LECTURE

# Historiography of a "Lost" Cinema

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How is the history of a "lost" cinema written? The problematic one needs to confront in dealing with Cebu's "lost" cinema provides a daunting task for film historians desiring to write about a cinema when its films are lost, its filmmakers are long gone, and there is no archive to consult about its past. Even the scant historiography that is available is uneven and in need of scrupulous scrutiny and validation. Considering the difficulties faced in historicizing Cebu's "lost" film heritage, what key issues must be considered in studying the historiography that is written about a cinema burdened by "absence" and "loss"?

Three general issues need to be considered in studying the historiography surrounding the "lost" cinema of Cebu, based on the writings that still exist about this otherwise "absent" cinema. Historiography is simply defined here as a body of writings on the history of a movie industry that once developed in the island of Cebu, but which collapsed and materially disappeared by the end of the twentieth century. Although a body of historiographic writings has been left behind to attest to its once robust existence, it is not enough to satisfy our knowledge about this cinema that once rivaled that of Manila. Few documents—written or artifact—are still extant. The loss has been a major one, and in this context, researchers may be inclined to think of the cultural genocide that inflicted its disappearance. This came about through the confluence of many causes: technological obsolescence, physical decay, personal and institutional neglect, government apathy, lack of archiving, natural and man-made disasters, and "collective amnesia," among others.

Hoping to overcome such loss, even if only through memory and recall, we gather from available writings the possibility of knowing this cinema, which forms a part of the Cebuano people's past, as well as the Filipino nation's culture and history. In considering the available historiography to construct the "lost" Cebuano cinema, there are three general issues to consider: (1) theoretical problematization, (2) contextual framing, and (3) appraisal of existing historiographic work. These three are used here to investigate matters of historiographic importance surrounding this "lost" cinema, as they address the phenomenon of "loss" and the consequences brought about by "absence."

## Theoretical Problematization

In problematizing a subject as challenging as "the historiography of a 'lost' cinema," the nature of "loss" and its consequent effect, "absence," have to be foregrounded. They are to be theoretically regarded as concepts resulting from the disappearance of a cinema that developed in Cebu—from the time when motion pictures were first introduced in the country (and possibly in Cebu as early as 1897), extending to the time of its perceived "demise" towards the end of the 20th century. During this period in time, cinema took a material form that was chemically-based and had a system of operation—from production to exhibition—that demanded a technological infrastructure based on its celluloid form. From its material culture, a set of social relations evolved forming the economic, cultural, and ideological uses of that cinema to a people who identified themselves as "Cebuanos" or "Bisaya." After a hundred years, a change in technology dislodged the celluloid-based film with digital technology. With that dislocation came a corresponding change in the material culture and the social relations wrapping around the concept and practice of "cinema." There is a need for a movement to acknowledge and reflect on a cinema that is now considered to be "lost," and to find ways of dealing with its "absence," as society continues its march into the future, seemingly unmindful of what it has lost in the past.

Considering that film was so materially visible in society and culturally relevant to Cebuanos, how could such a popular cinema ever disappear and leave so little to trace its past? The loss of Cebuano cinema offers questions about the significance of film culture and how to historically regard its loss. One cannot help but think, although with varying degrees of despair, about humankind's many other lost civilizations, languages, and cultures. In reflecting on these phenomenal "disappearances," we are urged to ponder upon the nature of "loss." What are considered to be "lost" and how can their loss be accounted for and for what reasons? In being "lost," what are

the consequences caused by the "absence" of the object that is considered to be "lost"? What role does memory play in accounting for a "lost" object and its past? Can an object or a past be "lost" but not "absent"? Or can an object or a past be "absent" but not "lost"? If history were to be a form of "memory," what kind of memories may constitute a history of "loss" and "absence"? What history and historiographic writing may result from a memory of "loss"? Who constructs the past, for what reasons and for whose benefit? All these are profound issues we need to reflect upon if we are to make sense of the phenomenon of a cinema that burst into the Cebuano society, only to disappear in a slow death, lamented by the few grieving individuals haunted by thoughts of a past cinema that captured a time and a life worth remembering.

"Loss" is about "losing something." A simple dictionary definition will tell us that it is also about "the damage, deprivation, trouble, and disadvantage" that losing something brings. "Absence" is about "being away, being without, lack." All these concepts are problematized in the light of the disappearance of a cinema, material in its presence within the time it was operating, but now "gone," with only a few traces to re-construct its former *self*.

