

# Alternative Modes of Distribution and Exhibition: Cebuano Cinema from the Perspective of Cebuano Filmmakers

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## Abstract

Although historically detached from the films of the so-called golden ages of Cebuano cinema in the 1950s and the 1970s, a new breed of Cebuano filmmakers have emerged in the 21st century. Through a series of interviews with Cebuano filmmakers, this article will map the alternative modes of distribution and exhibition in contemporary Cebuano cinema. In order to do this, the article begins with a discussion culled from a fresh interview with one of the brains behind the 1970s Cebuano blockbuster, *Ang Manok ni San Pedro*, Domingo Arong. *Ang Manok* provides a valuable roadmap for contemporary Cebuano filmmakers. In attempting to connect *Ang Manok*'s mode of distribution and exhibition with that of the contemporary Cebuano filmmakers, this article hopes to describe Cebuano cinema's alternative modes of distribution and exhibition.

Keywords: film distribution, regional cinema, Cebuano cinema, Bisaya film, Binisaya

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## **How to cite this article in APA**

Borlasa, J. B. & Arong, M. R. B. (2020). Alternative modes of distribution and exhibition: Cebuano cinema from the perspective of Cebuano filmmakers. *Plaridel*, 17(2), 43-60. <http://www.plarideljournal.org/article/alternative-modes-of-distribution-and-exhibition-cebuano-cinema-from-the-perspective-of-cebuano-filmmakers/>

Distribution plays a crucial role in film culture—it determines what films we see, and when and how we see them; and it also determines what films we do *not* see. (Lobato, 2012, p. 2)

The decline in Cebuano film production can be traced to several factors: “booking difficulties, technical and budgetary limitations, talent poaching, change in audience taste” (Deocampo, 2004, n.p.). But most significant for this research is what film historian Nick Deocampo described as the inability of Cebuano cinema “to take control of its market through film distribution” (n.p.). Indeed, Ramon Lobato (2012), in his illuminating book *Shadow Economies of Cinema: Mapping Informal Film Distribution*, noted that “distributors . . . determine which films win and lose in this game of cultural consumption” (p. 2). In this regard, Cebuano cinema’s status as a “lost’ cinema,” (Deocampo, 2004) can also be viewed in terms of how Cebuano cinema eventually lost the “game of cultural consumption” (Lobato, 2012, p. 2) to Hollywood and Tagalog films.

However, despite repeated declarations regarding its disappearance from Cebuano cultural history, Cebuano cinema continues to exist because a new generation of local filmmakers has turned to alternative modes of production, distribution, and exhibition in order to get their movies made and shown. Although historically detached from the films of the so-called golden ages of Cebuano cinema in the 1950s and the 1970s, a new breed of Cebuano filmmakers emerged in the 21st century that includes Remton Zuasola, Keith Deligero, Victor Villanueva, Ara Chawdhury, and Christian Linaban. And through a series of interviews with these filmmakers, this article will map the alternative modes of distribution and exhibition in contemporary Cebuano cinema.

To do this, this article begins with a discussion culled from a fresh interview with one of the brains behind the 1977 Cebuano blockbuster *Manok ni San Pedro*, Domingo Arong. Praised for its “remarkable . . . use of alternative modes of production and distribution” (Grant & Anissimov, 2016, p. 24), *Manok* provides a valuable roadmap for contemporary Cebuano filmmakers. In attempting to connect *Manok*’s mode of distribution and exhibition with that of the contemporary Cebuano filmmakers, this article hopes to describe contemporary (i.e., 2007 to the present) Cebuano cinema’s alternative modes of distribution and exhibition.

