

The Intersection of Philippine and Global Film Cultures in the New Urban Realist Film

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With the rise of indie cinema in the Philippines, many say that another golden age is again in the making, and, like its predecessor, the films are being produced in the midst of widespread poverty and political instability. Understandably, a significant number of indie films has consciously returned to and explored the limits of the urban realist film of the 'golden age' (1975-1984), revisioning city spaces and signifying patterns in Philippine and global film cultures.

The essay has three intricately connected sections. On the one hand, it delineates the shifting contexts of Philippine and global film cultures and situates current indie cinema in these contexts. On the other hand, by considering several key films, it traces the development and revisions of urban realism from its birth until today and reflexively problematizes the critical discourses that define and are defined by such realism.

Keywords: *Philippine cinema, realism, city studies, film culture*

The Context of Philippine and Global Film Cultures

Philippine film scholarship in the last three decades has had two general agendas. On the one hand, scholars have critically engaged film's popularity as mass entertainment. At the root of this agenda is the assumption that the production, distribution, and exhibition of popular films are engendered and sustained by the masses and, therefore, are indicative or reflective of Philippine culture. Such works analyze genre movies and theorize their ritual-functions for the moviegoing "bakya" crowd, either to champion them (e.g., Salazar, Covar, & Sotto, 1989), undermine them (e.g., Del Mundo, 1984; 1998; 2001), or strike a balance between promoting and criticizing them (e.g., Guerrero, 1983). On the other hand, film scholarship has also endeavored to write or, at least, to delineate the history of Philippine cinema and define what and how great films have helped shape Philippine culture (e.g., Tiongson, 1994). From such writings are drawn and circulated the names of film artists, titles of films, and other such details and corresponding valuations that constitute a more discrete film culture.

There have been very few studies that reflexively deal with the way these mass and discrete film cultures codify the significance and meaningfulness of genre movies and “serious” films¹ in relation to Philippine culture in general. But such critical reflexivity is becoming more pressing because of the major shifts in and intersections between Philippine and global film cultures, especially since the turn of the century.

A number of Philippine genres, like the *bakbakan* (action films) and the *kantahan* (musical films), have practically disappeared from the movie screens. The moviegoing masses have largely turned their attention to movie genres, mainly melodrama, action-adventure, komiks adaptations, now extravagantly produced for free television. The movies shown year-round by giant film exhibition chains, like the cinemas of SM, Ayala, and Robinsons, are now aimed at the middle- to upper-middle-class sector; movie theaters have been made more luxurious and what used to be the cheapest form of pastime now costs between P150 and P600 per picture (Lumbera, 1984: 222). Today, in place of the local genre staples churned out in great quantities as late as the 1990s are Hollywood movies, a few big-budgeted Filipino movies, and what is referred to today as “indie” films.²

This cultural and economic shift in moviegoing practice has crucially altered the shape of film culture in general and the discourses expressed in and about indie cinema in particular. Like its most apparent predecessors – i.e., the realist films of the 1970s and ’80s and the alternative art cinema of the 1980s and ’90s – contemporary indie films have not been seen by majority of Filipinos locally. The titles and the filmmakers of these indies are publicized in popular media, including fan magazines and primetime news, and so, in this sense, they are part of popular cultural idiom; but hardly anyone has seen the films, based on actual box-office receipts and duration of theatrical run.

In spite of this, and unlike its predecessors, indie cinema in the last five years has been even more productive than its movie industry counterpart. Consequently, though actual box-office sales are still lorded over by Hollywood imports and Philippine mainstream movies, today’s indie’s local supporters – middle-class cinephiles, educated viewers, the intelligentsia – have also grown in number³ and have become more active as commentators, opening up discursive spaces outside of specialized or academic journals, opting to write instead in traditional print media and highly accessible new media, like weblogs, online discussion groups, or e-groups.⁴

Notwithstanding this productivity and the expansion of multiplexes in the Philippines, the disproportionate distribution of screens among Hollywood movies, local genre movies, and indies signifies how Philippine cinema has

