Torture in Martial Law Cinema

Laurence Marvin S. Castillo

Abstract

In the context of the broad historical amnesia and authoritarian nostalgia that attended the rehabilitation of the Marcoses in Philippine politics, the filmic representation of torture has served as a crucial element in constructing the memory of the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, Sr. This article examines how torture in Martial Law cinema contributes to the cultivation of the public's historical consciousness about the dictatorship. Touching on significant concerns about the representability of political violence and trauma, sense memory, and the question of sensationalism, the article analyzes the film *ML* (2018) by Benedict Mique, which graphically portrays Martial Law torture through conventions associated with torture porn. It highlights how the film's explicit reenactment of political violence engenders reflections about the crisis of historical memory, and the continuities between Marcos Sr.'s dictatorial rule and fascist violence under the presidency of Rodrigo Duterte. The article explores how such generic adherence to violent cinema can advance our understanding of the complex sensory dynamics of filmic spectacle in shaping political memory and articulating socio-political commentary.

Keywords: Martial Law, torture, memory, trauma, torture porn, SDG 4: Quality Education, SDG 16: Peace Justice and Strong Institutions

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Introduction[1]

In May 2022, Ferdinand Marcos Jr., the son of the deposed dictator Ferdinand Marcos Sr., was elected to the Philippine presidency, garnering over 31 million votes in an unprecedented landslide win (Morales 2022). The electoral victory served as a high point in the Marcoses' long-standing, persistent bid to return to the corridors of political power. Earlier in 2016, the dictator was given a state burial at the National Heroes' Cemetery through the sponsorship of former president Rodrigo Duterte, amid protests from Martial Law-era survivors and human rights activists (Pasion, 2016). The results of the 2022 polls are reflective of the extent to which the public has been influenced by the numerous efforts by the Marcoses and their allies to sanitize the legacies of dictatorial rule and propagate the memory of the Martial Law years as "golden age" in Philippine history (Salazar, 2022).

The rehabilitation of the Marcoses foregrounds the crisis of historical memory that has cultivated a favorable public response to the Marcos dictatorship. The broad socio-economic discontent generated in the post-authoritarian period has given rise to the effective consolidation and dominance of a memory regime—referred to here as a repertoire of commemorative practices administered and managed by institutions and social formations like the state and civil society—that fosters popular yearning for dictatorial rule. This memory regime also involves the perpetuation of historical amnesia that sidelines, if not obliterates, the memory of dictatorial atrocities during the Martial Law years. In addressing these issues, testimonies of individuals and communities that suffered during the dictatorship have become an important element in rituals and practices of remembering the Martial Law years, documented in films, literature and other published accounts (Castillo, 2025; Concepcion, 2018; Gealogo, Castillo, Guiang, Pante and Vallejos, 2022).

Articulated in many of these stories are the various mechanisms of psychological and physical pain inflicted by the dictatorial regime in its campaign of terror. One such practice was torture, which has been an integral tactic in the Philippine government's counterinsurgency mechanisms through the sponsorship of the United States. The Philippine military, with the advice of US security forces who drew on the experiences of counterinsurgency in Latin America and Vietnam, organized a network of safe houses where detainees—political dissidents and those suspected of being sympathetic to, or members of,

the revolutionary movement—were brought and subjected to torture (McCoy, 2009). These detainees would undergo various forms of physical and psychological violence ranging from electric shock to sexual violence (Chua, 2012). These methods were designed to break detainees' spirits, force them to confess and even verbalize their abandonment of their political commitment and principles under duress.

According to estimates by Amnesty International (2022), cases of torture recorded in the country during the Martial Law years have reached over thirty thousand. Justice remains beyond the reach of many victims of the dictatorship's human rights abuses, despite persistent efforts to claim reparations and hold the Marcoses accountable. A significant development in this regard is the passage of Republic Act 10368, which recognizes Martial Law atrocities, and contains provisions on granting reparations for the victims of human rights violations and the commemoration of the political violence of the Martial Law years, as well as the heroism of those who fought the dictatorship.