## **Pre-Digital Self-Production, Distribution, and Exhibition: The Case of *Manok ni San Pedro* (1977)**

Recent histories on Cebuano cinema (Deocampo, 2004; Grant & Anissimov, 2016) did not explicitly state that the filmmakers of the acclaimed *Manok ni San Pedro* (Arong, D., Arong, N. & Macachor, 1977), brothers Narciso and Domingo Arong, were also the children of the owners of the highly-popular post-World War II theater Liberty Theater, and the smaller Rene Theater (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018). The family also owned Azucena Pictures, which produced several Cebuano films in the 1950s, notably *Princesa Tirana* (1951), which was the first film that starred Matt Ranillo, Jr. and Gloria Sevilla together (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018). Another fact that has escaped film historians was that *Manok* director Jose Macachor's co-producer in JRJ Productions Co. was Reynaldo Arong, Narciso and Domingo's youngest sibling (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018). Reynaldo Arong would later produce the highly-popular Cebuano TV show *Si Goot Da Wanderpol*, which also starred Julian Daan of *Manok* fame (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018). These overlooked connections have resulted in an incomplete understanding of the strategies that were used to produce, distribute, exhibit, and turn *Manok* into a remarkable Cebuano blockbuster. This section seeks to examine how these missed connections inform what Nick Deocampo would later refer to as a remarkable feat in film distribution.

According to Domingo Arong (personal communication, March 18, 2018), his father Pedro had owned a successful tailoring business after World War II. His success allowed him to open Liberty Theater in 1947 and Rene Theater a year or so later. This readily-available exhibition platform encouraged Pedro to start his own production company, Azucena Pictures. Movies made by Azucena Pictures were usually credited under his wife's name, Concordia Arong. So their sons Narciso (born 1941), Domingo (born 1943), and Reynaldo (born 1946) were not just accidental filmmakers but grew up around movies and filmmaking. Growing up as children of theater owners, they had access to American movies, usually animated ones, loaned by the United States Information Service (USIS). Domingo noted that unlike the practice of today where movies are only shown starting around lunch time, the local theaters then, specifically his family's theaters, showed American animated films in the mornings. While he could not remember if these screenings were free, he surmised that considering his father's practice of exhibiting free films using 16mm projectors also loaned by the USIS on Legaspi Street in downtown Cebu, these morning animation screenings might have either been free or on the cheap. What was interesting about this

anecdote was that it served as a precursor to what would later be considered a revolutionary mode of distribution and exhibition for *Manok*.

One myth about *Manok* was that its filmmakers were merely successful Puka shell businessmen (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018). The family business did shift from film production to the lucrative shell-craft industry, and Narciso, as one of the first batches of geology graduates of UP Diliman, became based in Hayward, California while Domingo became a councilor (1968-1981) under the Liberal Party in Lapu-Lapu (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018). But although both brothers were no longer doing anything related to filmmaking, Domingo remained a film enthusiast, and his US-based brother was simply happy to regale him with stories about the latest film technology. Then the preproduction process of *Manok* was a confluence of factors: first, a conversation between Joe Macachor, Reynaldo, and Domingo regarding the highly popular *Manok* radio drama and its economic viability as a film adaptation; second, the availability of cheap hardware in the form of Domingo's recently acquired Canon 1014 Super-8 camera—a gift from Narciso; third, a network of former film contacts made through their family's history in film production (Concordia was still alive at this point but Pedro had long passed away); and fourth, readily available film hands in the form of the shell-craft factory's loyal employees (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018).

It is important to note that this film was made at the height of Marcosian Martial Law, and Domingo was a staunch anti-Marcos councilor. In order to get their desired 35mm blowups for their theatrical release, Domingo had to bring their finished product to Michael Hinton, who owned the San Francisco-based lab Interformat, a company billed as “the #1 Super 8 to 35mm blowup lab in the world” (“Interview: Michael Hinton,” 1982, p. 1). But first, he had to acquire an immigration clearance. In order to avoid potential immigration delays due to his political affiliation, Domingo sought the assistance of his friend, Marcos-ally Dr. Max Patalinghug, then mayor of Lapu-Lapu (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018). This network of political and business connections also proved helpful for the alternative mode of distribution and exhibition used by the producers of *Manok*. As noted by film historians, *Manok* producers brought the movie all over the Visayas and even Mindanao and showed it during barrio fiestas. This distribution model was made possible by the political leaders of the local towns (D. Arong, personal communication, March 18, 2018).

