Cinema pandemia: Reflections on the underrated Netflix series La Révolution vis-à-vis current Philippine & international realities

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Abstract

This piece tackles the underrated Netflix series *La Révolution* vis-à-vis current realities of the pandemic in a national and international context. Using data and statistics on the pandemic era in the Philippines and around the world, in combination with a social realist contextualization of the said history-inspired yet fantasy-imbued film series, this short article weaves numbers and stories into contemporary reflections on how the reel helps explain, inform, and even shape the real, through humankind's dual role as not-so-passive viewers of the reel and as dynamic actors or subjects who are capable shapers of the real.

Keywords: pandemic cinema, Netflix, Philippine society, social realism, revolution

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Introduction

Despite the pandemic's toll on public health and the global economic system–from more than 6.4 million deaths and more than 590 million total global COVID-19 cases as of August 9, 2022 (Worldometer, 2021) and record-level unemployment rates and waves of economic recession in many parts of the world, to name a few–those who have internet access can at least console themselves with having a plethora of Netflix selections to kill time while collectively experiencing on-and-off lockdowns. The Philippines is among the world's current COVID-19 hotspots, in terms of total active cases, deaths per million people, and slow vaccination rollouts (San Juan, 2021). Thus, it is also among the countries that have endured the longest pandemic-related lockdowns (See, 2021); consequently, its citizens are also among those who have had to find home-based hobbies to distract their minds from physically and psychologically draining work-from-home and/or study-at-home schemes (Muldong et al., 2021; Tee et al., 2020; Tudy, 2020). Recent reports put the number of Netflix subscribers at 208 million worldwide (Kastrenakes, 2021), with record new subscriptions fueled by stay-at-home orders in 2020 (CBS & AP, 2021). Statista (2020) pegs the "number of active streaming subscribers to Netflix in (the) Philippines" (figure title) at more than 296,000 in 2020 but the number of Filipinos with access to Netflix or Netflix offerings via other websites (e.g. video sharing websites that skirt or circumvent copyright laws) could be closer to the percentage of Filipinos who use the Internet–50% in 2020, according to the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) World Telecommunication/ICT Indicators Database as cited by the World Bank (n.d.).

Hence, while discussing Netflix films may seem too bourgeois or too "elitist" (to use a common derogatory phrase in the Philippines, to refer to something too opulent or luxurious for the typical poor and low-middle-class citizens who compose the country's majority in both official and real terms) for some, it can still arguably be an exercise of reading the nation's pulse—the collective fantasies, preferences, and imagination of the people. In the case of underrated, pandemic-related Netflix offerings, such as *La Révolution*, this essay could help broader audiences discover socially-conscious *cinema pandemia* (pandemic cinema) from other parts of the world, at a time when Korean films and series dominate the Philippine Netflix scene (at least, in most weeks' "Trending Now" notices for Philippine subscribers). At the very least, as a pedagogical aid, these reflections could also help in broadening the cinematic checklists and syllabi of teachers of subjects like Filipino and English in junior high school (where literature is tackled as a springboard for grammar and/or communication lessons); Understanding Culture, Society, & Politics, and 21st Century Literature

from the Philippines and the World in senior high school; and Filipino and/or *Panitikan*/Filipino/Philippine Literature, & The Contemporary World in college. With regard to tertiary-level Filipino language and literature subjects, a syllabus for *SineSosyedad* or "Cinema & Society" (a Filipino literature subject which Filipino language advocates developed at the height of the struggle against the abolition of Filipino and *Panitikan* as mandatory core courses in college) includes both local and international, social-realist or socially conscious film selections (Geronimo et al., 2017) and it is very popular in many public and private universities where these courses were retained despite a Philippine Supreme Court ruling that made them optional for students.

Meanwhile, from an international perspective, discussing Netflix offerings, especially social realist ones, can help global audiences process and contextualize global phenomena such as the class-related inequities–from slow vaccination rollouts in the Third World & vaccine stockpiling in the First World to health care systems' strained capacities in cash-strapped, undeveloped, underdeveloped, and developing countries and even in peripheral zones within developed countries–that the current pandemic has laid bare.