Beyond these legislative measures and judicial moves, human rights activists, academics and civil society organizations continue to exert various efforts to document Martial Law abuses and share them to the public (Chua, 2012). More recently, this has been particularly evident in the aftermath of the hero's burial for Marcos Sr., and the subsequent electoral bids of the Marcos children for national positions, which brought to the fore the need to remind the public of the dictatorship's atrocities. Survivors of torture, now in their aging years, have actively made use of various communicative platforms to discuss their experiences and amplify calls to end the continuing impunity in Philippine society.

Ongoing human rights advocacies and social justice claims depend significantly on the circulation of these experiences. Their value lies in spreading "awareness of the ongoing legacies of massive traumatic occurrences... a consciousness that not only validates victims' and survivors' experiences, but that also provides some measure of insurance against the recurrence of such atrocities" (Goldberg, 2001, p. 246).

Filmic representation is one such form in which Martial Law-era violence, specifically torture, is made accessible to the public. As forms of cultural memory, films centered on the dictatorship reenact for the public the state's detention and abuse of political dissidents. For those who have not experienced these forms of political violence, films bring to light, and render imaginable the acts of terror that the state has kept

hidden in the shadowy corners of safe houses. Through the devices of fictional narration and the visual artifices of reenactment, films become forms of imagined memories, distinct from "lived memories," as they are derived from cultural constructions and archives (Huyssen, 2003, pp. 17). In these imagined memories, torture is reenacted in a way that highlights its performative character as a "spectacle of violence for civil control, becoming a virtual theater state of terror" (McCoy, 2009, p. 124).

The issue of the representability of violence however haunts the question of circulating stories and images of torture. Any attempt to speak about these experiences is often deemed inadequate, especially since terror is broadly understood as situated beyond the domain of the representable and the sayable. Referring to the problem of producing testimonies of traumatic events like the Holocaust, the words of scholars Felman and Laub (1992) reflect on the limits of representation: "[t]here are never enough words or the right words…never enough time or the right time, and never enough listening or the right listening to articulate the story that cannot be fully captured in *thought, memory and speech*" (p. 78, emphasis in original).

At the same time, attempts to represent violence must also contend with the issues of sensationalism and restraint, and more broadly, the ethico-political stakes of representation as a contribution to meaningful historical discourse and justice claims. As Goldberg (2001) explains:

> If they are to be politically effective, then, cultural representations of pain and terror must achieve a fragile balance between the difficulty of presenting that which is too painful to think or to say aloud—and perhaps too painful to be heard—and the imperative of presenting that very material in the service of remembering those events and the people lost to them, and of resisting continued enactment of such violences (p. 246).

This essay aims to contribute to discussions about the limits and potentials of filmic depictions of torture as part of the broader human rights agenda of challenging historical distortion that celebrates authoritarian rule. Here, I am concerned with how the spectatorial portrayal of the tortured body in cinema aids in cultivating historical consciousness about the atrocities of the dictatorship among the viewing public. At the same time, the question of representing torture also

carries with it certain issues about sensationalism and the affective and sensory impact of graphic violence in articulating political commentary. To address these issues, I examine the film *ML* (2018) directed by Benedict Mique, which presents a graphic portrayal of Martial Law torture through the conventions associated with the controversial genre of torture porn. As I elaborate in my analysis, the film demonstrates how such adherence to the conventions of violent cinema can engender political reflections, advancing our understanding of the complex sensory dynamics of filmic spectacle in shaping political memory and articulating socio-political commentary.

Representing torture

The dramatization of torture in film hinges on the construction of what Turim (2014) referred to as "subjective memory," which crucially involves "the double sense of the rendering of history as a subjective experience of a character in the fiction, and the formation of the Subject in history as the viewer of the film identifying with fictional character's positioned in a fictive social reality" (p. 2). Here, audiences are expected to identify with film characters, share the latter's onscreen experiences of political violence, and consequently, become more receptive to political meanings that are encoded in them.

