

# Heneral Luna: Appreciation and Reservation

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In the last half century, *Heneral Luna* has emerged as a cinematic phenomenon, not only for its budget (at 80M plus, one of the biggest in recent history) but for the tremendous reception it got at the box-office, with shows extending to many weeks as word of mouth spread like wild fire and eventually earning an unprecedented gross income of 240M when it closed. Such reception seemed to have been warranted by a script that offered some very sharp insights into Filipino society, and by the superior quality of its direction, acting, cinematography, and editing. *Heneral Luna* was food for the eye, the brain, and the heart.

Covering the period from around 13 August 1898 to 5 June 1899, the screenplay merges fact and fiction to flesh out the character of General Antonio Luna, General-in-Chief of the Philippine armed forces, as he is defined by his efforts to transform the scattered military units of the revolution into a professional fighting army for the Republic, his conflicts with the vacillating Emilio Aguinaldo, the opportunistic *ilustrados* (educated Filipinos), and undisciplined soldiery, and his tragic assassination in Cabanatuan.

Through this engaging narrative, the screenplay of Henry Francia, E.A. Rocha, and Jerrold Tarog articulates its most important insight, that in the struggle to defend our independence from the American invaders, “we [Filipinos] are our own worst enemies” because we cannot think beyond the narrow confines of clan and family. In one scene, Luna lashes out at the

ilustrados who refused to go to war with the Americans because it would be bad for their businesses and their families. In another, Luna uses a stick to drive out relatives of officers who occupied the train that was supposed to transport much-needed troops and ammunition to Bataan. Practicing what he preached, Luna allowed his brother Joaquin to languish in jail to atone for the drunken brawl he caused because of a woman. In a society that continues to enthrone family as the supreme institution, the thought that family is also the principal obstacle to our unity as a nation is an unsettling epiphany that is much needed in our times.

Just as novel to contemporary audiences perhaps is the revelation that the struggle against the Americans was much weakened by the factionalism among the leaders of the revolution, with a minority composed of Mabini and Luna absolutely dedicated to the ideal of independence, being undermined by a majority of wealthy entrepreneurs who thought nothing of switching loyalty from Spain, to the Republic, and then to the US to protect their own interests. Such a revelation cannot but resonate with contemporary Filipinos who have witnessed the shameless turncoatism of their political leaders from 1946 to the post-2016 elections period. In *Luna*, the present plays out in the past, and we get to understand how the country has been betrayed by its leaders over and over again.

And one of those leaders was Emilio Aguinaldo, whose commitment to the cause of independence was marred by his obsession with protecting, consolidating, and expanding his hold on power. Thinking like a political warlord of our times, he glossed over the lack of discipline among Cavite generals and troops and tolerated the insubordination of Captain Pedro Janolino, because he believed that the only loyalty he could count on was that of his fellow Caviteños. Against Mabini's better judgment, Aguinaldo allowed the anti-Luna elements to multiply, setting the stage for the assassination of the general he most (but wrongly) feared as his rival for power. The erstwhile *gobernadorcillo* (mayor) of Kawit simply could not rise above his parochial fears to the demand of being the president of a nation, thereby losing sight of the greater ideals that he had set out to serve. To put his fears to rest, Bonifacio and Luna had to be sacrificed. And when Luna was finally killed, Aguinaldo aggravated his guilt by letting the murderers go scot-free and eliminating the remaining supporters of Luna.

But where most of the men are flawed, the women come out as brave and decisive, whether as uniformed soldiers at the front lines or as volunteers of the Red Cross attending to the sick and wounded. The fictional Isabel, Luna's sweetheart, sacrifices her relationship with the general so that both of them can better serve the cause of independence that is higher than them. And when she and her friends later intervene in the in-fighting between

Luna and Mascardo to prevent unnecessary bloodshed, Isabel chides them both for acting like children. In this film, the women are liberated – and liberating.

