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JAPAN

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MANILA

ART

A Collection of Essays
on Philippine Contemporary
Literature & Film

ART ARCHIVE 02

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The Japan Foundation, Manila
ART ARCHIVE 02

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The Japan Foundation is Japan's only institution dedicated to carrying out comprehensive international cultural exchange programs throughout the world. With the objective of cultivating friendship and ties between Japan and the world through culture, language, and dialogue, the Japan Foundation creates global opportunities to foster trust and mutual understanding.

As the 18th overseas office, **The Japan Foundation, Manila** was founded in 1996, active in three focused areas: Arts and Culture; Japanese Studies and Intellectual Exchange; Japanese-Language Education.

This book is the second volume of the **ART ARCHIVE** series, which explores the current trends and concerns in Philippine contemporary art, published also in digital format for accessibility and distribution on a global scale. This volume brings together eleven writers from the Philippines, putting forth a diverse set of perspectives about contemporary literature and film in the country. With many creative talents, both genres have been drawing much attention locally and globally but there is little publication to give outline of their current states and interpret their background for the global readers.

We hope that this publication will serve as a resource for our readers interested in Philippine art, thereby contributing constructively to the dialogue on contemporary art in the region. We would like to express our gratitude to the contributors and the editorial team for their painstaking labor on this publication.

We would also like to thank you for your support of our second volume and our projects in the arts and culture in the Philippines. We look forward to your continued support in our succeeding projects in the future.

A New Age of Contemporary Philippine Cinema and Literature

words by

PATRICIA TUMANG

From the regional, and the national to the global, Philippine contemporary cinema and literature have amassed a multitude of diverse expressions, genres, and styles that reflect the personal, social, and political perspectives of their creators and also the state of the nation.

The Japan Foundation, Manila's *ART ARCHIVE 02* is the second book in a series that explores and extrapolates on current trends and concerns in Philippine contemporary art, this time focusing on the country's cinema and literature. It aims to introduce readers to the history and development of these two significant art forms and how they are expressed today.

The book features thought-provoking essays written by creative writers, filmmakers, journalists, academics, professors, and experts in film, literature, and creative writing scholarship, who bridge the past and the present while proposing new modes of thinking about, perceiving, and deconstructing Philippine film and literature. The book also includes a curated directory of Philippine film and literary institutions and resources.

Just as ART ARCHIVE 01 sought to capture how Filipino artists respond to or create works in the current political and socio-economic climate, the editorial vision of ART ARCHIVE 02 builds upon this framework to explore new avenues of artistic production and its intersections with modern technology, distribution, and mass market appeal. For example, what impact do local and international festivals have on the recognition and reception of contemporary books and films? Given the rise of digital modes of production, how do emerging technologies affect not only how we perceive and consume these art forms, but also how filmmakers and writers engage in a creative process?

Guided by these inquiries, ART ARCHIVE 02 presents a collection of thought-provoking essays that explore the myriad of ways that Philippine contemporary cinema and literature are breaking new grounds in subject matter, styles, expressions, and forms. The title of the book series – ART ARCHIVE – stems from the desire to document, present, and preserve these insights and articulations in a compiled format.

Functioning as both a primer and a survey, ART ARCHIVE 02 is divided into three sections: *The Golden Ages*, *Regional to National*, and *Third Waves*, interspersed with the essays on film and literature. A golden age describes a period of time when a specific art form or movement is at its height; the first section *The Golden Ages* includes essays that examine these peaks of Philippine cinema and literature, alongside their ebbs and flows in larger historical contexts. *Regional to National* explores the emergence and reception of regional cinema, literature, and writing workshops in relation to the “cultural capital” of Metro Manila. The final section, *Third Waves*, features essays that explore new expressions of film and literature, from digital indie documentaries to graphic novels.

We begin with the essay “What We Don’t Know About The Books We Know” by Patricia May B. Jurilla, which retraces the history of popular Philippine literary works from the nineteenth century to present day, offering an overview of Philippine history through the lens of its literature.

Nick Deocampo’s essay “New Perspectives: Philippine Cinema at the Crossroads” captures the heights that Philippine cinema has soared to over the past 100 years, ever since Filipino film producer and director José Nepomuceno set up the first local film studio in the Philippines in 1917. Classifying Philippine cinema into four distinct

paradigms, Deocampo attempts to deconstruct the complexity of the country’s film culture and local film industry.

The next section, *Regional to National*, explores developments and issues in contemporary regional cinema and literature. Patrick F. Campos’ essay “Small Film, Global Connections” reveals how advances in digital technologies and the advent of independent film festivals like Cinemalaya have led to big shifts in making films accessible, particularly enabling regional films to be shown to wider audiences.

Katrina Ross Tan delves into the history and emergence of regional films in her essay “Creating Ripples in Philippine Cinema: The Rise of Regional Cinema,” where she also writes about the issues and concerns in building a regional film movement that has a larger impact on national film culture.

We continue with John Bengan’s essay “The Historic and The Epic: Contemporary Fiction from Mindanao,” which explores the factors that have contributed to the rise of contemporary literature from Mindanao and in particular, recent works of fiction published in the last five years written by writers from Mindanao.

Tara FT Sering’s essay, “Silliman and Beyond: A Look Inside The Writers’ Workshop,” recounts her firsthand experience as a young student in the Silliman Writers Workshop in Dumaguete, where she learned about the writing life from the late founders Edilberto and Edith Tiempo, who was conferred the National Artist Award for Literature in 1999.

The last section, *Third Waves*, introduces new innovations and approaches in creating films and literature in the Philippines. In Adjani Arumpac’s essay, “Digital Documentary Traditions,” she writes about the cinematic documentary tradition in the Philippines and its development at the intersections of workshops, local film festivals, collectives, and recognition by award-giving bodies and government institutions.

In his essay “A Third Wave: Potential Future for Alternative Cinema,” Dodo Dayao makes a compelling case for the existence of a Third Wave of Philippine experimental cinema and recounts significant films from the First and Second Waves of national cinema.

Roy Agustin’s essay “Philippine Comics: Tradition and Innovation” provides an overview of the evolution of Philippine comics, from editorial cartooning at the end of the nineteenth century, where satirical magazines often featured political caricatures and editorial cartoons criticizing the state of the nation, to present-day popular superhero comics.

Andrea Pasion-Flores’s essay, “Festivals and Literary Imaginations,” explores the evolution of book publishing in the Philippines and the proliferation of local literary festivals, particularly the Manila International Literary Festival, which she had organized for several years when she was the Executive Director of the National Book Development Board.

We end with Baby Ruth Villarama’s essay “Current Film Distribution Trends in The Philippines,” which takes a closer look at film distribution in the Philippine film market, and its connections to cycles of film distribution around the world.

My hope is that the collection of essays presented here in *ART ARCHIVE 02* will take readers on a journey of discovery in learning about the critical issues, concerns, trajectories, and possibilities that encompass the richness and diversity of Philippine contemporary cinema and literature today. ■

words by
PATRICIA MAY
B. JURILLA, PhD

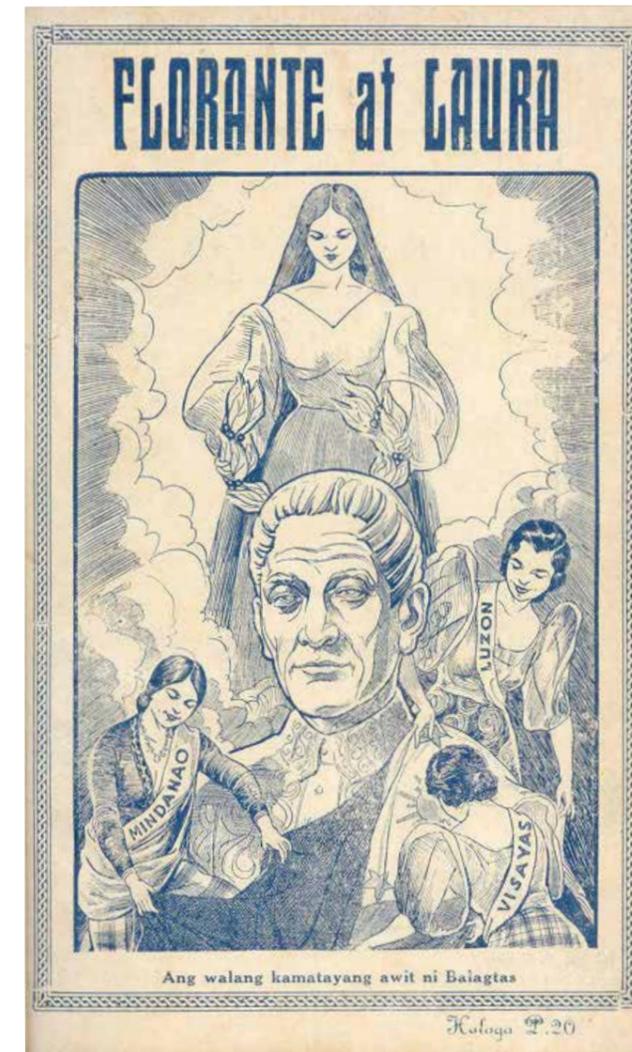


Fig. 1

Among the many fascinating features of literature is its ability to come alive. If read well, a literary work springs into motion. Characters leap out of the page to become persons we love or hate, emulate or avoid, pity or blame. Settings pop out of paper, and we find ourselves transported to other places, sometimes where we've never been, and we see its sights, smell its scents, feel its temper and temperature. Plotlines extend out of the margins to intertwine with our own comedies, dramas, romances, adventures, and fantasies. Themes seep through the binding, and we are affirmed or challenged in our beliefs and values.

But there's more to a literary work than the lively story it tells. There are many other stories about and around it that have to do with the work's coming to life—backstories, as it were, on its composition, publication, and reception. Some of our most important or popular literary works have much to tell on how they came to be written, published, and read. Their stories offer information and insights not only on the books themselves but also on Philippine literature, history, and culture in general.

THE UNWIELDY TITLE

Take for instance *Florante at Laura* by Francisco Baltazar (Balagtas), which was published in 1838. A verse narrative about the travails of Florante, an Alabian aristocrat-soldier, who battles heathens, saves his kingdom from evil forces, and wins the hand of his beloved Laura, this is a book that every Filipino who has gone to a local high school knows but probably did not read in its entirety. Its full title is *Pinagdaanang Buhay ni Florante at ni Laura sa kahariang Albania, kinuha sa madlang 'cuadro historico' o pinturang nagsasabi sa mga nangyayari nang unang panahon sa imperio ng Grecia at tinula ng isang matuwain sa bersong Tagalog* (The History of Florante and Laura in the Kingdom of Albania, based on various 'historical scenes' or portraits relating events in ancient times in the Greek Empire and written by one who delights in Tagalog verse).

The full title now sounds dated and rather unwieldy, thus the preferred usage of its shortened version. But during Balagtas's time, the full title was quite fashionable, its length and style following conventions that had prevailed in Western Europe since the sixteenth century. Titles of books then typically included not only the name of the work but also its genre, a synopsis, the name and designation of the author, the name and designation of the dedicatee, the name of the person or institution who sponsored or approved the publication of the work, the place of printing, the name of the printer, and the date of printing—information that could well fill up an entire page. Considering this, the full title of *Florante at Laura* seems short and sweet. The composition of the work, however, was anything but such.

Florante at Laura was written in prison.¹ Balagtas was serving a sentence beginning in 1835 or 1836. He had been jailed on charges allegedly trumped up by Mariano Capuli, who was wealthy and powerful and who also happened to be Balagtas's rival in the courtship of Maria Asuncion Rivera—the "Celia" to whom *Florante at Laura* was dedicated and whose initials appear in the dedicatory verses. Capuli and Rivera eventually married. Balagtas stayed in jail until 1838. *Florante at Laura* was published that same year, after his release.

Around 1856 or 1857, Balagtas was again imprisoned, this time for cutting off the hair of a housemaid. He was released in 1860. Unemployed and impoverished, he spent the remaining years of his life writing one literary work after another. He died in 1862. It is said that before his death, he strictly forbade any of his children from becoming poets, claiming that it would be better for them to have their hands cut off than to follow in his footsteps.

Balagtas wrote numerous poems and more than a hundred plays in his lifetime, majority of which have been forgotten. But *Florante at Laura* has survived, having been

read and taught as an allegory of the sufferings of the Filipino people under the oppressive Spanish colonial regime. It has never gone out of print since it was first published, with over a hundred editions issued. It has been adapted into a novel, a children's picture book, and comic books. It has been serialized in a periodical and issued in digital form as an e-text. It has been translated into Kapampangan, Visayan, Ibanag, Pangasinan, and Iloko—as well as in Spanish, English, German, and French. It has also been performed on stage as a play, a musical, an opera, and a ballet; it has been made into a film and recorded as an audio book.

Unique as *Florante at Laura* is—for its survival among Balagtas's many writings, for its many varied adaptations and translations, for its stature as one of the most important literary works of the Philippines—it was actually a very common work in its day in terms of its form. *Florante and Laura* was written as an *awit*, a metrical romance with lines made up of twelve syllables. The other metrical romance form of Philippine literature is the *corrido*, with lines in eight syllables. These types of works were the most popular literary texts during the Spanish colonial period until the early decades of the twentieth century. Hundreds of titles were produced, with stories on fictional nobility of European kingdoms, saints and martyrs, and Filipino folklore and history. All of them are practically forgotten now except for *Florante at Laura*, which has become part of the literary canon of the nation and is required reading in Philippine high schools.

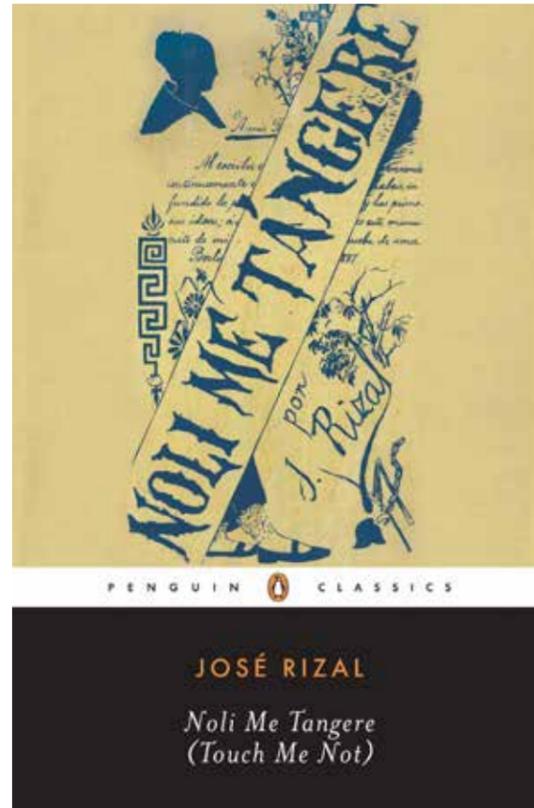


Fig. 2

Fig. 1 1938. *Maynila: Mga Aklatan ni Juliana Martinez*. New revised edition. Edited by Emiliano Rionda. [Image: copy of the University of the Philippines Main Library in Diliman, Quezon City]

Fig. 2 2006. New York: Penguin Books. Trans. by Harold Augenbraum.

Fig. 3 1959. *Manila*: Manlapaz Publishing.

1940. *Manila: [Angela Manalang Gloria]*. First edition. Title page. [Image: copy of the University of the Philippines Main Library in Diliman, Quezon City]

1962. *Manila*: Alberto S. Florentino. Title page.

Fig. 5 [Image: copy of the University of the Philippines Main Library in Diliman, Quezon City]

Fig. 6 2011. Tucson, AZ: Schaffner Press.

RIZAL, INEPT PUBLISHER

The principal texts in the Philippine literary canon, which are also required readings for Filipino students as mandated by law, are the novels *Noli me tangere* and *El filibusterismo* by José Rizal. We know these books well, of course, and surely have read them more (or more of them) than *Florante at Laura*. What is perhaps not so well known is that Rizal published these books himself.

In 1884, while in Spain, Rizal began writing a novel on contemporary Philippine society and politics. Its story centers on Crisostomo Ibarra, an idealistic young man who returns to the Philippines after his studies in Spain and becomes caught in the troubles of his homeland. Rizal finished the novel some three years later when he was in Germany studying ophthalmology. In February 1887, at the age of 26, he published it as *Noli me tangere* (Touch Me Not). Borrowing money from his friend and compatriot Maximo Viola, Rizal had the novel printed in Berlin in an edition of 2,000 copies. He sent copies to a select group of friends in Europe, one to the Governor of the Philippines, and another to the Archbishop of Manila; the rest of the copies were crated for dispatch to Spain and the Philippines.²

It is estimated that 1,000 copies of the *Noli*, at most, reached Filipino readers during Rizal's lifetime.³ Smuggled copies of the novel sold briskly at the shop La Gran Bretaña in Manila. With the rest of the edition held up in customs, according to Rizal's biographer Austin Coates, "Second-hand copies not more than a few days old were a week later being sold as third-hand copies..."⁴ The books "had pasted-on covers marked 'Gems of Spanish Verse, Vol. II', or something equally innocuous."⁵

Rizal was a man of many accomplishments and talents: he was a physician, writer, and artist; he was fluent in

Tagalog, Spanish, German, French, English, and Italian. But he was not very adept as a publisher. He did not set a fixed price for the *Noli*, nor did he keep a record of its distribution and sales.⁶ As to be expected then, he did not make any money out of it.

It is unsurprising, too, that the *Noli* provoked the ire of authorities in the Philippines, particularly the clergy, for its scathing depiction of corrupt Spanish friars. A special committee of the University of Santo Tomas, formed at the request of the Archbishop of Manila, declared the novel "heretical, impious and scandalous in its religious aspect, and unpatriotic, subversive of public order and harmful to the Spanish Government and its administration of these islands, in its political aspect."⁷ The censors banned the book in December 1887.

El filibusterismo (Subversion), the sequel to the *Noli*, was written and published overseas as well. In the *Fili*, Ibarra has transformed himself into the immensely wealthy and powerful Simoun, who carries out a sinister plot to incite a revolution against the government in the Philippines. Rizal finished writing the novel in Belgium in May 1891. Desperate to get his book in print and nearly destitute, he moved from Brussels to Ghent where printing was cheaper. The novel was cut drastically because of lack of funds, and its publication was never entirely certain until Valentin Ventura, another friend and fellow Filipino, sent Rizal money in September to cover his printing bills.⁸ The *Fili* was published that same month.

While more careful arrangements were made for its distribution, the *Fili* was not as successful as the *Noli* in reaching the Philippines undetected. Having heard of the novel's existence, Spanish authorities were able to intercept and destroy a bulk of the edition in Iloilo.⁹ The copies that saw entry into the country came through the post, sent from Hong Kong, Singapore, and Europe by Rizal's friends.¹⁰

As in the case of *Noli*, Rizal did not make any profit from publishing the *Fili*. Both novels, which inspired the Philippine Revolution against Spain, ultimately cost him his life. While he did not even believe in the idea of revolution, his commitment being to reforms in the Philippines and the assimilation of the country into Spain, he was charged, found guilty, and executed for being the "principal organiser" of the uprising.¹¹

As much as Rizal was an influential force in Philippine politics, so was he in the literature of the nation. He became, as the literary scholar Resil B. Mojares notes, "a primary example for writers who came after him", and after the *Noli* and the *Fili*, the novel went through "a vigorous existence, particularly in the native languages."¹²

A COMMERCIAL CATASTROPHE

Banaag at Sikat by Lope K. Santos was one of the works that came in the wake of Rizal's novels. It is a story about social injustice, depicting the cruelty of the rich and the sufferings of the poor through the experiences and insights of the friends Delfin and Felipe. Like most of the early Tagalog novels, *Banaag at Sikat* (From Early Dawn to Full Light) first came out as a serial in a periodical, appearing in regular installments in the newspaper *Muling Pagsilang* (Renaissance) from 1904 to 1906.

At this time, the novel was a new and exciting genre for Filipinos. For centuries prior to this, under the Spanish colonial rule, literature in the vernacular languages had been largely limited to religious writings in traditional verse forms due to the strict censorship enforced by the Church and state. During the early years of the American administration, with censorship relaxed and foreign novels allowed entry into the country, Filipino writers enjoyed some freedom of expression and discovered new models for their writing. A number of them became novelists almost instantly; the reading public in turn took to fiction just as readily. According to the Tagalog author Iñigo Ed. Regalado, the serialized novels were so popular that readers bought the periodicals mainly for the fiction rather than the news.¹³

Inspired by this eager reception, Santos issued his first novel in book form at his own expense, just as some other early Tagalog novelists did with their own works. *Banaag at Sikat* was issued as a book in 1906. Santos had 10,000 copies in newsprint and 1,000 in book paper printed with the Imprenta McCullough.¹⁴ This self-publishing venture turned out to be a commercial catastrophe. Of the 11,000 copies, he managed to sell only 4,000. Being unable to pay for the rest of the unsold books, Santos was charged in court by the printer and ordered to relinquish various possessions, including fifteen female cows, as partial payment for his printing bill. The Imprenta McCullough auctioned off the remaining 7,000 copies. Santos spent many years paying off the rest of his debt to the printer. As he recalls in his biography, the publishing of *Banaag at Sikat* was meant to uplift his financial situation, instead it left him more impoverished than ever.¹⁵

Despite its disastrous beginnings as a book, *Banaag at Sikat* survived and even triumphed. It has seen reprinting through the years and is now recognized as the most prominent work of the period known as the Golden Age of the Tagalog novel (1905–1921). The novel is considered a milestone in the history of Tagalog fiction for its engagement with social issues. Santos, who was a staunch advocate of the Tagalog language, went on to become an important figure in Philippine literature.

LYRICAL PIECES ABOUT A WOMAN'S PRIVATE PASSIONS

Poems by Angela Manalang Gloria may not be as well-known as Santos's novel, but it was a milestone itself in the history of Philippine literature in English. Manalang Gloria was among the first generation of female students at the University of the Philippines (UP), graduating *summa cum laude* in 1929. She was also among the first generation of Filipino writers in English. In 1940, she published *Poems*, a collection comprised of seventy-nine pieces. It was the first and only pre-war anthology of poetry in English by a Filipina.

Manalang Gloria entered *Poems* in the Commonwealth Literary Awards of 1940. It did not win, for the contest favored works of social significance and moral values. *Poems*, which has been described as “a collection of lyrical pieces exploring a woman's private passions”, evidently did not

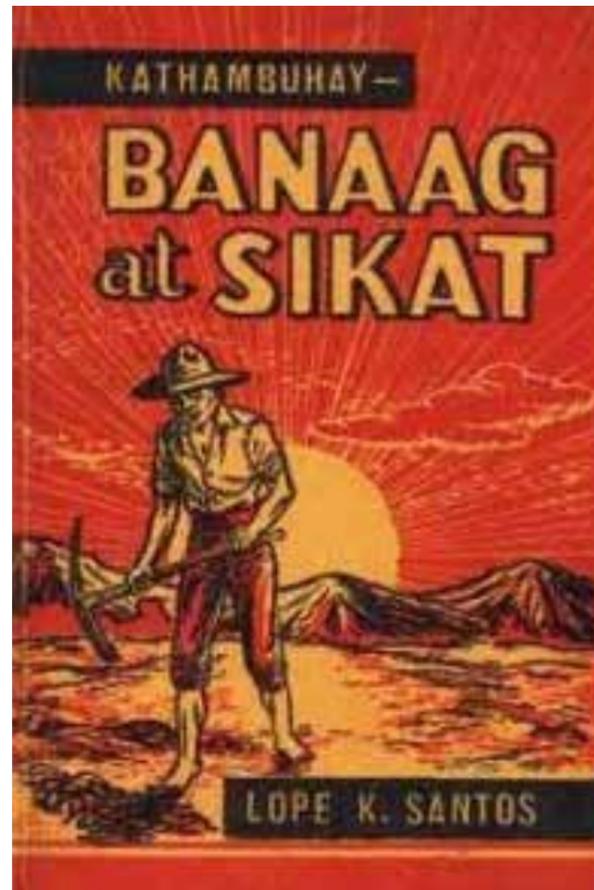


Fig. 3

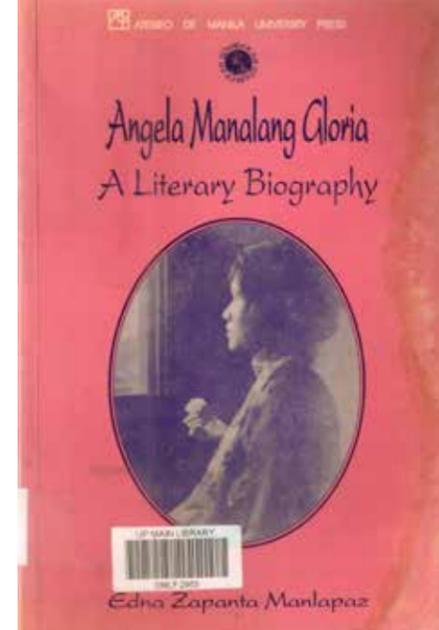


Fig. 4

fit the bill.¹⁶ Moreover, parts of it were found objectionable if not offensive. One poem, “Querida,” was judged as not making much sense. Another, “Revolt from Hymen,” which is about marital rape, was considered immoral, reportedly making the judges—all male—“see red.”¹⁷ In 1950, *Poems* was re-published as a student edition. It included new poems, while the controversial ones from the first edition were revised or omitted.

Manalang Gloria and her work might have well been forgotten, or maybe just remained a footnote in Philippine literary history, if not for a sort of renaissance in the late twentieth century. In 1993, the Ateneo de Manila University Press published her biography by Edna Zapanta Manlapaz and the complete collection of her poetry. Since then,

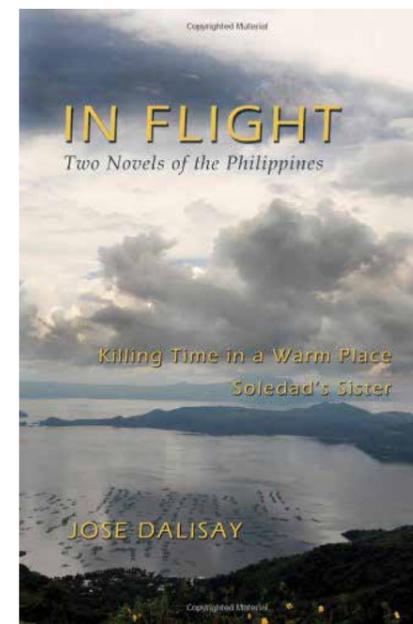


Fig. 6

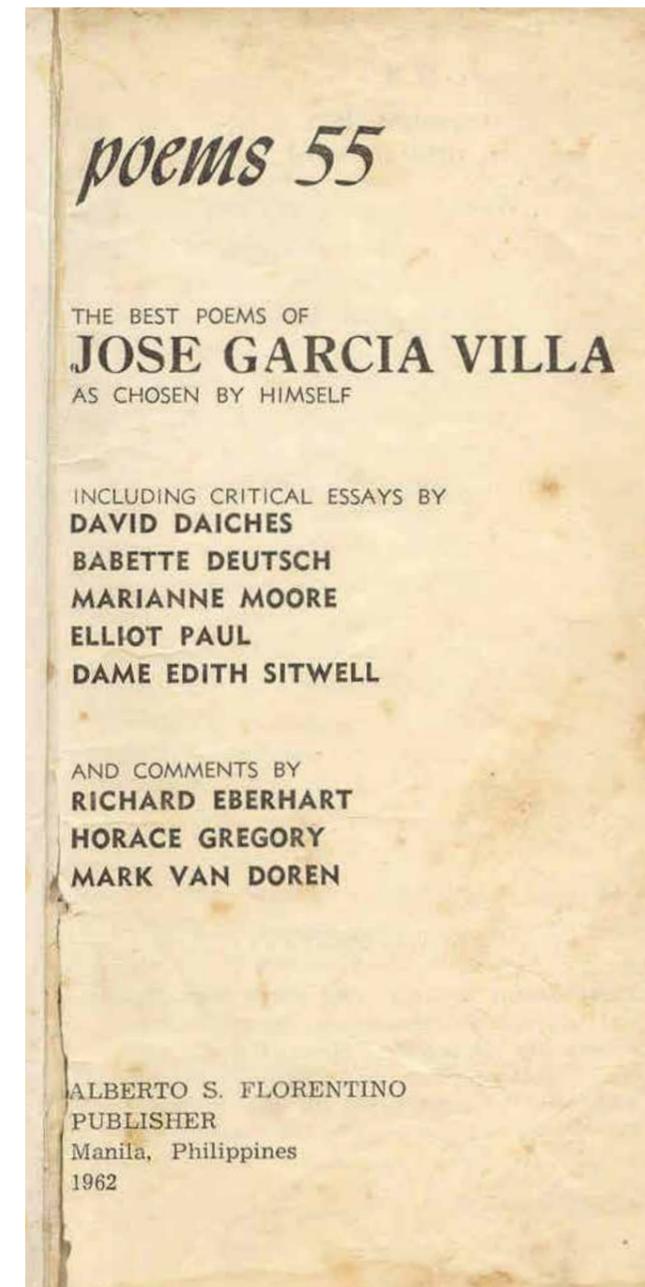


Fig. 5

scholars have come to recognize her as “the matriarch of Filipino poets writing in English,” and her poems have been read not merely as expressions of personal experience but also of political opinion and nationalist sentiment, with her treatment of love and relationships as metaphorical of the American colonization of the Philippines.¹⁸

Poems 55 by Jose Garcia Villa might be more familiar to Filipino readers than Manalang Gloria's *Poems* since Villa is certainly the better known writer. Incidentally, Villa and Manalang Gloria were students in UP at the same time, in the same department; both wrote for the university newspaper *Philippine Collegian*, but they were not friends.

There's more to a literary work than the lively story it tells. There are many backstories on its composition and publication. Knowing this makes for a livelier and richer literary experience.

PESO BOOKS DID NOT MAKE AUTHORS MILLIONAIRES

Villa's *Poems 55* was the first title in the Peso Books series issued by Alberto S. Florentino, a playwright who ventured into publishing. In 1959, Florentino issued a collection of his own works, *The World is an Apple and Other Prize Plays*. This was followed by the anthology *Outstanding Filipino Short Plays*, by various authors, published that same year. In 1962, he published Villa's *Poems 55*.

Villa was already an established figure in the Philippine literary scene and was making a name for himself in the United States. As Florentino recalls, "At that time the only books by Villa available in Manila were the U.S. editions of *Selected Poems and New; Have Come, Am Here*; and *Volume Two*, which were selling at prohibitive prices—if available. His first two (prewar) books, *Many Voices* and *Poems* by Dovegion, had long been out of print."¹⁹ During a visit to Manila, Villa gave Florentino enough material for three books with the consent to publish, even waiving his royalties, on the condition that Florentino would sell the books for no more than one peso each.²⁰ And so, Peso Books was born.

Florentino published around twenty other books of short stories, poems, and essays under the series, all written

in English by prominent and up-and-coming Filipino writers of the day; among them were Nick Joaquin, Francisco Arcellana, Linda Ty-Casper, Edith L. Tiempo, and Paz Marquez Benitez. The Peso Books were issued in editions of 3,000 copies; they were distributed by Bookmark and sold at, yes, one peso each.

Florentino produced other book series of Philippine writings in English and Filipino. His publishing activities involved many difficulties and great expenses, leaving him practically broke at one point that even his refrigerator was nearly repossessed. On venturing into literary publishing in the 1960s, Florentino remarks, "Among my contemporaries, writers who went into publishing with me, no one committed suicide, formally declared bankruptcy, or went to jail... But no one became a millionaire either. They went back to their ranks and continued to write or resume their old activities."²¹

Florentino continued to publish through the decades, well up to the early twenty-first century. He has produced almost one hundred books by various Filipino authors. It is interesting to note, however, that not one of these books is a novel.

⁴ Coates, *Rizal*, 124.

⁵ Coates, *Rizal*, 124.

⁶ Guerrero, *First Filipino*, 147-48.

⁷ Quoted in Guerrero, *First Filipino*, 149.

⁸ Guerrero, *First Filipino*, 273-74.

⁹ Coates, *Rizal*, 217.

¹⁰ Coates, *Rizal*, 217.

¹¹ Quoted in Guerrero, *First Filipino*, 413.

¹² Resil B. Mojares, *Origins and Rise of the Filipino Novel: A Generic Study of the Novel Until 1940*, 2nd ed. (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 1998), 169.

¹ The details on the composition of *Florante at Laura* and on the life of Balagtas are taken from Hermenegildo Cruz's *Kun Sino Ang Kumathâ Ng "Florante": Kasaysayan Ng Búhay ni Francisco Baltazar at Pag-Uulat Nang Kanyang Karunungan't Kadakilaan* (Maynila: Librería "Manila Filatélico", 1906), which is the definitive source of biographical and bibliographical accounts on Balagtas. Jodesz Gavilan, *Martial Law 101: Things you should know*, Rappler, August 15, 2016, <http://www.rappler.com/newsbreak/iq/142723-martial-law-declaration-philippines> (accessed January 30, 2017)

² Austin Coates, *Rizal: Philippine Nationalist and Martyr* (Hong Kong: Oxford University Press, 1968), 109.