Central to the filmic construction of subjective memory is the body, which acquires a kind of agency as a consequence of its subjection to political torture. As Feldman (1991) stated, political violence is a kind of "transcription" that makes the body into a political subject: "the very act of violence invests the body with agency. The body, altered by violence, reenacts…political discourse and even the movement of history itself" (p. 7). Thus, the circulation of tortured bodies as cultural images carries these inscriptions of historical, social and political struggles and violence, generating interpretation from the viewing public. Goldberg (2001) articulated it clearly when she expressed the dual signifying capacity of the wounded body in referring to both historical violence and a myriad of affects like terror and desire variably perceived by viewers across different contexts.

In the context of filmic representation, the onscreen spectacle of the suffering body can engender a myriad of sensory reactions from the viewers. It is hence instructive to turn to Marks (2000), whose work in intercultural cinema mobilized an understanding of film's multisensory potential through the notion of "haptic visuality," which

refers to how "vision itself can be tactile, as though one were touching a film with one's eyes" (xi). The viewers' act of viewing bodily experiences onscreen stimulates the senses, allowing them to undergo multisensory experiences such as pain and torture. While watching a film is primarily an optical activity, such practice has the effect of awakening the senses, enforcing further the identification of the viewer with the characters in the film. Haptic visuality is crucial to understanding how cinema can construct sense memory. The embodied experience in film that triggers a host of sensory responses can register "a nontransparent and differentially available body of information" (p. 199), which also becomes integral to the construction of political meanings and the deepening of historical understanding.

Philippine cinema contains various examples that demonstrate how the spectacle of the tortured body aids in constructing viewers' political and historical knowledge about the dictatorship of Marcos Sr. In films produced during the Martial Law period that are not explicitly about the regime, the representation of torture have carried subtextual registers of Marcosian violence, figuring the atrocities of authoritarian rule through allegorical evocations that also became functional in evading problems with the dictator's censors. In Lino Brocka's rape-revenge thriller *Angela Markado* (1980), film scholar Capino (2020) expounded that the acts of sexual violence inflicted by the thugs on the protagonist "were either evocative of or comparable to the methods employed by the authoritarian regime," re-enacting "torture sessions…as flamboyant displays of cruelty" (pp. 98-99), drawing on the experience of the film's screenwriter, Jose Lacaba, who suffered torture at the hands of the Marcos military. In another film produced during the Marcos dictatorship, Mike De Leon's allegorical *Batch '81* (1982), the process of fraternity initiation is recoded as Marcosian torture, calling to mind the machismo and cronyism of authoritarian rule. In one scene that chillingly invokes the so-called "tactical interrogation" sessions conducted by the Marcos military, the fraternity masters playing the part of torturers grill one of the fraternity applicants about whether Martial Law is good for the country, and use electrocution as torture method.

Diverging from these allegorical examples is another Mike De Leon picture *Sister Stella L.* (1984), which explicitly portrays torture as part of the technology of Marcosian violence against activists participating in the labor struggle. The torture scene positions the titular nun, Sister Stella L., as witness while the military officers subject activist characters—in

particular, the labor leader and the journalist who covers the strike—to physical violence. Here, the protagonist acts as a diegetic surrogate for the film viewers; in identifying with Sister Stella L.—her shock at the brutality faced by her comrades, and the ensuing development of her political consciousness—the viewers are also expected to accept the film's endorsement of activist politics, and condemnation of the authoritarian regime's repression of the labor sector.

As evident in films about the Martial Law produced after the overthrow of Marcos, torture is also a significant element that reenacts dictatorial atrocities in an era of widespread historical amnesia. These films also contain portrayals of torture, which serve as pivotal crisis moments, through which the political subjectivities of characters are forged, tested and reshaped.