responded to the shifts in globalized film culture. As intended, “enormously expensive” Hollywood “event movies, must-see films..., films that could break opening-weekend records in one or two thousand theaters [worldwide], run for months, segue smoothly to video windows, and spin off into merchandising and other licensing arrangements” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2003: 683-684, 687) flood Philippine screens. In the global concentration of the entertainment economy, the relatively mature Philippine mainstream cinema has not been supported by the government and has not formed regional alliances with neighboring nations or entered into international coproductions in order to challenge Hollywood domination with highly culture-specific narratives (as did a number of Asian and European nations), but has instead followed the Hollywood “blockbuster strategy” of enticing the least-common-denominator audiences to star-studded, expensively shot (on location abroad or with heavy special effects), must-see movies during summers or holidays. In this context, and based on the kind of language used in news coverage, feature articles, and colloquia, it is clear that indie filmmakers have taken on art cinema’s project of “elevating” film from popular, vernacular entertainment into world-class works of art.⁵ Stemming from the tradition of alternative filmmaking, discussions about indie cinema circle around the polarized concepts of “art versus commerce,” many times slipping into the language of ethics, with terms like “compromising,” “prostituting,” and “selling out.”⁶ And so, while the indie subculture is undeniably gaining ground with the unprecedented proliferation of indie productions, most of these films are not commercially exhibited locally and are generally confined to “art-house” or “sure-seat” theaters, notably, the Cultural Center of the Philippines theaters, the UP Film Institute Cine Adarna (formerly UP Film Center) and Videothèque, and Robinsons’ Galleria IndieSine; and even in these spaces, the films do not draw crowds (with the exception of the annual Cinemalaya Film Festival).

Since dozens and dozens of indie films have been and are being produced without the benefit of local distribution and exhibition, film festivals, here and especially abroad, have become the default marketing, publicity, and distribution channels for the indies. In fact, the relatively significant column-space and airtime afforded to indie cinema in popular media, in spite of remaining unpopular, is due to the new historic high in terms of number of indie films exhibited, recognized, and bought abroad.⁷ Such publicity, which indie filmmakers and producers admittedly work for,⁸ gives local media consumers the impression that these films and film artists are “important,” even if they have not seen or never will see the actual works in question.

The continued international recognition of Filipino indie films cannot be emphasized enough, because it is part and parcel of the discursive fabric that

defines and makes the idea of contemporary indie meaningful. In other words, the value of the works is now, more than ever before, cross-culturally defined and, hence, ripe for debate and contest. In this regard, the active, critical, necessary, if not always warm, critiques of indie films by film-literate Filipino viewers, whether on the internet, in popular media, or in specialized fora, mediated by the specific modes of production, address, and reception of art cinema worldwide, are no longer isolated, no longer conditioned by the discrete and local film culture only, but find their place in an increasingly globalizing film cultural exchange.

“Golden Age” Urban Realism and the Politico-Ethical Agenda

Interestingly, references to “Philippine cinema,” whether local or international, popular or academic, almost always refer to the so-called golden age of Philippine cinema (1975-1984) as a central trope by which to understand and discursively define the current indie phenomenon. Of prime importance in these references is the fact that the golden age marched in near-cadence with Marcosian martial rule and thrived on political and economic instability.

The thematic preoccupations of the key films of the period were the necessity and/or tragedy of mobility and anonymity, the systematic oppression of individuals and regulation of bodies, and the search for identity; their imagery was based on “creative” visualizations of poverty; their preferred mode of narration was “realism”;⁹ and the setting of arguably the most defining films was the city. The significance attributed to the aspiration and realization of realism in film is due to the sociopolitical context of this period and the critical context (itself shaped by and now discursively inseparable from the same sociopolitical context) by which these films have been evaluated and canonized in film historicizing.

For example, the film criticism of the 1970s and the 1980s – not limited to, but indelibly defined by, the writings of the members of the only critics group in the Philippines at the time, the *Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino* (MPP) – was primarily expressed in the language of politico-ethical engagement and a nationalist program.¹⁰ The standard for “good” filmmaking, as far as this critical milieu is concerned, is emblematically articulated by cofounder and active MPP member, Bienvenido Lumbera. He asserts that Filipino filmmakers should aim for “social change, nationalism and social consciousness,” “expunge the scars of colonial past,” contribute to the attainment of “progress and stability,” help “secure for the people freedom from foreign domination and raise the level of their consciousness regarding rights and obligations” (Lumbera, 1984: 223). Elsewhere, in this regard, he notes that “the MPP has consistently preferred cinema that deals with Philippine social realities over those which are merely skillfully or artfully made” (Lumbera, 1984: 208).

Within these Marcosian-sociopolitical and nationalist-critical contexts, Manila was in many senses the battleground, and its visualization was the battle itself. Manila – and no other city in the Philippines – has been most significantly imagined and represented in Philippine art and history, and this is no less true in cinema. Being the Cosmopolitan Capital, the imaginings of Manila are easily conflated with the imaginings of “the Filipino nation” (cf. Villacorta et al.).

The desire of the government and its city planners, at the time of Marcos (until today), to transfigure Manila into a bright and beautiful city, is akin to Michel de Certeau’s idea of the Concept City that is utopian and urbanistic. The bright street lights at night and the open spaces aspire to render the city-space governable, available to the policing gaze, transparent. The Concept City, as de Certeau evokes it, is a purified, hygienic space, purged of “all the physical, mental, and political pollutions that would compromise it.”¹¹ This ought to be the public image of Manila, both a form of desire and a form of discourse, or a discourse of desire projected on the city.