³ León Ma. Guerrero, *The First Filipino: A Biography of José Rizal* (Manila: National Historical Commission, 1963; 4th repr. 1971), 147-48.

THE PHENOMENAL 'SOLEDAD'S SISTER'

In a lecture entitled "Why We Don't Write More Novels, But Should," Jose Dalisay, Jr. provided some reasons on the matter, among which are: One, it does not pay. He says, "The labor of many years won't even be enough to buy you an iPhone, if and when all your royalties come in." And two, the influence of Rizal endures and apparently stifles: "We're still largely stuck on the *Noli* and *Fili*... and find it difficult to think of the novel as anything but history writ large, with a flaming revolution in the background and a love story in the foreground."²²

An accomplished and multi-awarded writer, also a professor of creative writing in UP Diliman, Dalisay has written more than twenty books in various genres, but only two novels among them. *Soledad's Sister*, his second novel, was published by Anvil in 2008.

Soledad's Sister is a somewhat comic treatment of a tragic circumstance, which in real life happens more than it should. The novel is about the death of Soledad, a Filipina domestic helper in Saudi Arabia, and her sister Rory's efforts to find the explanation for such. In her attempt to solve the mystery of her sister's death, Rory is helped by Walter, a policeman whose wife left him to work as a nurse in England.

While the novel was published in 2008, its writing was actually begun some ten years earlier, in 1999, when Dalisay was in England for a writing fellowship. He envisaged a "small, mostly quiet, darkly comic novel involving ordinary people (here, a small-town cop and a karaoke-bar singer) in absurd situations and covering no more than a few days of real time."²³ He finished writing the novel in 2007. In March that year, on a lark, he submitted a 10,000-word section of an early draft to the inaugural Man Asian Literary Prize, a regional contest for new unpublished novels in English, launched in Hong Kong in 2006.

What happened next was this, as Dalisay recounts: "I forgot about it for months until, early in July, I learned that it had been longlisted. My euphoria lasted only until I read the fine print of the rules, which required me to submit the full balance of the novel in less than two weeks, by July 15, if I wanted to make the short list of five finalists. For a few days I thought of shrugging my shoulders and telling myself

that being longlisted was achievement enough; but I knew it was a hollow honor, without a finished novel to show the international jury and, more importantly, my own people, never mind that they hardly read me and my fellow fictionists. Filipino flags and anthems began playing in my head. So out of shame, I sent my classes off on take-home assignments, holed up with tubs of coffee and macaroni soup, and wrote 20,000 breathless words in one week, beating the Hong Kong deadline by a few hours."²⁴

Soledad's Sister did not win the first Man Asian Literary Prize, but it did make it as far as the shortlist of five finalists, which is accomplishment enough for a Filipino novel and a Filipino writer. And it did win a good share of readers. Its initial print run of 3,000 copies sold almost immediately. In 2009, the novel went through a second printing, with 2,000 copies issued. These figures are nearly phenomenal considering that the typical print run of local literary titles today is 500 to 1,000 copies, which usually take no less than two years to sell out, if they do at all.

In 2009, *Soledad's Sister* was issued in Italian translation as *Soledad: Rocambolesco Romanzo Filipino*. In 2011, the Schaffner Press in the US published it together with Dalisay's first novel *Killing Time in a Warm Place* in the volume *In Flight: Two Novels of the Philippines*. *Soledad's Sister* has also been translated into French and is being considered for Spanish translation.

Florante at Laura, *Noli me tangere*, *El filibusterismo*, Manalang Gloria's *Poems*, Villa's *Poems 55*, Florentino's publications, and *Soledad's Sister* are of different times, languages, and genres. Yet they share a common element among them in the stories of how they came to be, the production of each involving some measure of struggle and suffering—generally financial, emotional in some, even mortal in one. What they also have in common is that they each eventually achieved recognition, significance, or success in some measure, from modest to massive. Knowing the circumstances of the composition, publication, and reception of these works—or any other literary piece for that matter—offers an experience that could be just as lively and fascinating as reading the texts themselves. ■

¹³ Iñigo Ed. Regalado, *Ang Pagkaunlad ng Nobelang Tagalog* (Manila: Bureau of Printing, 1939), 13.

¹⁴ Lope K. Santos, *Talambuhay ni Lope K. Santos*, ed. by Paraluman S. Aspillera (Quezon City: Capitol Publishing House, 1972), 67.

¹⁵ Santos, *Talambuhay*, 67-68.

¹⁶ "The Major Collections, Filipino Writers in English: Angela Manalang-Gloria (1907-1995)," Ateneo Library of Women's Writings (ALIWW), accessed October 20, 2014, http://rizal.lib.admu.edu.ph/aliww/english_amgloria.html.

¹⁷ "Angela Manalang-Gloria," ALIWW.

¹⁸ "Angela Manalang-Gloria," ALIWW

¹⁹ Alberto Florentino, "Komadrona to a Native Literature," *Pilipinas* 35 (Autumn 2000): 3.

²⁰ Florentino, "Komadrona," 3.

²¹ Florentino, "Komadrona," 15.

²² Jose Dalisay, Jr. "Novelists in Progress: Writing Long Filipino Fiction in English." *Likhaan Panayam and UPAAA Professorial Chair Lecture*. University of the Philippines, Diliman, Quezon City. July 31, 2008.

²³ Dalisay, "Novelists in Progress."

²⁴ Dalisay, "Novelists in Progress."



Fig. 1

Cinema in the Philippines is at a crossroads. After one hundred years since motion pictures were first shown in Escolta, Manila, on January 1, 1897, film developed to become a popular medium using chemically-based material. By the turn of the 21st century, however, digital technology brought changes never anticipated before. The change in how cinema is made signaled the sea-change in the way films are produced, watched, and distributed. But while changes are inevitable, it is interesting to see how Philippine cinema adapts to film's global development on a bedrock of historical legacy.

Celebrating the centennial year when Filipino filmmaker Jose Nepomuceno set up the country's first locally-built film studio, Malayan Movies, in 1917 allows for a reflection on Philippine cinema's past.¹ Recall how two decades earlier, in 1897, motion pictures first came to the country as an imported commodity from Europe.² From film's colonial beginning, it evolved to become the present-day national cinema. In reminiscing about film's past, we are able to organize ideas about its development and develop concepts regarding its growth. Conceiving new perspectives can throw light on how cinema evolved from a pleasurable novelty into a complex system of communication, art, and culture.

While it is to Spain that we can look back at the beginnings of local cinema, including the ever-present Catholic themes and images found in contemporary Filipino movies, it is to America that the Philippines owes the popular film forms and genres dominating much of today's film culture. Spanish businessmen like Francisco Perterra and Antonio Ramos were the first to import film projectors into the country thereby inaugurating the first film screenings. Early film shows were mainly dominated by European brands like Pathé, Gaumont, Nordisk, and Ambrosio.

It took the American itinerant cameraman E. Burton Holmes to be on record as the first to produce the country's images on celluloid. As colonial rulers managing the country changed hands from Spaniards to Americans after the defeat of Spanish naval forces to Commodore George Dewey's war fleet in the 1898 Battle of Manila Bay, so did the fate of cinema transfer from Europeans to Americans. Holmes made films about the Philippines at the time of the Philippine-American War in 1899. As America's colonization of the Pacific country became a hot topic in the emerging popularity of cinema in the United States, several filmmakers later came to film in the Philippine Islands. With America's control over its colony, and Hollywood's rise as global film leader by the mid-century, American cinema became a model for local films to imitate.

Despite the trauma caused by the Japanese military occupation in 1941-1945, little change happened to alter the course of the nascent cinema from following the American film culture. The eventual declaration of Philippine independence³ in 1946 allowed Filipinos to embark on creating their own national cinema, albeit under the shadow of the influential Hollywood. What followed is the close relation that developed between the country's modern history as a nation and the cinema that reflected its evolving society and culture.

With a hundred years of history behind Philippine cinema, and the complex evolution of its hybrid nature, new perspectives are necessary to look into its history of colonial dependency and the responses created by local filmmakers in their journey to become national. New models are conceived in this essay to help understand the way Philippine cinema took on forms to guide its production, growth and identity.

NEW PERSPECTIVES IN PHILIPPINE CINEMA

New models are useful in comprehending the systemic growth of motion pictures in the Philippines. Two of these models have been inspired by a foreign source while another two are self-devised. All of them are conceived to contribute to the understanding of the rich and complex Filipino film culture. The first of the two models are inspired by the writings of French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari.⁴ The models referred to are the arborescent and the rhizomatic organizations of bodily as well as conceptual forms found in plants that have been applied to human, social, and political organizations, specifically to cinema in this essay. The third and the fourth ones, the mangrove and the archipelagic models, are self-conceived and they seek to address the evolutionary adaptation, which Philippine cinema experienced while developing in a colonized, tropical archipelago.

The four models offer new perspectives in the general understanding of Filipino film culture, its history, and identity. They challenge worn-out truths fostered by historical accounts made by previous film scholars. It was written previously with a traditional, if singular, view of cinema's growth that was biased toward a popular, commercial, movie industry. This suppressed the knowledge of other forms of cinema like short films and documentaries, alternative films that became marginalized and their history almost unwritten.⁵ But with new research made, a new understanding emerges regarding how Philippine cinema started, took early on diverse film forms, and fulfilled tasks beyond entertainment, to constitute what is yet to be fulfilled as a truly archipelagic cinema, the fourth and all-encompassing model offered in this essay.

The archipelagic perspective is one way to define Philippine cinema by its geopolitical reality. This localized view situates cinema in native realities where film has taken root and developed. In order to be true to cinema's nature of adapting in a water-and-land habitat, we are asked: What in Philippine cinema's experience translates the consciousness and experiences of Filipinos living in an archipelagic country into cinematic works? Filipino cinema has been produced by a people who live in the twin-coupling of land and sea, lake and shore, and underwent country-specific experiences brought about by material, historical conditions. It is a cinema that embodies the diversity of native personalities and cultures scattered in all the islands, combining what is foreign and native, *dayo* (foreign) and *tumandok* (native), as they struggle for self-definition. The archipelago offers both habitat and a modeling paradigm that can shape the way Filipinos live and also produce their cinema.

ARBORESCENT MODEL

In the first model, the arborescent presents an organizational structure of film's development resembling a tree. The way a tree grows in vertical fashion using hierarchical parts such as roots, trunk, branches, etc., finds resonance in the way a movie industry also relies on its systemic parts to define its industrial growth: film studio, movie theater, distribution outlet, and market. This growth is seen as linear and hierarchical and no different from a tree. A growth like that results to a singularity and with singularity comes dominance. This is problematic when conceiving cinema as motion picture because there are other forms of motion pictures that are non-industrial in nature and fulfill tasks other than entertainment.

So why do they remain undefined and their history unwritten? Why are they made invisible? In Philippine cinema, the growth of studios, or film companies like LVN and Sampaguita in the 1950s; Regal, Viva and Seiko in the 1980s; and Star Cinema in the 2000s, not only dominated local movie industry with their structured business models but the commercial system that they created became intolerant of other cinematic growths to flourish. Their business model resorting to cut-throat competition to survive stifled the growth of other motion pictures whose purpose was to fulfill other functions such as spreading information, producing knowledge, or advancing culture. Alternative films had no chance to compete with commercial movies.

The arborescent model is best manifested in the way a movie studio is organizationally structured. A producer as CEO is served by an assembly-line of hired employees and talents in designated order of positions. No one jumps the line as each worker is expected to fulfill the function that has been designated. This way, the company functions in vertical organization stratifying the industrial mode of production. In time, its linear development defined the entire local movie industry (as arborescent) because greater value was given to companies sharing similar hierarchical organizations. This resulted to the singularity that now defines the local movie industry as the embodiment of Philippine cinema. It is an industry that becomes nervous of any change in organization, resulting to its intolerance toward any form of competition. This closed system hardly leaves any room for cinema-as-motion-picture to realize its other forms and functions, as in the case of documentaries and short films, to mention a few.

Patterned after Hollywood, the local motion picture industry produced films of predictable outcome, such as those to be found in genre films from melodrama to musical, comedy to horror. From the movie industry came films that made breakthroughs in national and foreign film festivals, with celebrated names like Lamberto Avellana and Gerardo

de Leon in the Fifties, Lino Brocka and Ishmael Bernal in the Eighties, and, Lav Diaz and Brillante Mendoza in the digital era. Their films sustained mainstream filmmaking despite claims by some of being "independent." They provided the canonical list of films to watch, alongside commercial movies made for popular audiences. Prizewinning films like Avellana's *Anak Dalita* (1956), Brocka's *Insiang* (1976), and Mendoza's *Ma' Rosa* (2016) garnered critical attention internationally but domestic public patronage sided with popular choices like Fernando Poe's *Ang Panday* (1980), Dolphy's *Facifica Falayfay* (1969), and Antoinette Jadaone's *That Thing Called Tadhana* (2014).

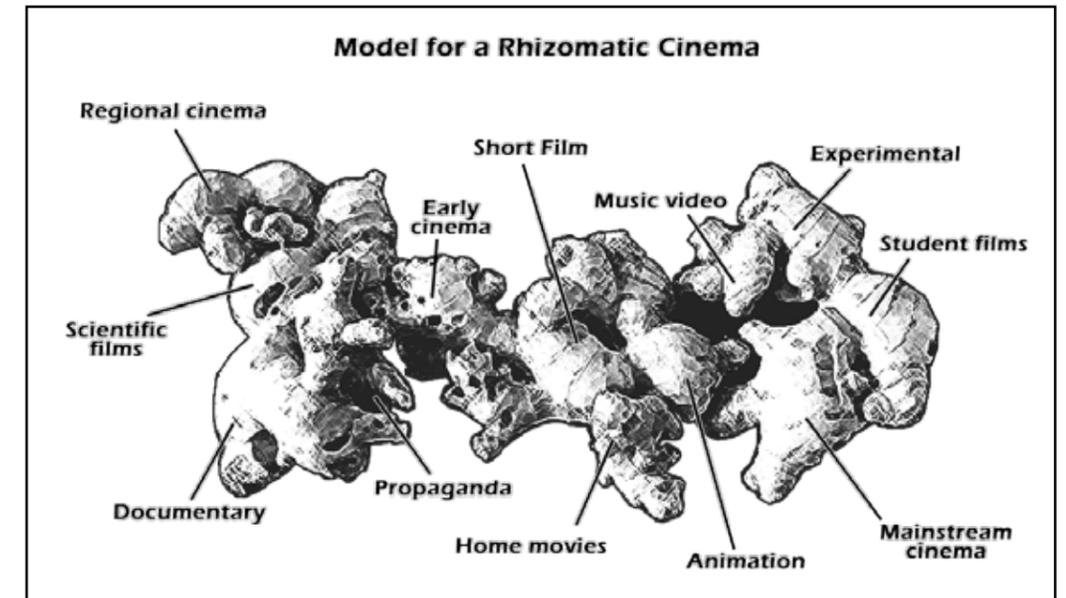
Adulated as these filmmakers and their movies are, their films, however, are not the only ones that ought to define what Philippine cinema is. Outside the mainstream

movie industry and its shadow cinema, the "indie" (or independent films) are forms of cinematic expressions that do not follow the same strict and structured organizational pattern as that of commercial movies. Produced outside the rigid movie industry, they flourish at the margins of popular cinema. But despite their countless numbers, they remain publicly "hidden" and have no history to call their own. It is bewildering how these cinematic forms were ignored by film scholars and historians in the past. Surprisingly, the coming of digital technology allowed forms of cinema that have been marginalized to haunt the present. This marginal cinema comprises what is called "alternative cinema." A new model calling for a new perspective allows this marginalized cinema to become visible through the rhizomatic model.



Fig. 2

A new understanding emerges regarding how Philippine cinema started, took on diverse film forms, and fulfilled tasks beyond entertainment, to constitute what is yet to be fulfilled as an archipelagic cinema.



RHIZOMATIC MODEL

In the second model, the rhizomatic paradigm offers a diversity of film forms outside the dominant movie industry. The histories of these non-industrial films remain largely unwritten despite their large numbers. These marginalized forms may be compared to what are commonly known as rhizomes, underground plants that produce roots below and send out shoots above. Among the rhizomes are gingers, bamboos, and crab grass. Unlike trees, these plants are subterranean. Forming nodules and chambered structures underneath the ground, they provide different ways of structural organization that develop horizontally in underground networks. When applied to film, this type of organization provides a different perspective in studying cinema.

Owing to Deleuze and Guattari, this new way of classifying cinematic expression, this novel ordering of cinematic forms is different from the conventional way that history has been traditionally constructed as linear and genealogical. Countering tradition, the rhizomatic way recognizes plurality of forms and this has a profound effect in the understanding of cinema. Any motion picture that is produced is legitimately part of Philippine cinema, notwithstanding a film's length and duration, social function, budget, or whether it was produced outside the commercial industry. This makes for a greater variety of film forms to enrich our understanding of local film culture.

Rhizomatic cinema celebrates heterogeneity, marked by a multiplicity of cinematic forms and functions. This is seen in the types of films produced outside the movie industry: short film, the "mother" of all cinemas, from where the long, feature film evolved from; documentary, a medium, which seeks to convey "truth" and "reality"; propaganda, which propagates partisan ideas; experimental film, which deals with abstract, conceptual expressions; animation, which uses stop-motion to give life to inanimate objects; student film, which is academically produced; and so forth. The forms of cinema mentioned here are not popular to Filipinos, nor do these films even try to. Their histories challenge accepted notions of popular cinema.

After a hundred years of misinformed notions of what constitutes the body of Philippine cinema, its history and identity, it is time to formulate a new film historiography that is realistic of the way cinema—as motion pictures—developed in the country, diversely. These alternative film forms compose the country's archipelagic cinema, embracing varied film cultures produced in the islands. These film forms flourish mainly in public hands—among amateurs, students, independent filmmakers, collectives, families, communities—with no centralized system to dictate their growth. A rhizomatic cinema is people's cinema.

The rhizomatic recognizes the peripheral (or marginal) alongside the industrial cinema. It has no intention to overthrow the industrial but to co-exist with it, providing multiple options to commercial filmmaking in order to serve cinema's multi-faceted nature and tasks. The harmful thing that the movie industry had done in the past was to cause the suppression of cinema's diversity of forms and functions to favor capital and profit. This resulted from film's colonial past and the capitalism that motivated and controlled its growth. With the coming of digital technology that made film accessible to a large number of non-professionals, mainstream cinema became contested with the rise of subaltern films, mushrooming all across the country's cinematic landscape. Not only amateur films flourished but new modes of circulation also came into practice, such as the rise of micro-cinemas and countless non-theatrical film exhibitions and festivals, mainly happening in schools. Philippine cinema's future lies in alternative cinema.

One sees the entire archipelago waking up to non-commercial films produced as far as Batanes in the north and Zamboanga in the south. In between are cinemas celebrating local films marked by their linguistic and cultural diversity: Cinemakasilanwa in Iloilo, Cine Cabalen in Pampanga, Bacoliwood in Negros, and numerous films produced in native languages in Bisaya, Bicol, Kankamay, Hiligaynon, Ilocano, among others. Cause-oriented films

add to the mix with their political, ecological, and gender themes. Films coming from the country's regions and diverse communities provide a new definition of national cinema.

Alternative cinema is conceptually represented by the rhizome. Its symbolic reference offers a new consciousness in the way diversity of cinematic forms and practices are recognized. But despite being under the shadow of the mainstream industry, these marginal films form a strong resurgence that will—in time—make their profound impact on the country's moving picture heritage as they challenge traditional notions of "national cinema."

Yet, despite the emancipative attributes brought about by a rhizomatic model, it can be faulted for its Western-centric perspective. The rhizome mainly attends to form and remains in need of an identity to complete its journey to becoming "Filipino." Conceived by two Frenchmen, the rhizome cannot escape the alien ideology swaddling its origin and makeup. It is also burdened by the geo-politics it fosters, coming from a landlocked continent whose geography is far different from the archipelagic structure of Asia, in general, and of the Philippines, in particular. To address this difference between the French theory and its application to a cinema that emerged in the archipelago, two other models are presented to help understand Philippine cinema.

MANGROVIAN AND ARCHIPELAGIC MODELS

The mangrovia model pertains to a cinema (whether commercial or not) that has been formed by the historical experience of growing in a unique geography, such as that of an archipelago. Specific to the Philippines, its experience has been shaped by the colonial history that led to the adaptation of Western forms while pursuing its homegrown development. This paradigm points to a cinema with the combined traits of being foreign and local.

In conceiving the mangrove as model, cinema is understood in ways that are inherent to the geography of its growth. With cinema developing in a country composed of scattered tropical islands, there must be something to make it adapt to the geo-political demands of its habitat, the way a mangrove does growing in estuaries. The archipelago defines a location where there is a meeting of land and sea, unlike many growths defined strictly by their terrestrial, aquatic, or arboreal surroundings. Looking at how cinema evolved in an archipelago means finding ways to know how the country's unique geographic location provides ways to understand its evolution peculiar to the experience given by the beaches and estuaries bounding every island. This knowledge may come either from understanding a literal geographic location (a shoreline), or a metaphor (such as that which speaks of hybridity, or in-betweenness).

In giving prominence to marginal spaces, attention is given to the significance of mangroves growing in a unique ecosystem. The *bakawan* (mangrove in local language) as metaphor for the country's cinema is profoundly rich in meanings. It provides conceptual ideas that can be gainfully applied to the study of local film history. A model based on the mangrove and the estuary where it resides helps one to understand the nature, identity, forms, and functions of the country's cinematic system. Rather than see Philippine cinema as arborescent or rhizomatic in its growth determined by its Western derivation, the *bakawan* (or mangrove) offers a symbol for cinema that is homegrown and localized, containing the marks of all contradictory forces influencing its growth. It is a cinema that embraces its indigenous ecology, although shaped by its foreign, colonial past.

The mangrove paradigm, being a self-devised one, reacts to the limitations posed by the earlier mentioned rhizome and tree. Looking for a post-colonial and a more indigenous metaphor to describe the way motion pictures developed locally, the mangrove serves as a fitting symbol for Philippine cinema's emergence from the coming together of opposites, described as an encounter between the foreign and the native,⁶ the tree and the grass, sea and land. This embodiment of contradictory filmic textual and contextual elements is not unlike the experience mangroves

get in growing in estuaries, where salt water (*tubig alat*) meets freshwater (*tubig tabang*). As a native paradigm, this best describes Philippine cinema's archipelagic nature. It can be used to negotiate relations between bodies and signs—the *ilaya* and the *ilawod* of native geography—pointing to the mountain and the sea, the west and the east, all coming together to form a new identity. The Filipino was born from this mix of races resulting to the *mestizo* (half-breed). Likened to the mangrove growing in the country's sinuous coastlines, Filipino cinema resembles the traits of the mangrove's in-betweenness.

The mangrove model embraces films that are both popular and elitist, mainstream and alternative. From the highly patronized commercial successes like Vice Ganda's *Praybeyt Benjamin* (2011), the cowboy-and-Indian parodies of long ago, to the classic works like Eddie Romero's *Ganito Kami Noon, Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (*This is how we were before, how are you now?*) (1976) and Lino Brocka's *Hellow, Soldier!* (1974), the mangrovia elements can be seen in the film aesthetics as in the material conditions of these films' production and reception. Their contents are overlaid with the history of colonization and capitalism to which they owe their origin and sustenance. Not even alternative films are immune from mangrovia influences as they combine their Western-derived filmic vocabulary with homegrown (dis)content. Despite their anti-movie industry claims, such as Regiben Romana's *Pilipinas* (1989), Roxlee's *Spit/Optik* (1989), or Baby Ruth Villarama's *Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016), they all reveal the combined (and contradictory) elements of foreign appropriation and native indigenization.

Philippine cinema's development tells a story of evolutionary adaptation that may be likened to the way mangroves adapt to their hostile environments. Starting with the way mangroves withstand the salinity of salt waters, growing in muddy conditions lacking of air, when compared to cinema, local films have also withstood Western colonial influences, which systemically drowned out aspirations for a truly homegrown cinema. The way mangroves survive their saltwater environment provides interesting parallels to Philippine cinema. The extraction of elements from the toxic saltwater to benefit a mangrove's growth provides useful metaphor for the way Western film is taken in and indigenized. Natives sift through Western cinematic culture and take in only those they find useful in order to eventually form their own national cinema.

In this transfer of cultures, local filmmakers extract and store the foreign film culture, which they derive from the West. What to keep and what not to depend on how the outside culture gets translated, understood, and becomes useful to the host culture. In other times, as is often the case



Fig. 3

with colonization, the host culture is not equipped to resist the invading one (similar to the way floodwaters inundate the helpless shore).

The process of "nativization" happens when locals try to "own" the foreign elements, which enter their bodies to make them their own.⁷ In a similar manner of getting films into the native culture system, cinema is adapted and indigenized, until the resulting films can be identified as "Filipino"—some fair, others foul; beneficial or not. The significance of this negotiation lies in the translation happening between the two interfacing cultures. As both cultures tangle in their relations, Western influences get rubbed off on local cinema, enriching Philippine cinema in the same way salt gets diluted at the meeting of freshwater. The alien dissolves into the local and the local desires to become foreign.

Philippine film history can be appreciated for its archipelagic nature, teeming with various kinds of films having different models to understand their nature.

Local cinema is a fertile ground where cinematic outgrowths have withstood the test of time. They spiked in growth even during critical times like wars and revolutions. They remained undefeated by social forces as they persisted to grow. Seeing cinema from a mangrovia perspective—applied in equal measure to mainstream (arborescent) and marginal (rhizomatic) films—provides us with a viewpoint more sensitive to the context of cinema's development in an archipelagic sanctuary like that in the Philippines. While acknowledging the continuing popularity of commercial movies, new paradigms of growth like those offered by the rhizomatic and mangrovia models, seen among marginalized films like short films and documentaries, will provide the Filipino people with innovative ways to define their national cinema, and a film history that will be reflective of their nation's archipelagic reality. ■

Fig. 1 Still from *Ang Magpakailanman (Eternity)* (1982), directed by Raymond Red.

Produced outside the mainstream movie industry are several types of marginal cinema that comprise alternative cinema. Pnoy TwoFace, 2012.

Fig. 3 Still from *Oliver* (1983), directed by Nick de Ocampo.

¹ The first local movie studio was set up by the brothers Jose and Jesus Nepomuceno in 1917, claimed to be the birth of Philippine cinema, in Joe Quirino, *Don Jose and the Early Philippine Cinema* (Quezon City: Phoenix Pub House, 1983).

² Francisco Perterra imported the first motion pictures from Spain and publicly screened them on January 1, 1897 in Escolta, Manila.

³ Philippine independence was declared on July 4, 1946.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* (Edinburgh: EUP Publ., 1985).

⁵ Excerpt in Nick Deocampo, *Short Film: Emergence of a New Philippine Cinema* (Sta. Mesa, Manila: Communication Foundation for Asia, 1985). No other book-length account made about alternative cinema has been published. The book on Philippine documentary authored by James and Isabel Kenny, *Making Documentaries and News Features in the Philippines* (Pasig City: Anvil Publishing, Inc., 1996) is more of a production manual than a history book.

⁶ For a deeper insight into the coming together of the foreign in native culture, one may want to read Vicente L. Rafael, *Contracting Colonialism (Translation and Christian Conversion in Tagalog Society under Early Spanish Rule)* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992).

⁷ The reverse may also be true—when the foreign makes claims it has invaded the native.

words by
PATRICK F. CAMPOS

ART ARCHIVE 02



Fig. 1

For us to appreciate what is happening today in the 2010s to Philippine cinema, we can take a step back and consider the situation just before the close of the twentieth century.

The 1990s was a decade of uncertainties. The idea that the years from 1974 to 1987 saw the coming and going of a “golden age” gained currency during this decade. This golden age was extolled for the period’s artistic blossoming in spite of industrial limitations and cinema’s politicization in a time of repression under Marcos. This was when filmmakers like Lino Brocka, Ishmael Bernal, Mike de Leon, Kidlat Tahimik, Peque Gallaga, Ricky Lee, Mario O’Hara, and Marilou Diaz-Abaya, as well as the more radical experimenters and political film collectives, emerged in the scene. The naming of the period was a kind of wistful celebration of the past and a way of expressing frustration over the present.

A PRELUDE TO DIGITAL CINEMA

No unified artistic and political agenda framed cinema after the People Power uprising of 1986; in retrospect, this situation may be seen as a reason for fictionalizing the oneness of the golden age. In the 1990s, moreover, the exorbitant taxation, accelerating cost of production, global decline in moviegoing, looming financial crisis, and steep competition with imported films drove commercial producers to flood the market with cheap movies—this, in the context of a newly restored democracy. The decline of the film industry amidst newfound freedom was ironic, and as the decade of the 1990s came to a close, pundits declared the film industry dead.

But the dismal state of affairs turned out to be rich soil on which seeds of new ideas, strewn alongside fertile discontent, would be planted. Responding to the gloomy situation, critics, scholars, and cineastes clamored for change and talk of an oncoming “revolution” in Philippine

The digital film cultures in Bacolod, Iloilo, Cebu, Davao, and their outskirts developed alongside the one in Manila, in synchronicity with the development of marginal cinemas not just in the Philippines but also around the world.

cinema was on the lips of independent filmmakers and film students who were coming of age. A palpable need to reinvent cinema characterized the transition into the 2000s. In hindsight, the lack of a unifying discourse on Philippine cinema would prove to be the wellspring of new life for cinema in the twenty-first century.

Digital technologies, which became accessible from the late 1990s to the early 2000s, catalyzed the budding of a new cinema. Suddenly, filmmaking was no longer the sole prerogative of moneyed producers; the power to make films was cascaded down to the people. The ethos of DIY, no-budget, and no-more-excuses cinema defined the period, led by advocates and practitioners of lo-fi video filmmaking.

The establishment of the fund-granting and competitive Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival and Cinema One Originals Film Festival, which yielded the first major harvest of digital features in 2005, signaled the end of the transition and the rebirth of a dynamic Philippine cinema. The uniquely Filipino “festival mode” of production and exhibition would multiply in the years to come. Though far from ideal,

these festivals provided a production platform and exhibition network for a significant number of innovative films to take their place in the local market alongside those produced by the more established commercial outfits. The steady production of festival films from 2005 to the 2010s challenged commercial producers to rethink formulas.

Today, the film industry is vibrant again. Notably, with local cinema’s rebirth, what had been considered previously as marginal practices of filmmaking, such as the production of short, experimental, and documentary films and films beyond Manila, now outnumber commercial films in quantity and, even if they do not dominate the market, make up a lively alternative film culture. Certainly, these practices continue to be threatened by deeply entrenched structures that work against them, like the cartel of theater owners that exert inordinate power over what gets screened and for how long. But there are now more spaces of engagement than ever before, including the virtual spaces of social media and the community spaces of cinematheques and microcinemas.



Fig. 2

Fig. 1 Still from *Tu Pug Imatuy (The Right to Kill)* (2017), showing vernacular costumes.

Fig. 2 Still from *Tu Pug Imatuy (The Right to Kill)* (2017), showing Obunay humiliated.

NATIONAL CINEMA ON SHIFTING SOIL

How are we to make sense of our particular film history in relation to current experiences that are still uncharted? In what follows, I focus on the contexts of *Tu Pug Imatuy (The Right to Kill)* (2017), a film from Mindanao, in order to chart the contemporary landscape of Philippine cinema and comment particularly on the challenges and opportunities a non-mainstream filmmaker faces in seeking to contribute to the political cinema of our troubled times. Instead of writing a review, I contextualize the film’s significance in the shifting patterns of “national,” “regional,” “local,” and “global” formations since the 2000s.

Tu Pug Imatuy (literally, to kill) follows the experiences of a Manobo family, whose peaceful lives are disrupted when soldiers abduct, abuse, and humiliate the parents, Dawin and Obunay, and use them as guides through the forest, while their children, Langit and Ilyan, are left to fend for themselves. The film’s screenplay, written by Arnel Mardoquio, is informed by the indigenous peoples’ historical and ongoing struggle against encroachers.¹ It focuses on the travails of the *lumad*, or the non-Muslim and non-Christian ethnolinguistic tribes in Mindanao, caught in the crossfire between the state military and the rebel forces. Arbi Barbarona directed and handled all the technical aspects of the creative process, but he worked on his research and production with the *lumad* community.

While *Tu Pug Imatuy*, portrays the centuries-old way of life of an indigenous community, it is undoubtedly a 21st century film, animated by global forces as much as it contributes to regional art production. In both contexts, the film occupies

a marginal space, but the significance of these distinct marginalities is not the same. As a local film in a global context, the time for such a film has inevitably come, but as a regional film in the national context, its arrival has actually come quite late.

Mardoquio’s and Barbarona’s previous films, as well as other films beyond Manila, have been spotlighted in Cinema Rehiyon, the flagship project of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Since its arrival in 2008, Cinema Rehiyon has grown significantly, from programming only a handful of films in its first year to showing over a hundred in its tenth. NCCA, through its efforts to develop homegrown and even grassroots talent, has helped put the idea of “regional filmmaking” across to the public by financially supporting the founding or mounting of smaller “festivals in the regions” throughout the archipelago – much more down-to-earth festivals compared to their glitzier counterparts in Manila.