Another myth about *Manok* has to do with its distribution and exhibition. Most film histories suggest that the blowup 35mm *Manok* used for the theatrical release was the same version used for the traveling exhibition.

When asked to confirm this, Domingo (personal communication, April 21, 2018) instead asked, “Who would willingly transport a 35mm projector from one barrio to another? It would have been a logistical nightmare!” So, how was it exhibited then? According to Domingo, he had made a copy or two of his original Super-8, in fact, the last known Super-8 copy was donated to Nick Deocampo (personal communication, April 21, 2018). Domingo claimed that the traveling exhibition of *Manok* was done using their Super-8 projectors, the Elmo Projector 1200 (D. Arong, personal communication, April 21, 2018). When asked what led them to distribute *Manok* to the barrios during fiestas, Domingo said it was just common sense. According to Domingo, *Manok* was just waiting to be made into a film and without the constraints of film production costs, it was totally worth the gamble (D. Arong, personal communication, April 21, 2018). Considering the popularity of the radio program, they easily managed to recoup the minimal expenses spent on production after the theatrical release.

Interested audience members started approaching them to inquire if it was possible to bring the movie to their barrios (D. Arong, personal communication, April 21, 2018). These requests led his brother Reynaldo to think of a more profitable distribution and exhibition model: they would tap local officials, who usually had a budget set aside for their fiestas specifically meant for inviting radio personalities to perform and entertain the audience. The established popularity of the radio program *Manok* meant townspeople not only knew about it but were already massive fans. This model is similar to the business model used by producers with their comics film adaptations. The main difference is in the mode of payment: *Manok* producers did not have to win the wallets of their moviegoers; they simply had to tap the shoulders of barrio leaders who were responsible for paying for the traveling exhibition (D. Arong, personal communication, April 21, 2018). In most cases, they didn’t even need to do anything; barrio leaders were desperate to book the traveling exhibition of *Manok* because it was a source of pride for their administration to show the movie during their fiesta. According to Domingo (personal communication, April 21, 2018), if a barangay captain managed to book *Manok* for their barrio fiesta lineup of activities, the locals would hold their barangay captain in high esteem.

The portability of their Super-8 projectors, specifically the Elmo Projector 1200, as compared to the 35mm projectors, meant they could easily transport their movie from one barrio to the other. What about the interisland screenings in the Visayas? Or the Mindanao screenings? Domingo (personal communication, April 21, 2018) said that as long as they had a minimum of three bookings per area, they were willing to bring the movie. But for Domingo, that was rarely a problem. He noted that wherever

the *Manok* radio program was heard, their *Manok* movie was probably shown. It is important to note that at this point in Philippine history, the national language was still a contentious issue for the Visayan-speaking regions and the effect of the choice of the Tagalog-based Filipino language on the number of Visayan-speaking population would only take a decade or so later (D. Arong, personal communication, April 21, 2018). In fact, in *The Bisayan Dialects of the Philippines: Subgrouping and Reconstruction*, Zorc (1977) noted that “Cebuano alone has the greatest number of native speakers in the republic. If taken together with other members of the immediate family (Hiligaynon, Waray, Aklanon, Kinaray-a, Surigaonon, etc.), speakers of binisayáq come to over forty percent of the Philippine population” (p. 7). If we go by Zorc’s statistic during this period, this clearly translates to a massive economic scale for the distribution of *Manok*. We may never know the exact figures of how much *Manok* earned, but it is easy to view the production of *Manok* and its subsequent distribution and exhibition model as an astute business decision.

### **Craft and Exhibition in Contemporary Cebuano Cinema**

The previous generation of Cebuano filmmakers was able to establish Colon Street as the heartland of Cebuano cinema from the 1950s to the 1970s. In the late 1980s, though, moviegoers began to prefer watching films in the larger, more comfortable mall cinemas, which showed Tagalog crowd pleasers and Hollywood productions. Colon Street only had a few cinemas, and these screened mostly Tagalog action and *bomba* flicks. Soon, The once-glorious movie houses became derelict, some gaining reputation as prostitution hubs. In February 2018, the historic Vision Theatre was even raided by operatives of the Optical Media Board, with over Php59 million worth of pirated movies and related materials confiscated (Moradas, 2018).

