lao
 Cast: Coco Martin, Gina Pareño, Jaclyn Jose, Julio Diaz, Kristofer King, Dan Alvaro, Mercedes Cabral, Roxanne Jordan, Dido dela Paz, Buddy Caramat, Bobby Jerome Go, Jemmalyn Galicia, Julia Taylor, Nico Taverna, Aaron Christian Rivera, Billy Ray Gali, Babylee Borromeo, Arnold Toledo
 Released: 2008
 Running Time: 89 minutes
 Awards: 2008 Cannes Film Festival (Best Director), 2008 Pacific Meridian Film Festival, Russia (Best Director, Best Actress), 2008 Bangkok International Film Festival (Golden Kinnaree Award for the Southeast Asian Competition), 2009 Urian Awards (Best Cinematography, Best Production Design), 2009 Asian Film Award (Best Supporting Actress)



Best Direction, Best Picture,

The film *Serbis* lends itself well to the making of a microcosm. It is rooted within a locale, mired in the routine of everyday life in a movie theater that

unreels porn in a city in Pampanga, a province north of Manila. On the other hand, this seemingly banal, quotidian circumstance speaks to a wider context and community and consequence: the cinema and its audience of strangers, a crowd in the dark transfixed on a silver screen, which takes it elsewhere. That the locus used to be home to the American military bases charges the historical atmosphere of this film palace that has gone to seed.

This is one stratum. The other references a particular type of people that gathers around the light of film in the theater: sex workers that dispense sexual favors to a gay clientele. This is labor or service or colloquially “*serbis*,” which in Philippine gay parlance refers to ministrations performed by boys or men, becoming gay-for-pay or simply carrying out the task with their masculinity avowedly untouched.

Another layer is the extended Pineda family that runs this rather rundown business at a time when audiences are flocking to the cineplexes of gargantuan malls or buying pirated VCDs and DVDs and watching them in the comforts of their houses. There is a matriarch who presides over this enduring but decaying structure; she takes her bigamist husband to court and creates rifts within the clan, which includes a projectionist and a billboard painter.

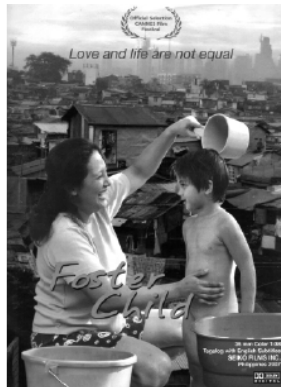
The director builds his milieu around these levels of microcosm that weave a wider world, but one that also reveals tropes of constriction, a semblance of the dead end. Petty thieves come and go, gay customers pick up their hustlers, transvestites sashay into their imagined ramps. There is something tedious about this depiction, the ethnographic bent generating motifs of life happening without much spectacle, except for sex and squalor, fellatio and bad plumbing. Ultimately, it is abjection that is conjured as life transpires unceremoniously, or better still, contrived to transpire unceremoniously.

This exercise, however, is not without its virtues. First, the technical elements of cinema are harnessed well, rendered potent in the representation of the said tropes and the formation of a survivalist world that is flattened, or reduced to misery. Second, it pursues the director’s cycle of films on Pampanga, a path that is instructive within the discourse of locality in the context of a national cinema. Third, it may be able to sketch out emergent frameworks of political mediation in Philippine film that transcend the strategies of Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal. And finally, that this cul de sac, the site where a man’s boil ruptures, happens to be the President’s hometown can only be telling. Analogies may be

drawn between a decrepit cinema, both the architecture and the medium, and a corrupt government, between a matriarch at the helm of a failed fantasy and whose name translates to “prone to fatigue” and whatever sensational service it is that has brought us excelsis, from glory to glory.