Happily, the gravitas of the film is matched by its dynamic storytelling, which results from its masterful direction, powerful acting, and innovative cinematography and editing. Known for small-scale indie films like *Confessional*, *Mangayanan*, and *Sana Dati*, Tarog in this film rises to the challenge of an epic work. He proves himself a master of the *mise-en-scene* in long interior scenes, such as the sequences in Aguinaldo's office where the president first meets with Mabini, Paterno, Buencamino, with Mascardo later walking into the frame, which segues to the scene where Paterno and Buencamino disappear into a backroom as Luna presents his resignation to Aguinaldo but instead gets permission to build his Cordillera fortification, which then segues to the scene where Aguinaldo transfers to the sofa opposite his desk and listens to all the reasons why he must get rid of Luna. The way the characters move around the set clarifies the relationships between them as well as the shifting of Aguinaldo's point of view about Luna, whom he now begins to regard not as an asset but as a threat. This last scene becomes doubly powerful because it is intercut with shots of Luna playing flamenco-type music on his guitar, while sitting on the edge of his bed in front of an open capiz window framing a full moon fiercely shining in the night sky.

Fresh and effective too is Tarog's handling of the exterior scenes. In the first battle scene, he allows us to see not only the large formations and encounters but also the individual interactions and movements of Luna and the soldiers under him. In the confrontation scene between Luna and Mascardo, he holds us captive from beginning to end with alternating long shots, top shots, and close ups that allow us to witness the movement of troops and the changing emotions of the contending generals. In the assassination sequence, he builds the tension through acting, camera movement and angles, and editing, climaxing in the carnage where the camera assumes the point of view of the conspirators circling around and wielding their bolos at Luna.

Powerful are the performances of John Arcilla and the (mostly theater) actors he is pitted against. With an uncanny resemblance to Luna (except that Luna was younger), Arcilla captures the sincerity and fervor of Luna's love for country, as well as his defining (and self-destructive) traits – impulsive, explosive, and eventually, implusive. For this role Arcilla had been amply prepared by playing Luna in two Tanghalang Pilipino productions years back. With no big stars in the principal cast, the film delivers memorable acting from the ensemble, notably from Nonie Buencamino (Buencamino),

Leo Martinez (Paterno), Archie Alemania (Rusca), Joem Bascon (Roman), and Mylene Dizon (Isabel).

Storytelling in *Luna* is at once visual, unusual, and arresting. Cinematographer Pong Ignacio uses a top shot to follow Antonio Luna on horseback charging into the American lines, and later, the Bernal brothers, also at full speed on horseback, parting ways at a crossroads to avoid arrest and mislead their assassins. In the assassination scene, the camera turns into one of the conspirators as it shuttles back and forth between the unsuspecting Luna entering the *convento* (parish priest's residence) and the other conspirators lurking in the corners and doorways itching to pounce on him. Using a crane, the camera first records the arrival of Luna at camp one morning through an ordinary tight shot and then moves up to reveal the thousands of "volunteers" that he had rounded up from different camps to help dig the trenches in Bagbag. In one long take, Ignacio shoots the nostalgia sequence fluidly – from the Christmas dinner to the painting of the *La Parisienne* to the publication of *La Solidaridad* to the execution of Jose Rizal to the fencing match between Juan and Antonio Luna. Finally, the camera hovers like a buzzard or angel of death around Luna as he sits atop a hill before the tragedy, showing him alone and lonely, far from and above the madding crowd, as he thinks about his destiny and decides to follow it because "a man who has feelings is not a slave."