It is the turning of the city inside out – the exposing of the regimented attempts and wretched failures and terrifying concealment of the macro-scale oppressive technologies of disciplining the citizenry and the micro-scale slippages of individual bodies – that we find in the landmark films *Maynila sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975) by Lino Brocka and *Manila By Night* (1980) by Ishmael Bernal.¹²

Maynila may be considered as a marker for the beginning of the golden age, which, compared to previous genre films set in the city, was radically different – the pioneer urban realist film. In *Maynila* and the later “Brocka films,”¹³ Brocka endeavored to identify the slum-dweller cinema-type and to privilege the portrayal of urban milieu. His “realist effect,”¹⁴ first realized in *Maynila*, is founded on 1) his reshaping of two-dimensional generic characters into working-class archetypes, whose character motivations and developments are tied up with socioeconomic realities; 2) his adherence to dramatic, tragic plot formula, with the narratives typically culminating in the death or defeat of the protagonist;¹⁵ 3) his inclination to choose subjects (i.e., main characters) and subject matters that resonate with the “real” or “everyday” way of life of slum-dwellers; and 4) his electing to shoot on location in the slums and to record live-sound, consciously allowing visual and aural interferences and incidentals that are peculiar to the milieu to be registered in the narrative, like cacophony of children, street litters, wanted ads, political posters, and graffiti on walls, city-folk extras spitting on the sidewalk, etc.

All these departures from commercial formula put the “serious” films of Brocka during the 1970s and 1980s in the mainstream of world cinema history,

coming later in a sequence which begins with French poetic realism in the 1930s, Italian Neorealism in the 1940s and 1950s, Indian and British new waves in the 1950s and 1960s, among other “young” or “new” national cinema movements. The films from these movements, like Brocka’s realist films, tended to highlight marginal characters and social problems. The significance of Brocka’s place in this cinematic context has been noted by Filipino critics, but more than anything else, it is his place in the sociopolitical context of the Philippines that made him a champion among local critics.¹⁶ It is precisely for the newness of realism in Philippine cinema and not for the oldness of his realist aesthetics in the context of world cinema that made his *Maynila* timely and relevant even to political struggle. Moreover, it is the political milieu in the Philippines and the discrepancy between Imelda Marcos’s “spiritual” (5) and “global” (6) “City of Man” and the city-images depicted on film that situates and differentiates Brocka from his precursors in world cinema.

The power of Brocka’s realism, as Rafael Ma. Guerrero correctly describes it, is in the impeccable integration of the director’s dramatic sense with his documentary aspiration, his propensity to emphasize the specificity of characterization vis-à-vis the determinations of the urban slums milieu. The credibility and political potential of his realist imagery, coupled with his keenness on melodramatic acting and pacing, have become discursively inseparable from the critical milieu of his times (cf. Campos, 2006).

Where Brocka struck a balance between documentary visualization of milieu and dramatic characterization, Bernal was concerned about subjects-as-individuals. In *Manila By Night*, he achieves the feat of ironically portraying imploding stereotypes, while, at the same time, imbuing these stereotyped characters with moral agency. In place of a tight, linear plot, the film is animated by dramatic and thematic complexity – the balance between cold abstraction and warm bodies, the ambivalence of hating and loving Manila, the opposing realities of brightness/day and darkness/night, the interactions between people and interior/exterior spaces, between the social and the psychological. The city is overturned and what is hidden is revealed – the labyrinthine *eskinitas*, the inside of bars, bedrooms and comfort rooms, taxis. And as the subjects walk in and out of the hidden spaces, we (through the characters’ fields of vision) see the individual characters’ reactions as the city weighs down on them – on Kano, the lesbian drug pusher; on Bea, the blind masseuse; on Pebrero, the three-timing taxi driver; on Baby, the naïve *probinsyana* waitress-turned-whore; on Ade, the prostitute disguising as a nurse; on Manay, the middle-class gay couturier; on Virgie, the middle-aged former prostitute; and on Alex, the restless youth – each a body and a

consciousness roaming through the city, each mind, as in spaces they inhabit within the city, architectures of secret selves; in *Manila By Night*, the private and the public are conflated.

Bernal's imagined Manila is an intricate mapping of individuals caught in dehumanizing space; of the site/sight of revulsion of bodily abjection, of the desire to expel whatever is reviled, the powerlessness to do so, and the pathetic but perpetual policing of visible "cleanliness" by daylight. Hence, the film ends: young Alex, creature of nocturnal Manila, is caught by daylight, when the "normal" people are up, going through the motions of daily grind – jogging, selling, heading for the office or school – the public image of Manila; he lies down on the grass and shuts his eyes, to shut out the sunlight and the vision of the city. Poignantly symbolic and contrary, only the blind girl, Bea, who has never literally seen the sites/sights of Manila, is able to wish for redemption, to attempt escape from the prison of private Manila.