In fact, however, filmmaking outside the National Capital Region began earlier than 2008, and it did not result from the protean period in Manila in the 2000s. The enabling factors of digital technology and the virtual networks of cinephilia were not imported from the capital city to the provinces (the usual route of film culture in the celluloid century), but from the global elsewhere. In other words, the digital film cultures in cities like Baguio, Bacolod, Iloilo, Cebu, Davao, and their outskirts, developed *alongside* the one in Manila, in synchronicity with the development of marginal cinemas not just in the Philippines but around the world.

In this light, “regional” filmmaking could refer just as well to how secondary cities in the Philippines had parallel experiences with independent cinemas across Southeast Asia, ranging from the coming of the “new waves” in Jakarta, Kuala Lumpur, Saigon, and Bangkok to the steady growth of alternative cinemas in Jogjakarta, Makassar, Purbalingga, Sabah, Luang Prabang, and city-centers like Hanoi, Phnom Penh, Vientiane, and Yangon, to name a few. In short, what galvanized filmmaking in Philippine regions in the digital period are the same global impulses that energized the indie scene in the larger Southeast Asian region.

Thus, the momentous establishment of Cinema Rehiyon and the growing consciousness on regional filmmaking in recent years in the Philippines actually indicate a lag in the recognition of films beyond Manila as part of national cinema, of the long and ongoing struggle for local stories and issues to take their rightful place in the mainstream of the national imaginary. It is remarkable, then, that *Tu Pug Imatuy*, with its urgent call about an age-old national problem, was only made in 2017. At the same time, that it earned wide acclaim in 2018, eventually winning major prizes from national award-giving bodies, FAMAS and Gawad Urian, is a sign that times have changed.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Global cinema is defined by market forces and is much more open to “other” cinemas that include non-formulaic, esoteric, and highly culture-specific works. For this reason, it has encouraged the production of very diverse films that can harbor the positive qualities of being marginal.

'SINE LOKAL, PANG-INTERNASYONAL'

The changing times have complicated the meaning of international film exhibition and distribution. Unlike the older idea of “world cinema,” which connotes a congregation of international artists whose key works comprise the “greatest” films, the contemporary notion of “global cinema” implies a network of film markets. In this sense, a film that goes global becomes accessible to audiences beyond its national borders, though it does not necessarily join the coveted but contested ranks of world cinema.

Global cinema is defined by market forces and is much more open to “other” cinemas that include non-formulaic, esoteric, and highly culture-specific works. For this reason, it has encouraged the production of very diverse films that can harbor the positive qualities of being marginal.

Because Philippine festivals like Cinemalaya are more welcoming of inventive works that would otherwise not be produced by mainstream studios deeply rooted in local mass culture, the interested parties readily plugged into global cinema. At the same time, because not all festival films are distributed internationally, they compete in the local market with big studio films and Hollywood imports, against which they tend to appear “small” with “fringe” special-interest films. Meanwhile, a small fraction goes global and still others figure in world cinema, where a different kind of validation is attained for “national” cinema.

The double-coded aspiration of doing well in the local/global market and being validated in inter/national festivals is typified by Sinag Maynila Film Festival, where *Tu Pug Imatuy* first premiered before being screened in Cinema Rehiyon in the municipality of Nabunturan, Compostela Valley, where, at that time, not a single movie screen existed. Sinag Maynila

(literally, the rays of and from Manila) is funded by distribution company Solar Entertainment, which imports and exports commercial content, and its films are selected by Cannes Film Festival-prizewinner, Brillante Mendoza.

Unlike other festivals, Sinag Maynila does not produce films but rather scouts for homegrown stories that are potential content for wider distribution in the Philippines and in niche markets abroad. The festival, whose identity is anchored on the image of Manila as the center of filmmaking, is also branded as enabling “sineng lokal, pang-internasyonal” (local films for the international market), which alerts us to the complexity of the contemporary situation where initiatives by the state and private corporations are providing platforms for regional filmmakers.

That *Tu Pug Imatuy*, a fearlessly political film with a shoestring budget, was programmed in Sinag Maynila indicates how older paradigms dating back to the 1960s that made clear distinctions between First, Second, and Third Cinemas, or industrial, art, and political cinemas, respectively, have become inoperable.²

First Cinema refers to commercial filmmaking and its ultimate model is Hollywood. Film practices in this category were honed in the 1930s and refined in postwar Philippine cinema. Movies made in this system, needless to say, have been the most productive and avidly patronized locally for the most part of the twentieth century, and Solar Entertainment is doubtless one of the conduits and enablers of this system of filmmaking today.

Following a parallel path, nonconforming filmmakers have throughout history questioned the formulaic and profit-oriented industry values that define conventional movies.

These filmmakers have promoted instead a cinema that refuses to compromise artistic vision, a filmmaking stance that forms an alternative Second Cinema. Films of this type are realized by independent artists rather than studio-employed craftspeople. The tradition of Second Cinema films in the Philippines grew enough to become a wave in the 1970s and a series of waves from the 1980s to the 2000s. And the daring of the artists that rode them continues to challenge the system and push the boundaries of the cinematic arts today. Interestingly, Sinag Maynila is part of this cultural and political economy as well, driven by festival production that encourages newness and innovation for an expanding market.

Third Cinema is militant, anticolonial, and antifascist cinema, exemplified by a number of social realist and personal films by the likes of Brocka and Kidlat Tahimik and more pointedly by political film collectives during and after the Marcos period. Such films did not necessarily aspire to be art nor did they endeavor to be distributed commercially for profit, but they needed to be seen by many because they exposed national realities concealed in mass media.

Tu Pug Imatuy dramatizes the *lumad's* experience of dislocation, and its imagery gestures toward vanishing forest covers and massive mining operations. Quite startlingly, akin to political collective films, it closes with documentary footage of the real Obunay, speaking of the trauma of fleeing her militarized village in Talaingod, Davao del Norte, and traveling with over a thousand others to Davao City as a *bakwit* (evacuee), only to be kidnapped by soldiers. Clearly, the desire to shed light on what is obscured in public consciousness and to reach a wide audience is at the heart

of the production of *Tu Pug Imatuy*.

In the older paradigm, Second and especially Third Cinema films were expected to steer clear of the First Cinema structures. Any form of “compromise” was anathema to “independence.” But the globalization of marginal films is now well documented, and the myriad experiences of filmmakers laboring in the peripheries caution us from making sweeping claims and invite us to consider concrete cases, such as that of *Tu Pug Imatuy*.

From being conceived in Davao City, shot on location in the border between Davao and Bukidnon, distributed through a Manila company and exhibited in Tokyo, Berlin, Luxor, and Jogjakarta, to moving back to small-town, open-air screenings around Mindanao, the itinerary of *Tu Pug Imatuy* is instructive, for it reveals the constraints and options that regional filmmakers as ground-level agents must negotiate in order to be visible and yet continue to harbor the potential for political resistance.

Thus, a Mindanawon film casts in relief the shape of contemporary cinema in a particular way: a small production made out of passion and conviction by a duo of mavericks from the region, riding on the new wave of art cinema, lending itself as content for Sinag Maynila, bending over backward in search of a national audience, and extending its reach to an international audience.

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Fig. 3 The outdoor Luang Prabang Film Festival screening.

Fig. 4 The outdoor Cinema Rehiyon screening.

LUMAD CINEMA AND ITS GLOBAL CONTEXTS

It is a truism that mainstreaming the arts from the ethnolinguistic cultures throughout the islands can help create a more complete tapestry of Filipino identity. In this sense, *Tu Pug Imatuy* vividly portrays what regional films contribute best to Philippine cinema. Moviegoers are permitted to see the colors and hear the music of lumad culture that is peripheral in everyday national consciousness.

In the first third of the film, we are made to appreciate the wild beauty of the mountains. We hear the distinguished sounds of native instruments accompanying the images, and we observe the Manobo family donning their regal red garments adorned by native designs and accessories whose patterns intermingle brilliantly with lush greens and the verdant earth.

As the film opens, we witness the dynamics of family and community life, and we learn about the Manobos' views on nature and their belief that the spirits of the departed come back to guard their ancient ancestral land. We are also given insight on their folklore and how new tales are created by the community as they struggle against trespassers. In this borderland that may seem faraway to moviegoers, history may be understood not as a line moving forward but as space layered in time, building up a place resistant to the outsiders' fiction of "progress" that renders the *lumad* "backward."

The aesthetics and creative strategies of *Tu Pug Imatuy* resonate with the project of Fourth Cinema, a term proposed by Māori filmmaker Barry Barclay in the 1990s to identify indigenous films produced in settler colonial nations like New Zealand.³ The notion of Fourth Cinema is Barclay's reply to the three-cinema paradigm discussed above. It implies that First, Second, and Third Cinemas have functioned as "invader cinemas" and have obscured the narratives of the first peoples of the land, rendering them static, vanished, or exotic.

Fourth Cinema is a distinct mode of filmic production that is partial to indigenous expression, dignified representation of place and identity, and political engagement both on screen and off screen. The processes of Fourth Cinema capture well the experience of Barbarona in filming the plight of and working with the *lumad*, who have been subjected to oppression by colonizers, settlers, land grabbers, and the state.

Barbarona's process of working with the locals to make a film that speaks of the native's tragic experiences instantiates community, collaboration, and reciprocity in the spirit of Fourth Cinema. *Tu Pug Imatuy* reminds us that the *lumad* are the original inhabitants of the land who nevertheless stand to lose the most in the face of a never-ending war waged in the name of development. In fact, because the term "*lumad*" does not refer to a particular tribe but to the universal "native of the land," the idea of Fourth Cinema may be imagined in terms closer to home as "*lumad* cinema," of which *Tu Pug Imatuy* is one of hopefully many more instances.

Framed in this way, the political project of art-making is seen from a longer historical perspective and a wider geographical view. The Manobos, in this context, stand side-by-side with Apaches in Oklahoma, Yup'ik Eskimos in Alaska, Martus in Australia, Veddas in Sri Lanka, Was in Myanmar, and the other lumad of the world, the subject of Fourth Cinema. In such a context, another kind of "world" and another mode of "globality," distinct from what is connoted by "world" (canonical) and "global" (market-driven) cinemas, become imaginable.

Regional films enrich Philippine cinema, yes, but more significantly, some of them reactivate the radical potential of the margins that the proliferation of indie films have tamed. This reactivation allows us to interrogate the constitution not only of national cinema but also of the nation itself. Here again, *Tu Pug Imatuy* as a particular case is instructive, because it aimed (and in my opinion succeeded) to reveal how global forces have been relentless in their drive to erase societies in the peripheries in collusion with the state. For this reason, the production of such a film from the margins is necessary, to emend the dominant narrative that sees indigenous peoples merely as enriching Filipino identity and to address a wider public about the actual plight of the *lumad*.

On the level of the national, we have frequently heard about the situation of the *lumad* framed in media as a question of political instrumentalization. *Tu Pug Imatuy*, indeed, shows the *lumad* caught in the middle, their places of refuge militarized, as rebels blend with them while the government military utilizes them in their counterinsurgency efforts. But the logic of the appalling threats made recently by the president of bombing *lumad* schools because they have been politicized and have taken sides, misses the bottom line—*whose birthright is the land?* This is the fundamental question of Fourth Cinema.

And why are *lumad* places being militarized? Ultimately, this question cannot be addressed without reference to an international situation. The valiant "lumad of the world" have for centuries fought and today continue to resist encroachers, be they Kankanaeys in Benguet, Kitchenuhmaykoosib Inninuwugs in Ontario, Amungmes in West Papua, Mayans in Guatemala, or others, which is why the richest natural reserves that transnational businesses are greedy to extract can still be found in indigenous lands.⁴ The strategy of progress by dispossession and militarizing indigenous territories so that extractive industries could rapaciously pillage is a global threat, which have resulted to environmental degradation and human rights abuses, such as those shown in the film, like displacement, persecution, humiliation, coercion, torture, rape, and extrajudicial killings. In this light, *Tu Pug Imatuy*, a little film from an outpost of national cinema, is calling the world's powers to account. ■



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

¹ To better understand the historical and sociopolitical contexts of this issue, see Arnold P. Alamon, *Wars of Extinction: Discrimination and the Lumad Struggle in Mindanao* (Iligan City: RMP-NMR, Inc., 2017).

² For in-depth discussions on these cinemas, see Jim Pines and Paul Willemsen, eds. *Questions of Third Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1989).

³ Barry Barclay, *Our Own Image* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1990).

⁴ For a global accounting of the problem, see Andy Whitmore, ed. *Pitfalls and Pipelines: Indigenous Peoples and Extractive Industries* (Baguio City, Copenhagen, and London: Tebtebba Foundation, IWGIA, and PIPLinks, 2012).



Fig. 7

Fig. 5 Poster for *Tu Pug Imatuy* (2017) by director Arbi Barbarona.

Fig. 6 Arbi on location with the Lumad community.

Fig. 7 Arbi Barbarona in Tokyo International Film Festival.

words by
KATRINA ROSS TAN



Fig. 1

For almost a century, the Filipino audience has been used to watching Tagalog films produced by the commercial film industry in Metro Manila. Until recently, it was unthinkable to see a movie that does not use the dominant Tagalog language. All these changed when filmmakers from the regions began producing digital films.

Known collectively as ‘regional cinema,’ these films depict stories rooted in places beyond ‘imperial Manila’ and made by directors who come from cities and provinces outside the National Capital Region (NCR). They use languages spoken in the regions, such as Ilocano, Kapampangan, Pangasinan, Bicol, Cebuano, Bisaya, Hiligaynon, Chavacano, and a host of indigenous languages. Because a number of them are made outside the commercial system, regional films are associated with digital independent cinema. Due to their limited distribution, these films reach audiences usually through film festivals in the regions and in Metro Manila. Most notable of these is Cinema Rehiyon (CR), a state-funded film festival that provides a non-competitive exhibition space for films from across the archipelago. It has been running since 2009, bringing awareness about regional cinema wherever it goes—CR is unique in that it is hosted in different places every year. Many films from the regions are critically successful as well. Award-giving bodies in the Philippines have rightfully recognized many of these works. With such a relatively strong presence in the national film culture, regional cinema has created ripples of new cinematic consciousness.

EMERGENCE OF REGIONAL FILMS

Prior to the introduction of digital technology, films were already being made outside of Metro Manila. A thriving cinema in Cebu existed between the 1930s and 1970s though a few films were made until the 1990s.¹ In other parts of Visayas, like in Negros and Panay islands, short films have been produced since the early 1990s. For instance, Elvert Bañares from Iloilo made *Banal* (1993), an experimental short film, which was the first recipient of Best Regional Entry at the Gawad CCP para sa Alternatibong Bidyo at Pelikula given by the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP). Many of the films during this time came out of the Negros Summer Workshop (NSW) established in 1991 by director Peque Gallaga, who worked in Manila’s commercial film industry. NSW was a pioneering region-based workshop that provided training for aspiring filmmakers in Bacolod and other neighboring provinces in the Visayas.

With the arrival of digital technology, film workshops and, later on, film festivals were put up in other provinces that encouraged short film production. In 2003, a group in Davao City led by Dax Cañedo held the first guerilla filmmaking workshop that had three short film outputs. These were screened with three other documentaries.² In the following year, Ray Gibraltar, a filmmaker from Iloilo, helped put up the Bantayan Film Festival that featured works made in his small town of Guimbal in Iloilo. Teachers in the area were the first to learn filmmaking from experienced filmmakers, like Gallaga, cinematographer Ogi Sugatan, and Gibraltar himself.³ Guimbal’s festival format—short film competition and workshop—is similar with others throughout the archipelago that now number close to 20. The only difference is that Guimbal’s local government provides fund to produce short films.

SHORT FILMS FROM THE REGIONS

Many filmmakers from the regions started with making short films before they had established their names in independent or commercial cinemas. For instance, Gutierrez Mangansakan II from Mindanao made his first short documentary, *House Under the Crescent Moon* (2001), which deals with the government's all-out war in Mindanao. Sheron Dayoc, also from Mindanao, entered Cinemalaya with his short film *Angan-Angan (Dreams)* (2008) about a mute young girl belonging to the Yakan group in Basilan who desires to have a good education. In 2012, Dayoc won Best Director in Cinemalaya for his short film, *Mientras su Durmida (As He Sleeps)* (2012) about a woman who spends her daily life taking care of her bedridden husband.

One of the most prolific filmmakers from Bacolod started with making shorts. Lawrence Fajardo won the Jury Prize in the inaugural Cinemalaya for his short film, *Kultado* (2005). Ostensibly an action film, this short tells the story of a market vendor who fights back against a gang that exploits other vendors through their extortions and lending scams. Remton Zuasola, who is among the first digital filmmakers from Cebu, had been making shorts with his fellow Cebuano directors before he made features. Perhaps his most successful short film is *To Siomai Love* (2009), which received a Gawad Urian handed out by the country's critics group, Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino. Shot in one continuous take, the film captures the chance meeting of a heartbroken man and a female nursing student at a siomai stand in Cebu City.

Regional short films have made waves not only in national film festivals but also overseas. Recently, Keith Deligero from Cebu, who, after making four full-length features, made the short film *Babylon* (2017), which competed at the Berlin International Film Festival in 2018. Produced by QCinema, the film narrates how two female assassins traveled back in time to kill a fascist politician. In 2015, Aiess Alonso's *Katapusang Labok* (2015), another Cebuano film about the struggle of local fishermen against coral harvesters, was programmed in the short film corner at Cannes Film Festival. In addition, Anj Macalanda's *Wawa* (2014), won Best Film in Exground Film Fest in Germany. It centers on a young man contemplating his guilt while he and his mother lead the burial procession of a family member in Rizal province's river. Some shorts made in Compostela Valley were shown in the multi-art Sarajevo Winter Festival in 2016.

Despite the relatively low recognition given to short films, they are important for regional cinema since they keep local filmmaking alive. Short films are less costly to make and allow filmmakers ample room to experiment and find their voice. As Deligero notes, short films give directors like him the "most freedom" in their craft.⁴

Fig. 1 Still from *Ari: My Life with a King* (2015) by Director Carlo Catu.

Independently-produced and distributed, *Superpsychocebu* tells a story about a young man's quest to find the so-called superpsychocebu, a type of cannabis that makes its users go bonkers. Author's screengrab from *Superpsychocebu*.

Fig. 2

Women of the Weeping River (2016), Gawad Urian's Best Picture, is about two Moro families caught in *rido* (clan feud) in Mindanao. Stills provided by director Sheron Dayoc.

Shot in one continuous take, *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* follows Terya and her family as they travel to the island's port. A recruiter has arranged Terya's marriage to an old German whom she has not met personally. Author's screengrab from *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria*.

Fig. 4



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

Many films from the regions are critically successful. Award-giving bodies in the Philippines have rightfully recognized many of these works. With such a relatively strong presence in the national film culture, regional cinema has created ripples of new cinematic consciousness.

REGIONAL FEATURE FILMS

Digital features from the regions have appeared as early as 2002. The early films were mostly self-funded, like JP Carpio's *Balay Daku* (2002), a three-hour feature that tells about a Manila-based Bacolod native who returned to the province with his wife. Another early independent production is Mes De Guzman's *Ang Daan Patungong Kalimugtong* (2005). Shot in Benguet on a shoestring budget, it tells the story of two young siblings who have to cross rivers and mountains every day to go to school and fend for themselves. Having been exhibited in many international film festivals and having received awards, *Kalimugtong* is among the earliest critically successful regional films.

In 2005, two newly-established film festivals in Metro Manila started handing out production grants for digital films—the pioneering Cinemalaya Independent Film Festival and Cinema One Originals. The former is partially state-funded, while the latter is privately owned. Given the lack of state funding in film productions in the regions, these two festivals and several others that were put up in succeeding years, like QCinema International Film Festival and Sinag Maynila, became important funding sources and exhibition venues for regional films. Through them, regional cinema further penetrated the country's cinematic consciousness.

One way to illustrate this is the critical success of festival-produced regional films in the national context. Specifically, three of these films won Gawad Urian's Best Picture awards: Zuasola's Cebuano film *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* (2010), Arnel Mardoquio's *Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim* (2012), and Dayoc's *Women of the Weeping River (WOWR)* (2016). *Damgo* is a one-shot film that captures the titular character's last day in her island-hometown of Olango before she leaves to marry a German she has not yet met. This film is remarkable for being the first non-Tagalog film to win the Gawad Urian top prize. Bringing home for Mindanao its first Best Picture award from the critics group, *Paglalakbay* follows the journey of a young boy and his two aunts as they escape Mindanao's war zone. Lastly, *WOWR* is about two Moro families caught in *rido* (clan feud) in Mindanao. Cinema One Originals produced the first two films, while QCinema produced the latter film.

REPRESENTING THE PERIPHERIES

These Manila-based festivals have produced a significant number of regional films, including those that have offered critical representations of cultures and socio-political realities in the country's peripheries. The earliest of these films is perhaps Sherad Sanchez's Cinema One Originals entry, *Huling Balyan ng Buhi* (*The Last Priestess of Buhi or the Woven Stories of the Other*) (2006), which tackled complex socio-political issues specific to Mindanao. This southern region has long suffered from decades of government neglect, intrusion of multinational companies into ancestral domains aided by state forces, and escalating war between the military and several armed groups. The film is a non-linear narrative that weaves three seemingly disparate tales of communists, government military troops, and two children. The film won Best Picture in Cinema One Originals and received nominations in various categories in Gawad Urian.

In 2010, three more films competing in Cinemalaya focused on Mindanao narratives. What is significant about these films is the surfacing of multiple narratives told from a cultural insider's perspective. One of the Cinemalaya entries is Dayoc's *Halaw* (*Ways of the Sea*), which emerged as the festival's winner. It tells stories of those who cross illegally to Sabah Island in Malaysia to look for work. Mangansakan's *Limbanan* (*The Bridal Quarter*) was also a finalist that year. The film focuses on a young Maguindanao woman who waits for her wedding day inside her bridal chamber as part of their tradition. It went on to have an international premiere as the closing film at the Venice International Critics' Week. Lastly is Arnel Mardoquio's *Sheika*, which shows the life of a mother whose sons were killed by a member of the infamous Davao Death Squad, a vigilante group allegedly supported by then city mayor and now president, Rodrigo Duterte. Even though it was pulled out from the main competition, *Sheika* received the NETPAC Prize in Cinemalaya, and won several awards in Gawad Urian, including Best Screenplay and Best Actress for Mindanaoan actress, Fe Hyde.

Still on Mindanao, festival films have portrayed indigenous people or *lumad* as well in a relatively more sensitive way than earlier commercial films. One reason is the close collaboration between the filmmakers and the *lumad* community throughout the entire filming process. This is true in the cases of Bagane Fiola's *Baboy Halas* (*Wailings in the Forest*) (2016) and Arnel Barbarona's *Tu Pug Imatuy* (*The Right to Kill*) (2017). With its slow and immersive pacing, *Baboy Halas* tells the story of an indigenous family who are among the last remaining



Fig. 5

forest-dwelling indigenous peoples in Mindanao. The film, produced for QCinema, competed at Rotterdam International Film Festival in 2017. On the other hand, *Tu Pug Imatuy* narrates an indigenous couple's struggle against government military forces who used them to track communist guerrilla forces. Funded by local producers in Mindanao, the film was picked up by Sinag Maynila to join the festival competition where it eventually won major festival awards, including Best Picture. Barbarona was also recognized as Best Director at Gawad Urian, and FAMAS Awards, which is handed out by Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences (FAMAS).

Aside from Mindanao, other regional cultures and histories have been the subject of many noteworthy regional films produced by Manila-based festivals. For example, Bicolano filmmakers Alvin Yapan and Kristian Cordero were able to create films about their folk and religious cultures. Yapan made the Cinemalaya entry *Debosyon* (2013), which interweaves Bicolano folklore and religiosity in a narrative of love between a male lowlander and a mysterious female who lives in the forest alone. Cordero similarly takes on the region's religious culture in his period film, *Angustia* (2013), produced by Cinema One Originals, and in *Hinulid* (2016), produced by QCinema. *Angustia* centers on the story of a priest bent on converting the indigenous Agtas to Catholicism, while *Hinulid* tells the story of a devout Catholic mother—played by Bicol-born Nora Aunor, Philippine cinema's Superstar—who returned to Bicol with her son's ashes.

Moreover, Kapampangan filmmakers have proven that despite their province's close proximity to Metro Manila, they have a distinct culture and language showcased in their festival-produced films. Jason Paul Laxamana, who started joining these film festivals before making it to commercial cinema, directed *Astro Mayabang* (2010) for Cinema One Originals, and *Babagwa* (*The Spider's Lair*) (2013) and *Mercury is Mine* (2016) for Cinemalaya. The latter won the festival's Special Jury Prize and Best Screenplay.

It is perhaps this intense desire to surface regional cultures that have long been absent in Philippine screens that can account for the force behind this cinema's sustenance as a practice. Filling up this cinematic void is regional cinema's biggest contribution to Philippine cinema.

It is noticeable that in his films, Laxamana attempts to make sense of colonial influences still apparent in Pampanga—and in other parts of the country—at present. More recently, Kapampangan filmmakers Petersen Vargas and Carlo Catu have entered the Manila film festival circuit. Vargas made *2 Cool 2 be Forgotten* (2016) written by Laxamana for Cinema One Originals, where it won Best Picture. It is among the few films that take on the experience of homosexual youth portrayed with tender honesty. Catu, on the other hand, directed *Kung Paano Hinintay ang Dapithapon* (*Waiting for Sunset*) (2018), which won Cinemalaya's top prize. It is a tale of three senior citizens navigating their complicated relationship armed with kindness and love. The entry of this new blood to filmmaking bodes well for Kapampangan and Philippine cinema in general.

Perhaps among regional cinemas, the one in Cebu has built a strong festival presence with a number of filmmakers bagging production grants annually. This regular production enabled Cebuano filmmakers to explore facets of local culture, such as the urban experience in *Aberya* (2012) or rural life in Brandon Relucio and Ivan Zaldarriaga's zombie film,

Di Ingon Nato (2011), and Deligero's *Iskalawags* (2013). Some films followed genre conventions but offered a distinctly Cebuano element. For instance, comedy films like Victor Villanueva's *My Paranormal Romance* (2011) and *Patay na si Hesus* (2016), and Ara Chawdhury's *Miss Bulalacao* (2015) feature a certain kind of Cebuano humor. Except for *Patay na si Hesus*, which was produced by QCinema, the rest of the films are Cinema One Originals productions.

Indeed, the role of these competitive festivals in the growth of regional cinema is undeniable. By producing and exhibiting films made in different parts of the archipelago, they have given confidence to filmmakers in the regions to present their locally rooted stories on their own terms. However, there is the danger of becoming too dependent on these festivals for funding—which might reinforce the centrality of Manila in the country's cinematic culture. In other words, while filmmaking may have been decentralized, the source of production funds remain relatively concentrated in the capital. This, in turn, can impede the development of autonomous regional cinemas that can spawn diverse cinema cultures all over the country.



Fig. 6

LOCAL INDEPENDENT PRODUCERS IN THE REGIONS

What can counter this tendency is the presence of local producers who would invest in making and distributing regional films. The regions are not without locally-funded films. Perhaps the best example is the Igorot of the Cordilleras in northern Philippines who have their micro film industry. They have been making full-length films in their Kankanaey language since early 2000s though productions have gone down due to piracy.⁵ These films, which are usually moral tales with religious theme, are funded by local producers and sold door-to-door in Benguet and other neighboring provinces, like Nueva Vizcaya. Nestor Daguines, a filmmaker who made the multi-part 3D animated film, *Lampitok*, said his films earned more than the production cost. He notes that his film is popular among the audience.⁶ As this illustrates, production cost can be recouped through alternative distribution models.

Another interesting case for local production with successful distribution is Mardoquio's *Hunghong sa Yuta* (2008), which is produced by Brothers of the Sacred Heart Youth Ministry, a religious group in Davao City. Meant to be an advocacy film for peace in Mindanao, it tells the story of a male volunteer teacher who went to a community in the mountain to teach. The film earned a profit of almost

PHP 2 million from its screenings in various schools and universities in Davao region. This figure is impressive considering that the film's budget (PHP 800,000) is less than half of its earnings.⁷ Further, the film gained national attention by being nominated in major categories in Gawad Urian, such as Best Picture, Best Director, and Best Screenplay.

In Pampanga, Holy Angel University commissioned Catu, its alumnus, to make *Ari: My Life with a King* (2015). The film presents a young man's discovery of his rich linguistic and literary heritage through his friendship with Pampanga's "King of Poets." Although the film did not earn big, *Ari* was a critical success. It won Best Film at the Metro Manila Film Festival New Wave section in 2015 and gave Catu the Best Director prize for his debut full-length feature. In addition, it received Best World Film award at the Harlem International Film Festival 2015 in New York. *Ari* shows that a small local production can make waves at home and overseas that, in turn, can create demand among viewers. The film's critical success stirred audience's interest, and it was screened in several universities all over the country. This can be another pathway for regional films to recover production cost and perhaps even earn a little.

Fig. 5 Cinemalaya winner, *Halaw* tells stories of Filipinos in Mindanao who cross illegally to Sabah Island to look for work. Author's screengrab from *Halaw*.

Fig. 6 *Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim* captures the journey of three individuals escaping from the war zone. The film received a Gawad Urian Best Picture in 2013, a first for a film made in Mindanao. Source: downloaded from the film's Facebook page.

SUSTAINING REGIONAL CINEMAS

At present, a number of regional filmmakers have (temporarily?) migrated to Manila to pursue a career in the industry. However, regional productions have not slowed down as evidenced by new works programmed in annual film festivals, not only in Manila but also in the regions. Some filmmakers struggled to remain independent, financing and producing their own works. Such is the case of Christopher Gozum, who self-financed *Anacbanua (The Child of the Sun)* (2009), which he also wrote, directed, and edited. Reportedly the first film from Pangasinan, *Anacbanua* is a stunning black-and-white non-linear film that calls attention to a language at risk of vanishing. It premiered at Cinemanila International Film Festival and had limited non-theatrical screenings in schools and alternative venues. Another filmmaker is Deligero, who funded his first full-length *Baboyngirongbuang* (2010) set in the mid-1990s about two teenagers spending their last weekend together before they part for college. The digital film was transferred to VHS to achieve the quality of a home movie. He self-produced his next film in 2012—*Kordero sa Dios*, which centers on the character of Divino Maligalig, who struggles to survive after experiencing a string of tragedies. Also from Cebu, Linaban co-produced and directed *Superpsychocebu* (2016) about a young man's quest to find the so-called superpsychocebu, a type of cannabis that makes its users go bonkers.

The presence of these independently produced films attests to the tenacious spirit of filmmakers in the regions to create a cinema culture that attends to local specificities. Despite not yet having film industries in the regions, they are fuelled by their passion to tell stories about their homeplace in a manner that is different from Tagalog films they've seen before. It is perhaps this intense desire to surface regional cultures that have long been absent in Philippine screens that can account for the force behind this cinema's staying power. Filling up this cinematic void is regional cinema's biggest contribution to Philippine cinema.

Fortunately, the filmmakers are not alone in this regional cinema movement. Aiding them is an infrastructure of support composed of film groups and organizations that put up local screenings and film festivals, regional-based producers that invest in their homegrown artists, cultural agencies and local governments that provide funding opportunities for films and workshops. Additionally, Manila-based film festivals have shaped regional cinema's development through their production grants. However, there is a need to encourage more film investors in the regions to fully develop an autonomous regional cinema — a cinema that thrives within and beyond the commercial film industry in Manila. Investors should be convinced that regional films can sell, perhaps not through the usual distribution model, as demonstrated by the Igorot films and others. In addition, investing in regional films is not only an opportunity for business but an advocacy that support local cultural productions that diversify Philippine cinema. On a different but related note, an autonomous regional cinema can be achieved by ensuring that films are not only regularly made but, more importantly, they are distributed. When these kinds of films are regularly screened in local spaces and cinemas, their audience will emerge. In these ways, regional cinema could become sustainable, and it would be able to compete with commercial cinema titans, like Hollywood and Tagalog film industries. ■

¹ Paul Grant and Misha Anissimov, *Lilas: An Illustrated History of the Golden Ages of Cebuano Cinema* (2016); Nick Deocampo, *Films from a 'Lost' Cinema: A Brief History of Cebuano Films* (2005).

² Dax Canedo, "Guerillas in the Midst: A Narrative on the Rise of Mindanao Cinema in the Digital Age," *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society* 14, no. 2 (November 2017): 184, <http://www.plarideljournal.org/article/guerillas-midst-narrative-rise-mindanao-cinema-digital-age/>.

³ Menchu Sarmiento, *Businessworld*, March 27, 2018, sec. Arts and Leisure, <http://bworldonline.com/how-an-ilonggo-indie-film-cottage-industry-grew-and-grew/>.

⁴ Patricia May Catan, *Weekend*, August 12, 2018, <https://weekend.sunstar.com.ph/blog/2018/08/12/for-the-love-of-film/>.

⁵ Nestor Clemente, personal interview with author, Sept. 13, 2018.

⁶ Nestor Daguines, personal interview with author, Sept. 13, 2018.

⁷ Katrina Ross Tan, "Constituting Filmic and Linguistic Heritage: The Case of Filipino Regional Films," *Citizens, Civil Society, and Heritage-Making in Asia*, ed. Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, Hui Yew-Foong, and Philippe Peycam (Singapore: ISEAS-Yusuf Ishak Institute, 2017), 145.

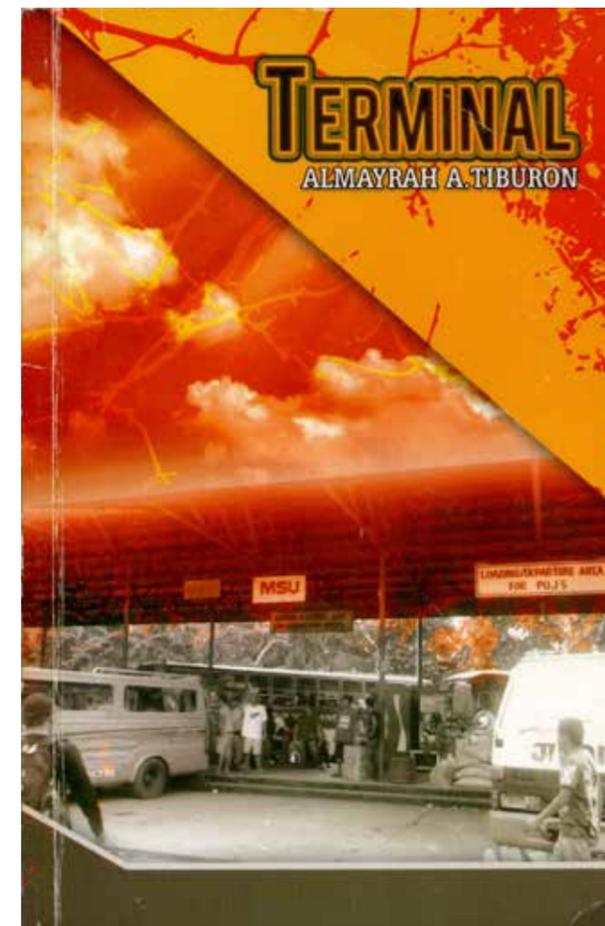


Fig. 1

In the last five years, contemporary literature from Mindanao has been on the upswing, particularly the genre of fiction. The establishment of new writers' organizations, the existence of creative writing workshops and programs, and the creation of online literary journals and independent presses have contributed to the rise of contemporary Mindanao writing. Perhaps more so than ever, the story of the region has been thrust into national consciousness after the election of Rodrigo Duterte to the presidency.

In this essay, I provide an overview of the books of fiction published in the last five years written by writers from or who have formed ties to Mindanao. A brief survey of the books of fiction published in the last few years presents works that openly engage with events as recent as the 2013 Zamboanga Siege and Joseph Estrada's "all-out war" against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, and works about events little known or forgotten, such as the formation of government-sponsored

paramilitary groups like the Ilaga, and the story of the Tagakaulo hero Datu Mangulayon. The essay also attempts to demonstrate how the stories of the three major socio-political identities in Mindanao (the *lumad*, the Moro, and the Settler) define the region's literature.

After the siege of Marawi, the passing of the Bangsamoro Organic Law, and the implementation of martial law, Mindanao remains a contested domain where the idea of a nation has always been unstable. This instability, a state of things unsettled, has shaped the works of fiction writers here, whether in oblique or direct ways, and depending on the communities they are writing from, for, and about. In their manifold attempts to confront local history, while also having a firm grasp of folk and oral traditions, these writers ask important questions about what the rest of us have long accepted as our story and identity. Perhaps, looking at their works will offer us a glimpse of the literature that will account for what is now unfolding before us.

THE QUESTION OF REPRESENTATION

Let us assume that the Nation is a resolved affair, and that reading literature from Mindanao is akin to turning a blind eye on the context from which these writings emerge. Only the majority, many of them settlers from the Visayas and Luzon who arrived during the American occupation, have unquestionably accepted the Filipino identity not only as a legal citizenship but also as a birthright. Outside this cozy migrant's view is a tangle of unresolved struggles.

I find the tri-people perspective that historians such as Rody B. Rodil and Samuel K. Tan have embraced in their studies helpful in defining a particular stream of literature from Mindanao. The inhabitants of the islands may be divided into three major groups: the indigenous peoples who are now called *lumad*, the Bangsamoro people, and the Christian settlers. When examined more closely, this framework has limitations. Not all Christianized lowlanders are settlers. There are Lumad who have integrated with the Visayans and other migrant groups. The Bangsamoro is also a layered identity, especially when compared to the problematic "Muslim Filipino." Nevertheless, the tri-people lens can begin to starkly illustrate the aftermath of the peopling of Mindanao.

THE CONNECTIVE THREAD IN ORTEGA'S STORIES

From Sultan Kudarat and South Cotabato, Jude Ortega is highly aware of the distinctions among communities he writes about. Ortega draws from the folk and ethnic lore in describing the lives of characters from South Cotabato, a place where the Blaan, Tboli, Teduray, Manobo, Ilonggo, and the Maguindanao live among each other. Published in 2018, his first book *Seekers of Spirits* (University of the Philippines Press) continues the tradition of writers of migrant stock writing about the indigenous groups in Mindanao. The thread that connects Ortega's stories is the magical spirit that either guides or harms his characters. In "The Last Guardian Seeker," Ogow, a Manobo, seeks the elusive spirit guardian who will bring him the strength to fight the settlers who have been laying waste to their lands. In "The Bride," a tryst between two young Manobo lovers is foiled by the *fegellong*, an entity that deceives and eventually kills one of the lovers who mistake the malevolent spirit for the beloved. In "Brothers," the story of Indirapatra and Sulayman is retold as a cinematic battle worthy of an entry in a national film festival. In their directness and simplicity, these short stories closely resemble the oral narratives from which they are based.

The overview
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in the last five years
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from or who have formed
ties to Mindanao,
demonstrate
how the stories of the
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the Lumad, the Moro,
and the Settler
—the tri-people lens—
define the region's
literature.

Everytime he tells the story from the eyes of a *lumad* character, Ortega takes a risk, one that often yields uneven results. His approach can be contentious, especially to readers whose traditions are depicted in Ortega's stories. This is particularly true in the "The Talisman," in which a young Teduray who wants to marry a Catholic girl forces his father to pass on to him the *ungit*, an amulet that not only turns its bearer into an expert hunter but also a stud. After he grudgingly gives away the amulet to his son, the father passes away, and many of his children also die from hunger soon after. The Teduray and the woman he marries live such an unhappy life together: at night he turns her into a sex slave, while at daytime she swallows her own talisman—birth control pills that prevent her from bearing Teduray children. The dreary depiction and the character's eventual suicide impair the story's theme of taking pride in one's own heritage. The material could have benefited from a fresh insight into the character and his predicament.

"A Battle of Amulets," the longest story in the collection, features Ilonggo *babaylan* or healers involved in a paramilitary group fighting Muslim rebels, but it is not clear what each camp is fighting for other than seeking revenge for deaths in their respective clans. While the characters now represent Ortega's own Ilonggo community, they are somewhat short of nuance. The *babaylan* Ilang becomes a seductress who manipulates the upstart Badong, himself the son of a powerful *babaylan*, and Gaston, a ruthless Ilaga commander. The story never truly gets down to the cause of why "[more] Christians will hate Muslims. More civilians will become vigilantes." In the end, Badong's survival is a small victory. The uneasiness I sometimes feel when reading Ortega's more complicated stories springs from their lack of a clear political standpoint, a stronger sense of where he is coming from and where he intends to go with his stories about the people in Kulaman.

THE ANGRY NARRATIVE OF THE BETRAYED

Since narratives about Mindanao have usually been mystified or distorted, today's writers bear the responsibility to tell stories that are scrupulously conscious of social and historical undercurrents. *Colon*, a novel by the Tagalog playwright Rogelio Braga, is a leap in this direction. Even though the novel's main character is a woman unwittingly discovering her Muslim roots and the violent incident that separated her from her community, Braga handles the subject with searing conviction. *Colon* is about Blesilda, a call

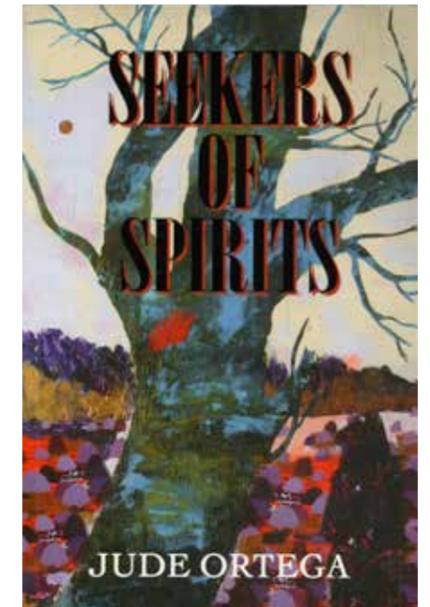


Fig. 2

center agent in Manila whose adoptive parents both die in an accident. After telling her close friend—the beleaguered history major Justin—about a mysterious visitor to her parents' wake, she is drawn to a series of startling discoveries.

Early in the novel, Justin is brutally murdered, and the killers leave a grotesque signature: his ear is cut off. Justin happens to be writing a master's thesis on the Ilaga, the notorious Ilonggo paramilitary group in the 1970s during the Marcos dictatorship that massacred many Muslim civilians; the Ilaga were known to keep the ears of their victims as trophies. The death of her adoptive parents and close friend compels Blesilda to experience a belated coming of age, her sense of identity obscured by the fraught relationship between the Filipino and the Moro. While the novel mostly takes place in Colon, Cebu City, the events in Carmen, North Cotabato haunt Blesilda's quest for answers.

A writer of Tagalog upbringing, Braga invites the readers to engage with the Bangsamoro discourse by allowing them to identify with Blesilda, a woman who grew up thinking that she was Filipino and is living an unexamined life. *Colon*'s tenacious pursuit of Blesilda's past mirrors the average Filipino reader's own introduction into one of Mindanao's longest running conflicts. Braga provokes us to question our perceived notions of being Filipino, an identity that has denied the Moro's struggle for self-determination. The novel bears the anger of the betrayed, but also the sensitivity of a teacher asking us to assess our complacency.

from Marawi, Lanao del Sur, Tiburon's stories are written in the popular Tagalog mode, such as the ones printed in the Filipino-language magazine *Liwayway*, but also occasionally use Meranaw terms and phrases and introduce cultural elements that may not be familiar to her Tagalog-reading audience. The stories are not necessarily about the Mindanao wars or fraught Muslim-Christian relations. Instead, they are about social mores, university life, traditions, and relationships, with the occasional turn for the paranormal. Tiburon's achievement, in my view, is precisely her choice to write about the commonplace. One does not need to write about the armed conflict to describe what it's like to live somewhere in Mindanao.

Tiburon's first book *Terminal* (Ivory Printing and Publishing House) describes the lives of Meranaw characters who seldom appear in the Filipino reader's consciousness. The characters' deeds and choices hinge on *maratabat* or the Meranaw concept of personal honor. In "Wedding Ring," a woman's dream of a happy life crumbles after her OFW husband marries a second wife. In "Omairah," a young woman is driven to the brink of her sanity after she is assaulted. The supernatural occurs more seamlessly, as in the story "Paktol," in which a married man from a prominent family suffers a hex cast by a jilted lover.

In *Terminal 2*, Tiburon turns to the horror genre and fills her stories only with non-Meranaw characters living in Metro Manila who encounter ghosts, ghouls, and monsters. After introducing her Meranaw community to the readers, she shifts to the usual cast of characters in Tagalog popular fiction. But since Tiburon does not depict interethnic relations or political conflict—at least not explicitly—in these stories, her depictions of her non-Meranaw characters do not ring particularly false, notwithstanding her manner of telling these ghost stories that follow closely the conventions of the genre: plots are created to induce an uncanny response from readers. This penchant for the uncanny and the strange also informs the works of two other fiction writers.

DARK TALES, DYSTOPIAN LANDSCAPES

Born and raised in Zamboanga City, Jose Miguel Arguelles works with a range of genres. Published in 2015 by Visprint, Inc., *Our Darkest Hours* features strange, darkly humorous stories that ring familiar. One of Arguelles stories is told from the perspective of an indigenous character, a Sama Dilaut, who is referred to as a "Badjao" in the story. "No One Else But Us" is an apocalyptic story set in the Zamboanga peninsula two

years after the 2013 MNLF siege. As Zamboanga burns from the coast, Abdullah, a Muslim Sama Dilaut, leaves his moorage to find medicine for his sick daughter. He and a few other men row toward the city to seek supplies. Their biggest obstacle: a horde of zombies. Though his characterization of the Sama Dilaut is done mostly in broad strokes, Arguelles is able to give Abdullah—and characters in the other stories—an inner consciousness that propels the story.

Also noteworthy is "The Outsiders," which is about a fictional town in Zamboanga suddenly "invaded" by a group of strangers. According to Arguelles, the idea came from news of informal settlers being relocated elsewhere. "The Outsiders" reads like a tale of inversion, a strange reenactment of the arrival of migrants in Mindanao. This time, it is the lowland city dwellers who are driven out from their homes. The rest of the stories in *Our Darkest Hours* move between Zamboanga City and Metro Manila where the author now lives.

Arguelles has a knack for retelling folk and urban lore. In "Lucky," a young man fleeing a gang riot runs into serious trouble when the mall security guard throws him down a basement where a half-human, half-python creature lives. It happens that the python is the shopping mall owner's twin sister. The material was inspired by Marne L. Kilates's poem "Python in the Mall," which was also inspired by an urban legend in the 1990s.

Not one of the eight stories in *Our Darkest Hours* offers any semblance of redemption. His characters witness debauchery in various forms—necrophilia ("One of Them"), gang rape ("The Scent of Flying"), and a cult ("Avenida")—and they are always pulled into the "dark side." Some stories test one's tolerance for the depraved and lewd. The stories' strengths are the character's self-awareness and Arguelles's humor.

STORIES OF IMPENDING EXTINCTION

The works of Kristine Ong Muslim offers a darker vision. Muslim hails from Upi, Maguindanao and attended the College of Engineering at the University of the Philippines. Even though she has lived most of her life in her hometown, her stories and poems have been published internationally, making her the most prolific and widely read among the writers included in this essay. The themes running in Muslim's work, mostly pithy and hauntingly poignant, are human neglect and abuse of nature, cruelty against other life forms, and self-annihilation. The memo is harsh but clear: we are responsible for our impending extinction. Her collection *Age of Blight*, published in 2016 by The Unnamed

Press, encapsulates Muslim's musings on pestilence, transmutation, and ruin.

The sixteen very short, parable-like stories in the book are grouped into four subsections: "I. Animals," "II. Children," "III. Instead of Human," and "IV. Age of Blight." Each subsection collects tales of cruelty, dark children's stories, abominations of corrupt science, and a view of the earth after the fallout, which resembles massive environmental ruin and societal collapse.

A standout from the first section about animal cruelty, "The Ghost of Laika Encounters a Satellite," is an account of the demise of Laika, one of the first animals launched into space in 1957 inside the Soviet Spacecraft Sputnik 2. In Muslim's story, we see Laika inside her shuttle and watch her incinerate. "There's no pleasant way to state what happened, so I'll just say it," the ghost of Laika says. "The core sustainer failed to automatically disengage from the payload, and I died by extreme overheating a few hours after launch [...] excruciating death by boiling of internal organs, which was, unfortunately for me, not instantaneous." We are reminded how technological progress involved the murder of a living thing.

Other exemplary stories include "Dominic & Dominic," about a boy who buries his discarded fingernail, only to find out that it's growing each day into a full-bodied clone; "Pet," about a possibly genetically modified creature switching roles with its owner; "Zombie Sister," a girl who returns from the dead and receives "formaldehyde treatment" in order to live with her family; "There's No Relief as Wondrous as Seeing Yourself Intact," about gradual human extinction by way of a slow bodily deterioration called The Empty; and "The Day of the Builders," about the arrival of aggressive "builders" who transform a village and destroy the lives of its inhabitants save for those who collude with them.

Since Muslim has set out to publish abroad, it's not surprising that the setting of her stories resemble American cities and suburbia. *Age of Blight* is set in a futuristic town called Balderstan in 2115. "All these places are familiar, and you may have been in some of them—or all of them," Muslim writes in a brief note in the book, "and if they don't seem familiar, it is likely you aren't paying much attention."

These bleak landscapes are not so different from towns and mountain ranges in Mindanao that have seen militarization, destructive mining, and foreign invasions. Though her concern is certainly the planetary effects of climate change and environmental degradation, it is not misguided to read Kristine Ong Muslim's fiction as parables closer to home.



Fig. 3

Fig. 1 Book cover of *Terminal*, by Almayrah A. Tiburon. Published by Ivory Printing and Publishing House, 2012.

Fig. 2 Book cover of *Seekers of Spirits*, by Jude Ortega. Published by University of the Philippines Press, 2018.

Fig. 3 Book cover of *Terminal 2*, by Almayrah A. Tiburon. Published by Balangay Books, 2013

Fig. 4 Book cover of *Si Menda ug Ang Bagani'ng Gitahapan Nga Mao Si Mangulayon (Menda and the Bagani Suspected of Being Mangulayon)*, by Melchor M. Morante. Published by Aletheia Publishing House, 2015.

DEPICTION OF ORDINARY MERANAW LIVES

If the previous writers took risks to portray characters outside of their own cultural backgrounds, Almayrah A. Tiburon's stories is refreshing in their depiction of ordinary Meranaw lives. A writer and teacher

Instability, a state of things unsettled,
has shaped the works of fiction writers
in Mindanao, whether in oblique
or direct ways, and depending
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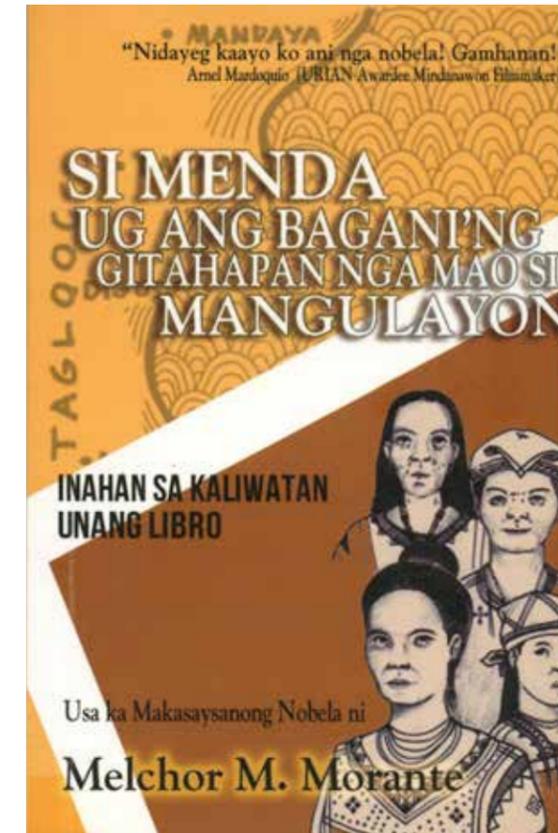


Fig. 4

REAL EVENTS IN EPIC MINDANAO FICTION

Real events are the subject of three novels by writers from northern, central, and southern Mindanao. Each novel takes a different approach in evoking periods in history. One reads like a queer novel of education set in the early 2000s. The second takes place in an indigenous village during the American Occupation. The third novel retells the entire history of Mindanao in epic fashion.

Jack Alvarez's *Kagay-an* (PSICOM Publishing Inc.) is set in Cagayan de Oro City during Joseph Estrada's war against the Moro Islamic Liberation Front. The novel tells the coming-of-age story of a student working part-time at a fast food chain. Between breaks, he visits a bookstore and clandestinely tears away a chapter from a novel by his favorite author—*Gapo* by Lualhati Bautista. He does this every day in the hopes of reading the entire book without getting caught. Alvarez's prose is colloquial, peppered with Cebuano-Visayan sentences. Apart from Bautista's novel, the narrator's own essays, stories, and short plays are woven into the narrative, revealing hints of the trauma that his father left behind.

An avid reader who could only afford books by stealing them, the young protagonist is an aspiring writer who also becomes aware of the region's political situation. He knows better than the average teenager about the displacement of indigenous people from their ancestral lands in the hands of land-grabbing settlers, logging and mining corporations, and government troops. Protests erupt on the streets of Cagayan de Oro, denouncing the President's war with Islamic militants, and calling for the abolition of the Visiting Forces Agreement. Not far from the young man's house is a military barracks that he stumbles into one day at a great cost. On his way home, a soldier captures and rapes him. The attack oddly draws victim and rapist together, after which they begin a tentative and unusual relationship.

Kagay-an attempts to present the Mindanao conflict from a migrant's perspective while also describing a queer character living through trauma and later, self-discovery. The novel combines a story of abandonment and abuse with a young queer person's sexual and

social awakening. Similar to Bautista's portrayal of Olongapo City in the time of the US military bases, Alvarez describes how militarization in Mindanao affected the lives of residents in the early 2000s.

Melchor M. Morante's Cebuano-Visayan novel *Si Menda ug Ang Bagani'ng Gitahapan nga Mao Si Mangulayon* (Menda and the Bagani Suspected Of Being Mangulayon) centers on the events in 1906 in Malita, Davao Oriental that lead to the assassination of Lt. Edward C. Bolton, the politico-military governor of Davao, by Tagakaulo warrior Mangulayon. The Americans never captured Mangulayon, but they made a show of displaying a body, allegedly that of the assassin, to serve as an example to anyone who dared resist the newly installed government.

Morante retells this chapter in Davao history with hard facts and a dose of fabrication. In the novel, real figures, such as Bolton, Benjamin Christian, and even the anthropologist Faye Cooper-Cole, make appearances. Unlike their counterparts in myths, the *bagani* do not possess extraordinary abilities.

Instead, they are presented as warriors who are outnumbered and overpowered. The fabulous and magical is only conveyed by word of mouth.

By shifting the focus away from Mangulayon's heroic deed to another character's personal tragedy, *Menda* follows the tradition of the Visayan novel that focuses on the lives of married men and women. Morante seems to be interested in how the ordinary lives of people, such as that of Menda and her husband, were disrupted by invaders. At first, the Tagakaulo hesitate whether to yield to the Americans or support a brewing resistance. The community leaders and warriors act out of their need to survive. The resistance does not quickly find momentum, until Mangulayon, at the spur of a moment, strikes the first blow. Nevertheless, Morante's novel reveals a deep affinity with the plight of the Tagakaulo people. He seeks to correct the colonial history that portrays Bolton as a martyred governor of Davao and instead pays homage to the unsung heroes of *lumad* resistance.

A RETELLING OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

In contrast with Morante's austere treatment, T.S. Sungkit, Jr., a Higaonon from Sumilao, Bukidnon, merges oral and written forms in retelling historical events. His first novel *Batbat Hi Udan* (The Story of Udan), published in 2009 by Central Book Supply Inc., describes the journey and transformation of Udan from ordinary man into a great *bagani* who frees his people from hostile *tagbaya* that have tricked other *bagani* and fed on the peoples' hearts and livers. The novel draws from the epic tradition in the way it narrates marvelous feats. Readers are introduced to beliefs of the Higaonon through customs in the *banuwa* (village or nation), *pangayaw* (tribal war), and mythological creatures such as *bakesans* and *aligasis*. Written in Tagalog and Higaonon and combining the oral with the literary, the publication of *Batbat Hi Udan* marks a significant point in Philippine literature.

Mga Gapnod sa Kamad-an, Sungkit's second novel written in Cebuano-Visayan, is even grander in scale. The novel was translated into English as *Driftwood on Dry Land* and published by the University of Santo Tomas Publishing House in 2013. Sungkit uses a similar approach in his previous novel, but this time, an entire history of Mindanao is narrated by one of its first inhabitants: the Higaonon. While an epic usually opens with an incantation, Sungkit's novel begins a poem, which is also titled "Mga Gapnod sa Kamad-an."

The story begins with a conversation between a young man and his grandfather about how their ancestors once knew how to read the stars. The young man grows old, drifts away from his family, and forgets about his grandfather's stories. Years later at a lecture hall in a university in Luzon, the man, seemingly possessed, interrupts the class by chanting in an ancient language. Seized by a vision, the man is astonished by his own words: "A day shall come when the raging fire will be seen [...] The rocks will jump into Kulaman for it is the day that Agyu's blood and Aniyun Minayun Anlaw's bones will come home." Thus unfolds the saga of the people who will later be scattered like driftwood across their own land.

Instead of writing conventional "scenes," Sungkit uses sweeping narration that covers vast periods of time, condensing epic cycles in compact chapters. From the great patriarch Buuy Pigsugdan who lived near the River of All Rivers; the descent of the sky deity Mambat-aw to marry Buuy Pigsugdan's daughter Gagawen and teach her people the ability to decipher the stars; the coming of the Central Asian voyager Mampur; the years of the great hero Buuy Agyu;

the descendants of Gaun; the arrival of the Kastila and later the Americans; the eventual splintering of clans to the turbulent years of dictatorship, Sungkit deftly constructs a historical novel that stores the narratives shared by the Higaonon, Maguindanao, Meranaw, Manobo, and other indigenous communities.

Gapnod operates in what E. Arsenio Manuel calls "mythological time." Gods descend from the sky and interact with noble clans. Spirits and tricksters intervene with mortals caught in disputes. Heroes are mythic figures who respond to the arrival of outsiders with their supernatural abilities. In one chapter, two warrior siblings resurrect their youngest brother whose head has been quartered while in battle. As the novel progresses, the mythic world diminishes, overshadowed by the colonial period. Communities break apart and heroes disappear along with their magical powers. In the end, the novel returns to the young man from the opening chapter, the one descendant who has gone adrift in the city.

Apart from the epic tradition, *Gapnod* is also influenced by Cebuano fiction. The novel, written in the Mindanao variety of Cebuano-Visayan, was serialized in *Bisaya Magasin*. The story of a young man who ventures into Metro Manila and discovers his supernatural gifts (extraordinary luck, the ability to talk with spirits) echoes a familiar storyline in Philippine movies. Moreover, the "flatness" of many of his characters, a convention of the oral tale, serves its serious purpose of "instructing" readers, similar to how folktales are expected to convey a lesson, how oral narratives are traditionally used in settling grievances, or how epics contain customs and ideals by which people live. Sungkit's art confronts the misrepresentation of his people: over time the Higaonon were called "Bukidnon" and their language classified as "Binukid" by the Visayan settlers who later arrived in Mindanao.

Gapnod is characterized by what Resil B. Mojares calls epic literature's "intimate connections with natural and human environments." The novel employs supernatural elements, but unlike most stories about Mindanao cultures written by migrant writers, Sungkit's use of the marvelous is motivated by robust principles: he writes not merely to achieve certain effects, but to reconnect with his people's historical memory.

CONCLUSION: A FLASH OF TRUTH

Jose Manuel Arguelles has published a second book, one that is even sharper than his first. *Ordinary World*, published by Visprint in 2018, features among

A heightened political atmosphere
has made more obvious
what is necessary...
The struggle lives on outside of fiction.

others an allegory of Rodrigo Duterte's drug war and how impunity has become "the new normal." Kristine Ong Muslim has co-edited a forthcoming anthology of fiction in English about our complicity in natural and man-made disasters. A year after the Marawi Siege in 2017, Almayrah A. Tiburon continues to teach at the Mindanao State University. She has not released a book of fiction since 2013 but co-edited *Lawanen: Mga Alaala ng Pagkubkob/ Mga Haraya ng Pag-igpaw* (Gantala Press), an anthology of writing by Meranaw women in response to the siege. If these works are any indication, our writers will continue to reckon with the distortions of the past and bring a flash of truth to the present.

However, as far as the state of publishing and readership in the country is concerned, literature can only be of so much use—a flash indeed, if at all. While I look forward to new fiction by Alvarez, Morante, Ortega, Braga, and others about Mindanao, my anticipation becomes absurd in the face of real lives affected by another year's extension of martial law in Mindanao, the harassment of *lumad* schools and communities, and this administration's campaign for a federal government that seems to advance only the interests of ruling clans.

The most senior among the writers listed here, Melchor M. Morante, is the pen name of anthropologist Karl M. Gaspar, CSSR, a political prisoner in the '70s.

As an activist and social scientist, Gaspar has done his share in advocating for change in the region. Others like Braga, Muslim, and Sungkit actively participate in discussions on social media and other venues in spite of the threat of paid "trolls." A heightened political atmosphere has made more obvious what is necessary. It is not enough to simply write about these things. The struggle lives on outside of fiction. ■

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Fig. 1

For all the solitude the writing life demands, the early, if not pivotal, stages of a creative writer's career very often, although not necessarily, begin in a group setting, more specifically, at a writing workshop. In a standard workshop, participants submit works to the scrutiny of others – fellow participants or a panel of experts – and critique is meted out according to pre-established parameters in form or content, or schools of thought. For the writer offering material up for evaluation, a workshop, with its keen readers and focused format, functions as a kind of testing ground for new work. For everyone involved, it's a conversation on art and craft.

PRESTIGIOUS RITE OF PASSAGE

In the Philippines, the Silliman University National Writers Workshop (SUNWW) is widely acknowledged as a rite of passage for many of the country's literary talent. It's even made more prestigious as it is the oldest and longest-running creative writing workshop in Asia and counts, as a result, almost a thousand former fellows, including some of the most prolific and active literary voices in the country.

Formally established in 1962 by Edilberto and Edith Tiempo, it was part of a creative writing program modelled on the Iowa Writers Workshop in Iowa City, United States, which the couple had attended. It had two components: a degree program in Creative Writing, and the Summer Writers Workshop, open to all young writers in the Philippines.¹

The Silliman University National Writers Workshop, the oldest and longest-running creative writing workshop in Asia, was established in 1962 by Edilberto and Edith Tiempo.

The Tiempos were writers, literary critics, and educators who had both spent time writing and teaching in the US through various scholarship programs, including the Guggenheim and Rockefeller grants. On returning to the Philippines, they settled in the coastal city of Dumaguete, where Edilberto took on a teaching post at Silliman University, and where, over the course of his tenure, he would serve in various capacities: chair of the English Department, dean of the Graduate School, and vice-president for Academic Affairs. In his later years, he was the university's writer-in-residence. Edith, on the other hand, was a prolific poet who would later become National Artist for Literature for her formidable body of work. But it was for the legendary workshop that they were best known to me as a literature student who wanted to write fiction.

That the workshop was conducted mainly by a married couple has perhaps added the familial sheen unique to it – generations of former fellows refer to them as Dad Ed and Mom Edith. The more self-conscious among us, feeling that perhaps such terms laden with familiarity needed to be earned, used the more deferential Doc Ed and Ma'am Edith,² although both of them were PhD holders. The same familial sense may be credited with the workshop's longevity and endurance even when, in the early 1990s, the original source of funding had run dry. It was then that former writing students, Alfred Yuson, Marjorie Evasco, Gemino Abad, Ricardo de Ungria, Grace Monte de Ramos, and Susan Lara stepped in, establishing the Creative Writing Foundation, Inc. (CWF), that would raise the money required to keep the workshop going for the next 15 years.

Fifty-one years and hundreds of alumni later, in 2013, the workshop was recognized by the Cultural Center of the Philippines with the Tanging Parangal³ award for its "immense contribution to the country's literary heritage."

By the time I joined the workshop in 1996, it was operating outside the auspices of the university (and was, for the time, officially called the Dumaguete National Writers Workshop). But apart from the changes in name and in financial backing, it was operationally the same, unfolding over a period of three weeks in May, with the Tiempos still its beating heart.

While a workshop is by no means the necessary ground zero for a career in the literary arts – many had come to the workshops with years of writing behind them – with limited slots to a batch, culled from hundreds of applications from across the country, the Silliman Workshop continues to be a prestigious starting point for someone hoping to become a writer in the Philippines.

It's where one can emerge from the solitary act of writing and present their work to the judgment and inspection of those who have toiled at their craft much more methodically for a longer period of time, and have proven successful.

According to the late Cirilo Bautista, "Practically all Filipino writers of any importance have joined the Silliman Writers Workshop at one time or another, either as fellows, lecturers, or panelists."⁴ Among its earliest panelists were National Artists for Literature Franz Arcellana and Nick Joaquin who, according to anecdotes passed on through the years, were rigorous if not ruthless and rather dramatic enforcers of the elements of style.⁵

By 2008, a few years shy of its 50th anniversary, the workshop returned to the administration of the University, and in 2010, a year before Edith Tiempo passed away, moved to its new home, the Silliman University Rose Lamb-Sobrepeña Writers Village in Valencia, Negros Oriental. In its current form, the workshop lasts 11 days and grants 10 fellowships a year.