And what the camera captures, editor Tarog weaves together in a truly fascinating and meaningful way. The exchange of telegrams between Luna in Kalumpit and Mascardo in Arayat and their personal reactions to these are tightly edited in a sequence of crisp short takes, to help build the tension between them, up to the confrontation. The brutality of the American conquerors is shown in a montage of scenes which visually contradict the voice-over of an American dishing out Imperialist rhetoric about America's Manifest Destiny. At the end of the film, the testimonies of Aguinaldo and Buencamino insisting on their innocence in the Luna tragedy are belied by the scenes of the repeated hacking and shooting of Luna's dead body, the frantic search for the incriminating telegram, the despoliation of Luna's body, and the search for and murder of the Bernal brothers. The film ends with the voices of Luna and the interviewer Joven declaring that "it is better to die in the field of war than accept foreign rule" as the huge Philippine flag hanging on Luna's wall slowly burns from bottom up, illustrating how independence was slowly devoured by the flames of personalism and factionalism among the leaders of the Republic.

But even as *Luna* must be praised for its achievements, certain ideas and images it propounds must be re-examined. The film begins with a caveat that it has "taken liberties" with the "depiction of historical figures

and the order of historical events”, which to my mind was not necessary, highly inadvisable, and not permissible. Historical facts are immutable and, while fictionalization is often necessary to fill in the lacunae and create believable characters and coherent stories, such fictionalization must build on given facts, not bend the facts to suit the fiction – precisely because the producers have opted to do a historical film, not simply a period film. The film’s disregard for historical facts is evident in the seeming lack or inadequacy of research on basic data. For example, the old name of what is now Plaridel town is not Quinga (pronounced Kingga in the movie), but Quingua (pronounced Kingwa) because the “g” on the latter is a Spanish soft “g.” Luna was a pharmacist by training, and a chemist by occupation. He was not a doctor as his mother says during her last visit to Luna. The first shot that started the Philippine-American War was fired at 9 pm on 4 February 1899 on the Balsahan or San Juan bridge that connects Sta. Mesa on one side and San Juan on the other, with the river serving as the demarcation line separating the territories held by the Americans and those controlled by the Filipinos. It was near that bridge on the San Juan side (therefore the Filipino side) that US Private Willie Grayson cried “Halt” before firing at the Filipino soldier who did not heed his call. (Agoncillo 1960, 452-56). Setting this incident on a newly-graded dirt road in the open field at high noon changes and confuses the nature of the confrontation, making it a simple accidental meeting between American and Filipino soldiers. Furthermore, it makes the Filipinos look like the trespassers when the opposite was true. Lastly, the open-breast attack launched by the 6 Filipino soldiers against the 20 armed Americans from a distance of about 200 meters makes the Filipinos appear idiotic and the whole scene illogical and ridiculous.

In a historical film, production design is expected to be well-researched and faithful to the period and material culture of the film, because on it depends the texture, ambience, and credibility of the film. While the film used buildings that were old, many modern additions to these buildings were not even masked. The church of Baras, Rizal which was used for the Cabanatuan church stands on a huge platform whose railings had newly cemented *pasamano* (handrail) and a convento door which was very modern in design (used as background for Rusca’s gunfight with the Kawit soldiers). The bridge on which American soldiers massacre a Filipino family in the Philippine-American war montage looks like it was recently built by the Department of Public Works and Highways. In the church where Luna and his men pray before they go to war, the statues of the Virgin of Lourdes and the Virgin of Fatima are anachronistic. The devotion to Lourdes came to the Philippines only in the 1890s and there was only one big image newly-installed in the Capuchin church in Intramuros which was

completed only in 1894 (Javellana 2010, 251). On the other hand, the Virgin of Fatima was supposed to have appeared to the three children only in 1917, more than a decade after the Philippine-American war. Mass-produced contemporary *santos* (saints images) from commercial stores in Quiapo are awkwardly placed on small tables and pedestals at the foot of the stairs of the Cabanatuan convent, or appear on makeshift altars with lighted candles in the convento of Bulacan. In Isabel's room, the bed and tables are draped in yards of *gantsilyo* covers, but this kind of crochet was introduced only in the 1920s.