Foster Child

Producer: Seiko Films
Director: Brillante Ma. Mendoza
Story: Ralston Jover
Cast: Cherry Pie Picache, Eugene Domingo, Jiro Manio, Kier Segundo, Dan Alvaro, Alwyn Uytingco
Released: 2007
Running Time: 98 minutes
Awards: 2008 Brisbane International Film Festival (Netpac Award), 2008 Durban International Film Festival (Best Film, Best Actress), 2008 FAMAS Awards (Best Child Actor), 2008 Gawad Urian Awards (Best Actress), 2007 Cinefan-Festival of Asian and Arab Cinema (Best Actress)



The film may on the surface be uneventful. Thelma Manlangqui goes about her errands as mother and wife on a typical morning, with the banal bustle that attends the ritual, except that her family, with husband and two sons, is quite exceptional. In their split-level shack in the belly of the city, she takes care of a foster child whom the government had entrusted to her. The boy named John-John would soon be handed over to American parents who have sought to adopt him. The film revolves around this event, beginning with the descent of a social worker into the depths of the slums to the moment when Thelma hands her charge over to his new parents in a posh hotel that does not only offer stark contrast to the dearth of his origin but also becomes the site of a deeply touching and troubling instance of cinematic experience in which the foster mother’s world falls apart in a skyscraper of marble bathrooms.

The event, therefore, ceases to be a mere element of the plot. It is an event that takes in a sense of the total, the totality of society inscribed in a fairly straightforward sequence of incidents that seems to happen in a day, in a singular stroke. We say this because such an everyday circumstance translates into a consequence of historical forces congealing to produce precisely an event of this nature, with contradictions of class, gender, and race playing out to generate exemplary pathos and profound perturbation.

And this operates not merely in terms of discourse but aesthetically as well. The ethnographic approach of the director intimates a stalking effect that

threads us through the social thickness of what may appear to be everyday routine. It surfaces for us an aspect of life as it settles like sediment of a residual socio-economic system. On the other hand, it gestures toward a passage from the hovel to Manila's highways and on to that transient station called a hotel. And then this: the final crash of maternal sentiment when Thelma realizes that her "son" had been taken away and that she could not do anything about it, a chronicle of a loss foretold but likewise a tale of the devout yearning of wistful belonging, indeed a reversal and deferral of maternity. At this point, melodrama flirts with melancholy, tragedy with the realism of soap opera, an uncanny liaison that stages the most vexing of ties, the most alienating of emotions, and an emergent tone and terrain of affection.

The critical scene, and the episode that renders the film thoroughly cinematic, is when Thelma takes John-John, whose diuretic urge had intensified that day presumably because of stress, to the hotel bathroom. Here foster mother and foster child find themselves alone, confined to the affluence of a suite, the fixtures of which they do not know how to use: they turn the faucets the wrong way and the water spills all over the place. It is the mess, this nervousness, the inability to grasp the structure of power that becomes the film's political logic, the sign of an aporia or impasse, the impossibility of not knowing how to carry out something very basic, to go about everyday life, something as rudimentary as it had been demonstrated in the prefigurative ablutions of the initial tableaux. It is as if, all of a sudden, everything becomes strange, unfamiliar, indifferent, formidable.

Foster Child is most productively viewed in relation to *Inang Yaya* (2006) and *Endo* (2007). The former speaks of surrogate motherhood and the latter of the contractualization of labor. It may motivate us to draw connections among these three narratives: of how work in the nation has been shaped by contractualization, more specifically subcontracting, surviving on exchange with short-term benefits and with enduring costs to well being and the capacity to truly love. In a significant way, these three portraits depict certain biopolitical formations in Philippine society: how bodies have become irreducibly the very "things" that have been produced for circulation as "labor" and whose romantic, erotic, and filial feelings have been compromised, and in fact, effaced, a contribution to the critique of reification. We tend to forget that John-John has a biological mother, too, absent though she may be on the screen. And it is the nation-state that finances fostering as part of "social work and community development" in the era of globalization.

Serbis and *Foster Child* carve into high relief an emergent form, delineating the contours of an aesthetic informed by a particular political economy and subjectivity in a period after the collapse of the industry and under the aegis of digital media and neoliberal economy. Moreover, the two films heighten the sensibility of the “political” in this complex context, paving the path beyond the cinema of Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal, refunctioning to a certain extent the utopian impulse of *Kidlat Tahimik*, and finally confronting the peril and allure of reality television and round-the-clock news and entertainment. All these intersect to contrive the highly improvised form of a cinematic contemporary in the Philippines.

Notes

- 1 These essays appeared previously in souvenir programs of the Young Critics Circle Film Desk.
- 2 CNN Talk Asia, August 19, 2009.

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