Without any market for Bisaya movies, Cebuano filmmakers in the 1980s until the 1990s turned to creating content for local television channels, mostly comedies and melodramas, most popular of which were *Si Goot Da Wanderpol*, *Milyonaryong Mini*, and *Ikaw ug Ako sa Kangitngit*. Thus, Cebu’s filmmaking industry eventually lay dormant until about 2007.

The beginning of the 21st century saw a resurgence of interest in filmmaking among a new breed of Cebuano filmmakers detached and completely independent from the previous generation. Their renewed interest coincided with the establishment of two local film festivals, the Sinulog Short Film Festival in 2005 and the BINISAYA Film Festival in 2009; the opening of the International Academy of Film and Television (IAFT) in Cebu; and the arrival of digital cameras made available for mass consumption.

During the 1950s and 1960s, filmmaking had been a profitable industry (Deocampo, 2004). In this new century, Cebuano filmmakers continue to struggle with issues of distribution and exhibition, mainly because in the beginning, they saw filmmaking more as an artistic pursuit rather than a profit venture. According to filmmaker Remton Zuasola (personal communication, April 20, 2018), “We just wanted to make films. We wanted to make films that we liked. Whether other people will like it or not was secondary to that. We had to like what we created first. We did not think of making any money out of it.” Film festivals and short film competitions became the Cebuano filmmakers’ main avenues for exhibition. Although a few of them have sporadically made short films and won in competitions in the years between 2000 to 2005 such as Kris Villarino (*Binaliw*, 2001 ) and Ruel Antipuesto (*Snake’s Pit*, 2004), it was not until about 2007 when Cebuano filmmakers began making waves in the festival circuits. Zuasola himself made several short films and documentaries that won prizes during the annual Sinulog Short Film Competition, including *Sinug* (2008) and *Humamai* (2009).

In 2005, Sinulog Foundation launched its very first Sinulog Short Film Festival as part of their roster of events for the Sinulog 2005 celebration (R.H. Tan, personal communication, February 28, 2019). The festival offers prize money to winning entries and provides for a one-day free public screening of selected entries. It also is an avenue for young filmmakers to showcase their craft with stories anchored on the Cebuanos’ devotion to the Sto. Niño. Aside from Zuasola, several Cebuano filmmakers have competed and won in the festival, including Antipuesto, Ara Chawdhury, Chloe Veloso, Christian Paolo Lat, Eli Razo, Clanche Dave Belleza, Ian Peter Mancao, Aldo Nelbert Banaynal, and Philip Lapinid IV .

Keith Deligero (personal communication, April 20, 2018), cofounder and executive director of BINISAYA Film Festival, said that the idea of a Binisaya film festival came about in 2009 as he and his former college classmates, including Zuasola and Idden delos Reyes, were working feverishly to beat submission deadlines for festivals outside of Cebu. Deligero began to realize that they were basically creating films that would not be shown to the Cebuano audience. Their desire to cater to a truly Cebuano audience became the impetus for the Binisaya film screening.

Zuasola’s *To Siomai Love* (2009) had just won best short film during that year’s Cinemanila Film Festival, so Deligero and his friends decided to hold an open screening to celebrate the homecoming of Zuasola’s film. The first Binisaya film screening was held at Turtle’s Nest Book Cafe in Gorordo Avenue, Cebu City on October 30, 2009 (K. Deligero, personal communication, April 20, 2018). Aside from Zuasola’s *To Siomai Love*

(2009), Delos Reyes' *Yawyaw* (2009) and Zuasola and Deligero's *Uwan Init Pista sa Langit* (2009) were also screened. In the succeeding years, the group continued to make short films and also began making full-length features with the intent of producing more content for the BINISAYA Film Festival. Simultaneously, they also staged barangay screenings to promote grassroots awareness of the Binisaya film movement such as the outdoor screening staged by the shoreline in Kasamahan, Barangay Opon in Lapu-Lapu City on May 27, 2011.