Most of all, the costumes leave much to be desired. While many of the soldier and peasant costumes are acceptable, the red pants of the Cavite troops (designed to show their refusal to follow the prescribed uniform of the army under Luna) would have been ill-advised, and definitely impractical, because they would have been easy targets on the battlefield. The costumes of the ilustrados in the two Aguinaldo meetings were European pants and coats (some with vests under the coats) but of different styles and periods. European clothes were usually worn only for pictures, weddings or one's funeral. For ordinary occasions and in the tropical heat, upperclass men would have worn, if at all, light-colored cotton *americana abierta* (coat buttoned up to mid-chest only to show shirt and tie) or *americana cerrada* (coat buttoned all the way up to upright collar), but most probably the formal *baro* (shirt) with canes and hats. Generals and soldiers would have been in uniform, including Aguinaldo, who is here made to wear the white suit and butterfly tie that he wore in his old age as a private citizen. And so with the costumes of the women, who in all their outdoor scenes are overdressed, wearing embroidered *baro* (blouse) and *pañuelo* (formal kerchief) of the 1890s (sometimes not even matching or using contemporary fabrics), which are wrongly worn with *sayang de kola* (formal skirt with train) of the 1930s, curiously worn without the required *enaguas* (half slips). For such scenes in the 1890s, the women would have opted for ankle-length *siesgo* skirts (of equal length all around) with *enaguas* underneath and a *tapis* (overskirt) over it, and on top a simple cotton *baro* over *corpino* or undershirt, and a large *panyo* (informal kerchief), not *pañuelo*, to cover the shoulders or the head if need be. It is surprising that up to now, after the publication of several scholarly studies on Filipino costumes of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, production designers continue to produce period costumes that are more products of fantasy than of research.

Some liberties taken with the dates and positions of characters lead to a confusion of relationships between these characters. In the first ilustrado meeting which is supposed to be happening around 13 August 1899 in Bulacan, Paterno is identified as head of cabinet and Mabini as prime

minister. On said date, Mabini was an adviser of Aguinaldo, becoming the latter's head of cabinet and prime minister only on 2 January 1899 (Majul 1970, 101). On 13 August 1899, Paterno was not yet with the Revolutionary government, joining it only in 15 September 1898 in Malolos when he was elected president of the Malolos Congress (Agoncillo 1960, 283). Paterno was appointed head of cabinet, only after Mabini's resignation, made effective 7 May 1899 (Majul 1970, 136), so it is preposterous to have Mabini as prime minister and Paterno as head of cabinet sitting at the same table. Moreover, Aguinaldo's office in August 1899 was in Bacoor not Bulacan, because the move to Malolos happened only after the American take-over of Intramuros on 13 August (Agoncillo 1960, 275). Lastly, when Luna was assassinated on June 5, 1899, Mabini had been resigned from the cabinet for a month already and was already in Balungao, Pangasinan (Majul 1970, 140), so he would not have attended the funeral of Luna, especially not in the company of Paterno and Buencamino who dislodged him from the cabinet. Historical facts have to be respected because they are the building blocks of history, and, by extension, of any historical film.

But even more serious are some of the ideas advanced by the film, first of which is the statement : "If we are to become a nation, we need radical change. There is an enemy bigger than America: ourselves." While it is true that class interests and Cavitismo became the obstacles to the creation of a unified resistance against the enemy by the Philippine army, the American imperialist forces were still the biggest enemy of the Filipino people at the turn of the century. While pretending to be a friend of Aguinaldo's government, the US slowly shipped her soldiers to the archipelago and systematically grabbed more and more territories from Filipino control (Agoncillo 1960, 179, 461). After the signing of the Treaty of Paris in December 1898 where the US bought the islands from Spain for 20 million dollars, the American army prepared to subjugate the country by force of arms (Agoncillo 1977, 245-46). If the Americans had not come, the Filipinos would have declared their independence from Spain and from there struggled among themselves to build a new nation, which would be, in spite of all differences among regions and personalities, Filipino. American colonization aborted the birth of that new nation.

