

In the Vortex of Violence

Fernando A. Austria, Jr.

Film Review of ***Tribu***

Director/

Writer : Jim Libiran

Producer : 8 Glasses Production
Inc., Cinemalaya
Foundation,
Independent
Filmmakers
Cooperative of the
Philippines

Cast : Havy Bagatsing, Karl
Eigger Balingit, Honey Concepcion, Mhalouh
Crisologo, Charena Escala, Jamir Garcia, Rey Javier
Guevarra, Apollo Labastida, and Gilbert Lozano

Released : 2007

Running Time : 95 minutes

Awards : Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival (Best Actor,
Best Sound, Best Film-Full Length Feature),
Cinemanila International Film Festival (Best
Ensemble), Gawad Urian Awards (Best Music), Paris
Cinema (Young Filmmaker Award); also nominated
for Gawad Urian Awards Best Picture, Best
Direction, Best Screenplay, Best Actor, Best
Supporting Actress, Best Cinematography, Best
Editing, Best Production Design, and Best Sound



The film *Tribu* is the story of Ebet, a boy less than 10 years old, and his coming of age in a world where innocence is trumped by his environment and his limited choice of role models. It is an account of street gangs – their initiation rites, zero-sum wars, “gangsta” rap, and the responsibilities and moral considerations of being part of these gangs that give members a sense of identity. It is the narrative of Tondo – its dingy slums, filthy streets and alleys, and tainted air. It highlights the abject poverty that remains constant and heart-wrenching even with the efforts of those with inadequate sensibilities who pursue the true, good, and beautiful in “Metro Gwapo” to conceal and camouflage

this picture of deprivation. The visceral presentation of Tondo is a big part of its storyline.

We know that there is something amiss, dysfunctional, and rotten in the kingdom of Tondo when we hear the freestyle gangsta rap going off-rhythm and missing more than just a rhyme or two. The director, Jim Libiran, said that the members of these gangs or tribes “are out-of-school youth whose poverty and lack of education almost assure most of them a not-so-bright future” (Conde, 2007). In *Tribu*, Libiran presents this “not-so-bright future” in a vortex of violence and provides us a glimpse of the circumstances of the youth of Tondo who are sucked into this vortex.

Take Ebet for example. In his opening narration we learn that his father told him that “*Ang Tondo ay para sa matapang at matibay lang. Bawal ang durwag at takot kahit bata ka pa. Dito ang bata puwedeng maging siga.*” (Tondo is only for the brave and tough.

There is no room for the cowardly and scared even if you’re just a child. Here, a child can become a toughie.) Like any other child we see him play with his peers, bring his mother food, and seek comfort and solace while he sleeps beside his mother. On the other hand, we see him mimic the gang wars while playing with his peers, drink beer with the Thugz Angels, and try to fit in as he acts as an informer for the Sacred Brown Tribe (SBT). With his absentee father and crack-whore mother, being part of a gang appears to be the only reason for living in Tondo.



Ebet, played by Karl Eigger Balingit, in a scene from the movie. Retrieved January 21, 2009 from http://www.pep.ph/photos/531/Behind_the_scenes_of_%22Tribu%22/num/0

In this place, where even a stare can get you killed, how would you expect Ebet to react when he sees how his mother is dishonored by another man? He observes his mother violated in the act of making love. It may just be kinky sex for her, but in his mind, the penis is like a knife thrust in her soul. When her mother's partner says "*Siguro kung wala ako rito kung sino-sinong lalaki ang pinapapasok mo para tirahin ka.*" (Whenever I'm not here, I suspect that you allow any man to penetrate you), the word "*tirahin*" (used in a colloquial sense) takes on another meaning: to kill. He takes to heart his father's advice that Tondo is not a place for the cowardly and scared. And like the child-god of Tondo, he takes the law in his own hands. Ebet exchanges his toy gun for a real one. We see him enter his mother's room while she is making love with another man. And as the screen fades to black, we can presume that Ebet exacts his revenge. Ebet has dipped his foot in the ebb and flow of street gangs in Tondo.

In the past, there were the OXO, Sige-Sige, Sputnik, Bahala Na, and other street gangs in Tondo which became notorious in the 1960s and whose members are now probably wasting away in prisons or are already dead. Today, Libiran jogs our collective amnesia and tells us that the spirit of these gangs is still alive, kicking, and continuing the tradition of force and violence in the various slum areas in the country. *Tribu* is not a gentle reminder of the past but a harsh wake-up call that indeed Thugz Angels, SBT, Diablos and other such gangs are real.

Members of these gangs go through painful initiation rites and often life-threatening activities. We witness how boys, not much older than 15, scream "I love Thugz Angels" as they are whacked with a blunt instrument and how girls of a similar age are made to choose between "pain and pleasure" to become part of the tribe. We watch how the members of SBT blindly agree, in a process of group think, to take up weapons and fight to the death in order to avenge the death of another gang member. The street-poem sung at the beginning of the film gives us a clue to the nature of these gangs:

Austria

*Ako ay isang bata,
Marunong lang sumulat
Ng mga awiting gusto kong sumikat at kumalat.
Makilala sa aking lugar...
(I am a child
Who only knows how to write
Songs I hope to be popular and disseminated.
Known to my place...)*

This song is an embodiment of what these children seek: identity and fame. The brother of the leader of Thugz Angels wants to join the tribe because this is the most popular gang in Tondo. By being a member, he can claim its identity and power. He can also get protection from the dangerous elements in this town. And despite being told that when he becomes a member of the gang he would always be in danger and would have to carry weapons all the time, and that his mother would negatively react and blame his brother for leading him into the dark world of gangs and destroying his future, he appears resolute in joining the tribe. In the end, even before he becomes a member of Thugz Angels, he gets killed in the riot. He is a mere bystander who goes against the characteristics of a typical youth who is prone to joining street-gangs. He is in school and has a future ahead of him. He has the support of his family and friends, as well as his girlfriend who works in a call center. He therefore has the opportunity for positive social interaction (Burnley, Edmunds, Gaboury, & Seymour: 2008). This just shows that for the children of Tondo, joining a tribe is a “damned-if-you-do, damned-if-you-don’t” proposition.

