

REVIEW

Interweaving Concepts of the Real/Reel and Cinema's Reflexivity

Avie Felix

Noy

Producer

Director

Story

Screenplay

Cast

Production Design

Director of Photography

Editor

Music

Sound

Released

Running Time

Cinemedia, Star Cineman, ABS-CBN Film Productions

Dondon S. Santos

Rondel Lindayag, Coco Martin, Francis Xavier Pasion,

Shugo Praico

Shugo Praico

Coco Martin, Cherrie Pie Picache, Erich Gonzales,

Joem Bascon, Baron Geisler, Vice Ganda, Cheska

Billiones, Pen Medina, Jhong Hilario, Janus del Prado,

Ketchup Eusebio, Ping Medina, Tess Antonio,

Neil Ryan Sese, Kristofer King

Glan Herbert Adriano

Timmy Jimenez

Renwin Alano

Carmina Cuya

Ross Diaz

2010

1 hour 44 minutes



The last two years have been witness to the heterotopic concept of the Aquino family. The nation seems automatically, whether in approval or remorse, taking part in the personal-to-public and public-to-personal transgressions of the Aquino family spectacle. In 2009, former President Corazon Aquino died. Her death revives memory of the 1983 tragedy when Senator Benigno “Ninoy” Aquino Sr. was assassinated. It is a participatory spectacle that engages both the personal and the political in all households. The nation, recognizing the hero in Ninoy, the “symbol of democracy” in Cory, and the future leaders in their children, seems to enjoy the staging and restaging of the Aquino family’s history in remembering the death of the father, mourning over the death of the mother as if it is a signal of waning democracy, and the many controversies attached to the youngest child Kris Aquino. Viewed in all perspectives, the plight of the eldest, Noynoy Aquino, for presidency in the 2010 elections, is indubitably another heterotopic spectacle stimulating and fulfilling the private-public interest.

The film *Noy* is made possible by that premise. There is a duplication of the heterotopic spectacle, an almost surreal encounter with the private and public as we see Coco Martin participating in most campaign activities of Noynoy Aquino. But unlike other celebrity endorsers of the candidate voluntarily helping Aquino’s voting stats level up, Martin is making a film. The film production part catches interest as it presents another crossover – the ‘personal’/private



Figure 1. Screenshot from the film showing actor Coco Martin filming President Noy Noynoy Aquino in one of the candid scenes. Photo from the film's official website.

volunteerism in the spirit of perhaps friendship with the Aquino family, or a probable personal political stance, and the “public” which is to film, to account, to chronicle the campaign through a very public medium as cinema.

Propaganda and Surveillance

The film opens with a montage of footages showing Noy Noynoy Aquino announcing his mother's death, declaring his decision to run for presidency, and a number of speeches talking about promises of reform, change, and order.

The rest of the film is packed with such kind of footages. Some show Noy Noynoy Aquino in most candid circumstances playing with his nephew, putting on foundation, or having ordinary conversations with his sisters. These sequences are images of surveillance maintaining proximity with the subject while equalizing distance and objectivity. The proxemics and dynamics are of course liminal by nature; the camera in itself is an inductor of liminality, but in this film, there is an obvious attempt to make the surveillance appear as an ‘experience’ rather than observation. This can be seen in several footages that aim to capture the insights or emotions of the subject. We see Coco Martin asking Noy Noynoy Aquino his reactions on random matters such as the political party, poverty, or going out on a date with his girlfriend. In essence, the audience is not only provided a window through Aquino's life, but also a passageway to construct an experience of what he is like, how he thinks, and how he lives his life.

This technique of using video to present a subject is not a new practice. There is an ample sampling of audiovisual productions with the objective of

foregrounding positive characteristics of a personality (mostly a politician or celebrity) to gain public confidence. In political-historical terms, we call this propaganda.

Whether the film *Noy* is a propaganda material or not is a major concern. Why would a film about him be produced in the middle of election campaigns? What is the purpose of the film? Cinema, is a separate terrain, we know, but the timing and the subject matter compels an investment with sociopolitical discourse. Is the experience factor taking it away from propaganda or otherwise?

As publicity materials for the film start to get aired, the audience is given more teasers, mostly vague statements from the lead actor and producer Coco Martin. In all TV advertisements, Martin promises that the film is for and about "every filipino." With this statement, curiosity is directed on why the subject matter (Noynoy Aquino) involves the Filipino.

Parallel Construction and Character Juxtaposition

When does the propaganda end and the film begin? The question is answered eventually, in sporadic and indirect manner, as the narrative progresses.