Talking about the "loss" of Cebu's cinema means speaking about a cultural heritage whose disappearance prompts one to account for several things: *what was lost, who lost what, when, why, how,* and *what consequences resulted from such loss?* In the context of Cebuano cinema, what was lost was, foremost, a material culture that made the cinema possible and the social relations that were built around it. As material culture, one looks at losing the physical, tangible infrastructure brought about by Western technology to produce and exhibit films that were initially foreign-sourced but also, later on, locally-produced and consumed. What also vanished include physical spaces that made film production possible—such as studios to laboratories—and movie theaters containing viewing spaces that include projecting machines, screens, chairs, and sound equipment to watch and listen to films. While these appear to be the most apparent manifestations of the lost material culture, it is also necessary to look at the social relations resulting from the experience of the now "lost" film entertainment. Economically, film was a source of livelihood; artistically, it enriched the island's culture; historically, it marked Cebu's social development; politically, it established norms to observe; and ideologically, it created an identity for a people patronizing the cinema it called their "own." While social relations continued to happen in *reality* despite this old cinema's disappearance, what came to be lost was the history of how those relations played out and were *lived* in the period when the said pre-Millennial cinema was still around. One would be lucky if there are records from the past that survived, something that would consist

the *historiography* of that cinema. This would be a significant find as those records can be made to speak about a life, a culture, a past that once defined the way Cebuanos took to cinema, as those in the digital present take to theirs today. The present is a lived past of a future that is yet to come. How that future will be shaped depends on how the present will be lived as it, too, fades into the past.

And so one faces squarely that which has been "lost." Was *that* "loss" of any consequence and for whom? Two arguments may be presented: one, historical; the other, cultural. Historically-speaking, if one were to look at "history" as a progression of events happening in the continuum of time, losing a past makes for an incomplete history. The break causes a narrative to be inadequate in fully describing a people and its past. This results in a lack of knowledge, which then results in mis-understanding or, worse, forgetfulness, a lacuna that will be hard to fill. A "lost" cinema results in a denial of a people's historical experience regarding a medium that was once a part of their lives. Such loss represses knowledge that could shape the way the present may be molded by lessons coming from the past. While the present society continues its forward thrust unmindful of its bygone years, what is missing in a "lost" culture is that part of social life that could provide a sense of historical origination—for an individual or a community—that will help measure progress in the past, both in material and spiritual forms, with what presently exists.

Culturally, the sense of "loss" may be thought of in terms of what is missing in one's way of life or a community's well-being. Despairingly, that which has been lost forfeits its engagement with the present and cannot be counted upon in constructing the future. Lessons from the past cast no potent force as new and foreign elements impinge upon and shape today's lives. The loss of cinema's past—any cinema, Cebuano or some other—constitutes a form of cultural genocide, considering the way by which such a "loss" was allowed to happen. Considering the scale and volume of the films that were lost and the magnitude of apathy that accompanied such disappearance, one looks at the utter lack of regard in preserving Cebu's film heritage as truly tragic and lamentable. It is a genocidal tendency that should not be tolerated now in the face of Cebu's resurging cinematic production in the age of digital technology.

Film constitutes Cebu's visual and auditory culture as it preserved the Cebuanos' visual way of life and the spoken indigenous language, together with the music and sound accompanying those films. As a mechanical recording machine, film not only recorded phenomena but, in its cultural function, it formed a collective memory to recall the past. Preserved in film images are recordings of Cebuano life as it was lived during the time

when those films were made. But if such images are lost, then gone, too, are memories of the past, diminishing as well the attendant heritage brought about by "identity" and "culture."

The tragedy of losing Cebu's cinematic past becomes compounded by the continuing loss of the ephemera surrounding film. With no archives, libraries and museums, and non-filmic materials such as film magazines, newspapers, posters, movie stills, tickets, billboards, publicities, autographs, flyers, scripts, contracts, letters, biographies, studio communications, as well as other documents that speak of the past, all these losses impoverish our knowledge of Cebuano film culture and of the national, Filipino culture. And, it should be said, also lost is a tiny piece in the mosaic that makes the world's audio-visual heritage so rich and diverse. The loss of these artifacts also makes the writing of its film history more impossible. Even if film archiving commences today, its inadequacy to store and its inefficiency to provide access to film materials leave its end users in a state of helplessness. The scant resources which have been found—extant films in varying stages of obsolescence and a disorderly heap of ephemeral memorabilia, themselves rotting in their advanced state of deterioration—hardly provide incentives for a productive scholarship on Cebu's cinematic past. However, scant as the archived documents may be, they serve as a source of hope, even if miniscule, in the seemingly futile task of re-constructing Cebu's past cinema.