Libiran uses Ebet’s point of view to survey the gangland of Tondo. Like Ebet, we, as part of society, are complicit in the “gang riots in Tondo and in other Tondos of the Philippines” (Libiran in Conde, 2007). Various vignettes, the crux of Libiran’s narrative, show how social institutions have failed Tondo. The woman running after her husband with a knife represents a dysfunctional family. The Meralco inspector brushing off



Sacred Brown Tribe (SBT) gang members in a scene from the movie. Retrieved January 20, 2009 from http://www.pep.ph/photos/531/Behind_the_scenes_of_%22Tribu%22/num/6

complaints from the residents demonstrates the lack of social responsibility from corporate institutions. The police and the Tanod Bayan's callous and abusive treatment of a gang member who was judged before being proven guilty and the "chicken *pagpag*" vendor's poetic tirade against the government's priority for debt servicing speaks clearly of the state. Media's global influence is telling in the New York "boys-in-the-hood" style gangsta rap. And the religious statue that stands in the battleground of these tribes illustrates the church's apathy towards the desperate plight of the least of our brethren.

It is not a coincidence that Libiran provides a visual essay on the feast of the Santo Niño, the patron of Tondo, after establishing the squalor of the town at the start of his film. He sets the tone of his narrative by offering a commentary on how the church, and by inference also most of society's institutions, has lost its meaning. This institution is like the colorful "Metro

Gwapo” façade that hides the problems of poverty and provides a meaningless solution to social ills.

The tribal rituals associated with the festivities juxtaposed with Ebet’s narration and the furious love-making articulate the primal instinct needed in surviving Tondo. Lofty ideals are debased and replaced by mundane and violent morals where the child becomes god: “*Dito ang bata puwedeng maging siga. Dito ang bata puwedeng maging sikat. Dito nga ang bata puwedeng maging diyos.*” (Here the child can become a toughie. Here a child can become famous. In fact, here a child can become god.)

The director, Jim Libiran, culls from his practice as a broadcast journalist, his knowledge from being a student of film, and his experience of growing up in Tondo to create this documentary-drama. He uses the conventions of a dramatic play which is cast and shot while employing “the looks and sound of a documentary material to deliver a more ‘realistic’ impact” (Corner in Creeber, 2003: 32).

With this genre, Libiran creates a fictional narrative with the rawness and immediacy of a news report. His work may lack the gleam and polish of a Hollywood big-budgeted movie, but this intended lack of technical sophistication works in his favor. I remember seeing a short film by Libiran on the same subject. The way the street war was choreographed and edited like a music video was magnificent and moving. But this is the polish that Libiran opted not to use in *Tribu*. He maintains the crudeness of a gang war with the unpolished editing style in order not to glamorize and prettify the very violence he riles against. He does not want to make us immune to this tragedy. And by using actual gang members as his main actors – as well as resorting to unedited and unrevised street poetry, shaky camera movements and unstudied compositions, uneven and sometimes dark lighting, and a discordant color palette in the design – Libiran constructs the narrative of Tondo in a manner that tries to remain true to the reality of this poverty and violence.

This genre that Libiran uses has been the subject of a debate among critics and theorists as to the “extent to which these techniques ‘blur the boundaries’ of fact and fiction, ‘dupe’ viewers and sacrifice factual accuracy to dramatic storytelling” (Ronlinson, n.d.). It has also been argued that “appropriating documentary styles in drama is a politically valid approach since it is merely presenting facts from a different viewpoint than those offered in factual programmes, which are themselves subjective” (Loach & Garnett in Rolinson, n.d.). It is this different viewpoint that Libiran uses to make his political statement. But in presenting reality using the documentary-drama, striking a balance between what is real and fictional as well as finding the right mix to represent reality and provide dramatic motivations are often problematic.

In one review, the film is said to be “a formulaic boys-in-the-hood flick revved up by authentic Manila street rap” (Lee, 2007). Indeed the plot is predictable and at times distracting from what Libiran tries to document. We already know the cycle of violence among street gangs. We know that the plot ends with what is best expressed in Filipino: “*Ubusan ng lahi*” (Elimination of race). As such, Libiran highlights the social situation around the violence in an effort to provide reasons behind the violence. And at the same time he gives us a glimpse of the personal circumstances that motivate his characters to explain the violence. But at certain points, the discourse on violence such as the initiation rights, the drinking and rap sessions, the gang wars, and the unfolding of the quagmire that is Tondo is slowed down by the



Jim Libiran briefs his staff before a take. Retrieved January 21, 2009 from http://www.pep.ph/photos/531/Behind_the_scenes_of_%22Tribu%22/num/3

attempt to recount the plot behind the gang wars and build unified and three-dimensional characterizations for its main protagonists. At the same time, the presentation of vignettes, such as that of the fighting couple, the Meralco inspector and the “chicken *pagpag*” vendor, while documenting the social realities of Tondo, distracts from the dramatization of the flesh-and-blood stories of the characters. The connection between the social and the personal is not clarified and expounded.

Tribu succeeds in reminding us of the story of Tondo. It is very much like a news story because it calls attention to and makes us aware of the reality of gang wars. But it begs for an in-depth investigative report to make sense of and give meaning to the complexity that Libiran represents in his film.

References

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