LEARNING FROM THE NEW CRITICISM

When I came to Dumaguete for the summer workshop, I was a 21-year-old unpublished aspiring writer about to enter my final year at De La Salle University, where I was completing a degree in literature. There were three others from the same university attending the workshop that year, and for expediency we were nicknamed the La Salle delegation. Three of us were assigned to bunk beds in the same room in the bungalow that housed all 20 fellows – a very diverse batch of writers from across the country – for the next three weeks. The modest resort was once a family residence with a spacious living room, several bedrooms, and a common dining hall that led to the kitchen. Behind the house was a pool and a lounge deck. We learned later that the comforts we enjoyed, modest as they were, hadn't even been available to previous batches in earlier years.

Lodging was free and at the beginning of the week, we were each given a modest allowance for food. That all of us were there meant that we had submitted two examples of our work in either fiction or poetry in English, and that these works had been deemed of a certain standard and suitable for the workshop. Upon arrival in Dumaguete, each of us were given packets that included a compilation of everyone's works, and a schedule for when each one would be critiqued.

During the week, we spent nights reading works to be discussed at the morning and afternoon sessions, each half-day session three hours long and covering at least two works, not necessarily by the same author. Sessions took place at a conference room in the CAP Building (now a hotel), along the leafy and scenic Rizal Boulevard. It was a squat, brick low-rise with the bright, fluorescent-lit interiors of a bank. Here, desks were arranged to optimize group discussion – in a single, rectangular conference table that could seat 20 fellows and four to five panelists.

A different set of panelists presided over workshops each week, all of them active practitioners of particular genres. Although the summer workshop was built on the formalist literary theory of New Criticism, an approach to understanding works of literature purely on what's been laid out on the page – without looking to milieu or author to influence the appreciation of it – there was much to learn from the panel, even outside of the sessions, on process, the struggle to deliver what ultimately makes it to the page.

While I had done a few day-long writing workshops as part of the course work required at university, I had never been to one of such length and focus. Most instructive to me were the practical discussions on craft and technique; while some of the panelists were also literary critics, all of them were writers. Fellow participant Cherrie Sing,



Fig. 2

then a business student at De La Salle who had attended writing courses on the side, and who continues to write poetry and fiction, recalls a similar impression. She says, "The workshop was an eye-opener in terms of experiencing how panel and peer reviews work. It was my first time to see how a piece was discussed and cut up, and how it felt to be on the receiving end of the critique. This learning turned out to be crucial over the years of my writing – comments, when given constructively, can help you correctly revise your work. As one of my fellow beta-readers in a group I joined said, "We are usually blind to our mistakes and need one another to help correct them."

Once a week the workshop moved to a different location outside the city: a beach resort in Bacong; a semi-alfresco dining area set in a coconut grove in Calo, in the home of Cicero Calderon, a former president of the university; the Tiempos' hillside rest house in Valencia. On weekends, we were free to explore the city and its immediate surroundings. On the first weekend, we trekked up to Casaroro Falls, which has found itself into several poems, including one by the poet and literary critic Gemino Abad, thanks to such excursions; and on the second, half the group sailed across the Tañon Strait to Siquijor island. Although Silliman University itself was deserted for the summer holidays, the university town played warm host to the workshop all throughout the three weeks by way of pocket art and music events. There was always something to see and do whenever we needed a break from reading and writing, and in these moments, away from poring over pages, friendships were formed and cultivated.

EYE-OPENERS ABOUT THE WRITING LIFE

FH Batacan, novelist and author of the best-selling crime novel *Smaller and Smaller Circles*, remembers most the friendships she made at the Dumaguete workshop. At the time, Batacan had already begun to write what would become years later a groundbreaking work of crime fiction, but recalls her time with writing coaches as “an eye-opening introduction to certain conventions and principles which I'd never really thought of as someone who was just starting to write. It was really good to meet other writers as well, at various stages of their writing lives. It helped to listen to them and how they approached their work, and it helped to hear their critique of mine.” She had offered up a different work for review that summer, and although the workshop didn't directly impact the novel, she says it “altered the way I thought and felt about writing in general.”

For others, workshops may clarify attitudes towards the creative writing life. Poet and professor Jhoanna Lynn Cruz recalls attending the Silliman Workshop before it became clear that it was even a path to pursue. “I wasn't really a writer at the time, but I was teaching literature in De La Salle University-Manila and had written some poems and a story,” she says. “I met Edilberto and Edith Tiempo at a PEN Conference in Cebu and they asked me to send them my works for consideration for the workshop, and fortunately, I made the cut. At the time, it didn't seem like writers' workshops were a requirement to succeed, maybe because I wasn't really on that ‘career’ path. But being in Silliman that year was pivotal in my own development as a writer. It made me feel like I was really a writer –that I had a gift that I shouldn't squander.”

From week to week, the panelists intoned the value of discipline as the backbone of good practice; and that constant practice, every day, was about the only way forward. While this wasn't news to the more industrious fellows, it was somewhat of a revelation to me; no one had a trick to impart, no short-cut to spill. For the most part, it was a dissection of the anatomy of a story or a poem, every sentence or word held up to the light to be assessed as necessary or irrelevant, wondering aloud as we went along whether any of it was warranted.

A COMMUNAL CRITIQUE

Writing about workshops in the Philippines in general, National Artist for Literature Cirilo Bautista articulated what the Silliman Workshop is at the core, describing its primary task, and therefore ultimate service to the writer, as “a communal critique of the submitted works [to] bring out the author's strengths and weaknesses. The analysis involved a close reading of the text to discover

how it internalized the elements of coherence, harmony, and counterpoint, etc.; to justify or reject prosodic or narrative tactics in the context of the work's aesthetic direction; and to evaluate the clarity of its meaning within the boundaries of its functions.”⁶

All this was set against the backdrop of a city whose geography and makeup – a small university town by the sea – lends the workshop its peculiar magic. In 1996 it was a small city whose more intriguing characters were easier to identify and befriend, and mapping out the interesting places – where groups congregated for art shows, poetry readings and spoken word performances; where closing hours were non-existent – was as vital to the workshop experience as cracking open a manuscript the night before a session, so that come morning, you had something to contribute to the discussion.

Among the workshops' earliest panelists were National Artists for Literature Franz Arcellana and Nick Joaquin who, according to anecdotes, were rigorous enforcers of the elements of style.



Fig. 3

WORKSHOPS AS PRIME GROUND

The year I attended the workshop turned out to be Ed Tiempo's last. In what was apparently a rare outing, he joined the fellows for a beer one night at El Amigo, an open-air grill and bar; I had taken a photo of him taking a swig of San Miguel. A few months later, in September, he passed away.

At the service in the Silliman Church, writer Krip Yuson read a eulogy from Ed's daughter Rowena Tiempo-Torrevillas, who was unable to make it home, in which she shared her father's writing advice; the exact wording of it escapes me now, but the sense of it is as clear as crystal two decades later: “Write a page every day and in a year you'll have a novel.” Of all the scraps of pragmatic and concrete advice I've received over the past 22 years, this has proven to be a dependable one whenever my own practice buckles under pressure of multiple commitments.

For young and beginning writers, workshops are often when our most romantic notions of writing and the writer's life are both affirmed or crushed, a time and place

of meeting one's heroes, with all the highs and dangers that implies. You either come out of it proud to have powered through the tedium of rewriting and editing– and repeating the process endlessly – or exhausted to even think of what lies ahead, or hovering indecisively between both. It is the early workshops that are best remembered for having this effect.

The Silliman Workshop's length (although now it has been shortened to two weeks) and setting (few places in the Philippines have as much a creative vibe as Dumaguete does), make it prime ground for fostering relationships that can grow to form a vital support network for navigating the wider literary scene. Many of the people I met in that workshop over two decades ago still form a significant portion, if not the core, of the community of writers to whom I turn for readers and critics; friends who, as writers themselves, have a more acute understanding of the struggles of a writer.

WRITING WORKSHOPS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Similar university-based workshops have emerged following the success of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop, which, as the first and oldest such workshop in the country, remains one of the most prestigious. Universities, which usually have the bandwidth – more often than not in the form of a center or institute devoted to the literary arts – and the financial capacity to conduct workshops, have become the natural home to some of the more prestigious writing workshops in the Philippines. They are conducted in the summer months of March, April and May, which are traditionally outside the academic term, during which students are more likely able to attend, and critics and writers, who are often also affiliated with universities as administrators or professors, are available to sit on the workshop panel.

The UP National Writers Workshop

Organized by Likhaan: the University of the Philippines' Institute of Creative Writing, the annual workshop takes place in Baguio City, in April. It's open to "mid-career" writers who have at least one published work (or at least on the verge of publishing one) or have won major literary awards. It is open to all literary genres, in various languages.

The UST National Writers Workshop

Organized by the University of Santo Tomas' Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies, the annual workshop is held in March in Baguio City. The workshop, which has a minimum age requirement of 21 as a way to guarantee a measure of writing experience, accepts 12 to 15 fellows writing in two languages, Filipino and English, for poetry, fiction, creative non-fiction, and drama.

According to organizer Ralph Semino Galan, "The UST National Writers' Workshop aims to develop a healthy continuing dialogue between homegrown talents (meaning Thomasian writers) and writers from outside the Pontifical University."

Among the alumni who have won prestigious literary awards and published books are Paul Alcosoba Castillo, now UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies resident fellow, who won first prize for Poetry in Filipino in the recent 68th Palanca Awards; and Chuckberry J. Pascual, another writing fellow turned resident fellow, who has been publishing almost one book a year since 2012. Some of his books have become finalists in the National Book Awards. He was recently appointed as the coordinator of the newly established BA Creative Writing program of UST.

Davao Writers Workshop

Davao Writers Workshop is a regional workshop open to entry-level or beginning writers from the Mindanao region, particularly the Southern and Eastern Mindanao region. The emphasis is on nurturing writers who are at the very beginning of their writing careers, and so the workshop does not accept applicants who have attended national writers workshops. "We prefer writers who are based in Mindanao, although we have also had a few fellows who were born and raised in Mindanao but are based in Manila," says Profesor Jhoanna Lynn Cruz. The majority of the fellows in any given year are from Davao.

The regional workshop is designed to encourage writers in Southern and Eastern Mindanao to write in their mother tongues – English, Filipino and Binisaya – and no translations are provided, so all panelists need to be able to read in the three languages. It is organized by the Davao Writers Guild, in cooperation with UP Mindanao and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Among the alumni who have gone on to national writers workshops and won Palanca awards are Jondy Arpilleda, Jade Mark Capiñanes, and Mubarak Tahir; Jeffrey Javier and Arian Tejano have won the Cha Poetry Award; and Jude Ortega, whose novel was recently published by UP Press.

The Ateneo National Writers Workshop

Administered by the Ateneo Institute of Literary Arts and Practices, the week-long workshop is held in June at the Ateneo de Manila University campus in Quezon City. The workshop takes an average of 12 candidates a year in the genres of fiction, poetry, and essay.

The Iyas Creative Writing Workshop

Organized by the University of St. La Salle in Bacolod, in cooperation with the De La Salle University Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts, and the Institute for Climate and Sustainable Cities, the workshop, held every April at Balay Kalinungan, University of St. La Salle in Bacolod City, accepts creative work in four languages: Hiligaynon, Cebuano, Filipino and English, and in three genres: fiction, poetry and drama. The workshop includes critiquing sessions and individual sessions with each of the panelists, as well as tours of the city's historical places of interest.



Fig. 4

The workshop was a dissection
of the anatomy of a story or a poem,
every sentence or word held up
to the light to be assessed
as necessary or irrelevant.

Iligan National Writers Workshop

Encouraged by Cirilo Bautista, writers Jaime An Lim, Anthony Tan and Christine Ortega Godinez founded the Iligan National Writers Workshop in 1994; it is held in May. It was the first national writers workshop founded in Mindanao by Mindanaoans and, according to Christine, "it attempted to level the playing field by imposing a quota system of five fellows each from the major islands."

She adds, "Our focus today is to give opportunities to more Mindanaoans to attend the workshop and to get training from experts. Aside from this, the workshop now prefers themes of the indigenous or themes on our cultural heritage."

The workshop counts almost 400 alumni, among them such prolific writers as Charlson Ong, J. Neil Garcia, Ian Rosales Casocot, Camilo Villanueva, Vincent Groyon and Louise Vincent Amante. ■

Fig. 1 Silliman University campus. Photograph by Ruel Joseph Tabada.

Fig. 2 Edith L. Tiempo and Edilberto K. Tiempo, founders of the Silliman University National Writers Workshop.

Fig. 3 The Luce Auditorium at the Silliman University, built in 1973 from funds provided by the Henry Luce Foundation, Inc. in New York.

Fig. 4 The Writer's Village located at the Camp Outlook, Bongbong, Valencia. It was first used for the 49th National Writers Workshop in May 2010.

¹ CCP Encyclopedia, Susan Lara

² Susan Lara says, "I called them Dad and Mom. Mom first, because it was easier to go from Ma'am to Mom. Dad, a little later."

³ A workshop of such longevity will, of course, come with its own share of anecdotes and gossip, most of which would be difficult to fact-check.

⁴ CCP Encyclopedia, Susan Lara

^{5,6} Dr. Cirilo Bautista. In Focus: the Impact of Creative Writing Workshops (The National Commission for Culture and the Arts, March 1, 2004).



Fig. 1

*“Tragedy repeats itself as farce, the famous prophecy announced. But with us it is worse: tragedy is repeated as tragedy.” – Eduardo Galeano, *Book of Embraces**

This story ends as it starts—with a conflagration and a camera. It was 2005 when my father bought me a Sony Digital 8 (D8). I was a film student at the University of the Philippines (UP). With the D8, I made my first video documentary, *Aapuyan* (2005). It shows the progressive UGATLahi Artist Collective’s creation and burning of then President Gloria Macapagal-Arroyo’s effigy in a protest rally. Audio recordings of Arroyo’s call to the election commissioner surfaced, exposing how she rigged the 2004 national election in her favor.

Like the small and handy Super 8 of the previous generation of Filipino filmmakers, the D8 became my portable video diary. I documented the quotidian and realized how the mundane can never be recreated—such as the fury of the masses momentarily dissipating while watching the embers of a cheating president’s burning effigy.

In the same year I created my first documentary, I saw Ditsi Carolino and Nana Buxani’s third documentary, *Bunso* (2005), at the UP Film Center. Carolino and Buxani

previously made *Minsan Lang Sila Bata* (1996) and *Riles* (2003). Funded by NGOs advocating for the passage of the Juvenile Justice Bill, *Bunso* is a digital video graded in black and white that tells the story of three boys living inside the overcrowded Cebu Provincial Detention and Rehabilitation Center with adult inmates.¹ It was the first documentary I saw outside of television, doing away with narration of the story by a personality host and instead employing pure visual storytelling. *Bunso* was one of the documentaries that introduced me to the world of immersive cinematic documentary—where precise editing of observational shots creates an intimate window into the subjects’ lives.

This essay traces the cinematic documentary tradition in the Philippines. By looking into its development in the various narratives of political multimedia collectives, documentary workshops, local film festival support, and the eventual recognition by award-giving bodies and government institutions, I aim to map its agencies and at the same time locate the intersections and unexplored spaces where we, marginalized Filipino documentarists, can further negotiate and rationalize our mandate to represent realities.

THE INDIE DIGITAL

In Eloisa May P. Hernandez's book *Digital Cinema in the Philippines, 1999–2009*, she breaks down the history of digital cinema in the country into two periods: introduction (1999–2004) of the accessible and inexpensive digital technology that democratized filmmaking practice, and the innovation (2005–2009) when various commercial companies, non-government organizations and individual interests built on the possibilities created by the change in material conditions. Cinematic documentary trajectories appear in the innovation era at the turn of the decade and can be tracked back to the latter two practices of the NGOs and individuals, with works such as *Bunso* funded by NGOs and the personal documentaries.

As a film student, the newfound power to record memories and freeze time through accessible digital technology prompted me to create a personal documentary as my thesis project. I am from Mindanao, a land known for its bounty and conflict. I scoured the libraries and internet for documentaries on Mindanao for my review of related literature and found only one—*House Under the Crescent Moon* (2002) by Gutierrez Mangansakan II, that won in the 2001 Gawad CCP. Mangansakan's first film is about internally-displaced persons taking refuge in his grandfather's ancestral house in Pagalungan, Maguindanao during the "all-out war" waged by President Joseph Estrada against the Islamic secessionist group, Moro Islamic Liberation (MILF) in 2000.

In the early 2000s, I could not find cinematic documentary thesis projects in UP that tackled the personal. Apart from Mangansakan's work, I found inspiration from documentary filmmaker and historian Nick Deocampo's autobiographical documentary, *Private Wars* (1997), an 8mm film about the effects of the Philippine-Japanese War on his family, and indie filmmaking pioneer Kidlat Tahimik's *Perfumed Nightmares* (1977), a 16mm whimsical satire on globalization told through the documentation of his journey to Paris aboard his colorful jeepney.

Eventually, I was able to finish my film, *Walai* (Home) (2006), a documentary inspired by Trinh Min Ha's film *Naked Spaces* (1985). *Walai* explores the temporality of political power and democracy in Mindanao through the memories of my family.

During the post-production of *Walai*, John Torres's *Todo Teros* (2006) was released. Torres assumes the role of a wandering filmmaker documenting the zeitgeist of a period steeped in the US-led War on Terror campaign in the wake of 9/11. Torres's documentation of his nighttime loitering in different events and parties doubles as an inventory of the independent artist-led spaces in Metro Manila that burgeoned alongside the so-called digital revolution. These spaces—art galleries, bars, watering holes—provided a much needed space for artists to produce and exhibit their work unburdened by the limitations of commercial institutions. Similar spaces of autonomy can be seen in Torres's next work, *Years When I Was A Child Outside* (2008), a personal essay film juxtaposing the 2007 Financial Crisis with his family's breakup. The film opens with a sequence showing filmmakers Raya Martin and Khavn Dela Cruz talking inaudibly, somewhere abroad, unwinding after their initial forays in an international film festival.

More than artistic influence on niche communities, Torres' documentations pertain to the possibilities introduced by artist-led spaces and the New Wave indie, the former enabling artists to mediate transactions for themselves, and the latter showing how international co-production funding can be had for their succeeding films and video works. These agencies are now being tapped by current Filipino documentarists, rounding the co-production pitching circuit. Nevertheless, it must be noted that these cinematic documentaries at the start of the digital decade were isolated initiatives—individual/indie documentarists producing with their own money or funded by NGOs—a continuation of the lone wolf narratives of documentarists Kidlat Tahimik and Deocampo in the '80s.



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The confluence of interests from both the market and the state assists in the growing visibility of the documentary, banking on its growing promise of lucrativeness as a product and potency as a pedagogical tool.

THE PEOPLE'S CINEMA

Parallel to the individual documentarists' path in the '80s was the formation of a documentary collective called the AsiaVisions. It was founded by government communications employees Lito Tiongson, Joe Cuaresma, and Danny Consumido after they resigned in protest of dictator Ferdinand Marcos's imposition of media blackouts to quell national unrest. AsiaVisions championed the People's Cinema, a term for their body of works that documented the political and social upheavals that led to the fall of Marcos in 1986. The channels of distribution of these documentaries were mainly community screenings. They intermittently produced documentaries through the 1990s and quietly ceased operations. Access to AsiaVisions works is limited due to lack of a proper archival system. Fortunately, some have been uploaded online such as the iconic *Sa Liyab ng Isang Libong Sulo* (1997), a documentary based on Amado Guerrero's book *Philippine Society and Revolution*.

AsiaVision's imprint of the political multimedia collective was taken up by the new generation of People's Cinema multimedia groups armed with digital cameras and computers with non-linear editing suites. Southern Tagalog Exposure pioneered the re-emergence of People's Cinema. Formed in 2001 in the militarized Southern Tagalog region, the ST Exposure introduced highly cinematic and novel aesthetics to the visual language of propaganda films, with works like *Alingawngaw ng mga Punglo* (2003) and *Red Saga* (2004). The group's groundbreaking videos inspired the formation of other multimedia collectives, such as Kodao Productions, which produced *Nanay Mameng* (2012) and Tudla Productions, which created

Sa Ngalan ng Tubo (2004). The documentaries by these collectives were geared toward educating marginalized grassroots communities, but also gained recognition from award-giving bodies like the Gawad CCP and Gawad Urian.

The names of individual filmmakers behind landmark People's Cinema documentaries in the 2000s are usually not credited in favor of highlighting the collective identity of the groups. Nonetheless, these filmmakers continued to look for opportunities to hone their craft and found opportunity in the Goethe Institut documentary filmmaking workshop series that ran from 2010 to 2014. The workshop products of documentarists from political collectives feature the progressive sentiments of People's Cinema. I was a member of Sine Patriyotiko and guest filmmaker for Kodao Productions. Through the workshop, I produced *War Is a Tender Thing* (2013), an autobiographical essay film on the Mindanao conflict. A member of Tudla Productions and UP Film alumna who also made a documentary for her thesis, *Kung Balatan ang Bawang* (2008), Jewel Maranan produced the lyrical cinéma vérité *Tondo, Beloved* (2011). An ST Exposure member and Mowelfund alumna, Kiri Dalena, produced *Tungkung Langit* (2013), a visual narrative of the struggle of orphans who lost their family to a typhoon. Other multimedia activists also created their own cinematic documentaries, including Ilang-Ilang Quijano's *Puso ng Lungsod* (2012) and *Daughters of Cordillera* (2014), JL Burgos's *Portraits of the Mosquito Press* (2014), Anna Isabelle Matutina's *Magdalena* (2013), and Mae Urtal Caralde's *Yanan* (2013).



Fig. 2

Fig. 1 Still from *Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016), directed by Baby Ruth Villarama.

Fig. 2 Still from *Nick and Chai* (2014), directed by Cha Escala and Wena Sanchez.

Fig. 3 Movie poster of *Years When I Was a Child Outside* (2008), directed by John Torres.

Fig. 4 Still from *Aapuyan, Against the Current* (2013), directed by Adjani Arumpac.

Fig. 5 Still from *Red Saga* (2004), directed by Kiri Dalena.

Fig. 6 Still from *Tondo, Beloved* (2018), directed by Jewel Maranan.

Fig. 7 Still from *SONA 2018* (2018), produced by RESBAK (Respond and Break the Silence Over the Killings), an anti-extra-judicial killings creative alliance.

LOCAL FILM FESTIVALS AND TELEVISION

Some of the workshop documentaries were screened in grassroots communities while others went on to have premieres in international documentary film festivals. But one workshop product, Baby Ruth Villarama's *Jazz in Love* (2013), managed to break through the local circuit. Villarama was a researcher and producer for international television networks, and *Jazz in Love*, a homoerotic story between a young Filipino man and an aging German guy, was her first cinematic documentary. It gained support from the Manila Film Financing Forum and opened the 2013 Cinemalaya Film Festival, the first documentary to have done so. Villarama's next documentary, *Sunday Beauty Queen* (2016), about Filipina domestic workers moonlighting as beauty queens on weekends in Hong Kong, also became the first and only documentary to be programmed and to win in the state-funded 2016 Metro Manila Film Festival.

Prior and concurrent to the documentary genre's visibility in the local film festivals via Villarama's works were initiatives that supported documentaries, corresponding to the growing market for documentary worldwide. Cinemalaya introduced a documentary module in 2009, and notably, two of the more popular documentaries that Cinemalaya programmed are Philippine-American productions: Ramona Diaz's *Imelda* (2003), a documentary about the excesses of Imelda Marcos, and Marty Syjuco's *Give Up Tomorrow* (2011), a critique of the Philippine judicial system based on the account of the infamous Paco Larranaga trial.

In 2014, the newly-founded QCinema provided post-production funding to *Nick & Chai* (2014) and hailed it as its Best Picture. Directed by Wena Sanchez and Charena Escala, *Nick & Chai* tells the struggle of a couple who lost all of their four children to Typhoon *Haiyan*. QCinema also bestowed post-production grants to documentary projects in 2015 and 2018, including Sheron Dayoc's *Crescent Rising* (2015), a documentary about war-torn Mindanao. Cinema One Originals Film Festival started giving grants to documentaries in 2016.

Meanwhile, mainstream broadcast television also revamped its documentary approach. ANC's *Storyline* (launched in 2008) and GMA News and Public Affairs' *Front Row* (launched in 2010) are direct cinema television shows that noticeably do not feature personality hosts. It was in *Front Row* that I learned the discipline of documentary editing as the show's edit supervisor for three years. In 2014, GMA Network mounted the Cine Totoo International Documentary Film Festival and produced, among others, Carla Samantha Ocampo and Lester Valle's *Bontok, Rapeless* (2014), an anthropological reflection on a society that has no concept of rape, practiced by the Bontok community in Northern Philippines.



Fig. 5

AWARDS, INSTITUTIONAL AND GOVERNMENT SUPPORT

Impelled by the burgeoning body of documentary works during the first digital decade, the biggest local award-winning bodies finally recognized the form. In 2011, the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, a body that hands out the annual highest film award Gawad Urian, opened the Best Documentary category. Looking into the funding sources of Gawad Urian winning documentaries reveals diverse forces that shaped cinematic documentary production in the Philippines. *Harana* is directed by a Filipino filmmaker, Benito Bautista, but produced by a foreign production company. *Tondo, Beloved* is a product of a documentary workshop. Both *Bontok, Rapeless* and *Crescent Rising* are funded by local festivals. *Nanay Mameng* is a political multimedia collective project. Coreen Jimenez's *Kano, An American and his Harem* is an independently-produced documentary that started as an investigative research for a journalistic article. Baby Ruth Villarama's *Sunday Beauty Queen* is a Philippines-Hong Kong-U.K.-Japan co-production. The most recent winner was Toshihiko Uriu and Victor Delotavo Tagaro's *Yield*, an ethnographic documentary about child labor shot for five years. The director, Tagaro, was a member of Tudla Productions who directed *Sa Ngalan ng Tubo*. Uriu was an NHK cameraman who settled in the Philippines and has since produced multimedia works for local filmmakers, one of which was *Yield*.



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

Yield was also awarded Best Documentary and Best Editing in 2018 by FAMAS, which created its documentary category in the same year. Like *Yield*, the other FAMAS documentary nominees also tout long production timelines. Nawruz Paguidopon's *God BLISS Our Home* (2017), a video diary of a filmmaker struggling to make ends meet stitched together by animation, took four years to create. Maranan's third full-length documentary, *Sa Palad ng Dantaong Kulang* (2017), a cinematic direct cinema that concludes her *Tondo* series, took six years. But unlike *Yield* that had a private investor, both Paguidopon's and Maranan's films took the international pitching path to seek funding. *God BLISS* was awarded a seed grant from the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP), and received co-production funding from South Korea, Indonesia, and Japan. *Sa Palad* received co-production funding from the Film und Medien Stiftung NRW, Doha Film Institute, Asian Network of Documentary, and the National Commission for Culture and the Arts. Certainly, the more substantial international co-production funding shores up the filmmakers while buying more time for better film production conditions coinciding the pitching process.

Amidst prolific documentary production was also the rise of multimedia schools in the 2000s churning out documentary thesis projects. Gawad CCP just celebrated its 30th year, continuing its legacy of awarding and archiving

Philippine short and documentary works. This sizable body of work that largely champions oeuvres from the alternative filmmaking community was celebrated and made the starting point of future plans for the community in "Hidden Cinema Congress," a gathering of alternative filmmakers organized by Nick Deocampo in 2018.

Outside of Imperial Manila, a few documentaries are also produced through and for regional cinema platforms initiated by the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA). Collectively referred to as Cinema Rehiyon, this initiative is now on its tenth year. The latest government-funded program to join the fray is the FDCP's SineSaysay in 2018, a two-part initiative to further enrich documentary filmmaking in the Philippines.² It has a documentary lab component, where eight projects were chosen to be workshopped by film experts. It also has the feature documentary co-production grant, where four projects were awarded one million pesos. The confluence of interests from both the market and the state assists in the growing visibility of the documentary, banking on its growing promise of lucrativeness as a product and potency as a pedagogical tool.

POLITICAL DIGITAL

These agencies allowed me to gain my foothold as a documentary filmmaker—Gawad CCP hailed *Walai* as Best Regional film in 2006, broadcast television practice honed my editing skills, political multimedia collectives enabled me to locate my practice within the sociopolitical sphere, various film education (documentary workshop, UP Film Institute, and Mowelfund Film Institute) enhanced my film language, and award-giving bodies such as Gawad Urian recognized my works. Nevertheless, my distinct position is being in the thrice over. I am identified as a female regional filmmaker who works with a marginalized form. All vantages gave me another perspective to the concept of national cinema that has always been in contention. As a Filipina documentary filmmaker from Mindanao who benefited from every little assistance different sectors have thrown my way, I choose to recognize the intersections of these agencies as the space where I and the documentary filmmaker, as a collective body, can inhabit and continuously negotiate our practice. It is with this grounded and inclusive outlook that I conduct my endeavors as both a mentor to documentary film students in Mapua University and UPFI and convenor of DoQ, an initiative that aims to surface under-the-radar documentary films by giving them screening and discussion platforms. DoQ augments the initiative of Maranan, who founded Cinema Is Incomplete in 2011, to screen independent films in alternative spaces.

Philippine documentary filmmakers currently navigate the negative that informs the center—from peripheries and junctions to outside—the wider transnational fray where we are now finding more critical support and funding. Despite the rise in its production that I have tried to illustrate with an overview of documentary filmmaking in the Philippines, the conclusion remains that the biggest local film festivals, largest film grants, widest market distribution, and highest award-giving bodies still favor the feature fiction form, whether mainstream, alternative or independent. As Deocampo said in the 2015 Chopshots Travelling Film Festival Southeast Asian documentary filmmaking discussion: “Where is the center of this documentary? I don’t see any. Where’s the community? None. ...I have high hopes with the digital generation. I do hope you find something.” But perhaps there is no need for a center, as there is no need for history in a singular linear sense of the word. What must be recognized is the heterogeneity itself of national cinema, with a genealogy of works borne of myriad impulses of creation. A monolithic definition espouses a culture of cooptation and colonization (of cultures within the imagined nation) that the very idea of national cinema tries to break free from.

The flexibility that I allow the discourse of my documentary practice, prompted by the very lack of real and devoted agency, lends me autonomy to rethink my chosen genre and identity outside of its boundary/niche. This is because at the background of all these fray in the film world is a gathering force of anti-government sentiments under the present Duterte regime. Extra-judicial killings (EJK) brought by the state-sanctioned War against Drugs has claimed the lives of more than 20,000 Filipinos (as of 2018), mostly the poor and disempowered. Meanwhile, Duterte’s popularity remains. Where media blackout during the Marcos regime was the trigger for the creation of documentaries in the ‘80s, now I believe it is the noise of New Media misinformation that can set off a new brand of documentary production.

I recently helped make a short video for RESBAK (Respond and Break the Silence over the Killings), an alliance of artists who banded together to protest the EJKs. I worked with RESBAK convenor Dalena and other filmmakers to document the 2018 Philippine president’s State of the Nation Address. RESBAK capitalizes on the social media

¹ Carolino and Buxani previously made *Minsan Lang Sila Bata* (1996) and *Riles* (2003).

² It has a documentary lab component, where eight projects were chosen to be workshopped by film experts. It also has the feature documentary co-production grant, where four projects were awarded Php 1 million.

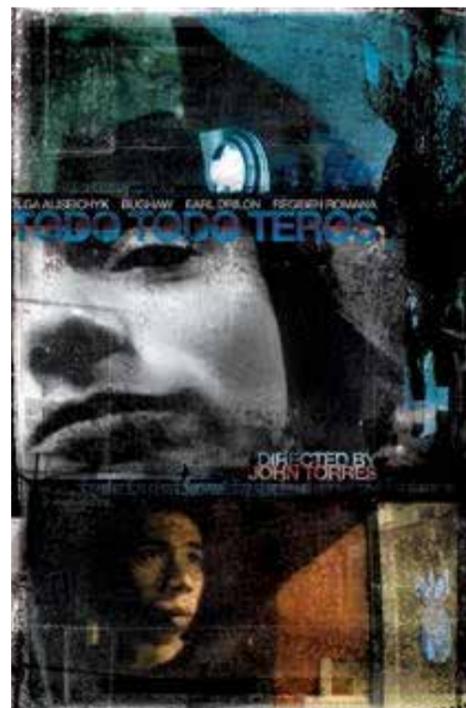


Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10

platform, creating videos for online consumption and information dissemination, among others. Again, I found myself in the streets shooting the blazing effigy of a president found wanting, wretchedly not unlike when I first made a documentary 13 years ago.

Indeed, details of the mundane can never be recreated in exact likeness, but the general imageries are essentially the same because of a system that remains untouched by revolutions. Beyond issues of niche and even genre identification, distribution, institutional support and recognition, etc., the next ethical action for the informed documentarist is to further study the strength and limitations of the digital form of a genre that claims to embody truth. The frontier of the digital and post-truth Information Age that envelops our society is a relatively new and befuddling terrain. The mandate of the digital documentarist compels her to relentlessly seek a deeper understanding of the peril and power of her tools in order to tell stories that are nearer to our realities. ■

Fig. 8 Movie poster of *Todo Todo Teros* (2006), directed by John Torres.

Fig. 9 Still from *Years When I Was a Child Outside* (2008), directed by John Torres.

Fig. 10 Still from *Yanan* (2013), directed by Mae Urtal Caralde.

Where media blackout during the Marcos regime was the trigger for the creation of documentaries in the ‘80s, now it is the noise of New Media misinformation that can set off a new brand of documentary filmmaking.



Fig. 1

The proposition that there have been two Waves of domestic experimental cinema and that we are in desperate need of a Third one is entirely mine but I could just as well be rephrasing somebody else's or merely stating the obvious. These Waves are not the same Waves that have charted the ebb and flow of domestic studio-made cinema through the decades; no, that's a different set of arguments, mostly over which wave was what and when did one wave end and the next wave begin. These two Waves and the wishful Third of the title are a lot more difficult to argue over by dint of what they're demarcating, but also because it's a consensus of one.

CONCORD AND ZEITGEIST

The First Wave emerged somewhere in the late '70s and sputtered into inactivity in the mid '80s and, in concord with its *zeitgeist*, came mostly from the same place (Mowelfund, the sole film school in the country) and was mainly a fringe activity, a metaphorical and often literal underground phenomenon, guerilla screenings in somebody's basement, all that. My own gateway drug, not just to domestic experimental cinema but to experimental cinema anywhere, was from the First Wave, Roxlee's *Juan Gapang* (1986), or *Johnny Crawl*, and I make that drug reference not as an affectation but out of my own imagined sensation of what a solid hit of arcane opiates would be like. This was pre-indie, pre-digital, pre-everything. I was pre-cinephilia,

with zero footprint on experimental cinema of any make and model, on any cinema that wasn't Hollywood, that, in a random rundown of some of the biggest movie stars in the history of Philippine studio-made cinema, wasn't FPJ (Fernando Poe Jr.) or Dolphy or Nora Aunor or Sharon Cuneta or Rudy Fernandez. It would be more primordially correct to call *Perfumed Nightmare*, Kidlat Tahimik's no-budget interrogation of the chronic infatuation Filipinos have on America, the loam from which the First Wave rose, also because that's exactly what it is. But my chronology was out of whack and because of this failure of circumstance, or perhaps destiny, I saw it many years after I saw *Juan Gapang* (1986), Cesar Hernando's *Botika Bituka* (1986) and Raymond Red's *Ang Magpakailanman* (Eternity) (1986). The last two are considered two of the touchstones of domestic experimental cinema.

Juan Gapang was short and sharp and silent, just a man crawling on all fours across the city for seven or so minutes, but it had all the synaptic boil of a waking nightmare. I honestly didn't know what to make of it at first, nor could I quite process what I felt right after. Amused. Disoriented. Seasick. I also saw *Juan Gapang* for the first time, not in a cinema, but at an art gallery, projected on a white wall, with the low hum of small talk and free beer lightly basting my brain, threatening to rupture its spell but not quite doing so. The conditions, needless to say, were perfect.

The similarly jittery, restless tenor of the Second Wave was not so much out of unrest as it was a surge of escape velocity.



Fig. 2

I experienced most of the First Wave retroactively, as a compendium of antecedents shot through with influence and curated by hindsight. The perspective was enlightening, to say the least. It made obvious a brief season of plenty, over before it had barely begun, and how much of a biomarker it was for the feasibility, if not the sustainable reality, of an out from our myopic thrall to the Hollywood way of making and seeing movies. It also made obvious how directly or indirectly inspirational it was to the Second Wave of experimental cinema (2000–present) more or less a decade later, ushered in by two films, one by a maverick who had been toiling restlessly under the most prominent studio matriarch in the country, Mother Lily, doyen of one of the Philippines’ biggest studios, Regal Films, and the other by no less than the boy wonder of the First Wave.

I personally missed the playfulness of Raymond Red’s abstractions in *Anino (Shadows)* (2000), which won the Cannes Palme d’Or for Short Film in 2000, the only Filipino film thus far to win the award. The omnipresent social realist impulses that were always collapsed inside his meta-textual and meta-textural surrealism are grounded here with a real-world immediacy and verisimilitude that almost qualifies it as an iteration of noir. It shows how the push and pull between a street photographer looking for his missing camera and the city that thwarts his search taps into similar neuroses, even as it opens its fatalist meditations up to ambiguities slightly out of its reach. Coincidentally, the existentialist murder mystery *Batang West Side* (2001) was itself something of a noir inversion, all but single-handedly rehabilitating Lav Diaz’s prolific but troubled run in Regal Films’ no-budget arm, Golden Harvest, as if it were a riposte to his season in boutique studio hell where he made four features, some allegedly under duress, that fluctuated in temperament and

sensibility and degree of success, emerging as if from a cocoon with this defiant sense of reclamation. I came back to *Batang West Side* a second time after having seen nearly all his longer films up to that point, used now to the meditative languor of his spaces, to the ways in which he manipulates our notions of both cinematic time and real time, to his clairvoyant way of framing a shot, none which were necessarily in full bloom yet in *Batang West Side*. I actually found myself flinching a little in the first hour over the ostensible rigidity of film school fundamentals it seemed to be steeped in. But even before it got a fifth of the way into its terse five hours, the film started to pull away from its own conventions and strictures, then from all other conventions and strictures, finishing up unlike any Filipino film at that time, certainly none before, and arguably none after.

TINGLING WITH GAME-CHANGE

Aesthetically fresh and fiercely current and resolute in their courage that a persistent auteur sensibility could proliferate in a Third World economy with such a risk-averse film industry, both films tingled with game-change. Something was up once again. The Third Wave scene exploded, not in a singular, collective thrust like the First Wave, but more of a sudden, outpouring of work from scattered recipients of a trickle-down gift. It picked up where the First Wave left off, making a noise loud enough so that the rest of the world could hear it, with digital technology as an almost talismanic third rail, both an emancipation from the prohibitive economics of filmmaking and an enabler of that punk dictum – anybody can be a filmmaker.

There was a jittery, restless tenor to the work that came out of that First Wave that I presume comes from how they were made under the caul of the Marcos dictatorship just a few years before its triumphant

dismantling, transience turned into abandon, outrage into catharsis.

The Second Wave, though, came of age in a different time. Most of the First Wave had long migrated to advertising, and the more blatantly commercial age of studio filmmaking that took over the (some say Second) Golden Age had been dismantled, too. The internet was systematically laying waste to the gatekeeper paradigm; an emergent new audience with a film vocabulary and film curiosity more expansive and more gnawing than even some of the filmmakers was showing up at screenings. And, perhaps more significantly, domestic film festivals began handing out grants and effectively producing the films in their competition lineup, a mode of financing unique to the Philippines that would eventually be institutionalized as a sort of new normal.

Despite the new varieties of political unease, having seen several democracies fail, coup attempts, all that, there was also this blinding sense of creative liberation, of anything goes. With all this vibrant flux and possibility, the Second Wave was in concord with its own zeitgeist, too, and “anything goes” is both the horribly inarticulate but thoroughly accurate codification of its palpating diversity. The similarly jittery, restless tenor of the Second Wave was not so much out of unrest as it was a surge of escape velocity.

It’s a beautiful confusion sometimes, a national cinema so diverse and protean and almost mercurial that it refuses a box to fit itself in, which the First and specially the Second Wave were, and for a while, the rest of independent cinema was, too, before it became all cushy advocacies and middle of the road faux-edge. The trouble is, you can’t index everything into neat rows. Rather let’s veer, let’s careen, let’s swing wildly like jungle madmen. According to Martin Mull,

“Writing about music is like dancing about architecture.” So let’s dance about architecture, because that old adage may not apply to traditional cinema, but just might to experimental cinema, given how with experimental cinema, you had to be there. Let me tell you about this stretch of more than a decade, when the prevailing instinct of independent cinema, not just experimental cinema, was this unfettered taking of liberties, when it felt like the Second Wave had no quarter in pushing itself, staunchly D.I.Y, unencumbered by format, disdainful of conventions and, perhaps more importantly, more or less aboveground.

Let me tell you first about the sui generis of John Torres, whose process is a documentarist’s process, that is, shoot first then find the story in the footage later, and whose confessional openness and brazen sentimentality give even his most abstracted work an emotive weight. His *Otros* (2005) trilogy of shorts sifts through the wreckage of a long ago breakup, and should go on record as probably the only time an experimental film made me tear up a little the way I would when watching a rom-com. His first feature, *Todo Todo Teros* (2006), lashes together, from a surfeit of found and shot footage, with all the mien of a collagist, a pseudo-espionage miasma of emotional terrorism about a husband cheating on his wife while planning insurgencies, love in the time of Al-Qaeda, if you will.

Then there’s Jet Leyco interweaving news footage and simulated drama in *Ex:press* (2011) to form his own quasi-narrative inter-zone that’s neither fiction nor documentary, but you can argue either way and both arguments would win. Christopher Gozum evokes the melancholia that comes from the displacement of working in another country with eye surgery footage from where he worked as an Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW) in the fractured short *Surreal Random MMS Texts for a Mother, a Sister and a Wife Who Longs for You: Landscape with Figures* (2008). It is a displacement he returns to in his tonally adventurous second feature in 2011, *Lawas Kan Pinabli* (Forever Loved). Here the rosy tint through which the Tourism Department has been selling their over-romanticized and over-valORIZED myth of working abroad to us is darkened with a series of candid, revealing testimonials from real-life OFWs juxtaposed against a presumably fictional and appropriately ghostly mystery in which a man searches for his missing OFW wife, reaching a point where they dissolve into each other that you can’t tell fact from fiction, or if you should. Ray Gibraltar approaches our diasporic narrative through the freeform mesh and meld of a documentary on nurses with a frantic mélange of poetry and politics and myth and slacker comedy in the lithe, breezy and often unremittingly warm *When Timawa Meets Delgado* (2007).



Fig. 3

CHEEKY SURREALISM

The cheeky surrealism of Gym Lumbera's *Anak Araw* (Albino) (2012) re-imagines his hometown as a whimsical ethnographic ode to the myths that sustain the place, most of which may not necessarily be myths or, if they are, may not necessarily sustain it. Similarly, Shireen Seno's films, from *Big Boy* (2011) and *Shotgun Tuding* (2014) to *Nervous Translation* (2017) mine found memories, hers, her father's, some memories that are not even memories but are perhaps memories of memories, re-purposing them into wistful miniature fugue-states, Bildungsromans of dreamland. Jon Lazam namedrops the iconic Philippine superhero, Darna, created by Mars Ravelo before Wonder Woman, in his work *Nang Gabing Maging Singlaki ng Puso ang Bato ni Darna* (Darna: A Stone Is a Heart You Can't Swallow) (2012). A lamentation on the sad state of film preservation in the country, but combined with his own re-purposed memories of Darna films and his fondness for manipulating multiple formats, it taps into deeper beguilements on the fallibility of memory, on history as an unreliable witness.

The historical autopsies of Raya Martin are similarly obsessed with post-colonial memory, and similarly in gleeful thrall to the constant blasphemy against form, shooting the first part of what has become his Historical Trilogy, *Indio Nacional* (2006), like a silent film, the third, *Independencia* (2007), inside a ghostly soundstage forest, like a Johnny Weismuller Tarzan movie, and the second, the nihilistic but conceptually ballsy *Autohystoria* (2007), with a camcorder, ruminating on how our collective memory degrades history with a film that actually degrades before our eyes, history as snuff film. There's a similarly immersive otherness, a hallucinatory but tactile quality, in the films of Sherad Sanchez, particularly the somber and mystic

Fig. 4 Still from *People Power Bombshell: The Diary of Vietnam Rose* (2016), directed by John Torres.

Fig. 5 Still from *People Power Bombshell: The Diary of Vietnam Rose* (2016), directed by John Torres.

Fig. 6 Still from *Jungle Love* (2012), directed by Sherad Anthony Sanchez.

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Fig. 4

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- Fig. 1 Still from *Anak Araw (Albino)* (2012). Source: <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2556674/>.
- Fig. 2 Still from *Nang Gabing Naging Singlaki ng Puso ang Bato ni Darna (Darna: A Stone is a Heart You Cannot Swallow)* (2012), directed by Jon Lazam.
- Fig. 3 Still from *People Power Bombshell: The Diary of Vietnam Rose* (2016), directed by John Torres.

Huling Balyan Ng Buhi (Woven Stories of The Other) (2006) and the joyful and erotic *Jungle Love* (2012), guided as he is by more classical rigors, more formalist urges, but tempered by personal spiritual gravities and a deep-veined mythology of place.

Then there's the renegade verve of the Second Wave's most prolific instigator, Khavn de la Cruz, whose filmography has a quicksilver velocity so dizzying you have to make up genres to rein them in, where there is a need to veer and careen and swing wildly like a jungle madman. From what I'd like to call the ballads of his oeuvre, love stories like *Goodbye My Shooting Star* (2006) and *Cameroon Love Letter (For Solo Piano)* (2010) and the poignant cancer diary *Breather* (2011) to a coruscating variety of shock-pop and slumpon and punk-verite horror and poetic reveries and structuralist experiments, their only aesthetic through-line is this heretic disregard for doing things the usual way.

When I say experimental cinema, of course, I actually mean independent cinema, because for a time (the First Wave) experimental cinema was the only independent cinema there was and a for a time, too, (the Second Wave) almost all independent cinema was experimental to a degree. That is, a signifier of distrust (disgust?) for the narrative limitations imposed by commercial cinema, seeking as it did/does an autonomy that was a lot more severe than merely making films outside of the studio system, a drastic re-calibration, even abandonment, of our habitual passivity, coming as the films did with no spoon to feed us with and a need to lean in a little, sometimes a need to lean in a lot, new ways of telling stories and new ways of coming to them. But where they used to be synonymous to the point of redundancy, where they used to symbiotically nourish each other, experimental cinema and independent cinema couldn't pull away from each other violently enough these days.

Fig. 5





Fig. 6

A national cinema
is healthiest when it can
metabolize all the strains
that make it up,
and it should be made up
of many, many strains.

'MAINSTREAM' AND 'INDIE'

I may have begun writing this piece as an overview of experimental cinema but you can tell from the title that it was never going to be merely functional, nor for that matter, democratic.

John Torres' *People Power Bombshell* (2016) was made with a documentary grant although it technically is not a documentary but, at the same time, it is sort of one. And that makes sense given how Torres is technically not a documentary filmmaker, yet at the same time is one, grafting his own life and his own self into his work. He uses non-fiction as a point of departure for fiction and fiction as a way of doubling back into non-fiction, as given over to whim and fate as he is to rigor and protocol, as consumed by the order he can tease from the chaos as he is with the chaos he can tease from the order.

There's a lot of chaos to mine in *People Power Bombshell*, the chaos of a set for a movie that never gets finished, the chaos of a tempestuous genius director in perpetual clash with his young and rising star who also happens to be his producer, the chaos of showbiz misogyny and political upheaval.

The unfinished film here is an actual unfinished film, *Diary of Vietnam Rose* (2016), and the director Celso Ad. Castillo. In juxtaposing the molten, haggard beauty of its blasted celluloid remains with digitally-shot dramatizations that are every bit as elusive and fragmented, it sharpens the dichotomies between memory and remembering. Constantly folding in on itself to the point of ravishing breakage (or, when the film explodes into a tumult of glitch near the end, ravishing Brakhage), *People Power Bombshell* conflates not only two disciplines (narrative, documentary) but two cinematic histories as well, the Golden Age of studio filmmaking, albeit in its final glimmers (*Diary of Vietnam Rose* was shot in the mid-'80s) and the Second Wave of experimental cinema.

People Power Bombshell: The Diary of Vietnam Rose (2016) is one of the more defiantly experimental works of recent years but also oddly enough sharpens to relief how severely independent cinema has lapsed into myopia and conservatism. When it came out, it was briefly met with mild furor over the liberties it took with the documentary form, by some quarters who perhaps should have known better.

Even worse is how Sherad Sanchez's found footage horror inversion *Salvage* (2017), in which a news crew encounters a strange cult in the jungle, was roundly criticized for looking like it was shot by...well, duh, a news crew.

Khavn's latest work, the apocalyptic and magical *Balangiga: Howling Wilderness* (2018) may well be his least experimental, but it was the most experimental work the year it came out. Where audiences used to be more attuned to the codes and temperaments of the discipline, somewhere along the way, thresholds have been homogenized.

The Kalampag Tracking Agency, a curatorial initiative run by Seno, continues to regularly tour a clutch of experimental films that showcase work from the First Wave and Second Wave as well as from my wishfully hypothetical Third Wave, but in such a conservative climate, it's reverted back to being a fringe activity. In the rush to broker a truce between the two sides of the dichotomy that independent cinema sharpened into relief, the lines between "mainstream" and "indie" blurred until there isn't one. The avant that was the phantom power of indie has become its pariah, and the cushy ecumenical overlap that took over is a maindie

(a new, conservative, conventional and quite profuse strain of independently-produced cinema) utopia in need of a reality check.

Rather than blur the divide, I'd argue that we're better off sharpening it even more, as sharp as it used to be, maybe even sharper, not to pit them against each other, or to cancel each other out – no, that's moronic, and destructive – but because a national cinema is healthiest when it can metabolize all the strains that make it up, and it should be made up of many, many strains.

It was only less than a decade ago when you couldn't find a box to fit in Philippine cinema. It is this fugitive sense of identity, this mongrel inscrutability, that bolstered the changeling energy and daredevil spirit, and that may well propel experimental cinema and independent cinema, as it is now, back into the more forward-looking, form-pushing future of its recent past. ■



Fig. 1

If we consider comics to be an art form that can trace its genes back to editorial cartooning, then we can see that Philippine comics has a long history, stretching all the way back to the end of the 19th century when satirical magazines such as the oddly titled *Upang Kalabaw* (literally, Carabao's Rent) and, later on, *Telembang*, which used political caricatures and editorial cartoons to lampoon Spanish, and later American, officials. Yet, the tradition has gone through peaks and valleys, and is currently again rising on the shoulders of artists who are creating new and innovative comics which points to an evolution of comics.

THE FIRST COMICS: CONNECTIONS WITH NATIONAL HISTORY

Intriguingly, the early history of comics connects comics to notable historical artists and figures. National hero José Rizal used caricatures in his contributions to some publications. Fernando Amorsolo, who is best known for his paintings of Philippine rural life and was the first recipient of the National Artist Award, was best known in the Philippines and the US for his painting *Planting Rice*. Seen by many as one of the country's greatest visual artists, he was also an editorial cartoonist. Aside from the caricatures and editorial cartoons, both Rizal and Amorsolo also created comic strips.

Rizal is credited with a retelling of a folk tale entitled "The Monkey and the Tortoise," which was published in 1889. He illustrated the story in a comic strip for Juan Luna's fiancée, Paz Pardo de Tavera. It was a gift and was never published.

Amorsolo, whose editorial cartoon work was found in *The Independent*, also published "Kiko at Angge" in the satirical magazine *Telembang*. Amorsolo's biting comic strip was critical of the American Occupation, particularly of the Filipino politicians who were supposedly negotiating for Philippine independence. *Telembang*, however, closed after two years, partially due to multiple libel suits filed against it.

According to comic scholar John Lent, the credit for the first actual comic strip in the Philippines should belong to *Kenkoy*, which was the first work actually published with the intent of it being a comic. Published in Don Ramon Roces' *Liwayway* (Dawn) Magazine in 1929, *Kenkoy* was a creation of writer Romulado Ramos and artist Tony Velasquez. Philippine Komiks enthusiast and writer Dennis Villegas describes *Kenkoy* as a reflection of the times, when American influences were contending with Philippine tradition. *Kenkoy* is a humorous reflection of these struggles. He wears western inspired clothes and attempts to speak in pidgin English. "[*Kenkoy*]

mouthed the ‘pidgin’ language fashionable among youth at the time, which was a mixture of Spanish, English, and Tagalog languages.”

Kenkoy, however, was just a beginning. By the 1930s there were comic strips in many magazines, many of them imitating popular American characters. Francisco Reyes produced a Tarzan-like character named *Kulafu*, which was to become very popular in the 1930s until the Japanese Occupation, when Reyes discontinued the comic to work with a Japanese-Filipino publication. Unfortunately, he was never able to return to the character, and *Kulafu* never returned. Along with *Kulafu*, other characters in comic strips appeared in the 1930s, also patterned after American funny comics. Lent cites Procopio Borromeo’s “Goyo at Kikay” as being based on George McManus’ “Bringing Up Father” and Jose Zabala Santos’s “Lukas Malakas,” a character that was based on “Popeye.” However, the onset of World War II led to an end to the production of these strips. Don Ramon Roces’s *Liwayway* was confiscated by the Japanese, and the other magazines were not able to continue publishing, thus keeping only Kenkoy alive to persevere through World War II.



Fig. 2

The early history of comics connects comics to notable historical artists and figures. Aside from the caricatures and editorial cartoons, both José Rizal and Fernando Amorsolo also created comic strips.

- Fig. 1 Kajo Baldesimo. *Santelmo*, 2014, courtesy of kajobaldesimo.blogspot.com.
- Fig. 2 Jose Rizal, *Ang Pagong at Ang Matsing*. 1884. Illustration on Journal. The Luna Estate. Courtesy of Comicscube.com
- Fig. 3 Tony Velasquez. *Kenkoy*. 1944. Illustration from *Kenkoy Komiks*.
- Fig. 4 Fernando Amorsolo. *Kiko at Angge*. 1922. Illustration in *Telembang*.
- Fig. 5 Unknown Artist. Illustration on *Pilipino Komiks* cover. 1947. courtesy of Ernee Lawagan, Manila, 2017.
- Fig. 6 Ryan Orosco, *Darna*, 2004, courtesy of Darna Facebook Page, 2004.

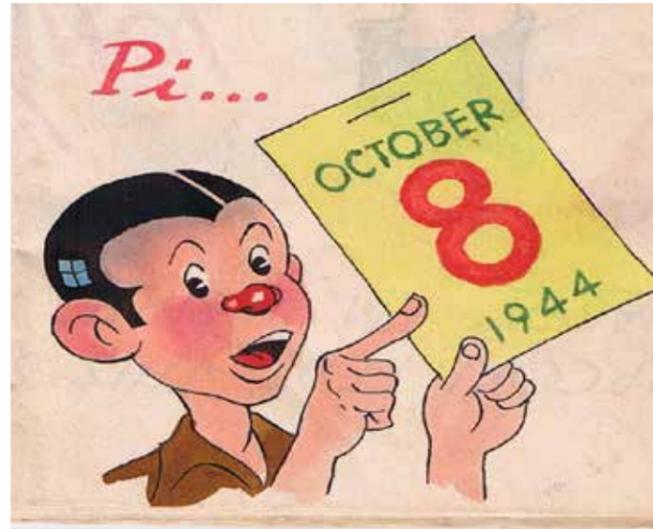


Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5

AFTER WORLD WAR II: THE EMERGENCE OF KOMIKS

The end of the war brought with it the beginning of a new term in Philippine Comics—*Komiks*, a vernacular adaptation of the foreign term. Interestingly, the word is never in the singular; it is always *komiks*, never *komik*. The first *komiks* book was *Halaklak* (laughter), a venture which, due to a lack of finances, lasted only ten issues. Around the same time, Roces, who had recovered *Liwayway*, spoke with artist Tony Velasquez to create Ace Publications, which would produce *Pilipino Komiks* in 1949; they adopted a new type of spelling for their books, using the vernacular style of spelling in their titles. This became a norm, with other publishers either using the same vernacularized spelling (for example, there was a book titled *Pilipino Klassiks*) of comics or using Filipino words as the title of their comics. The vernacularization of the terms was seen to add to the street appeal of the books; it was, after all, how the common Filipino used language on the street.

In terms of format, *komiks* adopted what was the established form at the time even in the US comic books; they were collections of stories, often between three and six stories consisting of four to five pages. While initially consisting of short, complete skits per issue, *komiks* creators eventually began to explore the form, writing longer, serialized stories called *nobelas*. The *nobelas* normally consisted of 24 chapters and would thus mean that followers of these stories would buy the next 24 issues of the publication. These long stories would be

interspersed with the shorter *wakasan* (or complete) stories. Thus, Filipino audiences would always have several stories to read per issue of *komiks*, which allowed the *komiks* to cater to a wide variety of readers. Eventually, some *komiks* specialized in publishing only complete, one-issue stories, calling their books “*wakasan*” *komiks*, while others specialized in the serial *nobelas*, the names of their comics reflecting the length of the stories they told. It should be of note, however, that while there were *nobela* *komiks*, they always published several stories per issue, and would not have single-story issues. This “anthology” format would remain the format of *Pilipino Komiks* for the rest of its run. The long-form *nobela* *komiks* would prove to be important both in the decline, and in the eventual resurrection, of the Philippine comic book.

DARNA: ICONIC HEROINE OF PHILIPPINE KOMIKS

The beginning of *komiks* also coincided with the appearance of Darna, the iconic superhero created by artist Mars Ravelo. Ravelo's creation actually predates Wonder Woman; Ravelo created Darna around 1939, but because she was not published until 1947, she was not acknowledged as the first female superhero in comics history. Originally named Varga, the character was not accepted by *Liwayway* and ended up in a rival magazine called *Bulaklak* (flower). A falling out with the editors of *Bulaklak* led to Ravelo transferring the character to *Pilipino Komiks*, changing the name to Darna. Her popularity would eventually lead to a self-titled book; eventually Darna would have over 25 comics series. Darna was a definite hit and would go on to star not only in *komiks* but also become a favorite in cinema and television and remains a popular character today.

Darna's debut coincided with a newly independent Philippines, and many saw Narda, Darna's alter-ego, as a representative of the ordinary Filipino. She was originally portrayed as a cripple, needing crutches to walk. Her transformation into the powerful warrior Darna, who defended the weak, was an inspiring image to many, particularly at a time when the country was also trying to rise from the Second World War and dealing with self-rule for the first time. Darna's appearance was also a bold move: portraying her in a two-piece bikini gave her a distinctive appearance, one which was appealing to male readers, while her heroism appealed to the general public.

Darna's success was only part of a rapidly growing industry, with Ace Publications eventually coming up with four more titles (*Tagalog Klasiks*, *Hiwaga Komiks*, *Espesyal Komiks*, and pocket-sized *Kenkoy Komiks*). Villegas recalled that titles would appear and disappear in the 1950s; many would suffer closure due to a lack of financial capital and facilities for printing, but "by 1954, there were at least 20 or so *komiks* titles sold in the newsstands...*Komiks* reading had become the Filipinos' national pastime."

The 1960s would see the industry change once more because of several events. Ace Comics, by that time the largest comic producer in the country, suffered a strike by their printing press workers and closed in 1962. The closure led comics creators to publish their own works, with varying degrees of success. Ace, however, resurrected as Atlas Publishing and Graphic Arts Services Incorporated (GASI), both still owned by Ramon Roces. Eventually, his daughters would take over as publishers. These two companies would become the most successful *komiks* publishers in the country.



Fig. 6

More importantly for the industry, the 1960s saw a period of experimentation in Philippine Komiks, such as the arrival of *Bomba* comics. *Bomba*, which was slang for naked, became the descriptor for comics that featured nudity or sexual acts, either implied or explicitly portrayed. These books were sold discreetly, the books hidden beneath the "clean" ones, "only a suggestive ask (sic) can make the salesman offer it directly." The appearance of *Bomba* was ironic, given that the Philippine industry had opted to police its ranks, and adopted the American publishers' creation of the Association of Publishers and Editors of Philippine Comics-Magazines (APEPCOM), a body that voluntarily censored any material that were seen as harmful to the morals of the reader. The allure of *Bomba* comics was obvious, however. In a country where pornography was strictly banned, the titillation provided by the comics made it a bestseller, though no one would ever admit to reading them.

By the 1970s the industry faced Martial Law, which brought with it several challenges to the industry. The Marcos government closed nearly all media or reopened

them under new owners, but in the case of comics, they were allowed to remain under the old names and publishers. The comics code was changed. John Lent described the change this way: "Whereas the 1950s code emphasized a need to play down crime as its preamble, that of November, 1972, used its first five guidelines to protect the government and the president and to paint a beautiful picture of the Philippines..." The new code prevented comic creators from portraying anything but an ideal version of their country, even if the opposite was true. This was, however, not always the case."

Nonoy Marcelo, who created the satirical comic strip *Ikabod*, often detailed how the mice of fictional *Daglandia* suffered under the abuses of the rulers of the land. Oddly enough, Marcelo was also an artist for the National Media Production Center of the Marcos administration. Lent called him a "kind of cartoonist double agent, working for the oppressive government at times, but also carrying on a subtle mission to bring it down." The 1970s also saw an exodus of comic creators, many of whom moved to the US to work in the comics industry there.

The 1970s also saw the advent of the supernovel: comics *nobelas* that continued beyond the normal 24-issue arc. Some of the more popular supernovels continued indefinitely; some, such as the serial "Anak ni Zuma" (Daughter of Zuma), based on a resurrected Aztec god, ran for a decade.

The supernovel was a dream for comics producers. A popular supernovel guaranteed the sales of a certain comic book for months, at the very least.

By the 1980s, *komiks* remained popular. Lent cited that by the mid-1980s, *komiks* circulation was estimated at between 2.5 to 3 million issues per week, with an estimated readership of six times those figures. A 1989 survey showed that comics was the most read medium, having 54 percent of print media. What added to the high readership was the interaction the *komiks* industry had with the local film industry. Film scripts were being taken from the stories being portrayed in the *komiks*. The relationship was mutually beneficial. Director Lino Brocka, interviewed by Lent, called the relationship between film and *komiks* "incestuous," with each medium providing an audience for the other. Both screen scriptwriters and comic artists were wary of the said relationship. On one hand, it allowed studios to rapidly produce films since the comics stories were very easy to adapt into film. On the other, the artists who produced the comics rarely received any of the proceeds from the film. As for scriptwriters, they were forced to work on adaptations rather than allowed to work on original work.

THE FALL OF PILIPINO KOMIKS

By the 1990s, most of the *komiks* industry was controlled by Ramon Roces. In 1992, 62 out of 71 *komiks* were published by the Roces companies. The four largest *komiks* were published twice weekly, circulating between 200,000 and 250,000 copies. The Roces companies produced comics quickly and inexpensively, which prevented smaller players from entering, since they were unable to compete with the speed and scale of production of the Roces companies. Also, the Roces companies controlled the distribution network for their books, which was used to further prevent other comics publishers from gaining a solid foothold in the market. The large production volume that GASI and Atlas had to meet eventually led to a dilution in the quality of the comics being produced. Eventually, the breakneck pace of production, and the lower quality of the work, resulted in a deterioration in sales. Aside from this, the 1990s was a difficult decade for *komiks*, as a struggling national economy, ecological disasters (the Mt. Pinatubo eruption, the second largest eruption in the 20th century, happened in 1991), and international financial crises (the Asian currency crisis in 1997) all contributed to steadily drop the ability of the average reader to buy what was increasingly considered a luxury. In addition, cable television, personal computers and videogames, and international comics entered the market, offering the Philippine public more options for their entertainment. In addition, newsstands had begun to rent comics out rather than sell them, which further reduced sales for *komiks* producers. While all these factors contributed to the decline of the *komiks* industry, it was a single event that nearly killed it.

By the middle of the 1990s, the only significant, consistent *komiks* producers were Atlas Publications and GASI, both of which were owned by the Roces family. The various economic shocks to the country led to the closure of GASI in 1997, while Atlas dropped their *komiks* titles, concentrating on magazines. The closure of GASI effectively removed any consistent *komiks* production and *komiks*, at least in the form it had existed since the 1940s, effectively disappeared.

Komiks, however, did not die. Smaller companies continued to publish titles in the vein of the older traditions, but none would become successful. Instead, the work that came out from *komiks* producers in the 1990s was highly derivative, copying either international comics, which were becoming very popular, films, or television shows.

The collapse of traditional *komiks* in the 1990s saw the beginning of a new form, and new styles. Instead of publishers, the new comic producers were driven by artists



Fig. 7



Fig. 8

CONTEMPORARY COMICS: RISING ONCE MORE

While the original form of Pilipino *komiks* were collections containing several stories per issue, new creators created comics that told one story serialized over several issues. This was the main influence of Western comics, which had adapted that format years before with such characters as Superman and Batman who became more and more popular, prompting comics producers to publish books focused solely on these characters. The new generation of comic creators were exposed to these comics from an early age and were enthusiasts of these comics, which was perhaps one of the reasons why the shift in storytelling occurred.

Alamat Comics, founded by comic creator Budjette Tan, produced an early comic in 1994 called *Comics 101*, which was still based on the Pilipino *komiks* format. Unlike *Flashpoint*, which featured one story, *Comics 101* was a collection of shorter stories. Difficulties in promoting and distributing the comic led to weak sales. In the end, the comic could not sustain itself and it closed after several issues. While the comic itself did not prosper, some of the stories published in *Comics 101* were later collected and published in a compiled, graphic novel format, such as Gerry Alanguilan's *Wasted*.