In this sense, the people that populate Bernal's Manila are representatives of, partially but not tragically determined by, and ultimately capable of transcending their milieu – if they decide to. When Julio and Ligaya try to escape Manila, they are destroyed; meanwhile, Alex hangs in the balance of rest and restlessness, of stasis and motion, of will and indecision. What is apparent upon watching these two films by Brocka and Bernal in retrospect is how different and highly original they were in their treatment of urban reality.

The Marcoses censored *Manila By Night* and refused its exportation to and exhibition in the Berlin Film Festival. The New Society's glamorous Manila was supposed to have "clean streets, neat sidewalks, no garbage, thanks to Imelda's metro aides" (Joaquin, c1990: 220). So, the metonymic chains of associations in *Manila By Night* – slums linked to dirt, dirt to hidden spaces, hidden spaces to moral degradation, and moral degradation to slum-dwellers and prostitutes – must be concealed, just as it was concealed within actual Manila – for the discourse of Manila is the discourse of the nation.

The act of censorship underlined the confrontation between the desired bright, beautiful, and transparent city of Manila and the real metropolitan prison of narrower and private spaces. The act of censorship was metonymic signifier of the construction of the ideal urban geography, the utopian city, mapped and remapped through power and myth, disgust and desire, concealment and revelation, vision and imagination.

The predisposition of *Maynila* and *Manila By Night* toward realism, at a time when the government had control over the media, was in itself a political statement, a desire to present Philippine society as it is, to lift a veil, and to open the eyes of its viewers, in the Philippines and abroad, to the reality concealed

by the New Society. What these urban realist films had done, in effect, was to expose the artificiality of Marcosian “realism.”

Between *Maynila* and *Manila By Night*, the formal, stylistic, and thematic possibilities of the urban realist film were realized. Soon after, the brand of urban realism defined by these films became the dominant form of socially conscious cinema in the Philippines, no less because of the nationalist-critical sanction it has received vis-à-vis generic “escapism” and elitist “formalism” (Lumbera, 1984: 222). Every other major mainstream director, in the last four decades, has made a “poverty film,” at times considered the crowning glory of their careers.

And yet, in a post-Marcos society and post-golden age cinema, when social decay, political corruption, and moral bankruptcy are supposedly no longer suppressed or can no longer be concealed and when such “realities” have become staples in popular visual culture, two challenges – one critical and another creative – must necessarily be faced. Since “reality” has become all too familiar and visual representations of this “reality” have been conventionalized, the aesthetic and politico-ethical efficacy of realism must be problematized, especially in the context of shifting film cultures.

New Urban Realism in Contemporary Indie Cinema

In 2006, born out of the boom in digital filmmaking and apparently the creative revivification of realism, a new urban realism came of age in the form of Jeffrey Jeturian’s *Kubrador*, which, though not isolated from the historical sequence of city films, exhibited remarkable originality. Shortly after, three films by Brillante Mendoza, which displayed the same realist effects but were set in three different locales, were released – *Manoro* (2006) set in the periphery of Angeles City, Pampanga; *Foster Child* (2007), which commutes between and compares indigent and affluent urban spaces in Metro Manila; and *Tirador* (2007), which takes the urban realist visualization of Manila to a new, almost manic, dynamism. Between the slow and studied pacing of *Kubrador*, which details the underground culture and economy of *jueteng*, and the pulsating, dizzying camerawork of *Tirador*, which details the subculture of *tiradors* (petty criminals), the peculiarities, affectations, ambit, and direction of new urban realism were set.

These new realist films, like many other contemporary indie films, were unpopular upon their release but popularly publicized locally and critically praised internationally. By 2009, with increased output and more obvious formal, stylistic tendencies, new urban realism saw an early climax with the garnering of major prizes at the most important and the oldest A-List European

film festivals, namely Berlin (Caligari-Special Jury prize for Tirador), Venice (the Orizzonti prize for *Engkwentro* and the Luigi de Laurentiis prize for its director, Pepe Diokno), and Cannes (Best Director prize for Mendoza's direction of *Kinatay*).