The group also travelled to towns outside Metro Cebu to as far as the Camotes group of islands and Bantayan Island, toting along their films, an LCD projector, and a white cloth used as projection screen (R. Zuasola personal communication, April 20, 2018). They screened their films where they were welcome, partnering with barangay or other local government officials and even with parish priests. These screenings were free and open to the public.

When asked how they came up with this mobile cinema idea, Deligero (personal communication, April 20, 2018) shared memories of his childhood spent in the southern town of Badian, some three hours away from Cebu City. Deligero recalled how a big truck would arrive during fiesta celebrations and special occasions, and an outdoor screening would be set up in the town plaza. Since their house was situated near the plaza, Deligero said that they would gather by the windows to watch whatever movie was playing, mostly action flicks starring Fernando Poe, Jr.

Zuasola (personal communication, April 20, 2018) shared a similar childhood memory. When he and his siblings would spend their summers with his mother's family in the southern town of Ronda, his grandfather would take them to the town plaza on some evenings to watch features. They would sit on the grass eating peanuts as the movie played. Both Deligero and Zuasola could no longer recall who sponsored these screenings but placed the time period to be in the late 1980s.

Both Deligero and Zuasola acknowledged that their own mobile cinema activities would not have been possible if Misha Anissimov, a Russian-American cinephile, had not allowed them to borrow his LCD projector for their purpose (K. Deligero and R. Zuasola, personal communications, April 20, 2018). Anissimov was then running the Tioseco-Bohinc Film Archive in Lapu-Lapu City. He established the archive in honor of slain Filipino film critic Alexis Tioseco and filmmaker Nika Bohinc, with the aim to share his own private collection of over two thousand films to filmmakers and film students looking to hone their craft, as well as with scholars interested in film discourse (Valeros, 2010).

BINISAYA Film Festival continued to expand, even including international films in their annual programs. Carrying Binisaya films, the festival has also travelled to other places such as Davao City, Biliran, and Metro Manila. For Deligero, the strength of the festival was collaboration. For each festival run, they partnered with a different organization as a means to expand their community. Deligero (personal communication, April 20, 2018) described the growth of BINISAYA using as analogy the indie music scene:

You go to watch a band perform because they're your friends. The people you get to hang out with are the friends of the next band playing. Then you start hanging out together and they also start supporting the bands you support, and vice versa. It's a closed circle, but it just keeps getting bigger and bigger.

Deligero, however, emphasized that BINISAYA is not a profit venture but rather a platform for exhibition.

Up to the present, film festival screenings are still the main mode of exhibition for Cebuano films within Cebu as well as nationwide and internationally. As examples, Deligero's short film *Babylon* (2017) has been screened in Berlinale and at the Jeonju International Film Festival (K. Deligero, personal communication, April 20, 2018). Villanueva's full-length feature *Patay na si Hesus* (2017), Zuasola's *Swap* (2015), and Chawdhury's *Miss Bulalacao* (2015) have been featured in Asian film festivals as well as in Europe and the United States. In 2012, Cinema One Originals brought the annual film festival to Cebu and was scheduled to run from February 11 to 16 at SM Cebu Cinemas. This was the first time the festival travelled outside of Metro Manila. By then, Cinema One had given grants to four Cebuano features namely Jerrold Tarog and Ruel Antipuesto's *Confessional* (2007), Zuasola's *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (2010), Villanueva's *My Paranormal Romance* (2011), and Brandon Relucio and Ivan Zaldarriaga's *Di Ingon Nato* (2011).