Wasted was originally an underground work, owing to its graphic violence. Alanguilan said that he made the book after breaking up with a girlfriend, and he was hesitant to publish it. Thankfully, he did. *Wasted* was published in serial form in *Comics 101* and *Pulp Magazine* and then collected into a book by *Alamat Comics*. It became highly successful, drawing praise from local fans and established comic creators in the West, particularly writer Warren Ellis. The comic launched Alanguilan's career, who has since worked for companies such as *Marvel* and *DC* comics, going on to produce his own

and writers, all of them enthusiasts of comics and keen to produce comics for the Philippine audience. Gerry Alanguilan, currently one of the most prominent Filipino comic book artists, recalled how he and other fans would create their own works, photocopy them, and share the works among friends or sell them at university fairs. Students from De La Salle University, led by writers David Hontiveros and Alexander Santos and illustrator Carlo Vergara, published a comic book named *Flashpoint*, which was about an alien war, but featured images and storylines that were clearly based on the western American tradition of comics.

The comic was ambitious; they were published in full color and on glossy paper, which made them expensive to produce. That, plus the relative inability of the creators to promote their works, given that there weren't any venues for comics at the time, meant that the comic would not go beyond four issues. These problems, however, did not deter creators from trying, and in the process, they changed Filipino comics.

graphic novels, such as his work *Elmer*, which won awards in France and was nominated in the United States. The success of *Wasted* also showed that the longer, single-story graphic novel format was a viable way of producing comics.

One of the first to come out with this new, longer form of comic was Arnold Arre who, in 1999, would publish *The Mythology Class*, originally a four-issue story that would eventually be collected into a 350-page graphic novel. The book, which chronicles the adventures of a group of friends who need to contend with Philippine mythological deities and creatures, was received well. The success of the book launched Arre's career as a comic creator. The book won the National Book Award in 2000 and was the first to win in the comics category. His success inspired creators towards writing unified, longer stories and in the process significantly changed what Filipino comics are.



Fig. 9

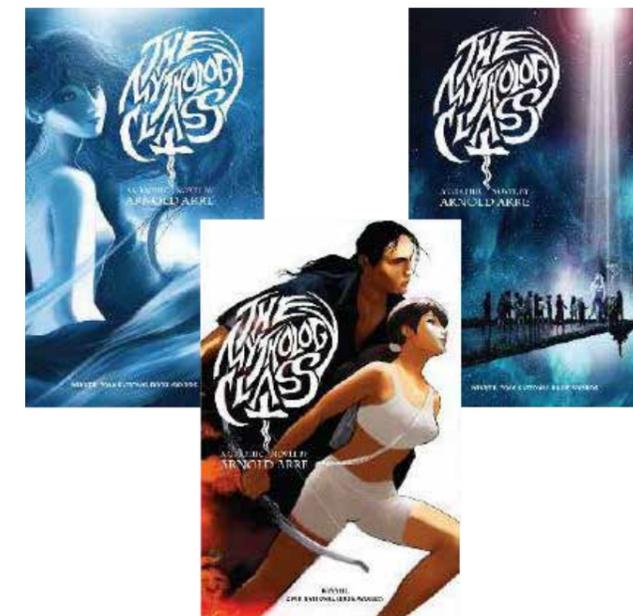


Fig. 10

THE GRAPHIC NOVEL: AN AVENUE FOR CREATIVITY

While the idea of the extended narrative was present in the earlier *komiks* tradition, it remained serialized and subordinate to the then traditional format of the *komiks*, which was delivering the stories in four- to five-page installments. Very few of these serials were collected and made into single works. The arrival of the supernovel in the '70s made them even more ungainly. For example, if "Anak ni Zuma" were collected as graphic novels, it would result in multi-volume collections, each several hundred pages long. For the average Filipino reader, these collections would be expensive, which made the idea of publishing them unattractive to comics producers. Darna, for example, had many comics, but there were very few collections of her stories. Instead, these stories were adapted for the screen. The frequency of publication for Pilipino *komiks* also made the collections unnecessarily redundant since the average reader just needed to wait until the following week to get the next installment of their favorite story.

When the industry and traditional *komiks* collapsed, the new wave of comics creators grew up on a more varied set of comics materials. Many of them were raised on monthly, single-story, single-character comics published in the United States. These comics had arcs that normally lasted 12 issues, or an entire year. The stories were easily more collectible since each arc was a complete, finished story. Thus, it was understandable that the newer creators gravitated to the longer format because it was more familiar and more easily reproduced. Looking at the works of Budjette Tan, Arnold Arre, and Carlo Vergara can give us insights on why the shift from *komiks* to graphic novel has changed the industry, and how younger artists are further innovating the medium.



Fig. 11

Budjette Tan was one of the first new creators, beginning with the stories he created for *Alamat Comics*. His first truly successful comic, however, was *Trese: Murder on Balete Drive*, which has spawned a series that is now in its seventh volume. *Trese* was a departure from traditional *komiks* in many ways. It was published in a smaller format and thus was distinctly different from older comics. It was black and white and featured an art style that was unique. Tan's collaborator, artist Kajo Baldisimo, created a uniquely moody aesthetic, fitting with the horror/noir feel that the book tries to go for. In terms of narrative, the comic was a hybrid of the Pilipino *komiks* tradition and contemporary, one-character storytelling. *Balete Drive* contained four short vignettes, each concerning a particular case that the protagonist, Alexandra Trese, investigated. Each story was much longer than the original *komiks* stories, however, consisting of roughly 20 pages per story. *Balete Drive* was 93 pages long, several times the size of a typical *komiks* issue.

By the third issue, Tan began to write single-story issues, broken into several chapters. Tan was also able to expand the *Trese* mythos, creating an extended backstory that now allows him the flexibility to tell more complex stories involving a consistent setting and characters. The books transitioned from being a collection of short stories to full-fledged graphic novellas. Tan has kept his issues purposely short; no book has ever gone beyond 200 pages. Aside from working on the seventh volume of *Trese*, Tan has launched an Indiegogo campaign to bring *Trese* to international audiences, where it is gaining a steady following.

Arnold Arre, who began at about the same time as Tan, took a very different approach to the creation of his



Fig. 12

work, but like Tan, he opted to use the graphic novel form. *The Mythology Class* was the standard length for Arre's books, which were sold in a more conventional format, though considerably longer. Aside from *The Mythology Class*, Arre has produced *Trip to Tagaytay*, *After Eden*, *Ang Mundo ni Andong Agimat*, and *Martial Law Babies*, all of which are about 300-350 pages long. He has also collaborated with Alanguilan for *Rodski Patotski, ang Batang Baby*. The collaboration is noticeably shorter than is typical of Arre, but it is still definitely a graphic novel in that it follows a single story arc throughout the work.

Arre's books are definitely graphic novels. Unlike Tan's practice of separating the story's sections into chapters, Arre's narratives are continuous and sprawling, often covering intricate plots and backgrounds. They cover not just Philippine mythology, but everything from science fiction and high fantasy to gritty Philippine action movie-style action. Arre writes and illustrates his own work, and his art style is clearly influenced by Japanese manga, which makes the books appealing to younger, manga-influenced readers. In *Mythology Class*, for example, Arre's use of the graphic novel allows the characters to travel to many locations and have adventures, while also allowing him to develop the characters emotionally, and in terms of their relationships. The result is a set of

When the industry and traditional *komiks* collapsed, the new wave of comics creators were raised on monthly, single-story, single-character comics published in the United States.



Fig. 13

characters that, unlike traditional comics, are changed by their adventures, this eschewing the traditional notion of comic characters always remaining the same no matter what happens to them. In his case, the freedom of space that the graphic novel presents allowed him to deepen his story beyond what a shorter serial format could accomplish.

Carlo Vergara's *Ang Kagilagilalas na Pakikipagsapalaran ni Zsa Zsa Zaturannah* (The Amazing Adventures of Zsa Zsa Zaturannah) is another example of how the longer graphic novel format has allowed for the development of more complicated longer stories, but also address social realities as well. Lauded as a landmark work in tackling LGBTQ issues, *Zsa Zsa Zaturannah* concerns the adventures of Ada, a homosexual hairdresser who, by chance, comes upon a magical stone (which, of course, is a direct reference to Ravelo's *Darna*). When he utters the word "Zaturannah" inscribed on the stone, he becomes this powerful, voluptuous, and female hero. Vergara's work was applauded because, in essence, it told two stories: one was the superheroic adventures of Zsa Zsa

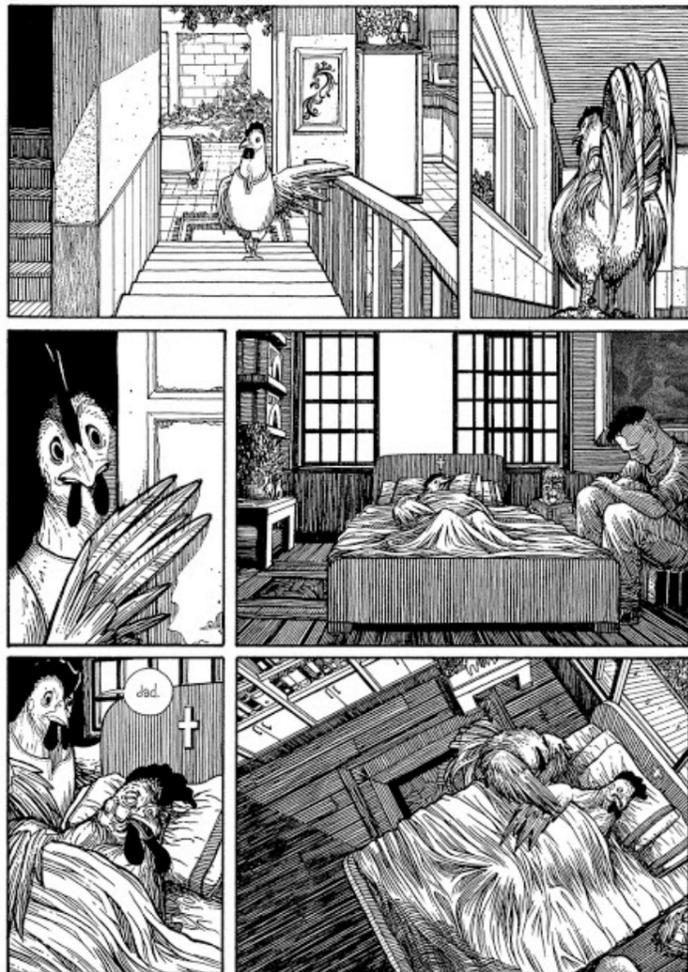


Fig. 14

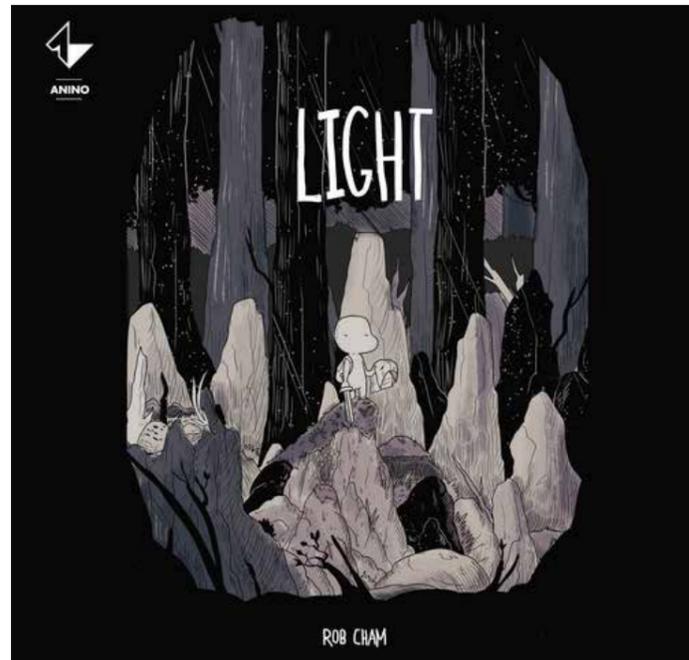


Fig. 15

Zaturannah, and her struggles as she figures out how to be a hero; the other story dealt with Ada and his struggles with loving someone from afar.

The book is, in turns, hilarious, exciting, and poignant. There is also the clear homage to Darna. Many of Zsa Zsa's foes are near exact copies of villains that Darna faced. But there is also the idea of subversion. Darna always appears fully clothed in her costume; Zsa Zsa needs to borrow a gay beauty pageant contestant's costume. The typical assumptions of the "stronger sex" is reversed in the story; it is Ada, the male aspect of the character, who is weak. Zsa Zsa Zaturannah, who is the female aspect, is strong, thus upending commonly held assumptions of gender power.

The story of Zsa Zsa Zaturannah is not typically arranged like a serial comic, instead, it reads continuously, the story following a clear plot, which is not halted by the many "to be continued" breaks typical of the older supernovels. Here, as is also the case with Arre and Tan, the story is coherent, allowing the whole graphic novel to function as a longer form of fiction.

OTHER NOTABLE GRAPHIC NOVELISTS

Aside from Tan, Arre, and Vergara, there are still many other artists who use the graphic novel format in their current comic book projects. Gerry Alanguilan, even if he is already a well-established Marvel and DC comic book artist, creates his own graphic novels as well. Aside from *Wasted*, he created *Elmer*, an award winning novel about talking chickens, which, together with the question of human identity, was very well received in the Philippines and abroad, where it won several awards.

Visual Artist Rob Cham is also worth mentioning for his novel *Light*, a wordless and visually stunning graphic novel about a classic quest. His unique visual style, plus the lush illustrations in every page, creates a beautiful narrative, which showcases the ability of the graphic novel to tell a story without the use of words. He has won book awards for *Light*, which cements him as one of the young creators to watch in the coming years. He has a sequel for *Light*, entitled *Lost*, and is working on a third installment of the story.

Finally, it would be remiss not to mention Elbert Or, who is a tireless promoter of local comics, and supporter of local comics production. While he is more famously known for his comic strip *Bakemono High*, which tackled the adventures of young monsters inspired by classical movie cinema, he has also produced and participated in some of the most significant graphic novels produced since the 2000s. He was one of the key producers of the graphic novel *Siglo*, which was

an examination of the Filipino identity in the new millennium. He was internationally published as the artist of *Lola: A Ghost Story* from Oni Press, alongside J. Torres. His most recent work is a flipbook entitled *Two Short Tall Tales: The Amazing True-ish Story of Andres Celestial and The Life and Death of Amorsolo Esperanza*.

While the graphic novel is, in the end, more expensive to produce per copy, the form has proven to be the more practical one to adopt for the current mode of the comics industry, which is driven by individual, often independent, publishers. The older, press-style publication model, which worked very well for GASI and Atlas publications, simply cannot work in an age when publication is done by single authors. The upside of this, however, is that the quality of the work has improved, and has led to an exploration of the comic in a more expansive way, and the creation of deeper, more thought-provoking narratives. The Filipino Comic may not be Komiks anymore, but it has grown into a form that can proudly carry on the tradition of the past and propel it forward to a new creative level. ■

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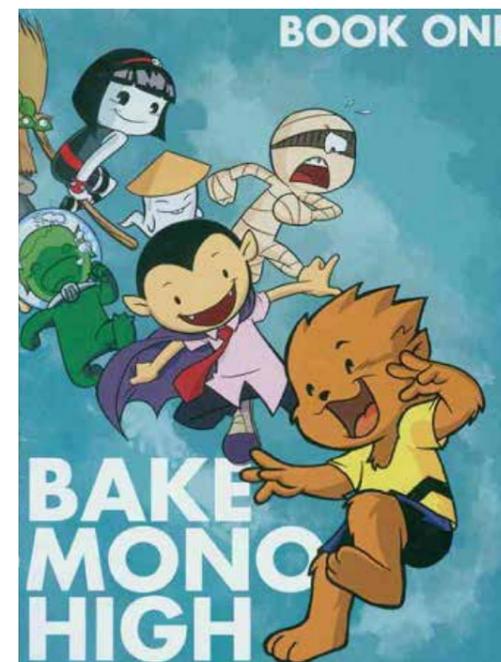


Fig. 16

- Fig. 7 Vicente Doria Catan, Jr. (Vicatan), *Zuma: The Series*. 1995, courtesy of Aris Panganiban, Manila. 2010.
- Fig. 8 Carlo Vergara, *Flashpoint*. 1994, courtesy of Aris Panganiban, Manila. 2011.
- Fig. 9 Gerry Alanguilan, *Wasted*. 2017, courtesy of wastedonline.blogspot.com, 2017.
- Fig. 10 Arnold Arre, *The Mythology Class*. 2012, courtesy of arnold-arre.com. Covers from *The Mythology Class*, courtesy of Arnold-arre.com.
- Fig. 11 Kajo Baldissimo. *Trese*, 2014, courtesy of kajobaldissimo.blogspot.com.
- Fig. 12 Arnold Arre, *Rodsky Patotski*. 2014, courtesy of Arnold-arre.com.
- Fig. 13 Carlo Vergara, *Zsa Zsa Zaturannah Esquire Cover*, courtesy of Carlo Vergara, Digital Image.
- Fig. 14 Gerry Alanguilan, *Elmer*, courtesy of Gerry Alanguilan, 2009.
- Fig. 15 Rob Cham, *Light*. 2015, courtesy of Rob Cham, 2015.
- Fig. 16 Elbert Or, *Bakemono High Book One Cover*, 2013. Source: Philippine Daily Inquirer "Monsters Ink" by Ruel De Vera.

words by
ANDREA
PASION-FLORES

ART ARCHIVE 02



Fig. 1

There is a disconnect between the Filipino public and the literary imagination. Beyond, say, the works of José Rizal, whose novels are taught in schools, there are very few Filipino literary authors whose works have resonated in the minds of the ordinary Filipino. There are many reasons for this: the limitations of publishers and the distributors, the young book market that is the Philippines with all the unsaid problems this statement brings, and the inaccessibility of higher education to a broad spectrum of the population.

In 2007, the year I became the Executive Director of the National Book Development Board (NBDB), the idea of connecting the public with the literary imagination seemed a good idea to help build a love for reading books, especially Philippine-authored books. There seems to be little recognition of the writers I was made to read in school to the book buyers who frequent National Book Store. Bridging that gap to build a market for our own books, I thought, might be one goal the NBDB should have, given its mandate to promote the local book publishing industry.

Our first attempt at bringing books to the public consciousness was not effective. The title of the project

was both a literal and an unfortunate mouthful, *Portrait of the City and the Literary Imagination*, a project in partnership with the Ayala Foundation's Filipinas Heritage Library, which featured an exhibit of photographs of places in Manila accompanied by excerpts from stories, essays, and poetry of authors like Rizal, Nick Joaquin, F. Sionil Jose, Cristina Pantoja Hidalgo, Gilda Cordero Fernando, and a few more. We wanted to draw a literary map of Manila, the city Manileños both loved and hated.

I remember going to a morning show hoping not to mental block on this long title while explaining the difficult concept of the writer's milieu and the writer's work to viewers before their day's first cup of coffee. I was wearing a lime green top that matched the backdrop, and just before I got on, I remembered the producer whispering, "I forgot to tell you not to wear green." And before I even spoke about the project, an image flashed in my mind of my floating head speaking as my torso blended with the background, trying to convince people we would be featuring authors who wrote about their city as a character in literature, and they would love the literature that was inspired by their city.

We needed space
for public conversations
on the art
and craft of writing,
the book market,
and publishing.
Thus, the idea of a
literary festival
came into being.

I knew then the project wasn't going to achieve what I had set out to do: engage the public with books and authors on topics that might be close to their hearts. I needed to match the audience with the product that I couldn't possibly explain in the few minutes I was in the show. It was a mismatched endeavor that made me think deeply about both what the content, the format it should come in, and the platform to deliver that content to engage the public. Bringing the literary arts to Manileños needed a whole lot of imagination.

The second and third attempts were a blast. They were *Tulaan sa Tren 1* and *2*, done in 2008 and 2009. We made posters placed on trains to accompany the inane ads commuters are constantly subjected to. The posters featured photographs of the city with excerpts from poems of known and starting Filipino poets. We also asked celebrities to record those poems to play them over the PA system in the stops as well as in the train cars during certain hours of the day. The idea of putting local material in public places made the news, people blogged about it, we were in the papers, and for a couple of years, the dreariness of riding the LRT was alleviated somewhat with poetry read and heard by about 700,000 commuters every day.

Though it garnered a lot of attention and the mileage it gained for Philippine poetry cannot be undermined, the activity felt static and it still didn't feel enough. We were telling people this was their literature, but we

weren't listening to people. We needed space for public conversations to take place on the art and craft of writing, the book market, and publishing in general. We needed people who made books for a living to speak to each other and to people who consumed books—teachers, students, readers—to find the connection we so wanted to establish between creator and reader. We also needed them to get in touch with people who wanted to make books themselves, in whatever aspect—as authors, illustrators, editors, and sellers to inspire each other to create content for consumers and how best to get that to them. Nothing like this has happened in the Philippines in the scale we wanted it to happen. Thus, the idea of a literary festival came into being.

Having gone to a few festivals abroad, I knew there was value to having the participation of minds that were not of the same background as our own authors and publishers. We've always read about other people's stuff, but there was the other aspect of getting our own stuff to other people other than Filipinos, too. I felt strongly that, in order to grow, we needed the distinct experiences international panelists would be able to contribute to conversations with locals, and that involved getting authors from around the world to join local panelists and have their names said in one breath, to pit their ideas of writing and publishing with each other in front of a Filipino audience. All this efforts should weave into the consciousness of a publishing industry, which seemed insular and a bit one-directional in putting things out there without caring about feedback or what's going on in the world, just a little bit of how I was when I first came into the job.



Fig. 2

LOOKING FOR 'SLUMDOG MILLIONAIRE'

In 2010, the hottest book of recent memory was *Slumdog Millionaire* by Vikas Swarup. *Slumdog* had just won in the Oscars for Best Film, and a musical amidst the squalor of Delhi captured the world's imagination. How was it possible that a book that is set in India, written by an Indian author could capture the world's imagination? So I went about looking for Vikas Swarup, whom, as luck would have it, was a consul in the Indian Embassy in nearby Osaka. I set about writing the Indian Embassy in Manila, which didn't get me anywhere as I was told to get in touch with the author directly. So I did, and he said he would have a look at his schedule, which I thought was a brush-off so, for a while, I forgot about him.

When I was in graduate school, I was sitting in a fiction class taught by a known author when he was asked why there were very few Filipinos published abroad. He replied, in a matter-of-fact manner, that we were, perhaps, too exotic. The international imagination seemed unable to imagine the reality of Filipinos, which, I thought, was ridiculous. How can I, in my unknown corner in the world, read international literature and imagine the realities of the authors whose works I was reading? How could they not imagine mine?

I would learn that the publishing business was really about bringing to the attention of its gatekeepers the stories that stood a chance at publication. And the many people who could help bring that into fruition, from many sectors of society, should contribute to making that happen. A book, to get out there, must be pushed by a village. But it starts with a literary agent because there was nothing wrong with the imaginations of foreigners.

I began my search of literary agents to invite to Manila so that local authors might be introduced to them. There were no literary agents in the country then, and I knew how difficult it was to get an agent, and felt distinctly the absence of Philippine literature in the international literary scene because of this lack. And while I was doing all this, I was also putting together the panels, inviting authors, and doing a lot of other things in between, when a couple of months before that first festival, I got an email from Vikas asking, "So is the literary festival still on?" And just like that, we had Vikas Swarup in the lineup.

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Fig. 1 Authorities, The 9th Philippine International Literary Festival, held in the CCP (Cultural Center of the Philippines) in 2018.

Fig. 2 Indian writer Vikas Swarup in the 2010 Lit Out Loud.

'LIT OUT LOUD'

We called that first literary festival *Lit Out Loud* or LOL. As part of the festival, we had a movie showing of *Slumdog Millionaire* after which Vikas annotated the movie. There were a few Indians in the audience, who, after the movie, gave Vikas a standing ovation. During that talk, I remember Vikas narrating his experience during the night of the Oscars. He was the unknown, conspicuous Indian man on the red carpet. All he brought with him was a copy of his book. When he was asked who he was and what he was doing at the Oscars, he just held up his copy of *Slumdog* and said, "I wrote *Slumdog Millionaire*." And the cameras would flash. I remember distinctly a question from the audience about how he felt about an American directing his film and it being produced by an American company, as though it was an intrusion to his identity to have been interpreted by a non-Indian while the writer and the cast were all Indian, and throughout the movie was filmed in Hindi. In reply he said, "I am very happy it was produced and directed by Americans, you know why? If it were done by Indians, even if it won Best Foreign Film, who would remember *Slumdog Millionaire* now?"

I knew then that there was importance in bringing the Filipino experience to the world without the insular thinking I was hearing at that time from local publishers: "Filipino writers should be for Filipino publishers." Though I understood the concern, as I constantly experience the dilemma of searching for stories to bring to the primary audience of the company I work for now, I knew that the world just offered much more than our just relying on our own local experience can possibly bring, and we all—authors, publishers, illustrators, and everyone in this industry—need to partake of it by tapping into the experience, talent, and resources that an international market can offer, including going beyond our borders in looking for an audience whose imaginations can comprehend the Filipino reality. I would confirm this resolve when I became a literary agent in 2012. As an agent, I would read through stacks of submissions, aware that nationalities didn't figure in the search for a good story. I needed to find a good story whatever kind it was from, wherever part of the world the author came from, and attempt to push out there for a wider audience to read. Great stories, from wherever they come from, just cannot be ignored—and I thought Philippine stories could certainly have a place in the world's literature during my lifetime, and I was going to do what it takes to achieve that.

In the meantime, I worked on three more literary festivals, seeing that efforts such as these needed to be repeated and gain traction by happening on expected

dates annually, like the other festivals in the world. A challenge was the difficulty in getting international authors who could bring in the crowd. For every successful international author we were able to bring in, there were probably five who rejected us. I was aware that we weren't bringing them to some exotic paradise like Bali or Jaipur. We were bringing them to Manila—and that didn't exactly sound like a tropical vacation for authors to jump at the chance of an invite. What's more, we weren't paying them either.

So every year, I would think of authors for the next or current year's festival and the caveat would be these authors should have an affection towards a country such as the Philippines, given its history, and the context of its economic development vis-à-vis its place in the world, and the author should be able to address such concerns as demonstrated by the author's works. In other words, I knew I was looking for someone who had a connection to the country in some manner, either by way of the person's heritage, or by virtue of the author's country's colonial experience, or just the practical aspect of being in a nearby Asian country.

'THE GREAT PHILIPPINE BOOK CAFÉ'

One of my favorite authors is Junot Díaz. His work is contemporary and he always voiced the migration experience. We also shared a colonial history; the Dominican Republic was also colonized by Spain. I sent him an email. I knew it was like dropping a message in a bottle in the vast ocean with no chance of its ever getting a response. And he agreed, with a few conditions that were not impossible to do. During that same year, I was also lucky that Edward P. Jones was invited by the US Embassy in Manila. Like Junot, EPJ was a Pulitzer Prize winner so, on that year, like gifts from the gods, I had not one but two Pulitzer Prize winners on my panels. It was unbelievable and unlikely to happen in another festival. That second literary festival in 2011 was called *The Great Philippine Book Café*—and it was great indeed with people like Jose Y. Dalisay moderating a panel with Junot Diaz. In that same year we also had a literary agent and an editor from Atlantic, Ravi Mirchandani, who had edited the novel *White Tiger* by Booker Prize winner Aravind Adiga. We had panels about the art of the novel, and I knew that that year, the rooms would be packed to capacity and the audience, composed mainly of young people, would be fired up.

The basic difficulty of access to Asian books confirms our position as buyers of the world's content rather than sellers. Thus, what comes to fore is the need for the very best of our books to find their readers all over the world.



Fig. 3

Fig. 3 Vijae Alquisola, Genevieve Asenjo, Clarissa Militante, Ouce Roque, Dowee Untivero and Adrian Ho at 9th Philippine International Literature Festival, held in the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), in April 2018.

Fig. 4 Comic book creator and author and co-founder of Pushpin Visual Solutions, Elbert Or (left) and comic book artist and writer Gerry Alanguilan, or "Komikero" in the 2010 Lit Out Loud.

Fig. 5 Chingbee Cruz, Elaine Castillo, Glen Diaz and Kristine Ong Muslim at the 9th Philippine International Literature Festival, held in the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), in April 2018.



Fig. 5



Fig. 4



Fig. 6

'READ LIT DISTRICT'

The year 2012 was my last literary festival for the National Book Development Board. We called it *Read Lit District*. I had met the poet and novelist Chris Abani who was a political prisoner in Nigeria. Chris spoke of the beauty of ugliness and the redemptive value in suffering in an event the year before where I was a member of the audience. Before he came to the Philippines, I don't think Filipinos knew who he was, but after they heard him speak, all his panels were packed. We were also lucky to have gotten Juliet Grames of Soho Press who spoke of the categories of the genre of crime like only someone who reads, edits, and lives crime novels could, complete with Venn diagrams explaining the nuances of crime fiction.

Literary festivals didn't die when I left the NBDB, as a matter of fact, they flourished, addressing different aspects that book publishing stakeholders needed to improve within the context of the perceived need at the time. As a keen observer of the Philippine book industry, my observations are now drawn from the perspective of someone outside the NBDB, seeing its activities as a stakeholder instead of a proponent, watching the permutations of the various literary festivals they have been holding all over the country gain and lose ground. This gives me a depth of vision as a stakeholder vis-à-vis the government's efforts in the development of this industry.



Fig. 7

‘TEXT IN THE CITY’

Asia, having the third largest population in the world, not counting China and India, is one of the biggest markets for content outside of the Western world. Thus, the NBDB’s efforts to introduce more Asian authors to the country was a step towards a most natural market direction for our books. In 2013, the NBDB had *Text in the City* where they invited Asian authors Xu Xi (Hong Kong) and Suchen Christine Lim (Singapore), Kamini Ramachandran (Singapore), Krys Lee (Korea) to visit different universities. They split up the festival between the University of the Philippines-Diliman, De La Salle University in Taft, and the University of Santo Tomas to engage with more students and teachers. But a constant problem encountered by participants is the difficulty in finding the books of the Asian authors in Manila, as well as Philippine authors in the book shelves of Asia. This problem is encountered less by Western authors, especially those published and distributed by the larger publishing houses, whose books are more ubiquitous in bookstores locally as well as the rest of Asia.

As in other aspects, this basic difficulty of access to Asian books confirms our position as buyers of the world’s content rather than sellers. Thus, what comes to fore is the need for a much wider distribution, not just locally, which is a given, but the need for the very best of our books to find their readers all over the world.

In 2014, National Book Store’s *Philippine Readers and Writers Festival* also took off, taking the place of a unified literary festival. It is now held yearly at the Raffles Hotel in Makati, where local publishers are given panels for their authors, while NBS invites a few American authors to engage with readers. What is interesting with this development is that the private sector response for the need for avenues for authors to engage with the public has been recognized and found to be a fruitful format to engage and an effective platform for authors to meet readers. What’s interesting with the PRWF, is that at its core, it puts readers central to its activities, and there is a much wider participation of commercial publishers and authors that speak to the readers that frequent NBS. It is a platform that is in touch with its market and it gives readers a chance to meet their favorite authors. The *Philippine Readers and Writers Festival* celebrated its fifth year in 2018, and has now become an anticipated event in the first couple of weeks of August.

Now that a private sector entity provided a festival that appealed to a broader audience, the NBDB seemed to have trained its focus on publishing issues. Thus, also in 2014, the NBDB had *The Pressing Issue* recognizing how literature plays a key role in our lives as the agenda

**The National Commission
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also supported literary
festivals in the regions, the
more prominent one being
Taboan, or marketplace,
which ‘was meant to gather
writers and readers and
publishers and audience
annually for purposes of
interaction through readings,
panel discussions,
and the like.’**

of economic and cultural integration comes into fore in a conversation about a more unified ASEAN market for our content. They had panels for the business of publishing, going strongly with the improvement of the publishing value chain and how best to reach a wider market for each others’ content. This was also the year I was working on the Road Map for the Publishing Industry, commissioned by the Book Development Association of the Philippines to take a good look into the capabilities of the local publishing industry and see how it can try and scale up to reach more people locally while also having a look at the viability of taking our books to other markets.

REGIONAL FESTIVALS

In 2015, the NBDB decided to bring the festival to the regions, which is a good effort to bring the technical knowledge of publishing to the many creators and enablers that resided outside of Manila to help create a market for local books in the regions, while doing capacity-building. The vision for a vibrant Philippine publishing industry should involve the rest of the country and not just Manila. Thus, the NBDB began a regional push to encourage festivals outside Manila, starting with Davao.

In a festival called *Laláng*, Manila publishers and authors were in panels with Davaoño authors and publishers, with a focus on capacity-building. Though it was a great effort, it wasn’t sustained. The problems of flying in speakers to places outside Manila entailed expense and the need to coordinate with locals for logistics. Also, it felt like a one-off, unrepeated, needing a little bit of introspection as to its effectivity when there is a lack of follow-throughs and sustained efforts for activities. But perhaps the learning that is gained in that effort is the need for translation of works from English and Filipino to the various local languages of the country.

