

A Teleserye Told Twice

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Sometimes, it is amnesia. Often, there are star-crossed lovers or abductions with the help of white vans and warehouses, all leading up to the grand finale: a big wedding. Indeed, the Filipino *teleserye* is a treasure trove of tropes. In the interest of making a case for Leonardo Chiu's *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* (1998) and Keith Deligero's *Lily* (2016) being twin feature films, its babies exchanged minutes after birth, leading separate lives yet inexplicably linked anyhow.

Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba? (Chiu, 1998) comes from an era in Cebuano cinema that is not lost as much as it is forgotten. Shot on digital video, it is still intact but unfortunately does not have the same nostalgic charms of barely-preserved works from the two previous cinematic Golden Ages. Whatever flaws the film has in sound and image is due to limitations in equipment and lack of effort, not because of the depreciation in quality over time. Even so, poor archiving is a beast that ravishes all. Despite the herculean efforts and Frankensteinian methods of restoration involved in bringing back to life Cebuano classics like *Badlis sa Kinabuhi* (Salvador, 1969), the burns and scratches are a permanent reminder that they were once left to rot. Clean digital copies of *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* may still exist, but there is barely any information about it. There will be even less to uncover for future reference now that director-producer Leonardo Chiu has passed away.

Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba? shows its age in many other ways. For instance, in the opening scene, successful adman Leandro bonds with his wife Elia and daughter Bobby at the then-newly-opened Ayala Mall in Cebu. Now, twenty years later, none of the original shops, restaurants, and fashions seen in the background exist. It is a consistent game present-day Cebuano viewers are wont to play throughout the film—that of trying to make out which parts of the city the scenes could have been shot in, for the places are at once familiar yet foreign.

Moreover, *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* comes from a generation of creators unable to sever their ties from their stage and radio roots. Where it could employ more cuts to keep the cinematography dynamic, the camera is resolutely still, save for a few clumsy zooms. The blocking-reliant and blocking-ruined *mise-en-scène* boxes in the actors who move within invisible walls in wide spaces. The old guard still holds on to the same tendencies in the made-for-TV movies produced by the Cebu Catholic Television Network (CCTN).

Then there are the monologues. The dialogue in *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* is predominantly English, peppered only with a few Cebuano words. Despite the hesitation in delivering lines—seemingly indicative of a “no improv” nature—there are precious moments of self-awareness in the film. In two separate arguments Leandro has, first with his wife then with his mistress Ellen, they all “break character” and factory reset to Bisaya. Even they acknowledge they are giving themselves a hard time by speaking the tongue that is perceived as more polished. This begs the question of how the Cinema One Originals film *Lily* could possibly fit in.

Lily (Deligerio, 2016) is stylized whereas *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* is devoid of visual flair. The former has mumblecore aspirations where the latter is theatrical to the point of being comical. Deligerio sought to thematically cover more ground, including local folklore and the contrasts between the city and the countryside. What does Deligerio’s film then share with a little-seen relic of Cebuano film history such as *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?*?

Lily markets itself as a horror film, while *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* jarringly pulls the rug from underneath the audience by revealing in the end that it is, in fact, a horror film. It will comfort cinephiles of a cowardly disposition, though, that nothing in the two films is capable of seriously scaring them. The way both offer up the bare minimum to qualify for the genre feels more like an afterthought—obsessed lovers who turn out to be *aswang* or dead all along aren’t deserving of the audience’s fear. But the true terror in both films lies in how restless, unfaithful men ruin happy lives to satisfy their needs. For Leandro and Mario Ungo, their moment of horror come when their women finally have had enough. It is only in the

disintegration of their nuclear families—their safety net—and the mistress' revenge that they learn.

The parallels in the plot form a second link between *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* and *Lily*. However, what makes it doubly interesting is how these two films are polar opposites in terms of storytelling. It is no surprise that digital natives play around with narratives in ways digital transferees cannot. *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* fumbles with the form in something as basic as a shot of Leandro's photographs of Ellen projected on a wall. Instead of shooting real projections of the photographs on a physical wall, the filmmakers settle with a slanted rectangle drawn on a software graphics program. In *Lily*, they not only succeed in making the viewer believe what appears onscreen but also bombard him or her with multiple realities created by the nonlinear editing.

In the past two decades, the structures and settings employed in the filming of *Nag Breakfast Ka Na Ba?* have changed. They have been repurposed, or torn down and reconstructed. Twenty years hence, and contemporary Cebu's film scene *Lily* is part of has blossomed and cannibalized itself in cycles. Like the long, strange lifespan of a *teleserye*, things pick up, peak, plummet then repeat.

REFERENCES

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