For example, in Chito Roño's *Dekada '70* (2002), a film portraying motherhood against the patriarchal rule of the nation and the home, torture scenes are positioned in the context of familial intimacies. An early torture scene shows one tortured victim, a comrade of one of the protagonists, crying out to his mother in pain. In another, the NPA revolutionary Jules recounts his torture, depicted in intercutting flashbacks, during his parents' visit to him in detention. In Sari Dalena's *Ka Oryang* (2011), which explores the theme of female revolutionary solidarity, the graphic scenes of torture focus on the violated body of the female victim, foregrounding the specificity of female experience of the state's masculinized exercise of military power. Concerned with the crises and contradictions that underpin the shaping and unmaking of comradely relations, Joel Lamangan's *Sigwa* (2010) focuses on how the state deploys political torture to cause not just individual suffering but also the destruction of collective affective ties in the struggle, as it coerces comrade to turn against comrade. The memory of torture therefore becomes instrumental in inciting political disillusionment about the revolution.

The presence of torture in these films, within the conventions of the genre of political melodrama, points to the figurative potency of the spectacle of the suffering body in engaging with the crisis of historical memory—marked by the perpetuation of the myth of the Marcos years as the Golden Age, the disillusionment with the memory of anti-Marcos resistance, and the broad discontent with post-EDSA democracy—that afflicts the public decades after the fall of the Marcos dictatorship.

ML and Torture Porn

At this point, I examine the representation of torture in Benedict Mique's *ML*. The film was released in 2018 during the 14th Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival, where its lead actor Eddie Garcia received the Best Actor Prize. The film would subsequently be recognized by the critics' group, Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino (Critics of Filipino Film). The said body would also nominate it for Best Picture, and hand Garcia the Best Actor award.

In analyzing *ML* and its political commentary about the memory crises surrounding the Marcos dictatorship, I intend to demonstrate how the film appropriates the generic conventions of what is known, frequently scathingly, as torture porn. This genre label has been attached to films like *Saw* (2004), *Hostel* (2005), and *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which were released a decade before *ML*. Torture porn is characterized by the following elements:

> [A] heterotopic non-site removed from proper society; isolated victims who are confined within a highly controlled space, bound, placed in stress positions; the administration of violence eliciting pain and suffering; and accompanying diegetic and nondiegetic audio elements that convey the gravity of the situation. (Kerner, 2015, p. 8)

Critics have derided this genre, characterizing films classified as torture porn as "little more than a series of violent vignettes loosely tied together with a narrative that is secondary to the exhibition of brutality" (Kerner, 2015, p. 13). Kerner argued that despite such derisive reception, the popularity of the torture porn genre, more specifically in American culture, endures significantly due to the political developments that enhance its palatability to the public, particularly the ubiquitous visual culture that has accompanied American exercises of counterterror operations such as the circulating images of abuse in Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo.

In the Philippines, the entry of films under this genre have faced trouble from censors, as in the case of *The Passion of the Christ* (2004), which received an X-rating from the Philippine state's foremost censorship body for screen media, the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB). Despite this regulatory move by the state, films linked to the genre like the *Saw* franchise have enjoyed

circulation, developing cult following especially among the youth through illicit circuits of consumption like piracy.

An issue that I aim to address here is how *ML* foregrounds the possibilities of articulating political commentaries within torture porn, and more broadly, horror/thriller cinema. Reviews of the movie have pointed to how *ML* refigures Martial Law memory within the generic conventions of cinematic horror. Writer Sarmiento (2018) opined that the film made use of the "framework of the standard teen slasher horror thriller" (para. 1). Film critic Cruz (2018) wrote that the movie is a "fine example of transgressive horror" (para. 10). Film scholar Tolentino (2020) commented on the graphic nature of the scenes in the movies, while also observing how "masinop at graphikong napaangat ang pelikula lampas sa genre film" (para. 6) [the film neatly and graphically rises above the genre film], owing to its political content. For some reviewers, the film's genre elements somehow undermine the discursive potency of its political message. Ramones (2018) mentioned the "film's employment of familiar thriller tropes" (para. 3), as a seeming departure from "nuanced discourse" evident in particular in the classroom scene with the professor. Flores (2018) also pointed out in her review how the film "foregoes critical thinking and analysis for an up close and personal view of the bloody, violent realities" (para. 15).