The two distinguishing characteristics of new urban realism are 1) the radical emphasis on milieu as primary locus of narrative knowing and 2) the appropriation of real-time visual narration. The profound emphasis on milieu in this realism has come to avow that instead of the conventional choices between character-driven and plot-driven narratives, a setting-driven (audiovisual) narrative is not only possible but preferable for Philippine cinema (Manrique, 2007). This means that any narrative, set in a particular city, ought to be impelled by the environmental and logical determinations of the setting, instead of the character's choices.¹⁷

As such, these new urban realist films are a movement away from *Maynila* and *Manila By Night*, in that while Brocka's film presented the city as one – but only one – of the dramatic characters and while Bernal sought to imbue narrative types with moral agency, the new films are nondramatic and, therefore, their subjects are not so much personalities as realist effects, socially determined in a normatively deterministic narrative world. Being nondramatic narratives, what once were marginal activities and non-events (or incidentals) conventionally subjected to ellipses, like walking, cooking, changing clothes, have become the central spectacle of this new realism. Remaining strictly fictional, the incidentals-turned-spectacle in new realist film is now self-consciously striven for, because the aesthetic efficacy of this realism is no longer derived strictly from dramaturgy but from the immediacy of "ethnographic" spectacle.

Moreover, new realism (not only urban-, but also the distinct rural-realism) has become synonymous with real-time filmmaking or visual narration. Real-time narration in media means that the exact duration of the story action would be equal, or simulated to be equal, to the time it takes to narrate that action. Technically, real-time filmmaking is reliant on paced and rhythmically calculated long-takes that aim to simulate a seamless space-time continuum in terms of temporal-visual perception and temporal-narrative apprehension.

The utilization of real-time narration is what simultaneously differentiates current Filipino realism from the previous realism of Brocka and Bernal and affiliates it with visual cultural trends in world cinema. Formalist experiments in real-time filmmaking are a global trend today, perhaps because this mode of filmmaking altogether challenges the hegemony of Hollywood, demands from the viewer a more heightened suspension of disbelief and self-awareness, and achieves perceptual and experiential immediacy. In any case, the incarnations of

real-time filmmaking in various national cinemas have yielded diverse aesthetic effects not necessarily restricted to realism.

The aesthetic functions or effects in non-Filipino reifications of real-time narration, impelled either by the pulse of long-takes or an adherence to chronological time, range from the heightening of generic suspense (e.g., John Avnet's *88 Minutes*) or formal-sensory assault (e.g., Gaspar Noe's *Irreversible*), to the questioning or overturning of Hollywood's insistence on verisimilitude instead of realism (e.g., Dogme films), from delineation of first-world ennui and Beckettian struggle against meaninglessness (e.g., Gus Van Sant's trilogy, *Gerry*, *Elephant*, and *Last Days*), to mediations and reflections about time, existence, or death (e.g., Abbas Kiarostami's *Taste of Cherry* and Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó*), or any combination of these.

The amalgam of urban realism and real-time filmmaking – contriving neither generic urgency nor intellectual meditations on nothingness, but feelings of anxiety, insecurity, and futility based on the spectacularization of poverty – is Philippine indie's contribution to the visual cultural trend in world cinema. Like its golden age predecessors, and unlike the many non-realist utilization of real-time narration in foreign art cinema, the new urban realist Filipino film does not rely on thematic ambiguities but instead insists on making politico-ethical statements. However, while it redeems realism from aesthetic dullness, new urban realism has turned golden age urban realism on its head. New realism has represented, quite unflinchingly, “what is out there,” but no longer in the same politico-ethical terms of revealing what is concealed or suppressed, but in terms of defamiliarizing “ordinary” slum life by way of grotesquery.

So, the constant championing by Filipinos and foreigners alike of Philippine indie cinema as “world-class” does not only, or even necessarily, mean that new realism is truly original, but that, if anything, it is in sync with global visual cultural fashions. Also, the now-typical charge against new urban realists regarding their peddling of poverty as exoticized spectacle¹⁸ is exacerbated by these artists' impressive but complicit fluency in the language of worldwide trends, the continued mastery of which further entrenches the Philippines in its visual niche in world cinema culture, with ironic and overwhelming validation by international festivals.

The key words, in short, are *spectacle* and *artifice* and how both, while cinematically indispensable, are regulated in any given work whose aim is realism. In films like Mendoza's *Manoro*, about a teenaged Aeta who wishes to teach uneducated Aetas to read and write, and *Foster Child*, about a poor woman whose job is to become a temporary foster parent to neglected children – both films featuring little-known subcultures – the ethnographic insights are

the highlight. Being both pioneering films of new realism, alongside *Kubrador*, their realism laid claim on a privileged, because novel, depiction of reality outside of the theater. As such, the films are comparable to documentaries, like Ditsi Carolino's *Riles* or *Bunso*, even more so in their ethical predisposition to dignify their subjects by never condescending to or exploiting them, but instead portraying them as real-life heroes. But in Mendoza's later, bigger international successes – namely *Tirador*, *Serbis*, and *Kinatay* – the documentary aspiration is tainted by the built-in drive of this urban realism to spectacularize the ordinary, in the process exploiting their subjects in the name of and due precisely to its simulated ethnographic posturing, without the benefit of ethnography's ethical imperatives. This is over and above what Jigna Desai already identifies as “the phenomenon of the art house [which] is based on positioning ‘foreign’ films as ethnographic documents of ‘other’ (national) cultures and therefore as representatives of national cinemas” (39); this means that “Philippine” urban squalor is exoticized twice over in the world market.

I presume the built-in drive to spectacularize, because how shall such realism proceed formally and artistically? How many *Manoro* films can be made that will not eventually be begged to finally cross the fiction/non-fiction divide? Or how many *Foster Child* films can be made until the need to resort to spectacular imagery finally arises? Apparently not so many, since *Foster Child* and *Tirador*, a film in which we are made uneasy and captive observers to the abject “realities” of slum life, where infants eat their own feces and desperate women crawl on all fours to look for their dentures in the gutter, were made in the same year.

Tirador's moral force, due to its aesthetic freshness and immediacy, is clear enough, palpable, and made especially poignant by its concluding sequence. As the film ends, we see a massive religious rally, where real-life politicians (big-time robbers?) shamelessly feign holiness and promise prosperity, while desperately poor, petty thieves in religious devotee's clothing are stealing from equally desperate people, in broad daylight. The ironic insight, though not new, is powerful for its original and almost opaque documentary treatment. But the effectiveness of the irony resides in the fact of familiarity; we know this already; this grim reality is no longer shrouded in darkness; *Maynila* and *Manila By Night* are now mere nostalgias.

And how many *Tirador* films can be made without giving in to the dynamo of graver and grander spectacularization? *Kinatay*, two years after *Tirador*, has become fully reliant for its potency on the extreme imagery of real-time narrated rape, murder, and dismemberment, an imagery which is also a worldwide visual-cinematic trend, properly called “New Extremism,” originating from European cinemas? The trajectory of spectacularization-as-realism is further

aggravated by the speed in which this new brand of realism is becoming visually conventionalized, commodified, and culturally hegemonic.

International film festivals and film markets provide an exemplary avenue for the convergence of commerce and culture. The interaction of art with commerce discommodates the neat definitions of film as art, as when marketing and distribution blend with the seriousness of the cultural event. As mentioned earlier about the current practice in Philippine film culture, getting a film exhibited abroad – for the roundabout way of earning validation or making a statement about one’s own national realities – and finding either an international distributor or getting media mileage – for the practical purpose of recouping one’s investment – are conflated. One can sense this conflation in the journalistic treatment and the language used by Diokno in an interview regarding the distribution of his film, *Engkwentro*, abroad, following its triumphs in the Venice Film Festival. The GMA News article reads:

“Our film is now being represented in Hollywood by Shoreline Entertainment, one of the most important film distribution companies in the US. We just signed a contract with them last week. They will handle selling *Engkwentro* worldwide and will represent it at the American Film Market in November,” Diokno said.

“A showing in the American Film Market, however, does not guarantee a buyer. So we are all crossing our fingers that we would generate interest from buyers,” said Diokno.

Shoreline Entertainment is a heavyweight in marketing, selling, and distributing foreign films worldwide, with 60 percent of its business interests devoted to sales. (Mateo, 2009)

Without interest from the local market to “buy” new urban realism so as to at least amortize production costs, indie filmmakers are encouraged, if not forced, to address an international market, via film festivals and film markets. As David Bordwell notes, “Festivals are...the primary paths to parallel film circulation, where buyers for video distributors or cable-television networks find new material to fill the pipeline” (Bordwell & Thompson, 2003: 718). The foregoing news excerpt signifies this fact, which indeed sounds very ironic vis-à-vis the humanitarian statement of Diokno about fellow Filipinos.

Recently, *Engkwentro* was invited to the 2009 Thessaloniki International Film Festival, because it is “one of the newest Filipino digital films that illustrates

the country's various realities, deals honestly with its past, and stands out as a *fresh, non-conformist* cinematic voice...*radical in content and form*" (in Mateo, 2009; italics mine). What of the country's "past" and "various realities" does *Engkwentro* present in a "fresh" and "non-conformist" way that is new to Filipino viewers?

As Filipino followers of indie cinema have already noted,¹⁹ Diokno's style is derivative, and so his visual treatment of *Engkwentro* is apparently coded and artificial.²⁰ The inordinately shaky handheld camerawork, the subculture of petty criminals and juvenile gangs, and the setting of the action in labyrinthine eskinitas have all been previously visualized in *Kubrador*, *Tirador*, and Jim Libiran's *Tribu*. The anti-realist stylistic decisions of Diokno – to dub and compose a multi-layered aural design; to erase the visibility of the cuts throughout the 61 minutes of the film; and to make the camera detachable from its human consciousness to function as a kind of documentary camera-eye not borne by any one character but by the filmmaker himself – suggest that new realism is restless to exceed its realist-effects by resorting to self-conscious artfulness. In this regard, the decision by Diokno not to film on location in the Davao City slums – ostensibly the setting of the film, though, questionably, Diokno would rather assert that he was not trying to be locale-specific (Bautista, 2009) – or in any actual slums area, but to instead build makeshift shanties – which, for a Filipino viewer looks fake, but for foreign viewers, such as international festival jurors or programmers, indiscriminately real – is a questionable departure from the revelatory, golden age politico-ethical realism.