Background and synopsis: Virus, vampires, and revolutionaries

La Révolution is a French language series created by Aurélien Molas (2020) and directed by Julien Trousselier (Episodes 1-2); Jérémie Rozan (Episodes 3-5); and Edouard Salier (Episode 6-8). Netflix's own synopsis describes *La Révolution* as "a reimagined history," about "a mysterious disease" in "18th century France, culminating in a brutal clash between rebels and the aristocracy."

In Netflix's automatic redirect to its Philippine page (https://www.netflix.com/ph/) when one is surfing the web in the country, as of 02 July 2021, *La Révolution* is still featured among the "new releases" under the broad "BingeWorthy TV Shows" category, but it is not listed among those in the "Popular on Netflix" subcategory. This film series is underrated–at least in the Philippines–as evident in the lack of pertinent reviews in the mainstream media. A Google search covering January 1, 2020, to April 30, 2021, yielded no Philippine review for "*La Révolution*" in the Philippines, except for a two-paragraph mini-review (Unjieng, 2020), whereas the French thriller *Lupin* has garnered dozens of related media mentions and even some reviews. *La Révolution* seems to be similarly underrated in the United States. While *La Révolution* was mentioned as among a reviewer's

"streaming picks" in the New York Times (Murray, 2020), no full review has been published in that major international paper so far.

Reel and real stories: Netflix series vis-a-vis current realities

Philip Cu Unjieng's (2020) two-paragraph review of *La Révolution* for *Manila Bulletin* is somewhat dismissive but can be used as a preliminary material to understand the film series' context and provide details that other developing country viewers might also find interesting. His first paragraph describes the series as "(a) reworking of the French Revolution of the late 18th century," which can "be seen as a gross simplification of this seminal historical event that has become a symbol of Fraternity & the Enlightenment..." In the second paragraph, he mentions "the murder of 16-year old Rebecca, and the cover-up made to mask the sinister activities of blue-blooded aristocrats and Royals" (para. 5).

Rebecca was no ordinary poor girl. As the narrator tells the viewer in the first episode of *La Révolution*, "She was of the people, and dreamed of a fairer world. A world in which all would be equal. A world without tyrants or people to enslave" (Trousselier, Rozan, & Salier, 2020, 47:16-47:06). Aside from Rebecca, other poor teenagers also went missing–as they were eaten up by nobles struck by a disease, a mysterious virus, that turned them into vampire-like monsters. As Jonathan Wilson's review (2020) says, "the rich literally eat the poor" (title) in this series.

Beyond vampires and zombies, *La Révolution* reminds citizens about half-forgotten *desaparecidos* (activists abducted by suspected state agents or forces influenced or funded by them), murdered activists, and *tokhang* (drug-related extrajudicial killings/EJKs) victims. In 2020, at least one activist–Elena Tijamo–went missing (Ecarma, 2020); meanwhile, countless *tokhang* killings are also documented in the 2020 United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights report on the situation of human rights in the Philippines (Bachelet, 2020, p. 4) and are also subject to the International Criminal Court's (ICC) investigations. On December 2020, the ICC's Office of the Prosecutor released a statement remarking that it is "satisfied that information available" on the Duterte regime's war on drugs "provides a reasonable basis to believe that the crimes against humanity of murder" and "other inhumane Acts...were committed on the territory of the Philippines between at least 1 July 2016 and 16 March 2019..." (Punzalan, 2020, para. 4). On activist killings, just this 2021, amid an ongoing pandemic, 9 activists were shot dead by state security forces in what has been labeled as a "crackdown on activists" in Southern Luzon (Talabong, 2021, headline).

They are the Rebeccas of the Philippines in these heavily-policed times (Agojo, 2021), with other neighboring regimes presided over by literal soldiers from Myanmar to Thailand, to name a few other countries. If it is any consolation to the families of Philippine EJK victims–be it drug war-related or not–the long arm of the law has recently caught up with Duterte and his minions (albeit, the ICC case covers drug war killings only), as formal investigations are now ongoing after ICC Prosecutor Fatou Bensouda (2021) has requested "judicial authorisation to proceed with an investigation" (para. 1). Bensouda can thus be likened to *La Révolution*'s protagonists who seek to uncover the truth behind the mysterious deaths of citizens from poor peasant and/or city poor backgrounds (whose murders would soon be unmasked as perpetrated by aristocratic vampires).

In his short review, Unjieng (2020) further notes:

> I mention blue-blood, as beyond the popular expression used to describe the ruling class–in this series, it's applied literally. Great visuals result from this, that along with nimbly choreographed fight scenes, and first class production values, make this series easy on the eye and entertaining. Just forget gaining any better understanding or historical perspective of why the French Revolution came to be. This is more like *Les Miserables* meets *Twilight* and *The Walking Dead*." (para. 5)

Many critics and/or progressives would surely take issue with the penultimate sentence in Unjieng's mini-review. While the film series did take liberties with some historical facts, its episodes can still be utilized as springboards for discussion of the French revolution's historical milieu. After all, the show's blue-blood metaphor is also central to the actual revolution's hatred of the *Ancien Régime.* The *sans-culottes* were certainly partly stimulated into revolutionary fervor by the nobility's unjust privileges.

A more nuanced reading by Floriane Reynaud (2020)–featured in Vogue France–speaks of such potential. It introduces one of the main characters, Joseph Guillotin, as the inventor of the "guillotine...a French method of execution" (a symbol of the French Revolution as it was used to execute Louis XVI and Marie Antoinette) who "discovers the existence of a new virus: blue blood. This disease spreads quickly in the corridors of castles, pushes the infected to attack the population and triggers an unprecedented conflict" (para. 1).

Reynaud (2020) further contextualizes the blue-blood metaphor:

> The film features not only incredible and elegant artistic direction, but also explains the social backdrop of the French Revolution and the anger shown by the people of Paris. As well as the virus that turns nobles into cannibals which translates into a horrific metaphor for a population drained to exhaustion by a reckless aristocracy. The more the series progresses, the more the fantastic sets will adapt to the realities of the time and the end of the Enlightenment. (para. 2)

In relation to the film's current social relevance, Wilson (2020) also praised the series as fit for "anyone looking for a good excuse to revise history into a fist-pumping...allegory for contemporary inequality..." (para. 1)

Nobles as bloodsuckers is reminiscent of Karl Marx's (1999) characterization of "capital" as

> dead labour, that, vampire-like, only lives by sucking living labour, and lives the more, the more labour it sucks. The time during which the labourer works, is the time during which the capitalist consumes the labour-power he has purchased of him (para. 7).

In other words, capitalism is exploitative as it bleeds the workers dry in a system where the worker is paid only a fraction of what he/she produces–the surplus of which is accumulated and expropriated by the capitalists, even during crises. At the end of 2020, Forbes Magazine reports that "(t)he world's billionaires have gotten $1.9 trillion richer," (Peterson-Withorn, 2020), amidst a period marked by layoffs, forced leaves, workload reductions, and other schemes that shift the pandemic's impact away from big businessmen and towards the poor and suffering workers. Dan Renshaw (2017) provided a review of similarly-themed literature where vampires represent blood-sucking rich people:

> Vampire fiction as class allegory predates *Dracula*. The means by which vampires feed not only has sexual and Freudian subtexts, but is also a powerful representation of a classically exploitative relationship–one body drawing strength whilst the other weakens–and Marxist writers were not slow in appropriating this imagery. Crucially, the vampire is also *aristocratic*, unlike, for example, the

> lumpen-proletariat Frankenstein Monster. Early vampires in Balkan folklore may have been re-animated peasants, but by the time the vampire novel emerged in the early-nineteenth century the classic undead was very much from the noblesse. John Polidori, in *The Vampyre* (1819), made his bloodsucker a member of the British nobility (in fact based upon Lord Byron). Carmilla, in Sheridan Le Fanu's seminal 1872 novella of the same name, is also an aristocrat. In addition, whilst Carmilla has an exploitative if romantic relationship with the heroine of the novel, Laura, who is also upper class, for day-to-day (or night-to-night) sustenance she feeds on local peasant girls–victims whom she at one point dismisses as worthless and expendable. In *Good Lady Ducayne*, written by Mary E. Braddon a year before Dracula, an incredibly aged and wealthy lady is sustained by transfusions of blood from various lower-class companions. The motif of aristocratic exploitation in vampire fiction therefore long predated Dracula's depredations of the local Transylvanian peasantry (and then their urban counterparts in London). When the socialist writers of the mid- to late- nineteenth century cast around for a powerful and instantly recognisable symbol of economic exploitation, they did not have far to look. (para. 5)

Echoing the global reality, in the Philippines, the country's richest–"capitalist bloodsuckers," to borrow from a quote attributed to Malcolm X (Smith, 2015)–grew their wealth "despite (the) pandemic" (Rivas, 2021a) and, with "Filipino billionaires swim[ming] in bonuses as [the] pandemic crushes [the] economy" (Rivas, 2021b, title). Incidentally, Rivas' second investigative report appeared just two days after Filipino citizen Ana Patricia Non started a so-called Community Pantry revolution against hunger when she "put out a small bamboo cart along Maginhawa Street in Quezon City filled with canned goods, fresh vegetables, vitamins, facemasks, and other necessities amid the pandemic...with a handwritten sign on cardboard... Take what you need. Give what you can" (Beltran, 2021, para. 1). In First World economies, such community pantries are more commonly known as food banks (like the one visited by a struggling single mother in Ken Loach's 2019 endearing and solidarity-oriented film *Sorry We Missed You*), though the former are mostly community-run, while the latter are usually charitable institution/Non-Government Organization (NGO)-run.

The Community Pantry revolution soon became popular many poor and even middle-class zones of the Philippine archipelago (and also inspired one in neighboring Timor Leste), with long queues of desperately hungry citizens forming in the vicinity of more than 300 similar community pantries which were spontaneously organized by grassroots volunteers, labor activists, and other sundry concerned citizens. Such real-life stories will help viewers of *La Révolution* remember a scene where a crowd of France's *les misérables* (the poor/wretched ones) gather outside a church, begging for alms from well-heeled parishioners (nobles included), in Season 1, Episode 2 ("The Revenant"). A very similar scene in the musical film *Les Misérables* (Hooper, 2012) in the Gavroche-headlined "Look Down" segment plays in the author's mind as the endearing kid sings: "These are my people, here's my patch...nothing posh! Here in the slums...We live on crumbs of humble piety. Tough on the teeth..." (0:48-1:06). Beggars and people who live in crumbs have only multiplied in poor countries like the Philippines as the pandemic's economic impact becomes more pronounced and prolonged, thereby fueling unrest, however silent the political situation seems to be. A December 2021 survey in the Philippines reported that "2.5 million families experienced being hungry amid the coronavirus pandemic at least once..." while "11.8% of Filipino families, or an estimated 3.0 million, experienced involuntary hunger–being hungry and not having anything to eat–at least once in the past three months" (Philstar, 2022, para. 2).

As in *Les Misérables*, there is also a brotherhood of rebels in *La Révolution*. In lieu of *Les Misérables'* Enjolras and his youthful fellow student revolutionaries/radical republicans, *La Révolution* has a more broad-based ragtag army of the poor and the dispossessed–*la Fraternité*–aiming to topple the aristocracy through violent means, with a strong egalitarian ethos positioned between revolutionary/radical republicanism and proto-socialism, and where women are in leadership roles too.

In the real world of the COVID-19 pandemic, progressive alternatives to aristocratic feudalism and neoliberal capitalism, like socialism, gains popularity. When capitalism is slowly being seen as at least one of the culprits behind the spread of the pandemic (Davis, 2020), as an "incubator for pandemics" (Pappas & Cozzarelli, 2020, title), or as something that "exacerbates" the crisis it brings (La Riva, 2020), pushing socialism into the "mainstream" (Eaton, 2018) becomes more logical and possible. One British political scientist (Muldoon, 2020) even predicts "coronavirus might make socialists of us all," at a time when the virus' "vector is capitalism" (Montague, 2020). At the very least, even capitalists emphasize that "(t)he Covid-19 crisis is a chance to do capitalism differently" (Mazzucato, 2020, title). Considering that the pandemic threatens the very existence

of humankind, there is an urgent need to resolve the crises brought by COVID-19 by going beyond neoliberal policies, an obviously tedious process that the government must lead (Marasigan, 2020) for swifter action and immediate implementation, in accordance with their mandate as the main proponent of the common good. Where governments are apathetic to the plight of the masses, there will always be some sort of *la Fraternité* to rebel against the status quo and bring about a new, and better world.