## Contextual Framing

The historiographic writings that have survived define the way Cebuano film history has been written about and how it is known today. With only a few documentary materials surviving, there are several issues that need to be noted. Today's slim film historiography is saddled by the failure to address several issues similarly plaguing the historiography of the country's "national" cinema, itself an under-researched subject. One of the issues to be confronted is *contextual framing*. In what historical context can we conceive of Cebu's "lost" cinema? Central to this historical context is the issue of "colonialism."

Two colonialisms affected the growth of cinema in Cebu. One was *external* — the Western colonialism that made possible the entry of motion pictures in the island and its native society and which also provided for the impetus behind that cinema's formation; and the other was *internal*— the "native" colonialism cast by the "national" cinema in the form of the Tagalog cinema. Seen from the contextual framing provided by the theme of "colonialism," we begin to become equipped with a historical mindset that can help assess Cebu's cinema along a more materialist line of

thinking, something that is only beginning to become apparent in today's historiographic writings about this cinema. This helps us veer away from knowing Cebuano cinema merely along essentialist lines, like when one indulges in problems of "identity" (i.e. the "Cebuano-ness" of Cebuano cinema).

A quick study of the discourse in much of today's historiography about Cebuano cinema reveals a perspective steeped in "nativism." Such perspective speaks of a cinema that appears to have "naturally" grown out of the presence of motion pictures in the island. But as to where the cinema owed its *origin*, little, if any, is said, because little is known. This has resulted in a paucity of knowledge regarding how this cinema originated from the West and from which it owed its colonial beginnings. On the other hand, hardly is there also any serious scholarship regarding Cebu's dependency on the Tagalog movie industry for its growth. Considered as *the* national cinema, the latter has impinged upon its technological, aesthetic and economic dominance over Cebuano cinema, enough to cast its hegemonic spell in oppressive tandem with Hollywood cinema. Both dominant film forces resulted in Cebuano cinema's dependency on its own filmic development, affecting the way the identity of that cinema became shaped.

Severely lacking in reflection regarding this southern island cinema's colonial context, one is made to believe the rhetoric swirling around this cinema about its "Cebuano" identity. Yet, no matter how convinced islanders are of the identity of their films, in studying it closely, one may be surprised to discover how that film identity is found wanting when subjected to a serious scrutiny regarding how it was materially and ideologically constructed. Historically speaking, what may be perceived to be "Cebuano" in film has material and historical roots in Western and Tagalog film influences and legacies. What "Cebuano" identity this cinema had evolved from came from the local engagements—and struggle—that it underwent and experienced, as it tangled with and asserted its own right to life *vis-a-vis* outside, or foreign, cinematic influences. These engagements must be understood in the context of physical film infrastructure (or the absence thereof), generation of capital, availability of talents and labor force, production output (i.e. films as commodities), system of exhibition and distribution (or lacking these), market audience, and social relations built around the local film. In reading about the past Cebuano cinema, one hardly encounters a study of the *political economy* of the said cinema. If one were to be made, this could help us understand how Cebuano identity in film was forged not inside the cradle of essentialist inspiration but inside the blazing furnace of materialism—a product of capital and labor, and all the attendant social relations they conjure.

It pays to remember that film is not indigenous to Cebu, nor to the Philippines. Even a proto-history of moving pictures such as that known in many Southeast Asian countries (like Indonesia's *wayang kulit,* or shadow play), has not been encountered in the study of Cebu's cultural past (at least by this author). The arrival of the mechanical motion picture machine could only point towards the West for its source, but even this had to pass through a native portal—cosmopolitan Manila, the country's capital—to make possible its entry to this southern society. This pattern of negotiation—seen in its trade, economy, culture, and politics—would cast a long shadow in the history of film in Cebu. Yet, there is little to show to acknowledge this external indebtedness and, more significantly, the *dependency*, in the historiography that has been written about this local cinema. From these missing accounts, one gets the impression that historians of this cinema were in haste to establish a cinema that is "Cebuano," without getting into the (cumbersome) historical details of how it came about. To many, films produced in the island were *already* and had *always* been "Cebuano."