Aside from the four Cebuano films, the roster of movies that were screened during the festival included the finalists from Cinema One Originals 2011 such as Antoinette Jadaone's *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay*, *Ka Oryang*, and *Anatomiya ng Korupsyon*. The screenings of the Cebuano films were well-attended with close to full houses for the crowd-pleaser *My Paranormal Romance* and for *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria*, although the most-attended screening was that of *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay*. However, the ticket sales made from the festival was

not as high as Cinema One hoped for, and there has not been another festival organized by the company in Cebu since then.

### **Screening in Mall Cinemas**

Tarog and Antipuesto's *Confessional* (2007) was the first Binisaya film to make its way to mall cinemas in Cebu City, following a long drought of Cebuano productions featured in movie theaters. *Confessional*, a mockumentary about a politician who chose to reveal his corrupt practices to an amateur documentary filmmaker, won Best Picture at the Cinema One Originals Digital Film Festival in 2007 (Atanacio, 2007). The movie also won major awards such as Best Editing, Best Screenplay, and Best Supporting Actor for Publio J. Briones III. *Confessional*, though directed by a non-Cebuano (Tarog is from Laguna), was embraced by the Cebuano public as such because it was shot mostly in Cebu, featured mostly Cebuano actors, presented Cebuano culture, and used Cebuano as the major language for the dialogue. *Confessional*, in its own way, crossed regional boundaries, with the plot moving from Manila in Luzon, to Cebu in the Visayas and an unnamed locale in Mindanao. The dialogue used a mix of Tagalog, Bisaya, and English, with Tagalog subtitles.

Tarog and Antipuesto successfully lobbied for the festival organizers to hold a special screening of the movie in Cebu City, set for February 29, 2008 (Dimaculangan, 2008), with two schedules, 5:00 p.m. and 7:00 p.m. The Cebu team was in charge of marketing, while Cinema One took care of ticket production, processing screening permits and paying for the rental of the movie theater. The arrangement was 20% share of profits for the Cebu team.

The team started to promote the movie early in January 2008. Since there was no fund available for traditional media promotions, the team largely relied on their network of friends and movie enthusiasts to help spread the word. They also conducted school visits, radio tours, and also posted information about the screening on the now defunct Multiply social media site. Tickets were priced at Php150, cheaper than regular mall cinema rates which at that time already cost Php200. Even so, there were still some who were hesitant to pay this amount, mainly because they did not recognize the actors. On the day of the screening, because a lot of people were lining up outside the theater, passersby and casual moviegoers became curious and wanted to buy tickets on the spot. Some 400 people came for the 5 p.m. screening while close to 700 came for the 7 p.m. screening.

Since 2008, a number of Cebuano full-length features have been produced mostly funded through grants or competitions with a few self-funded productions. For films funded through grants, distribution becomes

an issue because the filmmakers have limited ownership and therefore little control over decisions pertaining to exhibition and distribution. According to Christian Linaban (personal communication, April 20, 2018),

When you think of competition grants, you have to think in batches, a set of films per batch. These are the films you are competing with for distribution. Then you have another batch coming the following year. Some films end up shelved after the festival run.

When talking about profit, theatrical release is still the quickest means of ensuring return of investment. Since mall theaters and even the theaters along Colon Street prefer to feature movies that would bring in the crowds, Cebuano movies have to compete with Tagalog and Hollywood productions that generally have more capital for advertising and promotions. This is especially problematic for self-funded productions. “Self-funded means there is very little or no money at all. When you don’t put in capital especially for advertising, you don’t really expect to earn profit,” said Deligero (personal communication, April 20, 2018). He personified “independent production” with his first two full-length feature films, *Baboyngirongbuang* (2010) and *Kordero sa Diyos* (2012).

*Magbuwag ta Kay* (2017), produced by Heritage Productions and directed by Reuben Joseph Aquino and Janice Perez, is the first Cebuano independent feature to have been picked up by a major distribution company for theatrical release. Viva Films released the movie in cinemas nationwide on May 7, 2018. In a newspaper article, the cast of the film expressed hope for a positive response from non-Bisaya moviegoers (Benedicto, 2018). In the same article, Executive Producer Sunshine Lim emphasized that the talents of Cebuano filmmakers remain underappreciated. Quoting Lim from the article, “We also have what they have, we just don’t have the opportunities as big as theirs” (Benedicto, 2018).

Before the release of *Magbuwag ta Kay* (2017), Cebuano movies were featured in large mall cinemas in film festivals, premieres, special screenings or limited runs, including for Villanueva’s *Patay na si Hesus* (2017), Deligero’s *Lily* (2016), and Linaban’s *Aberya* (2012). All these films were produced through grants from Manila-based film festival competitions: QCinema for *Patay na si Hesus* (Navarro, 2016) and Cinema One Originals for *Lily* (Cinema One Originals 2016 Finalists Revealed. 2016) and *Aberya* (“Cinema One Originals 2012 finalists unveiled”, 2012). A few films produced through competition grants have also been distributed through special mall screenings and in schools as alternative screening venues. A special screening for Deligero’s *Lily* (2016), produced through Cinema

One Originals, was screened at SM Seaside. The screening was funded by Heritage Productions who had to pay Cinema One's standard screening fee of Php20,000 (K. Deligero, personal communication, April 20, 2018).

Chawdhury's *Miss Bulalacao* (2015), another Cinema One product, premiered in Cebu cinemas through the efforts of DAKILA, as part of their Active Vista Human Rights Film Festival (Dizon, 2016). The festival "is a mobile cinema platform that allows audiences opportunity to debate, discuss, and spark conversations on human rights that can shape society" (Rama, 2015). *Miss Bulalacao*, a story of a young drag queen who was revered in their barrio because of a miraculous conception, premiered at the Robinson's Movieworld Cebu on February 19, 2016. *Miss Bulalacao* has also been shown in schools all over the country as part of Active Vista (Pelikula Bilang Sandata sa Active Vista Human Rights Film Festival, 2016). Zuasola's *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (2010), a film about a young woman who has to leave her island home for an arranged marriage with a foreigner, has also been included by DAKILA in Active Vista for its portrayal of human trafficking.

Another Cebuano film that premiered in a mall theater was the independently-produced documentary *Eskrimadors* (2010) directed by Kerwin Go. *Eskrimadors*, a documentary about the Cebuano martial art of *eskrima*, premiered in SM Cebu on January 30, 2010. Compared with the previous screening of *Confessional* (2007), the makers of *Eskrimadors* did not have external support. Fund for the screening was raised by the director. As the screening incurred overhead costs for cinema rental, technical equipment, crew fees for the production team, and other logistical expenses, the team decided to sell tickets priced at Php100 for the matinee screening at 6:30 p.m., and Php150 for the gala premiere at 8:00 p.m. In addition to covering overhead costs, the team also wanted to promote a culture where Cebuano moviegoers get used to paying to see products of local artists.

To create buzz for the screening, a press viewing was staged at CAFA Theatre at the University of San Carlos - Talamban Campus a couple of weeks before the premiere. It was attended by a hundred or so members of the press, bloggers, columnists, and movie enthusiasts.<sup>1</sup> The team, with some help from willing friends, also did the legwork for logistics and marketing. A website was set up where those interested to watch could also make advanced ticket bookings. Promotions were also done through social media sites, school visits, and guesting on a local television morning show and some local radio stations.

The main difficulty faced by the organizers was in handling the logistics. The team had no previous experience and had to learn the process as they navigated through it. One big challenge was in securing the rating from

the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) whose office is in Quezon City. Other logistical challenges included securing the mayor's permit, registering for BIR permit, as well as reproducing and distributing tickets.

For the matinee screening at 6:30 p.m., the cinema was filled two-thirds to capacity while the seats were completely filled for the gala premiere at 8:00 p.m. The audience was a mix of film and *eskrima* enthusiasts. The gala premiere also featured performances and demonstrations from Cebu's *eskrima* grandmasters. The Cebu Provincial Government also showed their support, with Vice-Governor Agnes Magpale attending the premiere and presenting the grandmasters with certificates of appreciation for their role in spreading the Cebuano martial art.