The latter criticisms operate on the assumption that the genre representation of graphic violence and the possibility of critical political commentary are incompatible. Such divide gestures to the question of how adherence to conventions such as those found in critically derided genres like torture porn and slasher film—genres viewed less as platforms for political articulation than as exploitative forms of cinematic entertainment—could de/limit the film's capacity to make political commentary and articulate historical concerns. *ML* has triggered reflections about the potency of genre cinema in articulating political commentaries, calling attention to how viewers can perceive sensationalist spectacles as political. This then proposes a rethinking of the boundaries that demarcate political cinema from what is regarded as lowbrow entertainment.

Reenacting Marcosian torture

As a film associated with a genre often considered youth-oriented in content and target audience, *ML* is concerned with the problem of the younger generation's distorted understanding of the Martial Law

years. It centers on the experiences of university students, who are Marcos apologists. Vocal about their political conviction, they defend the Marcoses to their teacher, who, hoping to address their historical ignorance, then assigns them to interview anyone they know who lived through the Martial Law years.

Keen to learn from someone who became actively involved in the political struggles during the authoritarian rule either as an activist or a member of state armed forces, Carlo (Tony Labrusca) sets out to interview an old man, Colonel Jose dela Cruz (Eddie Garcia), a retired police officer, who lives in the neighborhood. Unbeknownst to Carlo, the Colonel was a torturer during the Martial Law years. The brutality lurking beneath the old man's gentlemanly exterior is suggested at the beginning of the film; he is shown luring a stray dog to his yard, before bludgeoning it to death. This scene, which functions as an expository moment that signals the film's genre and constructs a narrative world of dread and violence, foreshadows the fate that awaits the clueless teenagers who innocently seek him out for the class assignment.

Carlo visits the Colonel's house, where the former state butcher appears to enjoy his retirement. The comfortable life that the retired officer leads suggests that he has successfully evaded accountability for the human rights violations that he committed as part of his official duty during the Marcos dictatorship, registering the failure of institutional efforts to address Martial Law-era atrocities. Their encounter will reveal a disturbing detail that serves as the engine propelling the film's violent narrative – Colonel dela Cruz suffers from senility, causing him to harbor the illusion that he is still carrying out his violent duties during the Martial Law years. Thinking that Carlo is an activist fighting the Marcos regime, he strikes the young man unconscious and drags him to the basement.

The Colonel's psychological condition, which alters his sense of time and place, is suggestive of how agents of state violence have thoroughly internalized their brutal duty, making them unable to distinguish their identity apart from their roles as state agents. The torturers "were actors who personified the violent capacities of the state" performing the dictator's "script of terror for his New Society" (McCoy, 2012, p. 125). In the film, such personification of state violence is also registered in a brief scene, in which the Colonel carefully dons his police attire in a ritual that prepares him for his role as torturer.

In the basement, Carlo wakes up after being hit several times by the Colonel. The young man is shocked to realize his captive state—tied with ropes to a chair and his mouth taped. A vibrant soundscape of an '80s pop song contrasts with the dark interior of the basement, where a lightbulb hangs from the ceiling. As the space of torture, the basement evokes Kerner's (2015) description of the torture chamber as

> [A] hermetic space and, more than this, a nonplace, sequestered from the day-to-day civilized world—what Michel Foucault called a heterotopia. Set in contrast to utopias, heterotopias are "sites with no real place"; they exist contiguous with the inhabited world and yet are set apart, sequestered. (p. 32)

The basement's heterotopic quality—its separation from reality—is further emphasized by the film's evocation of the stark visual disparity between the brutal darkness enveloping the torture chamber, and the idyllic, well-lit space of the Colonel's main house, where he peacefully spends his retirement days, given to domestic routines like tending to his garden and drinking a cup of coffee. Against the seeming tranquility of retirement, the Colonel remains ever vigilant, particularly attentive to the movements in the basement where he conducts his brutal activity. He descends the stairs leading to the basement, the interior of the torture site awash in red-tinged darkness contrasting with the brightly illuminated space of the main house, and its stillness punctuated with cries and screams of pain. Here, the double life that the torturer leads allegorizes the seemingly placid exterior of dictatorial rule that conceals, while being sustained by, the violence lurking beneath the official facade.