In Season 1, Episode 3 ("The Innocents"), Marianne (played by Gaia Weiss), a masked, witty, and eloquent revolutionary confronts Elise de Montargis (played by Marilou Aussilloux), a well-intentioned noble and daughter of the local tyrant: "How could you understand us? By having meat and wine on your table while your people starve?" (35:21-35:17). Indeed, the film series seemed to have taken great efforts to ensure that the contrast between the poor ones dressed almost in earth-hued rags and the rich and powerful nobles dressed in typical pompous, *Ancien Régime* fashion–the latter, featured very early on, in a mid-episode Versailles-style banquet (Season 1, Episode 1: "The Beginning"). Elise–echoing the so-called "bleeding hearts" among the rich and the upper middle class replied: "By having compassion" (35:12). Marianne retorted: "We don't want your compassion!" (35:11). In the same episode, Marianne reveals that their revolution is for "justice" and "liberty."

In the struggle for justice and accountability, Elise's good intentions would have to be complemented with more combative and hence, more emancipatory ways of shaping a more egalitarian world–which oppressed people like Marianne will always uphold and practice. The enduring oppression-linked and poverty-fueled contemporary rebellions–from the resurgent remnants of the Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia-Ejército del Pueblo (FARC–EP) to the quiet yet steady Zapatista revolution in Latin America to the armed and decades-old Naxalite and Philippine communist movements in Asia–bear witness to the potency and significant popular attraction of what the United Nation's Universal Declaration on Human Rights calls as humankind's ultimate right and "last resort...against tyranny and oppression..." (United Nations General Assembly, 1948, para. 3)–none other than the right to rebel, especially when leaders live in comfort– banquet after banquet–while the rest suffer in squalor.

Speaking of banquets, the Filipino people will forever remember the duplicity of the Duterte regime's social media handlers who publicly released a photo of the Philippine president celebrating his 76th birthday through a "simple meal" culminating in blowing the candle atop a literal rice cake (Lacorte, 2021)–a simple meal which turned out to be a feast with *lechon* (whole roast pork) etc. (Tordesillas, 2021), during the second year

of the pandemic, a period when people were still reeling from its impact on the country's physical, mental, and economic health. Juxtaposing the Filipino *masa*'s (masses') poverty and hunger with the top leader's opulence becomes unavoidable in a period of crisis. Even if such displays of internal pandemic feast days could be forgiven or forgotten, leaders would have to be accountable on another level: they are expected to utilize and mobilize the country's resources to at least control (if not totally eradicate) the coronavirus and the economic crisis that it brought (or worsened). In other words, they can't just fiddle while Rome burns, or they can't just drink and eat to their heart's content while the country is hungry, or they can't just sit on a treasure chest while the people starve. Bernie Sanders' continuing left-wing populist crusade for progressive taxation comes to mind too (Gong et al., 2019; Outridge, 2020; Ocampo, 2020), in a world where the rich accumulate wealth in tax havens (Piketty, 2014 & 2020) while governments fail to impose taxes on wealth which could make better social services–from education to health care and even housing–be available for all citizens. In the recently concluded presidential elections, labor leader *Ka* Leody de Guzman's quixotic and unapologetically socialist and anti-capitalist campaign similarly brought publicity to many bread-and-butter people's issues such as badly-needed wage hikes, wealth tax, and capitalist exploitation of labor (see Biscotti & De Guzman, 2022). Long-time labor leader Elmer "Bong" Labog also ran as a senator in a separate ticket, on a platform of pro-people and pro-worker policies. Despite differences in means and tactics, such populist stirrings echo *la Fraternité*'s worldview in the series.

Unfortunately, like the billionaire class against whom socialist prophet Sanders preaches, the Philippines' current leaders seem not to care that tens of thousands are still getting sick of the virus (with the country's total COVID-19 cases at 3.69 million as of this writing), for as long as they are safe. For example, Duterte's guards were vaccinated against COVID-19 very early in the timeline of the pandemic, using "smuggled" vaccines (Reuters Staff, 2020)–even before the medical frontliners in the country lined up for mass vaccination. Meanwhile, when this article was drafted, on July 10, 2021, less than 3% of the Philippine population have been fully vaccinated–lagging far behind neighboring Singapore's more than 35% or early vaccine rollout leader Israel's more than 56% (Our World in Data, n.d.). One UK-based think tank predicts that the Philippines will be among the last countries in Asia to achieve herd immunity (De Vera, 2021). The Philippine strongman's pandemic-era incompetence (Juego, 2020; Teehankee, 2021) is also matched by similarly ineffective leaders in countries such as the United Kingdom (Abbasi, 2021), Brazil (da Luz Scherf et al., 2020), and–at least