Seeing this "lack" in historiographic reflection, the problem was addressed in the monograph this writer authored in 2004, published in connection with the festival he organized called *Sine ug Katilingban* (Film and Society) in Cebu City. Although it was hurriedly written in time for the festival and it made no claims of being definitive, there was an effort to trace film to its Western source and, in its subsequent development, through the Tagalog movie industry. For some time nothing substantial followed this initial study until two graduate thesis dissertations by Radel Paredes—and Misha Annisimov from the University of San Carlos, with parallel research conducted by Paul Grant, which added to the historiographic discourse on Cebuano cinema. Radel's thesis touches on the subject of early cinema, while Annisimov's revisits Cebuano cinema's "golden age." Hoping that something of a path was blazed by these writings, one is surprised to find that the recently published *Lilas* failed to follow through on what has been started regarding the subject of early cinema, for instance, by building on Radel's research. From this omission, and the sudden leap to the "golden" age in the island's cinema, it is clear how uneven the landscape is in surveying the contours of Cebu's movie scene. Regarding my contribution, what I wrote in my monograph merely traced the "origin" of this cinema. In it, I was only able to frame the foreign and native colonial contexts affecting the growth of cinema in Cebu. What needs further study would be the issue of film origin and how it informed the identity wrapping the cinema when it was not yet bestowed with the identity of being "Cebuano." It goes without saying that from there one could seek to see how, eventually, this local cinema attained its "Cebuano" identity, if indeed it ever found one.

The issue of "origin" is not one about "firsts," as mistakenly commented upon by the authors of *Lilas*. Rather, it is about *knowing,* or becoming cognizant of the nature and arrival of a film medium—Western in source—that made its entry to native society and the consequences resulting from its formation in its adopted community. As earlier observed, this part of history was omitted by the authors of *Lilas*, leaving it (again) as the "unwritten history" of cinema, no different from a similar omission made in much of the earlier writings on the history of Filipino cinema. If further left unwritten, what may forever become lost is the context of the early cinema in which was indelibly cast the formative origins of what would, only in decades to come, become the "Cebuano" cinema that is known today.

The context of colonialism provides the origin of the medium that would serve as basis, or point of departure, for any claims of indigeniety that would be bestowed upon this cinema in the years to come. The origins of the identity of Cebuano cinema is more complex than what one may want to think, in the light of the racial and cultural imbrication happening to the medium even during its early age. In taking into account the originary context of motion pictures in Cebu—acknowledging the colonial, non-indigenous identity of the alien apparatus as well as the overlaying of Western film culture (that was never severed but only "transformed") and the experience with the formation of the "national" (i.e. Tagalog) cinema—we properly consider the factors necessary to understanding the cinema that came to be known as "Cebuano." Lacking this historical reflection, we arrive exactly at where we are today, confused and unable to fully comprehend cinema's development. This is because the "loss" and "absence" in this cinema's historical past that have been left unresolved by historiographers in the past and, sadly, even by present-day scholars, have left a vacuum of knowledge upon which to base a more informed identity of *Cebuano* cinema.

The identity of Cebuano cinema must, thus, be given contextual framing to help shed light on its history. Through history, one gets to know issues like cultural identity. Of course, one may realize that such identity comes from a process, one that is layered with racial and cultural influences, material expediency, economic power, and political control. Knowing film's contextual framing helps determine issues relevant in determining Cebuano cinema's past. In doing so, one will be able to see how cinema became a cultural nexus attached to the same forces shaping the larger society in the forms of economic, political, cultural, and ideological forces.

## Historiographic Work

The above discussion leads back to the question posed at the beginning: What kind of historiography can be drawn up for a cinema that is now

considered to be "lost," and how can it account for the "absent" cinema it seeks to define? In concluding this discussion, one is left with the task of inquiring about the kind of historiography befitting a cinema that is "lost." Two questions are drawn up to aid in formulating a meaningful history of a cinema that has been "lost," but is not beyond recovery.

The first question would be: What historical timeframe needs to be drawn up to account for an inclusive conception of film development that would result in a better understanding of the identity of the cinema which developed in Cebu? What is being asked here is a historical timeframe that inquires: Where does film history start and what does it cover? Related to this question is the issue of periodization, accounting for such phenomenological constructions as "early cinema" as well as the oft-invoked "golden age" (and how many "golden ages" must a cinema really attain)?

The other question relates to the present: What should be done with an "absent" past, and how does the visible, living present deal with such "loss"? Many other questions follow this problematizing of the present seeking to account for its past: How does one frame a "lost" traditional cinema with the emerging "new" digital cinema? Does the appearance of digital cinema result in a break from the past? Does "identity," like "Cebuano-ness," apply diachronically across history, or does it become defined by the specific (synchronic) context of a film's production or reception? All these questions create a daunting task for historians as they face ruptures and breaks in their historiographic work. Such breaks create disjunctions and discontinuity in the historical narrative, which affect not only the conception of history but also the framing of identity. What to do with this problematic condition is the challenge facing the historiographer in unpacking the conundrum of a cinema that has attained the status of a "myth."

Answering these questions entails a serious study of the cinema that formed in Cebu. It is a study that will take a long time to conduct. It is through studying and answering these questions that one may become engaged in meaningfully discussing the kind of historiography which rightfully befits a "lost" cinema, such as that which has been found and "lost" in Cebu.

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