The torture that Carlo experiences at the hands of the senile Colonel assumes a protracted, methodical rhythm similar to that found in the torture porn genre. As if relishing in his sadism, the Colonel slowly takes out his tools and weapons of torture from his arsenal in the basement. The camera carefully follows his measured movements to heighten the sense of tension, willing the viewers to anticipate the torturer's next move. The Colonel takes his golf club and uses it to hit Tony's foot; blood is then shown spurting out of the injury.

As documented in accounts of Martial Law-era torture, the infliction of extreme bodily pain is integral to the coercive extraction of confession about communist involvement from the tortured. McCoy (2012) described the typical torture scenario: "The torturer begins with

a few questions, meets resistance, and then applies coercion, physical and psychological, to elicit cooperation" (p. 126). In *ML*, the retired officer insistently asks the clueless Carlo the whereabouts of communist organizing, such as the location of their supposed headquarters, about which the captive is clueless. Psywar tactics are employed to force Carlo's admission of his non-existent communist involvement; for instance, the torturer insists that he has been betrayed by his comrades, and should therefore cooperate with the state.

As the interrogation continues, the torture methods grow increasingly brutal, in response to the victim's repeated denial of the torturer's accusations. The torturer gets a pair of long-nosed pliers, and begins to denail Carlo. Here, the camera is unflinching in capturing the act of mutilation, graphically zooming in on the specific portion of the body to convey sensory experience. Auditory features—the sound of crunched nails, and the victim's howls of pain—add to this experience of haptic visuality. Torture also involves in this case the experience of humiliation and disgust. The torturer takes out a bundle of tissue, douses it with his urine, and forces it onto Carlo's mouth, before mockingly telling him to sleep like a baby.

Violence escalates as a new victim is introduced in the narrative. Gaining access to Carlo's mobile phone, Colonel dela Cruz lures Carlo's classmate Jaze (Henz Villaraiz) to drop by the torturer's residence. Like Carlo, the newcomer is struck unconscious and taken to the basement. Upon waking up, Jaze first assumes that a prank is played on him, until he is subjected to water torture by the Colonel. The camera steadily captures the act of violence committed to the tortured, the duration of suffering also intensifying the graphic nature of the staged brutality. The scene of water torture goes on too long, with a towel placed on Jaze's face, while water is hosed on him. The camera is positioned atop his head, while he lies on the floor, assuming the torturer's point of view. This perspectival positioning implicates the audience in the act of horror, a move that doubly works to elicit spectatorial identification with the torturer while triggering reflection about the ethical stakes of witnessing performed brutality onscreen.

The Colonel's interrogation of Jaze reveals the depths to which the torturer's delusions have led him, concretizing the insistent rigidity with which perpetrators of counterinsurgency personify the state's paranoia. He mistakenly assumes that Valkyrie—a bar, which the teenagers repeatedly mention in their message exchanges—is a safehouse of

political activists. Losing his patience at Jaze's repeated denial of his accusation, the Colonel pulls out his gun and points it toward Jaze. Here, the camera assumes Jaze's point of view to place the viewers in his distressed position. This Marcosian moment, which Capino (2020) described as "a scene of explosive violence inciting terror, precisely the fear of the autocratic state...punctuated, moreover, by shots of characters looking straight or almost directly at the camera" (p. xviii), culminates with the Colonel pulling the trigger, as it turns out, on an empty chamber.

In a scene reminiscent of *Batch '81*, the torturer subjects the two captives to electrocution. The sequence follows the methodical and careful rhythm in which Colonel Dela Cruz tapes wires into Jaze's chest, and clips the other end inside Carlo's shorts, presumably to his genitals. The torturer quizzes them, as if in a game, repeatedly plugging the electricity to shock them. At this point, Jaze appears to have reached the threshold of pain, and begins to admit to a political involvement he does not have.