Questionable too is the concept of patriotism that Luna in the film proffers, as seen in the Lt. Garcia episode. To Luna, Garcia is a patriot, real, rare and like no other, because he volunteered to take pot shots at the American colonel having dinner inside a nipa hut during the short ceasefire between the Filipino and American camps. Like an adolescent delighting at a practical joke, Luna and his men cheer Garcia for proving to the Americans "that we are not afraid of them." In its narrative, the film endorses such

behaviour as patriotic, when, if anything such juvenile joke would only have succeeded in alerting and angering the enemy further.

Moreover, the film passes Luna off as the true patriot when he accuses the pacifist ilustrado of opportunistically shifting loyalties to three successive governments and Buencamino of being a traitor like his son. While there might have been a basis for such accusations, Luna was in no position to act high and mighty because during the first phase of the revolution, when he was imprisoned in Fort Santiago, he denounced the Katipunan and the revolution, and squealed on his fellow reformists, albeit under duress (Jose 1972, 111-113; Joaquin 1977, 164). The film should have presented this other side of Luna to give a more balanced definition of his patriotism.

Lastly, the film subscribes to the notion that Luna was the “best general” of the revolution and the republic. Aguinaldo admits it before Mascardo, Paterno and Buencamino, while Otis declares after the assassination that the Filipinos “killed the only general they had.” indeed, Luna would seem to have been a good strategist, as seen in his comprehensive plan to attack and recover Manila from the Americans, in his strategic plan to repulse the enemy through the trenches of Bagbag, Kalumpit, and Quingua, and in his grand design of building a fortification in the Cordillera. But the measure of a good general is not only in the planning but in the implementation of those strategies. As it was, none of these strategies succeeded or even materialized, the last because Luna was killed before it could even start. The first two, however, did not succeed because persons loyal to Aguinaldo refused to follow him, resenting his iron hand, sharp tongue, and what they perceived as his arrogance (“kayabangan”). While the Cavitenos were culpable in refusing to follow Luna’s orders, their insubordination was mitigated or even rationalized by the fact that Luna was hardly a likeable character, tending to be abusive to those he perceived as recalcitrants. Moreover, why would the ordinary soldiers discipline themselves when their General-in-Chief could not discipline himself? In the end, Luna could not implement his strategies because he could not control his outbursts, taking everything personally and confusing the personal with the professional.

The fight with Mascardo is a case in point. If Mascardo disobeyed Luna’s orders, Luna could have resolved the problem by simply asking Aguinaldo to order Mascardo to surrender to Luna, as actually happened in the end anyway. To exchange insults and threats with an inferior officer and worse, to leave Bagbag when the Americans were expected to attack anytime only because he had to personally bring Mascardo to his knees were impulsive and utterly bad decisions. These actuations prove that to Luna the settlement of what he considered as a personal insult and assault to his machismo was more important than commanding the troops manning the most important



line of defense against the Americans. Indeed, what seems to be lost in the flurry of admiration for Luna's colourful ways is that he was in fact a bad general, because he could not unite all forces to implement his strategies, and this because he could not control his abusive temper and what he probably considered his "righteous anger" at those he considered less patriotic than himself. Sadly, he confused the country's good with his own; or worse, he loved his country, but he loved his ego even more. Blinded by that ego, he could not see that one can exact discipline in the ranks without having to insult the rank and file, that one can be firm without being harsh or unkind, that one can prevail above others without empty rant or rave. No doubt Luna's fondness for direct assault, whether in the battle field or the meeting table, is mesmerizing, dramatic, and to him ego-satisfying. But in the end such belligerence simply alienated both the upper and the lower classes and left him and his leadership alone and ineffectual.