There are two narratives in *Noy*: the narrative of the documentary and the fictional narrative. These narratives are interwoven, each giving input to the other. Aside from a single staged scene where Martin's character is asking for a wheelchair from Aquino, all the other footages are placed through a separating tool: the video monitor/computer screen. The monitor is the medium of transition between the two narratives, demonstrating a conscious handling of the documentary material to attempt to veer away from the conventions of propaganda. The documentary is presented only as a part of the story but not



Figure 2. The two Noys: Coco Martin (left) and President Noynoy Aquino (right) in a scene from the movie. Photo from the film's official website.

the story itself. The fictional narrative functions as buffers of the documentary; it intervenes with the “real” in very strong cinematic statements. As a cinematic device, it allows suspension of awe from the viewer to become aware that the celebrity may just be a product of his parents’ legacy, or a conspirator in Hacienda Luisita massacre, or a president wannabe. In this film, the heterotopic Aquino is recognized as spectacle and so is subjected to critical interventions.

There are two Noys in the film – Noynoy Aquino and Noy the protagonist. Their stories are told in parallel construction. Parallel construction is often used to demarcate an occurrence from another, mostly necessitated by different timelines/periods, varying locations or separate worlds. The film achieves this demarcation as the cinematic flow shifts from the fictional to the real but it somehow innovates the construction with liminalities. The demarcation of the parallels is not completely allowed, and apparently not a goal, since the two characters are juxtaposed as two individuals with the same narrative, only in different forms and social classes. While parallelism of the two stories is achieved, the dichotomy of class, the rich and the poor, the influential and the powerless, is strengthened. As a whole, the juxtaposition further confronts the difference and vice versa.

The liminal blending of narrative elements, the push and pull of narrative planes and juxtaposition of the two Noys, present an answer to the initial question. There are techniques used to identify temporal difference, concepts of real and fabricated space and distinctness of the real and the fabricated, but these are not utilized to dismiss propaganda. The effect is not a transition from propaganda to sociopolitical film but an obtained marriage of propaganda and sociopolitical criticism through film. The film’s tagline “How can one man’s dream define another’s destiny?” confirms this orientation.

Re(a/e)lism

Manolo “Noy” Agapito, the filmic character, is a journalist wannabe from an urban community submerged in flood, one of the many towns in Metro Manila that are permanently affected by typhoon Ondoy. He gets a job as TV journalist through falsifying school documents and buying a demo-reel from Recto. His first project is to document Aquino’s campaign. In between campaign scenes, we see him interacting with his family (mother played by Cherry Pie Picache, older brother played by Joem Bascon, and younger sister played by Cheska Billiones) and his lover Divine played by Erich Gonzales. Every so often, his supervisor (Vice Ganda) and his editor (Baron Geisler) bombard him with criticisms since his video materials allegedly lack substance. Occasionally, we hear him talking to minor characters such as the boatman and the vendor about economic struggles.



Figure 3. Screenshot of the Agapito family praying together. L-R: Coco Martin, Cheska Billones, Cherry Pie Picache and Joem Bascon. Photo from the film's official website.

As each character is introduced, another social problem is underlined. The mother is an illiterate widow working as freelance manicurist. When an American courts her, she is influenced by Noy to entertain the suitor in pursuit of the American dream. Unfortunately, the American beats her and Noy gets in trouble hitting the guy. The policemen, as in usual cases, take sides with the American. The sister is a grade school student who excels in school. However, she loses her sight due to undiagnosed diabetes. Noy's lover is a call center agent waiting for her official boyfriend to bring her to Dubai. She claims being in love with Noy but financial matters force her to marry her OFW boyfriend and work in Dubai. The brother is crippled after an encounter with a gang. When Noy gives him a wheelchair, he tries to earn a living shining shoes and selling illegal drugs. His illegal activities cause him trouble and eventually Noy's death. The stories of these characters carry commentaries on poverty, politics, education system, misgovernance, abuse of power, health, environmental crisis, graft and corruption, among others.

The film has given us clues, the signs and symbols of sociopolitical struggles that are familiar to us in cinema and in real life. The composition of the family is in itself a collaboration of such symbolisms. The mother who cannot read nor write, the brother who cannot walk, and the young sister who turns blind, symbolically present a limited past, an incapacitated present and a sightless future. And of course, the protagonist Noy, a dreamer intending to cross the boundaries of poverty and comfort, of the worlds of the educated and the deprived, serves as the central symbol that holds together desires of the other characters. The narrative

progresses in an exploration of the everyday, of the mundane yet seemingly impossible day-to-day life typical of the urban poor families.

It may not be as revolutionary or socialistic to be considered a protest film but it is successful in achieving a presentation of criticism to counter the hype of the Aquino spectacle. Moreso, the film upholds the fact that politics and governance are in direct link to narratives of the poor (the most prevalent theme in cinema).

Marriage of Conventions and the Narrator's After-affect: The Third Level of Discourse

The film's storytelling and tempo satisfies mainstream aesthetics as well as the aesthetics of realism in independent cinema. It may be described as a limited realism, adapting toned-down acting, in-location shooting, and non-cinematic directions but dropping other realist techniques such as stasis, long takes, long shot or hand-held cinematography. Technically speaking, aside from interweaving narratives, the film is also an attempt at interweaving styles and standards of mainstream and independent cinema.