New urban realism has become conventionalized in the span of about three years and has come to characterize what is "radical" in Philippine cinema in a manner that is accessible to the international audiences of art cinema; but it has remained impotent in its own nation. The issue is not so much about individual films, but in the sustenance of a visual cultural trend whose self-imposed task it is to represent Philippine realities and make an effective politico-ethical statement. Indeed, as Marsha Kinder observes, "the concepts of 'cinema,' 'nation' and 'national cinema' are increasingly becoming decentred and assimilated within larger transnational systems of entertainment" (440).

By virtue of its form, mode of production, and mode of address, these new urban realist films are now ostensibly directed toward the global community of art cinema patrons, whether Filipinos or non-Filipinos. This fact has led some commentators to call such films "pornographic," because, instead of presenting the national culture to the world in a good light, as did many prizewinning Iranian films, for example (Bordwell & Thompson, 2003: 716), new urban realist films, in sum, have capitalized on "regressive discourses" about its own culture.²¹

Meanwhile, the popular publicity of indie films has come upon the most ironic real-life reversal of Marcosian concealment, when news came out that President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo herself summoned Brillante Mendoza to the Malacañang Palace and awarded him with P1 Million for portraying the Philippines – Manila and its peripheral towns – in the worst possible light at the most prestigious film festival in the world. In an official press statement, Arroyo even proclaimed that, “Director Mendoza’s winning movie depicts social realities and serves as an eye-opener for moral recovery and social transformation, which my administration has been pursuing even early on in my Presidency.” (Dalangin-Fernandez, 2009; cf. San Diego, 2009)

In light of such political inefficacy – unpopular among majority of the Filipinos and absorbed by the very establishment it supposedly challenges – Mendoza does not even talk back, but instead wishes for a more thorough support from the government.²²

Here we divine that “censorship” has become a volatile, deconstructing critical concept. In the past, whenever censorship was enacted against a film, the censored film is discursively signified as a bold and potentially revolutionary film. At present, “censorship” is the last, thin line dividing the urban realist film and the establishment that such realism seeks to perturb. In other words, while the thorny issue of censorship remains, the terms are not, discursively, exactly the same. During the martial law, the notion of “pornography” used to be the government’s ammunition for shooting down films it considered as dangerous, and conscientious nationalist critics questioned the morality of such censorship, because the enactment conceals more heinous immoralities. Today, among the ranks of “intelligent” viewers that Philippine cinema has long hoped for, “pornography” has been the very notion used to question new realist films.²³

Notes

- 1 The use of the word “serious” recurs in many of the nationalist writings about film and is used to refer to canonical films that tend to be non-generic and/or unpopular. It is a subtle and politically charged word that can serve to highlight the nationalist agenda of film writing
- 2 Short for “independent” films.
In the last five years of the currency of “indie,” the term has come to mean many, sometimes disparate, things. It is sometimes understood as a “cinema movement.” With reference to sheer number, it has also been understood as the triumph – some would even go as far as to say “revolution” – of the non- or less commercially motivated and, therefore, less commercially palatable filmmaking over mainstream filmmaking. Hence, middle- or high-brow films produced by individuals or artisanal companies, using digital video technology, are likely to be called “indie,” regardless of the quality

of the works. But, at the very least, the term's claimers can be divided between the so-called "real indie" (heirs of the experimental and documentary filmmaking tradition historicized in Nick Deocampo's *Short Film*, which is totally outside of the mainstream) and the so-called "indie-indie-han" (filmmakers with hybrid, many times popular, sensibilities, who have niche markets within the mainstream). Cf. Campos, "The Politics."

But the division between "real" and "fake" becomes problematic if one assumes that the impetus of today's "indie" stems from the academe; and it does. A cursory observation of the participants of annual festivals like Cinemalaya, Cinemania, and Cinema Once Originals, and the local film competitions, like Gawad CCP Para sa Alternatibong Pelikula at Video, Diliman Film and Video Competition, .mov Film Festival, Ateneo Video Open (Loyola Film Circle), Piling Obrang Vidyo (UP Cinema), Haute Auteur (UP Cineastes' Studio), and Inyorai Bidyo Festival (UP Cinema as Art Movement), would bare this fact. The new subculture of filmmaker-wannabes is most visible in high schools and colleges; many of today's indie film artists have film or communication degrees; and the patrons of the indie events are mostly students and teachers of the arts or media. A cursory observation would also reveal that the products of film courses (now no longer limited to the pioneering film courses and workshops offered in the University of the Philippines, Ateneo de Manila University, De La Salle University, and MOWELFUND Film Institute) are heterogeneous and are more accommodating of popular influences.