In 2016, with the theme *Against Forgetting*, the NBDB brought the festival to Quezon City at the newly built QCX of the QC government at the Quezon Circle. The aim was to bring the festival closer to the students. With the participation of the Komisyon ng Wikang Filipino and local regional publishers, the necessary highlight of this festival is the importance of translation. There was a strong focus on Asia that year, with the participation of Singaporean Sonny Liew on board, whose graphic novel *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Eye* (Epigram, 2014) won the Singapore Literature Prize and the Eisner Awards. The discussions on translation during this festival—its challenges and rewards—focused on the need to create more work in regional languages, and on efforts that support translation in particular, even if local markets for the regional languages and publishing for the regions seem quite limited and cannot do the numbers a large distributor might need.

Building on this knowledge, in 2017, the NBDB held the Philippine International Literary Festival at the Cultural Center of the Philippines, calling it *AUTHORities*. According to the current NBDB Chair Neni Sta. Romana-Cruz, the name hoped “to emphasize the special power the author’s pen wields and the often difficult challenges faced in the craft of writing.” Training their focus on independent publishers and indie writers, the festival gave voice to small publishers and the important work they’re doing that are often eclipsed, given the unique

challenges faced by the independent publisher, such as limited distribution, the lack of marketing efforts perhaps because of the indie publisher’s smaller size, and the higher price, given that these titles would have appeal more to niche readers. Furthermore, an expensive book would have a limited market because of their limited print run.

The NBDB, of course, was not the only one doing festivals. By now, even the National Commission for Culture and the Arts also supported literary festivals in the regions, the more prominent one being *Taboan*, conceptualized by the poet Ricardo de Ungria, who, in 2009, was a commissioner for the literary arts of the NCCA. Held in February, *Taboan* or marketplace “was meant to gather writers and readers and publishers and audience annually for purposes of interaction through readings, panel discussions, and the like,” says Ricky. Since 2009 it has become an annual flagship project of the NCCA gathering authors, readers, scholar, and researchers to immerse themselves in regional literature.

When I was invited in 2017 to the *Taboan* held in Bauang, La Union, the featured author that year was short story writer Manuel Arguilla, who joined the guerilla movement to fight the Japanese, dying at only 29 years old. He was introduced by the fictionist Jose Y. Dalisay. By this time, I was already a publisher working in Anvil, so after his talk, I wasted no time in asking him if he would be interested in putting together the works of Arguilla while reprising his intro for the collection. It is the kind of coming together that gave birth to a book, and the possibility of introducing Arguilla to new readers, something that happens often in festivals and trade fairs all over.

It’s heart-warming to think that in 2019 the NBDB will celebrate a decade of giving the public literary festivals. The continuation of literary festivals shows the recognition by government that there is a need for this public platform for creators and enablers of Philippine books to engage in an intelligent conversation with readers. What it does for the countless participants these festivals have touched over the last decade is the deepening of the Filipino people’s appreciation for local authors and their works. This appreciation is, hopefully, because more and more readers appreciate literature that reflect their own aspirations and dreams as manifested by a literary imagination that is alive and well in our own books. ■

Fig. 6 English young adult fiction author Andrew Milligan in the 2010 Lit Out Loud.

Fig. 7 Attendees of the 2018 PILF (Philippine International Literary Festival)

words by
BABY RUTH VILLARAMA

ART ARCHIVE 02



Fig. 1

UNDERSTANDING FILM DISTRIBUTION

To understand film distribution in the Philippines, it is worth looking at how cycles of film distribution around the world are interconnected. These cycles are felt in spaces where artists and producers in pitching forums participate in story labs, and join film markets. Despite the apparent grandness of the movie business, it can also be seen as a small circle where people know each other's reputation. Film agents nurture relationships with filmmakers and producers to facilitate the windowing of a film from its public cinema premiere to its use as private home entertainment. In this process, filmmakers who bring in earth-shaking or commercially-viable contents are almost always sought after.

Consider the Cannes Film Festival. While heavy hitters like Julia Roberts, George Clooney, Pedro Almodovar, and Steven Spielberg stride up the red carpet, agents, producers, and distributors meet in hotel rooms or yachts to negotiate sales of films, close deals on future scripts, or war bid to acquire the next big thing in the box-office. As cameras roll at the red carpet, groups of Asian agents are on the other side of the international pavilion village, with the Chinese leading the way with their deep pockets and huge, hungry markets in need of content.

Co-productions from the East and West are trading, selling films like hotcakes, revealing the answer to the million-dollar question, "How do Asian films get distributed, as though it was a unified industry, changing the landscape of Hollywood territorial domination?"

The steady growth of the Asia Pacific film audiences, made up mostly of a young demographic reaching 620 million in number, is nearly double that of the United States. The Asia Pacific film industry as a whole has maneuvered some USD35.9 billion of returns at the box-office beginning in 2013 and has continued to move up at a steady pace, surpassing in recent years all other regions outside of North America for the first time.¹

This region is set to become the "next great global growth story in the industry,"² paving the way for major Hollywood studios to open production outfits in China to produce western-infused movies with partner distributors to keep the waterfalls not too far from their inner circle. Although it is still early to predict a tidal wave of major changes, the Southeast Asian market is visibly transforming in terms of viewing preferences with the emergence of new platforms pushing to democratize the market further.



Fig. 2

The Southeast Asian market is visibly transforming in terms of viewing preferences with the emergence of new platforms pushing to democratize the market further.

FILM DISTRIBUTION IN ASIAN MARKETS

The reality trails from our geopolitical and postcolonial history wherein the region has been a recipient of western commodities and influences. A country with spineless national film policies will always find it difficult to balance foreign and local influx in the market. The stream of foreign films coming into the country motivates distributors and exhibitors to create a demand chain for such films to win over more viewers through aggressive and effective marketing. While not all foreign films do well in the box-office, the current exhibition model obviously has a domino effect, destabilizing the sustainability of the local film industry with little room to distribute local films. As a result, producers are sub-modifying their work flow to keep their expectations low; productions are reduced to low-budget investments and working hours are expanded to avoid losses.

Moreover, film distribution in Philippine cinema operates on a relationship-basis model, with people who can produce the numbers preferred over those who can vouch for artistic integrity. A regular film booker with a record of commercial success gets preference for the ideal number of screens. At this time when companies

are experimenting with form and trying to keep the market exciting, film exhibitors are holding back local titles whose audience reach is uncertain. The cycle of distribution, in this context, is disrupted.

The Philippine market is still small compared to other regional contributors to the global content economy, and it is a market already saturated with foreign content, where exhibitors continue to prioritize formulaic emulations. Other countries have had their challenges in finding the balance to develop their national cinema. Countries like Japan, China, and South Korea have revamped their film industry as Asian pioneers, infusing 50% of original local films in their main production and distribution portfolios.³ As a result, various microfilm industry models are being tested in these places to allow small innovative films to do the rounds in key international film festivals and garner international critical acclaim or box-office success through creative marketing strategies. The policies of these countries are inspiring the next generation of filmmakers in the Southeast Asian region to create a similar path and to jumpstart their respective local scenes.

THE REALITIES OF FILM DISTRIBUTION IN THE PHILIPPINES

In the absence of a national film center, national agencies like the Cultural Center of the Philippines (CCP), has taken the initiative to discover and develop cinematic talents in the country. The CCP is instrumental in developing young filmmakers through Gawad CCP, the longest-running independent film and video competition in Asia, recognizing achievements in animation, experimental, documentary, and short feature.

CCP also co-organizes the Cinemalaya Film Festival, which was launched in 2005, to showcase new works by veteran filmmakers and new breed of storytellers. The Cinemalaya began the model of providing seed grants to propel the production of innovative scripts, and the finished films are exhibited in a festival platform that runs annually for about ten days in August. The festival has recently surpassed its box-office target by more than 80,000 viewers despite its limited screenings in just three venues, namely, CCP, Makati City, and Legazpi City in Bicol. There is a clamor for the future editions of the festival to be brought to more venues outside Metro Manila, in order to ensure sustainability and audience development.

With the success of Cinemalaya, similar film festivals have followed suit, emulating the formula of the process but tailoring it to different agenda.

Cinema One Originals, a subsidiary of the media network, ABS-CBN, launched its platform in 2005, just a few months after Cinemalaya. Held annually in October, the festival showcases diverse films, from commercial genres to experimental films. What's interesting about this festival is that selected films are automatically programmed in the cable channel of ABS-CBN, with minor rights given to filmmakers to explore further theatrical distributions.

Signal Television also saw the opportunity of producing their own brand of content. The company partnered with Unitel and PLDT-Smart Foundation to launch Cine Filipino Film Festival in 2013. The festival's stated mission is to be the gateway for aspiring and professional filmmakers to showcase films that are both artistic and audience-friendly. Like Cinema One, the festival gives grants to filmmakers with limited screenings in Metro Manila. Since the company specializes in television broadcast and not in film sales, distribution for the programmed films is still limited with filmmakers themselves submitting their films for the screening opportunities in and out of the country.

Another notable festival that started in 2013 is the QCinema International Film Festival. Funded by the Quezon City government, the festival aims to turn

the city—where majority of cinemas in the capital are located—into an entertainment hub in the country. Held annually in October, its annual crop is shown in major theaters around the city. It gives full rights of the films to the selected filmmakers, a system that encourages independent producers to give additional support to the productions. As part of its vision to become the nation's entertainment hub, QCinema also began acquiring international titles from A-list festivals for blocked screenings within the QCinema festival run.

Another media company, Solar Entertainment, joined the bandwagon when it introduced Sinag Maynila Film Festival in 2015, under the leadership of film director Brillante Mendoza. Unlike Cinemalaya and Cinema One, Sinag Maynila offers cinema distribution to filmmakers with finished films. Solar, being a film distribution company, has partnered with the SM cinema chain to expand the screenings and remit actual commercial sales to the filmmakers.

There is a unique film festival that emerged in 2008 to address a crucial distribution need in the country. The committee on cinema of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) brought together filmmakers from different parts of the Philippines to create an archipelagic kind of film festival space called Cinema Rehiyon. It is an annual non-competitive event that is held in different provinces, showcasing films that have won in regional festivals supported by NCCA and other works beyond Metro Manila.

Some critics regard Cinema Rehiyon as the true national film festival, a relatively rare but precious occasion to see filmmakers from Luzon, Visayas, and Mindanao come together to create regional networks, share their experiences, hatch collaborative efforts, and offer much needed moral support to each other. One setback of the festival is that, since there is a different host every year and it operates on very little resources that keep it from being marketed widely, not many people are fully aware of its significance. Moreover, because Cinema Rehiyon is a non-commercial platform, its survival is premised mainly on the initiatives of a committee of regional cinema advocates and is not assured without structural and long-term government support.

Several other film festivals have sprouted. ToFarm Film Festival, the brainchild of a fertilizer magnate, give grants to scripts that focus on farming and countryside experiences. Intergovernmental agencies are also launching more film festivals. The Department of Interior and Local Government's Cine Maria seeks to promote

women empowerment, the National Historical Commission of the Philippines's SineSaysay aims to showcase documentary films focusing on unvisited events in our history, and the Department of Science and Technology's IndieSiyensiya encourages science students, scientists, and artists to make educational and informative films that address community issues. These festivals are managed by the Film Development Council of the Philippines, an agency under the Office of the President.

The rise of the film festival platform as distribution channel has given many filmmakers the opportunity to produce and exhibit their dream scripts. There is now, however, an avalanche of films, with film festivals held almost every month, one after the other, sometimes even overlapping. In such an environment, the relationship between film festivals and audience development must be carefully reviewed, if the independent film community wishes to sustain the trend. The short length of production time fostered by grant-giving festivals has serious implications on the quality of films being produced, and the overproduction of films to fill in so many festivals lead to "festival fatigue" and a demographic disconnection between the audience and the important films.

The cycle of film production in the local film festival is too short a time to do post production and proper film promotion. Scripts selected in local film festivals are always miraculously produced within a six-month deadline. Various impediments like tranche schedules and the need for additional funding and casting give a heavier burden on filmmakers to effectively build a relationship with the audience. All good films deserve innovative marketing and distribution to make sure they don't fall into the oblivion of festival fatigue and memories of the selected few. While film producers strive to improve the quality of their films, local film festivals must now strategize a road map to expand their screenings nationwide and send their fresh films to competent distributors who understand audience-content matching with definitive marketing and messaging to bring it to the consciousness of the people.

Moreover, despite the increase in film production and audience number, there remains no unified circuit to distribute festival-produced films beyond the festival platform. In addition, exhibitors prioritize distributors who have constantly delivered the numbers in the past and resist the development of alternate film programming. Meanwhile, filmmakers still have limited to zero marketing budgets to even begin the next phase for their films. They need access to more marketers, film distributors who can promote and bring their films around.



Fig. 3

Fig. 1 Still from *Paki (Would You Please)* (2017), by Giancarlo Abrahan, a Cinema One film.

Fig. 2 Still from *Bukas Na Lang Sapagkat Gabi Na (Leave It for Tomorrow, for Night Has Fallen)* (2013) by Jet Leyco, a Cinema One film.

Fig. 3 Still from *Ka Oyang* (2011), by Sari Raissa Lluch Dalena, a Cinema One film.

Fig. 4 Film poster of *Confessional* (2007), by Jerrold Tarog, Best Picture, Best Director, Best Supporting Actor, Best Screenplay, Best Sound, Best Editing and Star Cinema Special Award winner of Cinema One Digital Film Festival 2007.

Fig. 5 Still from *Manang Biring* (2015), by Carl Joseph Papa, a Cinema One film.

THE CHALLENGES OF DISTRIBUTING FILIPINO FILMS IN THE PHILIPPINES

Local regulations dealing with film distribution must also be factored in, and they come in three forms.

The Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB) classifies each film, and its related marketing collaterals, and rates them according to their age-appropriateness. The Cinema Evaluation Board (CEB), on the other hand, through a collegial body, decides if a local film can be exempted from the hefty amusement tax and, therefore, augment its expected earnings. If a film is graded A, it can get a full tax rebate, while a grade B film gets a 65% tax discount. Getting rated by the MTRCB and the CEB entails significant fees, and applying for reviews of reconsideration means another payment. Getting appropriate ratings and amusement tax exemptions are contributing factors to how films thrive. Failure to secure an MTRCB permit would disallow a film from exhibition, except in government-run venues like the Cultural Center of the Philippines and the University of the Philippines Film Institute.

Furthermore, the largest cinema chain, SM Cinemas, does not screen films classified as R-18, which has immediate implication on sales. Notably, however, as per MTRCB rules, an R-18 rating does not mean that the film is "obscene," "offensive," or "pornographic," as these terms are defined by law. A film is classified as "R-18" based on the judgment of the board, following the criteria that include "taking into account the contemporary values and

Film distribution in Philippine cinema operates on a relationship-basis model, with people who can produce the numbers preferred over those who can vouch for artistic integrity. A regular film booker with a record of commercial success gets preference for the ideal number of screens.

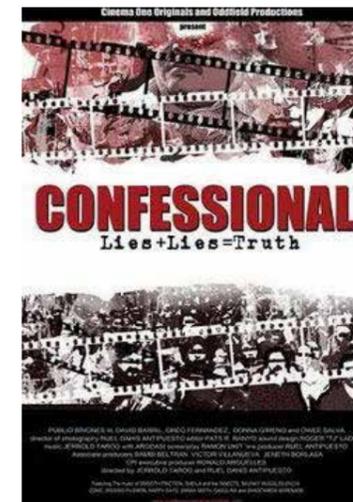


Fig. 4



Fig. 5

understanding of a Filipino viewer who is at least eighteen years of age."⁴ The law is straightforward; debates arise when local films are regulated by arbitrary discussions. Ambiguity poses a problem in finding balance between critical thinking and sanitation of the mind. Unfortunately, to avoid getting an R-18 classification that will limit the audience of a film, producers would just opt to create content that will conform to the set rules.

It is important also to note that some compliance officers of these two institutions are government appointees with uneven qualifications relating to film. In other countries with similar film classification boards, there is a strict process for determining people with the right qualifications to become board members and reviewers.

In the UK, for example, classifications are based on published and regularly updated guidelines. These guidelines are the product of extensive public consultation, research, and the accumulated experience of the British Board of Film Classification (BBFC) over many years. While the board is tasked to look at issues such as depictions of discrimination, drug use, violence, antisocial behavior, nudity, and sex, its reviewers give serious consideration to films with artistic and thematic bravery before making decisions. They also carefully consider the context, tone, and impact of the work as a whole, especially in relation to the development of national cinema.⁵

All good films deserve innovative marketing and distribution to make sure they don't fall into the oblivion of festival fatigue and memories of the selected few.



Fig. 6

Fig. 6 Still from *Bukas Na Lang Sapagkat Gabi Na (Leave It for Tomorrow, for Night Has Fallen)* (2013) by Jet Leyco, a Cinema One film.

Fig. 7 Film poster of *Violator* (2014) by Dodo Dayao, a Cinema One film.

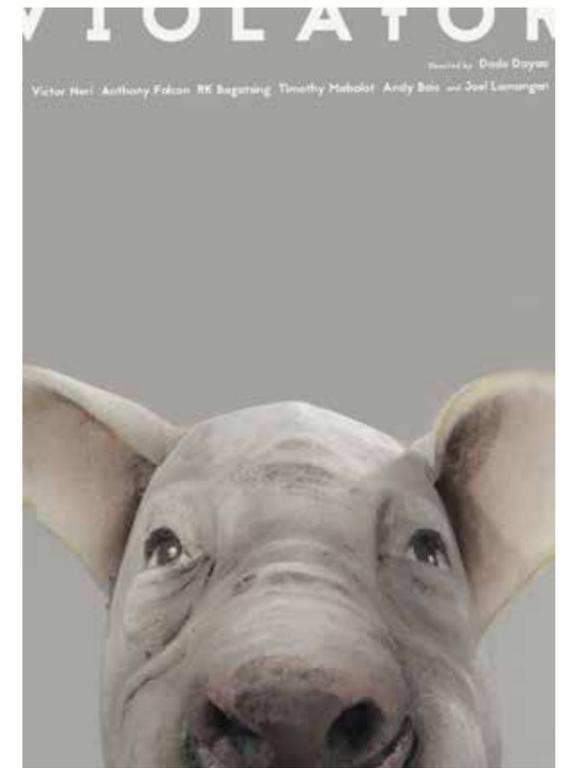


Fig. 7

Fig. 8 Still from *Pascalina* (2012), by Pamela Miras, Best Picture winner of Cinema One Originals Film Fest, 2012.

for some noteworthy festival films. Its aim was to have a week-long run of only Filipino films nationwide. This is a replica of the long-running Metro Manila Film Festival (MMFF), which happens during the Christmas season, when Filipinos flock to the cinemas starting December 25.

In 2018, however, FDCP opted not to include films that were previously shown in other festivals in their official PPP selection because, they said, cinema exhibitors wished to show only new films as a condition for their support of PPP. Although FDCP managed to have a special program of six films that won in other festivals, these entries were only shown in nine SM cinemas around Metro Manila, and with interchanging schedules during its run. The eight new entries were given more screens nationwide. This move ran counter to PPP's original goal of providing alternative distribution support for noteworthy festival-produced films. It is also evidence of the influence of cinema exhibitors on the ecology of Filipino filmmaking.

The third form of local distribution regulation is controlled by the National Cinema Association of the Philippines (NCAP), an organization composed of cinema exhibitors. NCAP also maintains the status quo. NCAP officers program only two Filipino films per week on a regular commercial run. According to them, in a forum with film producers held December 2017, allowing three or more local films to compete against each other and against foreign films would only cause more harm than good because, according to them, audiences with the same viewing preferences are swayed away from the film with box-office potential. But because this logic prevails, many other local films, including those produced or exhibited in film festivals, are unable to get the screen numbers that they need and are not assured of completing a seven-day run in theaters.

The math, however, does not even apply. In practice, cinemas lock almost all of their screens to anticipate the arrival of blockbuster Hollywood films in Philippine shores, so that there is little or no room spared for a local film that would dare to compete. Without the soft film quota to protect and support local content, bigger and aggressive foreign films will always dominate territorial screens for weeks and months with bookings made as early as six months to four years in advance.

In 2017, the FDCP, under the Office of the President, spearheaded the Pista ng Pelikulang Pilipino (PPP) to address the issue of limited distribution opportunities

POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS TO IMPROVE DISTRIBUTION OF FILIPINO FILMS

Effective distribution is always connected to creating a synergy among the films, the screening venues, and the audience. If only one finds the balance to bring the experience to discriminating viewers who are always seeking to be part of something special. Film distribution holds the power to take the Filipino film community to another level if given proper support. Discounts to local producers in film ratings and amusement tax can enable more local films to screen commercially in different venues with permits.

The abolition or decrease of the amusement tax can put local films on an equal footing with foreign films. The government through the FDCP, NCCA and MTRCB can support building more cinematheques in provinces as well as encourage private businesses to invest in boutique theaters to cater to a different film programming. This public-private partnership can create a new circuit that can support the sustainability of alternative local films and world cinema nationwide.

Access to new technology encourages innovations among think-tanks to create online hubs and fix the transparency of sales among stakeholders. The arrival of Netflix in the Philippines and other parts of Southeast Asia in 2016 is further altering the culture of film viewing because films launched in festivals do not need to go to theaters anymore but straight to online Videos on Demand (VOD).

The art of synergizing curators and film organizations will always play a crucial role in designing different experiences to develop more audiences. It is no longer about merely putting content in screening venues but strategically curating a spatial experience to augment the cultural movements of people towards a more personalized cinema lifestyle.

In 2017, a group of fresh film graduates from the University of the Philippines started an organization called Film Producers Society to engage film producers in marketing their films. Their take on promoting films like *Kita Kita* and the Cebuano film *Patay na si Hesus* caused a crossover of audiences in traditional cinema exhibition. Following the suggestion of creating good synergy, the group has since reached out to other film societies and producers to unify the community in rallying more support for homegrown films. The group has since met with Cinemalaya and QCinema officials and presented innovative ideas on how to connect their slate of new films to more audiences.

Just like water seeking its own level to reach the sea, the rise of Filipino films now seeks to define its audience together with other Asian titles with a matching platform for its commercial viability. It will be only a matter of time when these technologies will link post production to screen distribution of new films straight to the audience. Once this becomes the norm, only then can the market move toward a true independent cinema. ■

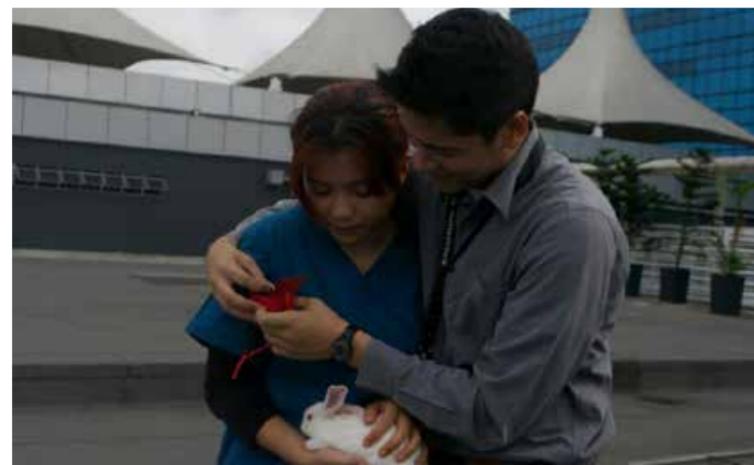


Fig. 8

¹ Anon, 2016, http://www.mpaa.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/MPAA-Theatrical-Market-Statistics-2013_032514-v2.pdf.

² The Hollywood Reporter, 2016, "Thailand - Cannes: Southeast Asia, The Next Global Growth Story," <http://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/cannes-southeast-asia-next-global-893052/item/cannes-asia-thailand-893053>.

³ Kumb, F., Kunz, R. and Siegert, G., 2016, "State of the Art and the New Directions of the Beaten Track Away from Theatrical Release," in *Journal of Economic Surveys*, p.n/a-n/a.

⁴ Movie Television Review and Classification Board (2018) Presidential Decree 1986 and IRR, <http://www.mtrcb.gov.ph/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/PD-1986-with-Revised-IRR-and-Latest-Issuances.pdf>.

⁵ British Board of Film Classification, 2018, <http://www.bbfc.co.uk/what-classification>.

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Tara FT Sering attended the Silliman National Writers Workshop in the summer of 1996. She is the author of several books of fiction and is currently at work on a novel. She is also the former editor of *Smile*, the inflight magazine of Cebu Pacific Airlines, and the founder of *Sit*, a new travel magazine advocating slow and immersive travel, and VisionAria, a boutique publishing firm that focuses on narratives about young women.

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Patricia Tumang is an arts writer and editor based in Los Angeles, California (United States). A contributing editor of *Asian Art News* and *World Sculpture News*, she was awarded an Arts Writers Grant from the Creative Capital | Andy Warhol Foundation in 2012 to write about the lives and work of contemporary Filipina artists. In 2009, she was a US Fulbright Scholar in Manila, Philippines. She regularly publishes articles, reviews, and catalogue essays on contemporary art, artists,

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Baby Ruth Villarama has been involved in co-productions for more than ten years. She began producing documentaries for Philippine broadcast channel ABS-CBN before she ventured in international co-production with networks like MediaCorp, NHK, British Council, EuroNews, National Geographic, and playing an active role in exchanging stories with filmmakers and producers. She is part of a team that supports Voyage Studios, Film Producers Society and DokyuPeeps that champion great local stories to reach a wider engagement.

She is a Chevening scholar of the British government who recently finished her post-graduate degree in Film Marketing and Distribution with commendation, a visiting lecturer at the University of the Philippines Film Institute and the newest member of the National Commission for Culture and the Arts on Cinema. She is the film director behind Metro Manila Film Festival 2016 Best Picture *Sunday Beauty Queen*, setting a historical feat as the first documentary film that ever made it in the festival, shattering mainstream and indie labels into One Filipino Cinema.

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📍 Osmeña Avenue, UP Diliman, Quezon City 1101 Metro Manila, Philippines
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✉ upfi_workshops@yahoo.com.ph

🌐 www.facebook.com/groups/1592044374353299

📍 Magsaysay and Osmeña Avenues, UP Diliman, Quezon City 1101 Metro Manila, Philippines
- 3 Cultural Center of the Philippines**

🌐 www.culturalcenter.gov.ph

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- 6 Videotheque**

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Microcinemas

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🌐 www.facebook.com/BlackMariaCinema

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🌐 www.facebook.com/cinema76fs

📍 3rd Level, Anonas LRT City Center Aurora Boulevard, Quezon City Metro Manila, Philippines
- 3 Cinema Centenario**

🌐 www.facebook.com/PHCinema100

📍 2F, 95 Maginhawa cor. Magiting Streets, Teachers Village East, Quezon City Metro Manila, Philippines

Institutions

- 1 Cinema Committee, National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA)**

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📍 633 General Luna Street Intramuros Metro Manila, Philippines
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🌐 www.filmacademyphil.net

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- 1 Cine Filipino Film Festival**

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📍 4th Floor Salustiana D. Ty Tower 104 Paseo de Roxas corner Perea Streets Legaspi Village, Makati City 1229
- 2 Cinema One Originals Film Festival**

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3 Gantala Press

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4/F Dormitory E Bldg.
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AILAP, through the Ateneo National Writers Workshop and other cultural endeavors, aims to contribute to the development of literature in the country by building a community of writers nationwide who are bound by the pursuit of excellence in their craft. (Source: www.ateneo.edu/ls/sohl/filipino)

2 Bienvenido N. Santos Creative Writing Center

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BNSWC serves as De La Salle University's effort to preserve the tradition of excellence in creative writing and research in the country. (Source: www.dlsu.edu.ph)

3 Cebu Young Writers Studio

The Cebu Young Writers Studio, an adaptation of the Cagayan de Oro Young Writers Studio, is an annual creative writing fellowship for 12 of the most promising emerging poets, fictionists, essayists, playwrights, and screenwriters born and/or based in the regions of Western Visayas, Central Visayas, and Eastern Visayas. (Source: https://panitikan.ph/2018/11/22/call-for-emerging-writers-from-the-visayas-the-2019-cebu-young-writers-studio/)

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The Silliman University Creative Writing Center is named in honor of two late outstanding Sillimanians, one of whom (EKT) is a National Artist for Literature. It is committed to develop the craft of creative writing among generations of Philippine writers through the Silliman University National Writers Workshop, the oldest creative writing workshop in Asia. (Source: https://www.facebook.com/sillimanCWC/)

5 Lamiraw Creative Writing Workshop

lamiraw@yahoo.com

Lamiraw Regional Creative Writing Workshop fosters a new breed of young writers in Eastern Visayas by encouraging contemporary works and writers in Waray and Cebuano and preventing the demise of the Abaknon language. (Source: www.facebook.com/easternvisayaslcww/)

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ICW is a hub of creative writing and research dissemination in the University of the Philippines system, whose major outreach programs include the UP National Writers Workshop. (Sources: www.upd.edu.ph; panitikan.ph - Philippine Literature Portal)

7 Polytechnic University of the Philippines Center for Creative Writing (CCW)

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CCW fosters research and workshop-led activities in creative works, such as writing, literary criticism, visual and performing arts, film and film criticism. (Source: www.pup.edu.ph)

8 UST Center for Creative Writing and Literary Studies (CCWLS)

Ground Floor, Benavides Building
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CCWLS is a unit dedicated to furthering the University of Santo Tomas's role in the development of a national literature through programs, projects and activities that will both nurture literary writers and literary scholars in the Thomasian Community, and encourage their interaction with other writers and artists in the country. (Source: www.ust.edu.ph)

Literary Festivals

1 Book Fiesta

The UNESCO-sponsored World Book and Copyright Day is a global celebration each year, on April 23, to promote the enjoyment of books and reading. On the same day, in the Philippines, the National Book Development Board (NBDB) spearheads a Book Fiesta for book lovers and copyright advocates. There is usually a one-day book market by Philippine publishers with activity/exhibit booths of different book clubs and writers' groups. (Sources: <https://en.unesco.org>; <http://booksphilippines.gov.ph/book-fiesta-on-world-book-and-copyright-day/>)

2 Manila International Book Fair (MIBF)

The 40th edition of the MIBF is slated on September 11-15, 2019 at the SMX Convention Center, Mall of Asia Complex, Pasay City. Highlighting the event are seminars, workshops, book signings and co-located events such as Fandom Fest. (Source: <http://manilabookfair.com/>)

3 The Philippine Center of International PEN

The Philippine PEN is a member of International PEN (Poets, Playwrights, Essayists, Novelists) with centers in some 150 countries worldwide. In its 50 years, the Philippine PEN has organized and sponsored such activities as literary readings, workshops, meet-the-author series, seminars and conferences in Manila and in the provinces. During the Marcos dictatorship, PEN stood in defense of the freedom of expression and speech. This is an avowed purpose as embodied in the International PEN Charter. More recently, in February 2019, the Philippine PEN posted a statement in defense of press freedom and Rappler CEO and executive editor Maria Ressa. (Source: <http://philippinepen.ph>)

4 Philippine International Literary Festival (PILF)

The PILF, a landmark project of the National Book Development Board (NBDB), is the highlight of Philippine Book Development Month observed annually in November. The festival is NBDB's way of celebrating literature and promoting best publishing practices through discourse on the issues of authorship and readership shaping the local book industry. Since its inception in 2010, the festival has been a major gathering for authors, illustrators, publishers, and literature lovers around the Philippines and beyond. (Source: <http://booksphilippines.gov.ph>)

5 Philippine Readers and Writers Festival (PRWF)

The PRWF, now on its sixth year, is an annual event held in August by National Book Store and Raffles Makati. This three-day event offers a series of book signings, discussions, and panels about books, literature, and culture from top Filipino writers and artists, as well as international bestselling authors. (Source: <http://www.readersandwritersfestival.com/>)

6 Taboan Writers Festival

"Taboan" is a Visayan word for "marketplace." In keeping with its word origin, the Taboan International Writers Festival seeks to be a marketplace of ideas for the Filipino literary community. A flagship project of the National Commission of Culture and the Arts, the Taboan Writers Festival is an annual gathering of writers from all over the country. The festival sets up shop in a different region every year where writers, readers, scholars, researchers and lovers of Philippine literature trade diverse ideas about culture, history and the literary arts. (Source: www.sunstar.com.ph; www2.upmin.edu.ph)

Major Literary Awards

1 Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature

www.palancaawards.com.ph
cpmawards@gmail.com

G/F Greenbelt Excelsior, 105 C. Palanca Street, Legaspi Village
Makati City 1229 Philippines

2 Kritika Kultura/ADMU Press First Book Prize

www.facebook.com/kritikakultura/
kk.soh@ateneo.edu

Kritika Kultura
Department of English
School of Humanities
Ateneo de Manila University
Loyola Heights, Quezon City 1108
Philippines

3 Madrigal-Gonzalez Best First Book Award

www.facebook.com/upicw/
contact@panitikan.ph / panitikan.com.ph@gmail.com

University of the Philippines Institute of Creative Writing (ICW)
Room 3200 Pavilion 3, Palma Hall
UP Diliman, Quezon City 1101 Philippines

4 Philippine National Book Awards

www.booksphilippines.gov.ph/nba/
helpdesk@nbdb.gov.ph

National Book Development Board
4/F Dormitory E Bldg.
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Meralco Ave., Pasig City 1605 Philippines

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