### **New Frontiers in Distribution**

Compared to other mall screenings of Cebuano movies with the intent to promote Bisayan products and ultimately gain profit through box office returns, the premiere for *Eskrimadors* (2010) was staged as a means to promote the DVD of the documentary available through Amazon Prime. Go and his coproducers had decided Amazon Prime's Disc+ on Demand as the best means of distributing the DVDs as there was no cost needed for reproduction nor any need for storage of physical copies. Since its release on Amazon Prime in 2010, *Eskrimadors* has only sold a little over two hundred copies.

Another film that has adapted to online distribution is Villanueva's first full-length feature, *My Paranormal Romance* (2010), currently available through iflix. Deligero has also made available his self-funded films online, although he said he does not expect to gain much profit from it.

Linaban takes a different stand on online distribution. His latest film, *Superpsychocebu* (2016), which was self-produced, has been shown through paid screenings in alternative venues such as bars and cafes all over Cebu since its release (C. Linaban, personal communication, April 20, 2018). According to him, if he makes the movie available online, fewer people might come to the screenings. Since *Superpsychocebu* is a film about a young man's quest for the most potent marijuana strain, it was also unlikely to be picked up for theatrical release. The bar and cafe venues were small, mostly with about 30 persons seating capacity, but the seats were always full. Although income return is slow in coming, Linaban (personal communication, April 20, 2018) said he prefers screening in smaller venues as it creates a cult following:

The good thing about being self-funded is that I can exploit

the movie as much I can and as long as I can. We are still far off from profiting from it, not even halfway to breaking even, but I'm thinking long-term. Hopefully, the film becomes a cult classic. That was really my intention when I decided to make this film.

For Zuasola (personal communication, April 20, 2018), distribution is a challenge faced not just by Cebuano filmmakers but by the entire Philippine movie industry, and perhaps even the global film industry. With more user-centered viewing platforms available and cinema-level home entertainment systems, people are less inclined to go watch movies in movie theaters. This is an added challenge as well as an opportunity for Cebuano filmmakers who are now exploring alternative avenues for distribution, albeit belatedly. Zuasola (personal communication, April 20, 2018) notes, "We now know we can make films. The challenge now is to make profit from it. There is no definite means yet. We are at the frontier and everybody is testing the waters."

### **Toward a Sustainable Future for Cebuano Cinema**

It is interesting to note that Zuasola locates the challenge of contemporary Cebuano filmmaking in how "to make [a] profit," because the case of *Manok*, which was a massive financial success, comes to mind. If it had been such a successful venture, why did the Arong brothers stop making films? According to Domingo (personal communication, February 16, 2019), despite the financial success of *Manok*, going through the same production (especially the blowup) and distribution process required a level of commitment, both financial and time, and that he and his brother would be unable to give. He talked about the political upheaval sweeping the country and also, of his responsibilities to the family's Puka shell business. He said if Cebu had a more robust and professional film infrastructure, he and other Cebuano filmmakers might have made more films. This desire for a professional local film infrastructure is echoed by contemporary Cebuano filmmakers. Perhaps only until all stages of filmmaking, from production to distribution and exhibition, are strongly supported by local government agencies and the private sector will a Cebuano Cinema thrive again as it did during the 1950s and the 1970s, the so-called golden ages of Cebuano Cinema (Grant & Anissimov, 2016).

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Information about *Eskrimadors* is based on Author 2's recollections as co-producer of the documentary.

## Grant Support Details

**Author Contributions:** Conceptualization, J. Borlasa; methodology, J. Borlasa; investigation, M. R. Arong & J. Borlasa; data curation, M. R. Arong & J. Borlasa; writing—original draft preparation, M. R. Arong & J. Borlasa; writing—review and editing, M. R. Arong & J. Borlasa; project administration, J. Borlasa. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

**Funding:** The authors received no specific funding for this work.

**Acknowledgements:** The authors would like to thank all the filmmakers who participated in the interviews.

**Conflict of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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