- 3 In 2008, 27,000 people were reported to have attended the Cinemalaya film festival – a historic high for any indie film event in the Philippines. (Baron, Mylene, 2008).
- 4 Two such examples of e-groups are **Cinemanila Yahoogroups!** and **UP Film Institute Yahoogroups!** For some examples of weblogs, see note 19.
- 5 On the rise and development of art cinema, see pertinent sections in Bordwell et al.; on the narration of art cinema, see Bordwell (1985: 205-233); and on the art cinema project of indie cinema, see pertinent discussions in the Cinemalaya Transcriptions.
- 6 See pertinent discussions, especially in the 2005 section, in the Cinemalaya Transcriptions
- 7 For a brief journalistic overview, see Cruz (2009, October 13).
- 8 See pertinent discussions, especially in the 2008 section, in the Cinemalaya Transcriptions.
- 9 Tiongson notes that the "New Cinema" of the Philippines, films of which constitute the "golden age," are characterized by social and psychological realism. See "The Filipino Film in the Decade of the 1980s" xxix-xxxi.
- 10 For a sampling of MPP articles, see **Urian Anthology: 1970-1979** and **Urian Anthology: 1980-1989**, both edited by founding and active MPP member, Nicanor Tiongson. Cf. Lumbea, Abot-Tanaw.
- 11 The idea of a "purified" and "hygienic" space is based on James Donald's discussion of de Certeau's conception of the city.
- 12 A fuller appreciation of these two pioneering city films may be gained by an understanding of the development of realist city fictions in vernacular literature. The imaging of the city in these films is, in a sense, not totally new and has found earlier visualization in novels by Inigo Ed. Regalado (*Sampagitang Walang Bango*, 1918), Ruperto Cristobal (*Ang Bulaklak sa Kabaret*, 1920), Pedrito

- Reyes (*Fort Santiago*, 1946), Dominador Mirasol and Rogelio Ordoñez (*Apoy sa Madaling Araw*, 1964), Edgardo Reyes (*Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, 1967, which is the basis for Brocka's *Maynila*), and F. Sionil Jose (*Ermita*, 1984, which while in English is considered by Lumbera as emanating from the same vernacular tradition), among many others. As critic Soledad Reyes notes, the visualization of the city as a dark and dangerous asphalt jungle, which is the antithesis to the peaceful pastoral landscape of the province and which has the power to crush and lay to waste the lives of its inhabitants, has become a rallying point and potent instrument for writers in protest (159-60).
- 13 Such as *Insiang* (1976), *Angela Markado* (1980), *Jaguar* (1980), *Bona* (1981), and *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (1984).
 - 14 As early as the 1960s, even before Brocka ushered in social realism to the Philippines, realism in film was already questioned and demystified, especially by French structuralist and/or Marxist critics. Roland Barthes perceived realism in art merely as "reality effects." Following this cue, Christian Metz argued that cinematic realism is only the structural organization of visual, musical, and verbal codes based upon conventions that the spectator must decipher in an attempt to make meaning.
 - 15 In contrast with the typical happy ending of genre films.
 - 16 See especially Hernando (1983).
 - 17 In literary terms, this is a return to naturalism rather than a subscription to mere realism.
 - 18 At least three papers presented in the 2008 Annual Southeast Asian Cinemas Conference, held at the Ateneo de Manila University, from 18 to 23 November 2008, make this claim explicitly or implicitly. See for example the unpublished papers, "The Pornography of Poverty in *Serbis* and *Tribu*" by Gary Devilles, "The Cinema of the Other 'Other': National and Cultural Identity in Filipino Alternative Cinema" by Elvin Valerio, and "The Aesthetics of the Meandering Camera: An Analysis of 3 Filipino Independent Films" by Alvin B. Yapan.
 - 19 See for example three separate weblog reviews by Bolisay, Francis Cruz, and Koon.
 - 20 See note 14.
 - 21 The notion of regressive discourses about one's own culture as being tied up with aiming for the international market is based on McArthur: 118-20.
 - 22 See Emma-Kate Symons, "Philippine cinéma vérité: Acclaimed abroad, banned at home," *The Wall Street Journal* (26 June 2009); "Pinoy director urges more support for indie films," *The Philippine Star* (21 August 2009); "Honored abroad, a stranger at home," *BusinessWorld* (10 October 2009).
 - 23 See, for example, Erwin Romulo, "That's Degradation!" *The Philippine Star* (11 June 2009) and Devilles (2008).

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