until Joseph Biden's election– the United States (Warf, 2021). Duterte and the said countries' leaders can be likened to the infamously apathetic King Louis XVI, the French monarch who was toppled by the French Revolution, and who was briefly featured in the last episode of Season 1: *La Révolution:* "The Rebellion," amidst general chaos and panic due to the vampire epidemic and a popular revolt against aristocratic oppression, giving assurances to his minions that when the Parisian mobs, masses, and rebels reach his Palace, he would be ready to violently confront them through his loyal troops.

Whereas the French nobles gobbled up food and wine (and used up the country's coffers) in countless banquets and the king splurged the nation's fortunes in war spending, leaders of the Philippines would have to do a full accounting on how they spent every cent in the trillions of pesos worth of loans which they purportedly acquired for pandemic response, especially that they allotted funds for some clearly unnecessary expenditures. As of March 2022, the Philippine national government's outstanding debt has risen to a "new high of P12.68 trillion" (De Vera, 2022a). Even before this new record was set, Duterte's Finance secretary proposed "new or higher taxes to pay for the foreign debts the Duterte administration incurred to address the COVID-19 pandemic" (De Vera, 2022b, para. 1). Thus, they would also need to explain why the Duterte regime allotted P19 billion as the budget for the National Task Force to End the Local Communist Armed Conflict (NTF-ELCAC)(CNN Philippines Staff, 2020)–akin to the relic of McCarthyism in the 1950s, at least for First World audiences. The now-retired spokesman of the NTF-ELCAC was recently condemned by at least 15 Philippine senators for his "disrespectful, derogatory, and demeaning" (Cepeda, 2021, para. 2) statements, which include red-tagging a local celebrity, Liza Soberano, after she participated in an empowerment-themed forum organized by Gabriela–an activist, legal, legitimate, & aboveground women's organization campaigning not only for women's rights but also against poverty and hunger, and which was named after a local anti-colonial freedom fighter, Gabriela Silang (a real-world, anticolonial Marianne), although some authorities falsely accuse the organization of being a communist front (Cupin, 2020). Some Philippine legislators have called upon the government to defund the NTF-ELCAC and re-channel its humongous funds towards financial aid *(ayuda)* for the poor and for the pandemic response, after its spokesman also red-tagged, apart from Soberano, the organizers of various community pantries.

Related to the NTF-ELCAC's huge budget, in 2020, the Duterte regime received its multi-billion peso orders for a jet that would officially serve as an "airborne command post" (Talabong, 2020) and fighter planes (Rita, 2020). A top military official also bragged that "we will finally have multi-role

fighters in the likes of the F-16 in our Air Force inventory" (Mangosing, 2020, para. 3). French aristocratic bacchanalia–also depicted in *La Révolution* and which certainly partly caused the French revolution–would be put to shame by the Philippines' heavy military spending amidst a killer pandemic that has disproportionately made the poor hungrier, poorer, and sicker.

With the proclamation of Ferdinand Marcos, Jr.–son and namesake of the reviled Philippine dictator notorious for his murderous and plunderous record–as the next president, the old oligarchic order is poised to literally carry on: the vicious NTF-ELCAC will be retained and possibly even more empowered (Karapatan, 2022), big business chums regains or expands their influence (Rivas, 2022) or the first family reconsolidates their Martial Law-era economic holdings by expropriating oligarchs so that their dynasty would reign supremely (David, 2022), dynastic opulence at the public expense (Martial Law Museum, n.d.; Scott, 1986;) and private jet setting galore (Robles, 2022; Sy-Quia, 2021) continue. If the record of the presumptive president's father is any indication, the incoming regime will also preside over mass poverty and starvation (Lopez-Gonzaga, 1996; Mangahas & Guerrero, 2008) as did the latter French kings in the pages of history and in the series *La Révolution* too. Considering that his ally Duterte also failed to at least reduce the proportion of poor Filipinos–from 16.7% or 17.7 million Filipinos in 2018 (PSA, 2022), two years after he came to power, to 23.7% or 26.14 million Filipinos in 2021 (PSA, 2021), the year before his term ended. The old king retires, a new monarch reigns, and the exploitative, blood-sucking *ancien régime* of mass poverty and starvation is projected to continue.

Practical Lessons from *Cinema Pandemia*: A Better World is Possible

Similar to what Emily Bickerton (2018) calls as a "New Proletkino"–"films that are 'really close' to the problems of the working class" (para. 5)–*La Révolution* as a sampling of *cinema pandemia* not only helps viewers in understanding their current plight, but can also help them realize their potential as actors: as subjects who can change the world as an "object of that transforming action by men and women," using Paulo Freire's (2005, p. 86) language in Chapter 2 of *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2005); as shapers of a world that should be better than the one at hand. As his translator Myra Bergman Ramos notes, Freire (2005) enjoins citizens to learn "to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (p. 35).

La Révolution ends with a mini-revolt of *la Fraternité*–a culmination that fits Freire's (2005) call to action–which the king's anointed noble leader

failed to suppress. There lies the most practical lesson that *cinema pandemia* can offer: in action, there is hope. Be it in the reel or real world, small steps and small beginnings matter in transforming the world. The bloodsuckers and apathetic tyrants of these times won't hand power voluntarily. They would have to be swept away from the pedestal, in the same way "that the murder of a low-born girl was the spark that set fire to the kingdom...It was the beginning of a conquest. That of a people prepared to fight for liberty, for equality, and fraternity" (Trousselier, Rozan, & Salier, 2020, 06:04-05:44) as the narrator concludes in the last episode of *La Révolution* ("The Rebellion"). The reel could certainly help shape the real, by influencing humans who shape history–true to a quote attributed to Freire (teleSUR, 2016): "Education does not change the world, Education changes people. People change the world."

The series' supposed second installment was unfortunately canceled (Baugher, 2021). However, sparks of genuine revolution are always present wherever there is oppression and exploitation–and, to borrow a phrase from the narrator in the first episode of the series–these sparks are waiting for those who will turn this age of darkness into that of enlightenment. One of the official campaign songs of Marcos Jr.'s closest electoral rival Leni Robredo's inspirational and volunteer-driven campaign (Marasigan, 2022)–Rivermaya's "Liwanag sa Dilim" ("Light in Darkness") (2005) expresses the same hope for the people to rise-up and bring about the change that they would want to see in society: "at sa paghamon mo sa agos ng ating kasaysayan, uukit ka ng bagong daan..." (1:35-1:51) ["and as you run against the current of our history, you will blaze a new path..."]. At the very least, the Philippines's leading academics vow to "staunchly defend the right to freedom of thought, inquiry, and expression...oppose all forms of censorship and book-banning...resolutely commit ourselves to upholding academic freedom...critically intervene in the vetting, writing, and teaching of history and other textbooks and educational materials" (Campomanes et al., 2022, para. 5-6) to fight the restoration of an old, malevolent dynasty.

Others will prefer the streets–the good old parliament of the streets–as even the progressive voices in the halls of power, say, in the Philippine Congress, for example, have been reduced to a few dissenting voices under the incoming regime (Reyes, 2022) hence the people have no choice but to clamor louder for their advocacies. Youthful volunteers who cut their teeth joining unprecedented house-to-house campaigns nationwide are now poised to join Robredo's Angat Buhay (literally: Uplift Life) NGO, to carry on with the struggle for a caring and nurturing nation, beyond elections (CNN Philippines Staff, 2022). Still others, the Philippines' version of *la Fraternité*, fan the flames of freedom in far-flung villages unreached

by government aid and development–voices in the wilderness seeking, fighting for the local, decades-long *la révolution* against the "continuation of the past years of tyrannical rule, state terrorism and puppetry to foreign imperialist powers, and a return to the Marcosian levels of corruption and plunder" (Communist Party of the Philippines, 2022, para. 10).

Amid this prolonged pandemic, it is hoped that the much hoped-for period of new enlightenment would also usher in a better era of a more caring & sharing society where the poor would no longer be treated as cannon fodder or food for monsters, but rather, respected, encouraged, and supported as subjects–in the Freireian sense–who are capable of collective action for their emancipation.

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