Narration is another innovative aspect of the film *Noy*. In the first scene, the voice-over says: "*Lahat ng makikita mo sa pelikulang ito ay totoo, pwera lang ako* (Everything you see in this film is real except me)." This line illustrates how the omniscient character-narrator functions beyond telling the story to supply more of a reconnaissance or an "after-sight." Beyond adding a detail to a scene or verbalizing a character's emotion or abstract ideas, he voices out recollections. The narration seems to blur or break the limitations of character-narration as well as the over-objectiveness of the omniscient. This form of narration is most important in achieving the critical level of the narrative. Its implications and nuances are explicated in the following section.

While the parallel narratives show juxtaposed realities (the actual and the fabricated), the narration directs the audience to find more than just linkage but a disparity. Towards the end of the film, the narration points out the ironic and illogical concept of hope attached to the name Aquino. He goes on opining that hope is not exclusive nor is it from a specific source, articulating that to hear change uttered by a politician does not mean an actualization of change. Change, according to him, is pursued.

The Noys and the Pinoy

Because the narration is in the tone of "the after," the tendency to be preachy or overimposing is avoided. However, it also presents a disconnect; especially towards the third act when the narration sounds inspirational rather than

declarative. The abrupt concluding lines make it sound detached and in that instance of detachment, the connection to the viewer as a protagonist is lost. But this disconnection is not a limitation. As mentioned in the previous discussion, there is no attempt for the two narratives to complement each other; the juxtaposition is presented not to present the two Noy's as mirrored images but to highlight the disconnections.

Take for instance the scenes where Noy (Coco Martin) interacts with his siblings. We see him passionately inspiring his siblings to hope and believe in a promising future. We see him assuring his sister of further education, finding a way to provide a wheelchair for his older brother, and convincing his mother that there is still a way for their family to live a more comfortable life. We witness these instances while the characters are inside their own familial space. Their personal space inevitably assists us to invest reactions such as sympathy, empathy or probably identification. In comparison, the other Noy (Pres. Aquino) is also visible in juxtaposed family scenes but in contrary, these scenes are mostly set in public spaces (the campaign stage, the recording studio, the backstage, the basketball court, etc.)

The manner of presentation of the two stories may easily be taken as similar but a closer look show that they actually are dichotomies. This point is further clarified in the conclusion of both stories. Noy the protagonist is situated in conflicts concerning his brother, his love interest, his mother's American suitor, and, later, his job. Throughout this shower of conflicts we sympathize with Noy because he appears to us as human and as close to the typical, making decisions that we as audiences could have made given similar situations. Despite the courage that Noy has sustained throughout the plots and subplots, conflicts and subconflicts of the narrative, his story ends with his death. Whether or not death here means defeat, tragedy is certain. Tragedy in this country is a common narrative in thousands of victims of feudal oppressions, political killings, neocolonial maneuverings, and, most especially, the most prevalent form – poverty.

On the other hand, any form of conflict is absent in the parallel story. There are, however, implied conflicts faced by Noy as a presidential candidate but mostly are situated in either the backstory or the future. The supposed conflicts (assuming this Noy considers them as conflicts), namely Cory's death and Aquino's candidacy, are both outside the timeline of the film even if they are within its landscape. In effect, the story of the other Noy provides very little, if not absent, potential to connect to the viewer. We are presented his "human side" but barely beyond what we know of him as Noy the first-born of the heterotopic Aquino family. The narration, as a cinematic device, supports this intent.

The film intends to present to us a story of the Filipino. The narrative structure seemingly gives us two faces of the Filipino but the narratives themselves as woven together offer us an insight of the disparity of the two Noys. The narration, as a cinematic device, assists to successfully bring us to inquire: which of the two Noys is the Filipino? The answer seems very clear.

Defying Boundaries

In summary, the film *Noy* is a successful experimentation of how conventions, techniques, and varying standpoints can be combined into an interlocking, intersecting new form. It illustrates the possibility of connecting actual reality with images of reality and vice versa to (re)introduce counter-ideas. This process of interweaving suggests reflexivity to the audience instead of outright subversion or automatic rejection/acceptance of social phenomenon.

As mentioned earlier, the propaganda aspect of the film is maintained. However, the fictional narrative is used to balance the persuasion. In other words, the fiction does not soften the propaganda, but does extend it to critical reflections of what really happens when icons or images of heroes surface in our society. The propagandistic aspect is maintained but only to allow a commentary that both recognizes and criticizes the social landscape.

Noy is a film that exemplifies the power of cinema to raise questions, to provide an inquiry even when a culture appears to be enveloped by a single specific belief, submerged in its own spectacle. The film was shown after the elections, when Aquino was already president elect. The time of exhibition is also a testament to cinema's potential to remind us of the need for the nation to be self-reflexive. Cinema in this sense is an account of a specific point in history working permanently even after history is made.

Noy is the country's official entry to the 83rd Academy Awards for Best Foreign Language Film.

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