Torture acquires a gendered dimension upon the arrival of Carlo's girlfriend, Pat (Lianne Valentin), whom the antagonist lures by deceptively sending her text messages from Carlo's number. After being knocked out by the torturer, Pat wakes up naked in the basement, her mouth taped, and her neck wrapped in ropes. The camera positions her body in full view of the two other captives, effectively turning the act of gazing into a diegetic act also performed by her fellow victims. At the same time, it is noticeable that the film blurs shots of her body, indicating a measure of avoidance to sensationalize the female victim's nudity, and by extension, the sexual violence that many victims of the dictatorship went through. This moment of restraint points to the film's conscious rejection of the tendency in torture porn to turn the suffering female body into an object of male gaze.

Pat's torture is clearly patterned after the documented instances of sexual violence experienced by female victims during the Martial Law years (Chua, 2012). The Colonel takes out a bottle and inserts it in her genitals, an act suggested by the shot of the bloodied bottle taken out from the direction of her pelvis, and the Colonel's insulting quip that she is still a virgin. Again, the camera does not linger on the female body, and instead captures the shock of horror reflected upon the eyes of Carlo, as he helplessly plays witness to the assault to her girlfriend. The Colonel then insults Carlo: "*Bata, ang hina mo naman. Naunahan*

ka pa ng bote" [Kid, you're so weak. Even the bottle beats you to it]. In this remark is encapsulated the subjective construction of the torturer as the avatar of state masculinity, here perpetrating gendered (and in this case, demasculinizing) forms of dehumanization to force submission to the supreme figure of phallic power—the Dictator.

From Marcos to Duterte

ML's representation of torture, as experienced by those who actually have not lived through the Martial Law years, decades after the end of the Marcos dictatorship underscores the crises of historical memory that significantly enable the rise of contemporary fascist politics under the presidency of Duterte. The film explicitly portrays how the dictator's institutionalized expansion of the police's violent capacities has brought about the exercises of fascism in the decades that followed. Crucial to this is the temporal positioning of the brutal actions of the Colonel—with his dementia-driven delusion that confuses the past with the present—within the socio-political milieu of Duterte's violent presidency. Under this later regime, the police has acquired immense political power, fueling the violent drug war, which has claimed the lives of thousands suspected or accused of being involved in drug use and sale.

The continuation of the two violent orders—Marcosian torture and Duterte's drug war—becomes the topic of discussion in one scene. Here the retired officer is visited by his daughter and son-in-law, with whom he strikes a conversation about his former role as a cop during the Martial Law years, and the present-day killings of suspected drug users and pushers. The Colonel confidently justifies the actions of police officers—both during the dictatorship and the drug war—within the framework of institutional submission; for him, the extermination of elements deemed undesirable by the state like activist groups and drug users/pushers is an official duty expected of armed state forces.

The Colonel would himself personify the continuities between the violence of the Marcos dictatorship and the atrocities under Duterte. He guns down Jaze, and dumps his body in the streets. On the corpse, he attaches the placard "Huwag tularan, Pusher" [Don't imitate, A pusher], referencing the manner in which the bodies of the victims of the drug war are disposed of, after being killed by the police. The Martial Law torturer is now a drug war perpetrator; the violence of the dictatorship is effectively intertwined with the recent exercise of state

brutality under Duterte. Here, the film visibly inscribes the "spectacle of violence" under the Duterte presidency that involves turning the body into an object of political spectacle, of humiliation and dehumanization (Reyes, 2016).