Not only his ways but his lack of compassion for the common man becomes apparent in the film, whether the writers intended it or not. He is able to mobilize thousands to work on his trenches but only because he used *Articulo Uno* to frighten them into acquiescence. At Cabanatuan, he slaps a guard who is gossiping and shabbily dressed and threatens to shoot him if he does not cut his hair immediately. In another scene, he scares all the vendors who gather around him by pulling out a gun. After this, he proceeds to terrify to death a frail old man vending chicken in a cage, by shooting the chicken dead so he could make the dramatic statement, "That is what I will do with all traitors; no one is exempt, not even the president." He later compensates the old man for the chicken but the old man, shaking uncontrollably, has been traumatized.

Which brings us to the question: If Luna's concept of patriotism is questionable and his military leadership seriously flawed, why does the audience still root for him in the film as a hero par excellence and condemn all his enemies as villains? Precisely because the film, unconsciously perhaps and unwittingly, allowed the narrative to degenerate into a popular genre -- the action film -- where the hero is the *bida* and the villains the *kontrabida*. Instead of aspiring to paint a faithful and more scientific portrayal of Luna as a man with his own strengths and weaknesses, the film chose to become a period action film a la Fernando Poe, Jr. (FPJ). Such a transformation was brought about I believe by fictional scenes that invest Luna with the characteristics of the typical action hero.

The FPJ wit is seen in the fictional episode where Luna, after discovering Janolino (in boxer shorts) in bed with a woman, drags the rebellious captain by his crotch from the house to the open public place to shame him in front of his troops, with the words that FPJ himself might have used (in Tagalog):

“Nasa ibang ulo ang utak ng inyong pinuno, at hindi naman ganoon kalaki ang utak niya” (The brains of your chief are in the wrong head. And the brains are not so big anyway.) When Luna confronts the British train supervisor, he speaks to the Brit in French, and then in English, but promptly orders his aides: “Nauubusan na ako ng Ingles. Sige na, hulihin nyo na. ‘Tangina naman, o’” (My English is running out. Arrest him now. Son of a bitch!) – a line calculated to endear him to a mass audience raised on broken-English comic dialogue of action film heroes.

Like the action film hero, Luna is also characterized as fearless, reckless even. Thus when he shoots the chicken and announces that that is what he will do with all traitors, including the president, Roman warns him that people might hear. Throwing caution to the winds, Luna answers arrogantly: “Hayaan mo silang makinig” (Let them listen.) And when the Filipino soldiers are beginning to be overwhelmed by enemy fire, he mounts his horse and charges into enemy lines to attract enemy fire, as Kevin Costner did in *Dances with Wolves* (albeit in the mode of an anti-hero). And if he is a roaring lion to his enemies, he is the meekest lamb before his mother and sweetheart, in true action hero fashion.

In characterizing Luna as an action hero, the film divests itself of the realistic and historical mode and in its stead assumes the values and worldview of the action genre. With this, the film’s critical stance disappears, as it romanticizes Luna’s virtues and glosses over his faults and inadequacies, and encourages the audience to do the same. This is how Luna gets transformed into the bida of the action genre, a superhero who talks and acts tough, thinking he has the ability to eliminate all his antagonists by himself. And because the audience loses its critical distance and now cheers for the hero, they are robbed of the chance to analyse and learn from the virtues of Luna and the errors that led to his defeat in battle and his tragic death.

At the end of the film, the wounded Rusca says: “We are our own worst enemies, so we all killed Luna” and we are expected to bow our heads and beat our breasts in shame. But wait, Luna’s tragedy was as much caused by his enemies as by himself. If the ilustrado factions could not go beyond their personal interests and Aguinaldo could not get over his Cavitismo, Luna for his part could not suppress or control his personal ego, which springs from a feeling of ilustrado superiority over the unlettered masses, a belief that he was the only true patriot, and a mercurial temper akin to a child’s who throws a tantrum when he does not get what he wants. And all this is rooted in the tragic fault, which is mentioned in Vivencio Jose’s biography of Luna: “Luna’s imagination swept away inconvenient facts and projected in front of him, not what was but what he willed should be there.” (Jose 1972, 127) As fate would have it, his will was foiled by the realities of his time. For a scientist, Luna was not empirical enough.

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