The film furthers its critique of the dictatorial traces of impunity that endures to the present by portraying the protagonists' difficult attempt to seek legal redress for the political victimization they have gone through. While Carlo and Pat are able to escape, the state bars their attempt to hold their torturer accountable; the police even links them to the fate of the "drug pusher" Jaze, suspecting them of using illegal drugs. Frustrated over the turn of events, which provides him a glimpse into how the state protects its enlisted agents of violence, Carlo sets out to take matters into his own hands. In the dead of night, he returns to the Colonel's residence to exact revenge, or find clues to indict the state butcher. What he finds instead is their torturer in bed, already dead in his sleep. Later the Colonel is shown buried in the heroes' cemetery. In this brief scene, which also recalls the events of November 2016, when Duterte, then maintaining a political alliance with the Marcoses,[2] allowed a hero's burial for the former dictator, the film grimly locates the pervasive crisis of historical memory in relation to the state's active efforts to rehabilitate and even honor the culprits responsible for the perpetration of dictatorial atrocities.

The film ends with Carlo back in the university classroom. Asked by his professor about the "interview" he conducted, the wounded and traumatized Carlo is rendered speechless, visibly contemplating the weight of the ordeal that he has experienced, as the film closes. The film's conclusion clearly gestures upon the pedagogical impact of experiencing violence in developing a critical understanding and consciousness of the dictatorship and its atrocities – firsthand, in the case of Carlo, and through the spectatorial haptic visuality afforded in the medium, in the case of the viewers.

Conclusion

In this discussion of *ML*, I have detailed the film's deployment of the conventions of torture genre in representing the violence of the Marcos dictatorship, as well as the continuation of police atrocities under the time of Duterte. The film's adherence to the genre is evident particularly in the prolonged staging of torture scenes and the camera's focus on the suffering body, as well as in its narrative elements involving a ruthless

villain and unsuspecting teenage victims, reenacting Marcosian torture to evoke the affective responses of terror, shock and disgust. Such responses are visceral reactions engendered by the dynamics of haptic visuality that can be reconfigured into expressions of political indignation.

Cultural portrayals of pain and suffering contain opportunities for historical pedagogy. As can be evinced in the genre exercise performed in *ML*, spectacles of violence deemed sensationalist, extreme and graphic bear politico-historical significations that can be decoded by viewers in ways that engage the senses more actively. Here, it is important to point out that the objective of raising political awareness and cultivating historical consciousness can significantly involve interrupting the field of the visual, and overturning the limits of what is sayable and representable. The novelty and cultic appeal of genre-oriented filmic representations like *ML* cannot therefore be dismissed in potentially drawing some audiences to explicitly political themes expectedly and commonly found in genres that they may not necessarily find appealing.

As the construction of memory assumes a sensory dimension, the sensory assault performed by *ML* may offer a potential rethinking of the visual as a field of cultural memory, in which to contest historical forgetting. As detailed in the foregoing discussion of the film's graphic depictions of bodily violence, *ML* is an example of "the possibility of feeling the past as an embodied experience," a viewing experience that heralds the "'return of history through the gut,'" in which "spectacle does not necessarily halt at sensation alone but opens out toward history" (Lowenstein, 2011, p. 49). At a time when the violence of the dictatorship is obliterated from the realm of visibility through the dominant imaginaries of the Marcosian cultural regime, the project of surfacing anti-dictatorial memory may benefit from spectacles that can jolt our historical senses in ways that may challenge our expectations about the form, content and genre of "political cinema."

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Notes

[1] Some of the early ideas for this essay were presented at the UP Film Circle's online forum CineSabe in December 2022, and the 6th International Conference on Asian and Philippine Studies organized by the De La Salle University at the Silliman University in June 2023.

[2] The political alliance between the Marcoses and the Dutertes has since broken down. It is under the current presidency of Marcos Jr. that Duterte was arrested by the International Criminal Court (ICC) for the latter's conduct of the bloody war on drugs.

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About the Author

LAURENCE MARVIN S. CASTILLO (lscastillo@up.edu.ph) is associate professor of literary and cultural studies at the Department of Humanities, College of Arts and Sciences, University of the Philippines Los Baños. He earned his PhD from the University of Melbourne, writing about political cinema and literature. He is a member of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino.