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A still from Richard Abelardo's *Zarex* (1958), a sci-fi production by LVN Pictures adapted from the komiks created by Clodualdo del Mundo, Sr. Images from *Zarex* that adorn this volume are from the collection of Mike De Leon, used with his permission.

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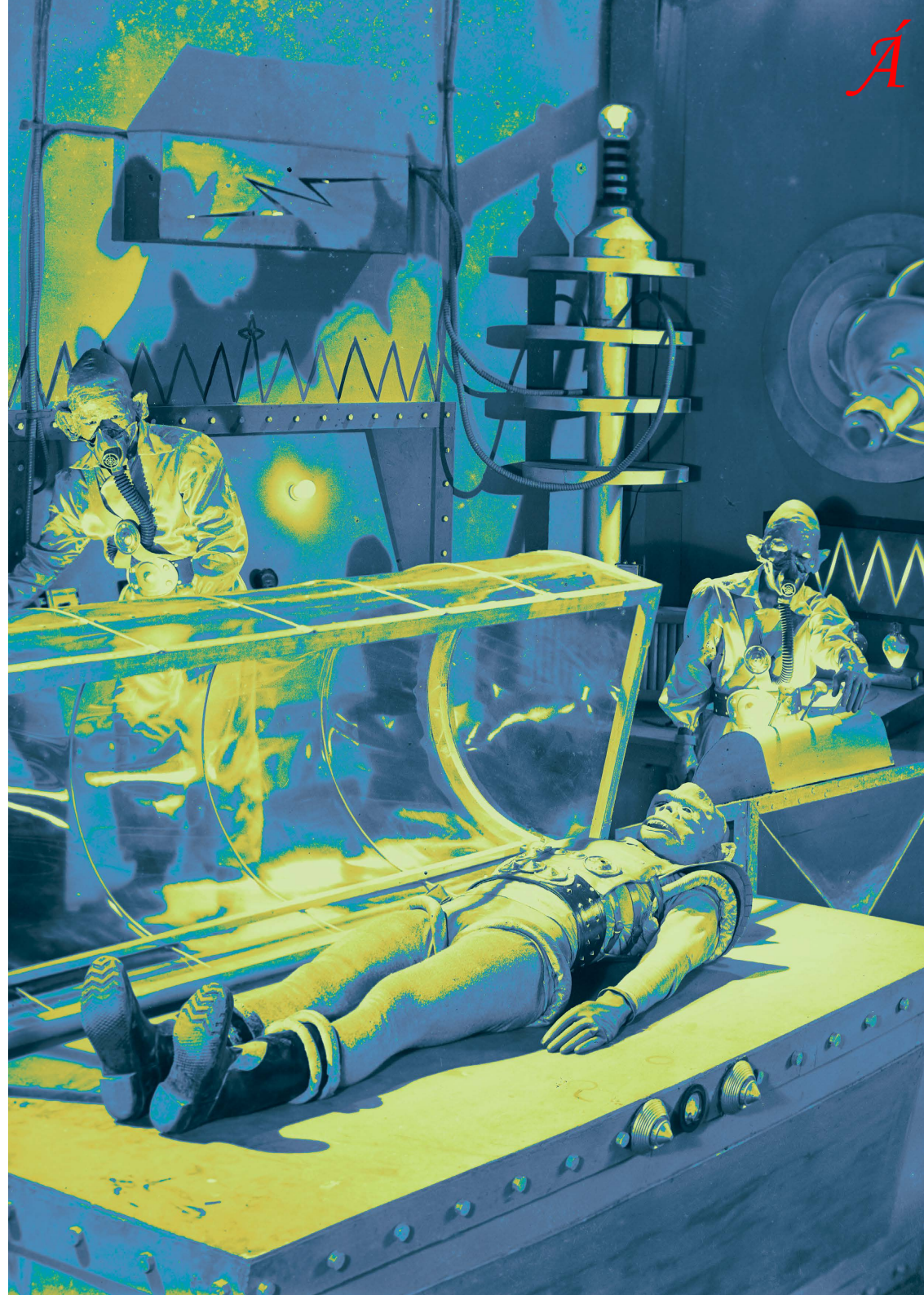
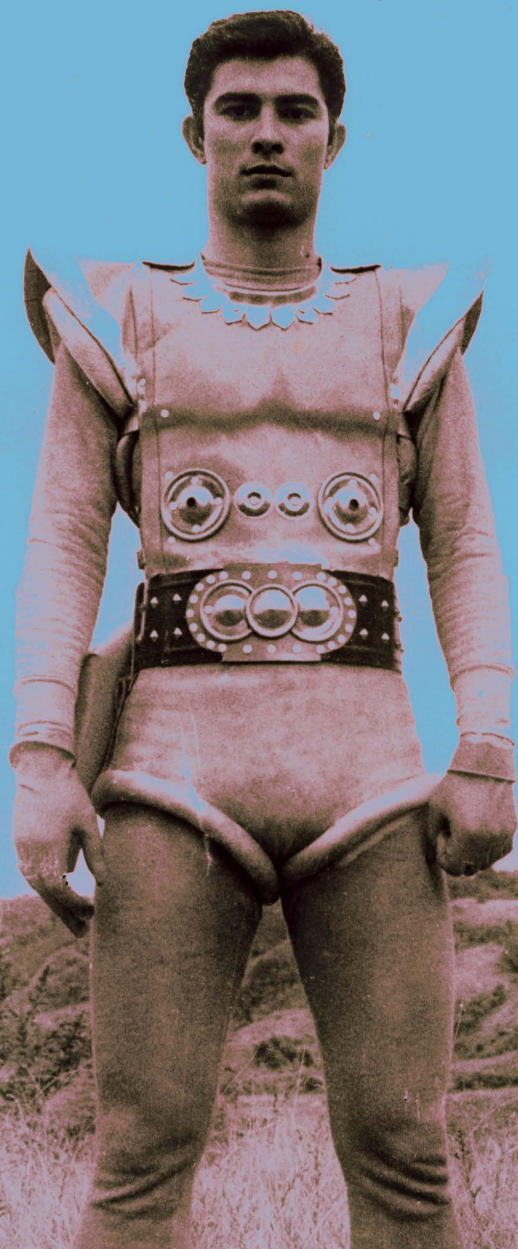


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A Missing Installation in the Philippine Pantheon:

Gregorio “Yoyong” Fernandez
(1904–1973)

JOEL DAVID



I must begin with a personal paradox: I started in film studies during a time when auteurism (or the “auteur theory” for those who prefer Andrew Sarris’s mistranslation of the *politique des auteurs*)¹ had its heyday and persisted mostly in the minds of what today’s cultural snobs would call fanboys. I participated in such activities, initially via award-giving, as a way of demonstrating the many lacks that local critical practitioners brought to their activities, and saw the millennial generation pick up on the mechanics but not the critique that I thought would make people hesitate or avoid auteur politics altogether.

I subsequently became aware that the prevalent trend in pop-culture activity will always be toward more prestige markers, not less, as definitively explicated in James F. English’s *The Economy of Prestige*.² In undertaking what I hoped would be my ultimate—and therefore final—stab at canon formation,³ I came to understand a significant aspect of its appeal: in recounting a work we have cherished, the more exclusively, the better, we get to replicate the pleasure we experienced in appreciating the piece, along with the satisfaction of knowing, or hoping, that our writing might persuade other people to reconsider their differences with us.

The canon project I had been working on (formally as consultant for a publication team) affirmed for me the collected names of appreciated filmmakers—or what Sarrists would call a Pantheon, an assemblage of worthies—along with occasional additions or tweaks, mainly in the direction of rectifying the constant and predictable errors of the Manunuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino, the original Filipino critics circle. This process has become so commonplace that some of the better young film bloggers could figure out for themselves how to evaluate films and bodies of work without falling into the established critics’ self-laid traps.

With earlier film samples, the provision of proof becomes more burdensome, mainly because of the country’s archival travails. One might stumble across the claim of certain oldtimers (some of them now gone) that Gerry de Leon is the all-time greatest Pinoy film talent, were it not for the loss of his reputedly best entry, *Daigdig ng mga Api* [*World of the Oppressed*] (1965). Yet, when I reread a vital article by the best among the first batch of MPP members, Petronilo Bn. Daroy,⁴ he expressed serious reservations regarding this film and instead upheld Lamberto V. Avellana’s *Anak Dalita* [*Child of Sorrow*] (1956). Lamentably, the latter film exists in a remastered condition and will probably be unable to sustain more than a single screening with audiences who do not share its church-fomented biases against slum residents, lumpenproles, and racial minorities.

Contentions

Interestingly, these first two winners of the Order of the National Artist represented not just rival studios but also different sets of creative associates and political affinities. Although both (along with another National Artist, Eddie Romero) directed episodes of *Tagumpay ng Mahirap* [*Triumph of the Poor*] (1965) for Diosdado Macapagal’s ultimately failed presidential campaign against Ferdinand E. Marcos, Avellana managed to switch political sides swiftly and effectively enough to be able to get his National Artist recognition ahead of de Leon.

The one last studio-era National Artist, Manuel Conde, also labors under the loss of his “best” entry, the series of political satires that feature his version of folk trickster Juan Tamad (1959–63), as well as his celebrated color musical, *Bahala Na* (1957); the few Conde musicals I’ve seen, including the now also lost *Ikaw Kasi* (1955) and *Basta Ikaw* (1957), suggest that his work in this genre may be an even bigger loss than his later homiletic output. What remains in his name is the charmingly problematic *Genghis Khan* (1950), evidence of the Philippines’s once-confident cosmopolitanism in appropriating a “lesser” culture’s heroic figure and devising rollicking entertainment premised on the legendary exploits that led to the rise in power of Temujin Borjigin, prior to his Eurasian expansion of the Mongol Empire during the 13th century.

Hence, via a process of elimination, the First Golden Age film that most contemporary film buffs have been holding in the highest regard for the past few decades would be Manuel Silos’s *Biya ng Lupa* [*Blessings of the Land*] (1959).⁵ Like *Anak Dalita*, it was produced by LVN Pictures, famed for its costume epics. Another quality both pictures share is an insistence on social conservatism as vital to the definition of nationhood, along with the open and violent rejection of marginal characters (Figure 1). It would be tempting to conclude that Filipino film observers tend to revert to reactionary values in evaluating the past, although I would caution against such a headlong conclusion. It may be safer to assume that whatever tools they may have devised for appreciating contemporary releases seem to them to be inappropriate for older films.

For this reason, I have insisted on maintaining the vital importance held by Gregorio Fernandez’s *Malvarosa* (1958). I also submit that its modernity gestures toward our present, which is why it appears anachronistic, capable of baffling viewers of early cinema who expect the samples to be genteel, virtuous, placid, and old-fashioned, possibly out of understandable and well-placed empathy for their elders.⁶ Nevertheless, such sentiments are beyond me, for better or worse, so my own uphill

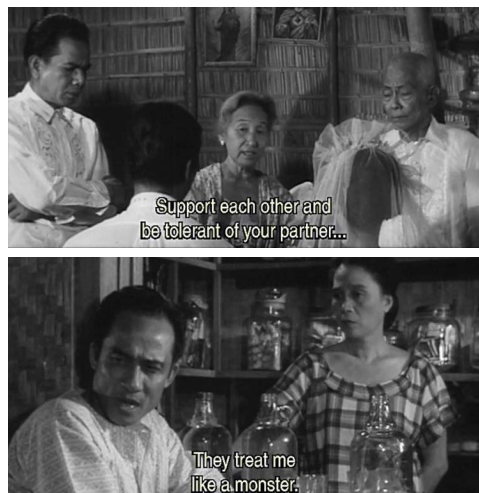


Figure 1. The central couple in *Biyaya ng Lupa*, vis-à-vis the person they call *taong-labas* (outsider), whom the townspeople will later lynch. LVN Pictures video. The image is the author's screenshot of the film

struggle to convince colleagues to keep rewatching these titles until they arrive at a level of familiarity that breeds either contempt or admiration can only be assuaged by the fact that *Malvarosa* will be capable of leaving behind most of them, and a lot of latter-day cinema besides.

A major part of the difficulty of championing *Malvarosa* is the figure of its director. Gregorio Fernandez was celebrated for his mid-1950s output, which when regarded by the acclaim bestowed by the Filipino Academy of Movie Arts and Sciences Awards would have indicated a declension: from a sweep of the major categories for *Higit sa Lahat* [More than Everything] (1955), to a best film and technical prize only for *Luksang Tagumpay* [Mournful Victory] (1956), to nominations for the direction of *Hukom Roldan* [Judge Roldan] (1957) and *Kung Ako'y Mahal Mo* [If You Love Me] (1960), with an “International Prestige Award of Merit” (presumably for foreign film-festival recognition) for *Malvarosa*.

As anyone familiar with award-giving trends might be able to infer by now, these prizes do not track Fernandez's achievements with satisfactory accuracy. His first incontrovertible world-class masterwork arrived before the FAMAS took notice, in *Prinsipe Teñoso* [Prince Teñoso] (1954), dismissed then presumably for being an overtly commercial adaptation of a literary form, the metrical romance, introduced during the Spanish colonial era. *Prinsipe Teñoso* was previously filmed in 1942, also for LVN Pictures, by Manuel Conde (who takes story

credit in the Fernandez version). From the available evidence, *Higit sa Lahat* would be a gendered twist on the Hollywood melodrama perennial *Stella Dallas* (silent, dir. Henry King, 1925; B&W/sound, dir. King Vidor, 1937; color/sound version titled *Stella*, dir. John Erman, 1990), but the succeeding modern-day films up to *Malvarosa* demonstrate even more admirable and often successful risk-taking.⁷

“Yoyong”

Born in 1904, Fernandez died before he reached 70 in 1973. This was about a year after the Order of the National Artist of the Philippines was first introduced. Considering the many other Filipinos who were able to acquire the distinction posthumously, Fernandez is certainly highly qualified. In fact, with the ready availability of several of his major projects for his home studio, LVN Pictures, one could easily make the argument that Fernandez has been severely underrated and unfairly overlooked. (For these and all other general filmographic and archival references, please refer to the Appendix.)

The prevailing assumption about Fernandez is that he shone brightest during the 1950s, the height of the First Golden Age, with a number of his films dominating the so-named academy prizes, in a way that would only be surpassed by Gerardo de Leon, an early National Artist Awardee, in the 1960s. The similarities between the two filmmakers go beyond the acclaim they received during this period: they were both actors, held advanced health-science degrees (de Leon in medicine and Fernandez in dentistry), provided unforgettable roles for actresses, and had clan members who also became prominent in the local industry. While all the films de Leon performed in are unavailable, the few remaining ones of Fernandez, including a supporting role (in *Kontrabando*) where he dominates the rest of the cast via effusive charm and subtle comic timing, shore up the possibility of his being the most accomplished director-actor in Philippine cinema (Figure 2).

Still in relation to de Leon, Fernandez's misfortune is that he specialized in melodrama, erroneously considered less socially significant than de Leon's action and suspense films during the mid-to-late 20th-century period when Western film festivals were scouting for so-called Third World talents to champion. While de Leon's productive streak continued way after the collapse of the studio system in the early 1960s, Fernandez's output became scarcer until he seemingly gave up on making films altogether. Unlike de Leon, who was still working on an unfinished epic (*Juan de la Cruz*, for Fernando Poe, Jr.) when he died in 1981, Fernandez directed a hagiographic bio-picture for Diosdado Macapagal and at least one sex-themed film. De Leon



Figure 2. Glamour pose of Gregorio Fernandez in actorly mode, with photo as the lead in Tor Villano's *Taong Demonyo* (1937). Top photo courtesy of Rap Fernandez; bottom photo, publicity still from Philippine Productions. All images are used with permission

also did *Daigdig ng mga Api* for Macapagal's campaign and a number of genre projects, but he seemed to weather the collapse of the studio system better than Fernandez, making films for the actor-producers who dominated the independent-production system as well as B-films for the US drive-in market.

The relative inactivity of Fernandez may have baffled serious observers during the time, but all we have are a few reports posted online as well as the accounts of some of his then-younger but now-elderly contemporaries. (People were understandably more discreet during this period.) His daughter Merle forged ahead of the aspiring sex sirens of the late 1960s by pioneering the trend known as *bomba*, which were erotic melodramas that were premised on the more (literally and figuratively) frontal depictions and discussions of carnal situations that originated in Western cinemas.

While the founding elders of the MPP decried the collapse of the vertically integrated studio system (and the First Golden Age along with it), I have pointed out elsewhere⁸ that the tendencies they considered most deplorable—*bomba* films and teen-idol musicals, both products of low-budget “quickie” efforts—actually betokened a progressive sensibility in the local mass audience. Inasmuch as the new urbanites, comprising rural migrants working in factories and domestic labor, demanded a new breed of stars who resembled them more closely (non-white females rather than the studios' emphasis on Euro-manqué males), the standard old-time mestizo performers were forced to immerse in taboo-busting material.

We ought to take note of the fact that a National Artist for Literature, Bienvenido Lumbera, once stressed⁹ that *bomba* films deserve to be reevaluated in light of their direct challenge to the strictures of conservatism and denial of women's prerogatives in acting on their desires and preferences. (Fernandez's last film, in fact, starred his daughter, possibly accounting for an abhorrent rumor that both engaged in an incestuous relationship.)¹⁰ With the declaration of Martial Law in 1972 by President Ferdinand E. Marcos, *bomba*-film production ended, as did Merle Fernandez's acting career for the most part. Instead, she provided contacts and support for her younger brother Rudy, who became one of the country's top action stars, renowned for his ability to combine stunt scenes with serious drama.¹¹

Family Tragedy

Interview articles on Gregorio Fernandez during this period situate him in his hometown, where he earned another kind of renown—as an expert cockfighter. He may have worked this out as his way of retiring from industry practice, although this may also indicate some degree of estrangement from his familial and work circles. One might want to speculate that his professional and personal instabilities may have started from the suicide by firearm of his wife, Pacita Padilla (a.k.a. Paz or Ching), whose record as a performer is so far unavailable on standard internet sources, including the *Internet Movie Database*.¹² The tributes that came out after Rudy Fernandez's untimely death from cancer mention how he was the first family member to encounter his mother's body—a traumatic experience, considering he was five years old when she died in 1957.

We can speculate on the ways that this incident may have affected Gregorio Fernandez's frame of mind, i.e., that he still valiantly managed to come up with an early feminist masterpiece the following year, in *Malvarosa*, and that he lost his enthusiasm for innovative filmmaking afterward, as perceivable in the decline in his later LVN films. This would be a tricky way of applying psychobiographical principles, however, primarily because his non-LVN films from the 1960s onward are unavailable. To reference once more Gerardo de Leon, I remember how most cineastes tended to uphold his prestige productions up to *Daigdig ng mga Api* but dismissed his co-productions and genre projects; yet when video copies of these films became available later, many of them constituted major revelations.¹³

In Fernandez's case, at least, we are fortunate to have LVN scion Mike De Leon, who has overseen the video transfers of nearly all existing Fernandez films and selflessly uploaded these on his *Vimeo* and *YouTube* websites (see Appendix, section 5/5), open-access style. I would enjoin all Filipino film enthusiasts to go over the Fernandez titles chronologically to acquire a proper appreciation of his considerable skills as a director and actor. The most significant aspect I noticed in the major films was his careful attention to identity issues, both in terms of strong women and children roles as well as in an abiding respect for Muslim Filipinos (Figure 3), to the point of providing them with a heroic twist in the spy narrative of *Kontrabando* (1950).¹⁴

He could not avoid the Western-enforced Cold War pressure to demonize anti-US East Asian characters, unfortunately; but in *Capas* (1949), he foregrounded the fraught issue of wartime collaboration and provided a conflicted Japanese officer as a way of demonstrating to the Filipino double agent that people on the enemy side could also be capable of human decency (Figure 4). We may note that this film came out almost right after the end of World War II, several decades ahead of Mario O'Hara's comparable (though expectedly better-focused) *Tatlong Taong Walang Diyos* (1976).



Figure 3. Smuggler overpowers Filipino collective in *Kontrabando*. LVN Pictures publicity still



Figure 4. Freedom fighters up against an increasingly desperate enemy in *Capas*. Here, as in *Kontrabando*, Fernandez undertook sensitive supporting roles, although he inadvertently tended to upstage some of the major performers. LVN Pictures publicity still



Figure 5. Sophisticated comedy amid class and gender tensions, as a Fernandez hallmark, in *Miss Philippines* and elsewhere. LVN Pictures publicity still



Figure 6. Unruly sisters—the king's daughters discuss how either singlehood or early widowhood would be preferable to a long married life in *Prinsipe Teñoso*. The youngest one (left, foreground) subsequently angers her father by picking an itinerant leper to marry, whose unenchanted form as a handsome prince was revealed to her when she spied on him bathing in a river; another of the princesses selects a Muslim prince, a choice which her father matter-of-factly accepts. LVN Pictures



Figure 7. Top: in *Higit sa Lahat*, a wife nearly recognizes her husband, who made her believe he died so she could survive on his death benefits. Bottom: in *Luksang Tagumpay*, a Korean War returnee's world is about to come crashing down when he realizes his wife, who believed he was dead, had planned to marry the same man who cured his blindness. LVN Pictures publicity stills

The other remarkable quality of Fernandez's films is his willingness to exploit humor. Even in his serious works, this tendency enables him to approach the material with a light touch, reminiscent of a great Classical Hollywood practitioner, Ernst Lubitsch. Despite its several promotional placements, *Miss Philippines* (1947), the earliest surviving Fernandez title, evinces the bemused stance that would sustain him through the "heavier" material he would tackle later (Figure 5); in fact, the situation of the alcoholic mother and the daughter torn apart by filial loyalty and her longing for happiness would subsequently reappear, with fuller social implications, in *Malvarosa*.

Showpieces

In the meanwhile, he came up with the only available color film bearing his credit, *Prinsipe Teñoso* (1954), and it is a marvel beyond the novelty of its Ruritanian-type romance (Figure 6). Its storytelling is so assured and skillful that the existing print's archival predicament, resulting in a narrative leap from the title character's attempt to defy his father to his wandering in another kingdom ensorcelled as a leper, becomes an unexpected modernist touch—perfectly in keeping with the film's championing of women, captives, diseased untouchables, and Islamic outsiders.

Fernandez's major FAMAS winners, as recounted earlier, were *Higit sa Lahat* (1955) and *Luksang Tagumpay* (1956), which attempt to spin the genre of melodrama by placing the burden of saving the family on male characters (Figure 7). The first time I saw these two during a late 1980s retrospective, I had the impression (affirmed in *Prinsipe Teñoso*) of a director who was not content with observing the standard approaches dictated by genres, star personas, and even Classical Hollywood stylistic prescriptions. The now-missing final sequences of *Luksang Tagumpay* had an Expressionistic denouement, where the central male character's domestic world literally starts falling apart around him. I remembered having just seen a similar sequence in a film whose title escaped me then; when I saw it again later—Mikhail Khalatov's *The Cranes Are Flying*—I needed a double-take because *Luksang Tagumpay* had preceded it by a year.

This was all in preparation for a final Fernandez revelation, heralded by Mike De Leon's social-media announcement. *Hukom Roldan* (1957) is the major black-and-white discovery of our time (Figure 8), proof that Fernandez's maverick impulses led him to attempt narrative and cinematic techniques that anticipated a globally influential trend that was just about to break out a year later in France. The fragmentation of linear time, abrupt shifts from one character to another, sudden insertions of direct-address sequences—even the narrative twist in following the title character's story only to focus more intently on the woman he unknowingly



Figure 8. Scenes from *Hukom Roldan*: left, after an envious associate misled him with fabricated evidence, the title character places his own wife on trial; middle, he excludes her from his life prior to banishing her from his home; right, forced to thrive on her own, she is unable to report that their daughter has found and grown fond of her. LVN Pictures publicity still courtesy of *Video 48* (left), and video upload from *Citizen Jake* (middle and right). The images are the author's screenshot of the film

betrayed: when Alfred Hitchcock attempted this defiance of audience expectation a few years later in *Psycho* (1960), the gender emphasis was in the more conventional direction of disposing of a woman “tainted” by crime, so we could focus on the man who solves the mystery of her disappearance.

I am not in the habit of lionizing our local filmmakers so enthusiastically because I believe that we do them, and ourselves, a disservice by overemphasizing their achievements. With Gregorio Fernandez, I have finally come across a filmmaker whose available body of work can sustain enough appreciation for us to declare, no matter how late in our history, another master film artist. I would rate *Malvarosa* (1958), for which he is justly celebrated, as superior to all the other existing “best” works—Manuel Conde’s *Genghis Khan* (1950), Lamberto V. Avellana’s *Anak Dalita* (1956), Manuel Silos’s *Biyaya ng Lupa* (1959); Gerardo de Leon would peak in the 1960s, so Fernandez’s films in the 1950s ought to rate more highly than even de Leon’s.

Since it would require an entirely separate article to explicate why *Malvarosa* deserves more than the significant appreciation it already enjoys (our best black-and-white movie would not be difficult to declare), I should close for now by pointing out its merits vis-à-vis its contemporaries: its focus on the downtrodden is not “redeemed” by the intervention of society’s superiors; it embraces slum culture—its lingo, pastimes, and aspirations—while slyly and good-naturedly pointing out their limits; it provides warm emotional closure without falsifying the tragic losses that our poverty-stricken compatriots still undergo (Figure 9). This may help explain why it has been easier for film commentators to dwell on the other non-Fernandez films of the 1950s: although more identifiably of its time than most of the other entries, the treatment that *Malvarosa* invests in this material is beyond-classical in its sophistication and naturalistic in its sociological observations.

Even if we take into account the nearly decade-long “retirement” of Fernandez, from 1964 to his death in 1973 (with two seemingly half-hearted efforts in 1966 and 1971), his reluctance to resume productivity may have begun even while he was still at LVN, with only one project in 1961 and another after a year (Table 1 tallies his capacities per year as actor, director, and writer, with zero totals suppressed in order to readily signal the years of inactivity). The fallow World War II years of 1942–45 applied to the Philippine film industry as a whole, while the earlier decade’s period of dormancy (specifically 1933–36) can only rely on speculation at most: when he resumed film activity in 1937, his directorial career began, and would persist in such a double capacity, although he would only occasionally perform in the films he was directing.

From 1951, he stopped acting altogether, although he would have been aware that the two children that he cast in his 1950s projects, Merle and Rudy, were carving out careers as performers in the industry (see endnote 11); only Merle could claim lead roles by the early 1970s—Rudy’s first lead breakthrough came about almost a half-year after Yoyong died in 1976. Through Rudy, the Fernandez clan made its mark as actors, with Mark Anthony Fernandez attaining the same peaks and skills display of his grandfather and possibly a similar propensity for controversy. Two younger grandsons, Renz and Rap, similarly maintain careers as performers, with Rap completing a documentary and thesis project on his grandfather.

His descendants’ high-profile status as actors might also ironically account for the Philippine film observers’ negligent regard for Gregorio Fernandez’s considerable achievements as a filmmaker. He might also arguably have preferred to be forgotten toward the end of his life, but the film legacy he left behind can and should call for a separate acknowledgment all its own.



Figure 9. After losing her husband in a train accident, Prosa turns to alcohol and faints at the same place he died; when her family loses everything, her only daughter, Rosa, attempts to bring her estranged brother back to the fold. From *Malvarosa*, LVN Pictures, video upload from *Citizen Jake*. The images are the author's screenshot of the film

Table 1. Gregorio Fernandez’s Total Number of Projects Per Year (1927–71)

Function	1927	1928	1929	1930	1931	1932	1933	1934	1935	1936	1937	1938	1939
Actor	2	1	1	1	2	1	0	0	0	0	3	0	2
Director	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	2
Writer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	2	1	1	1	2	1					4	1	4

Function	1940	1941	1942	1943	1944	1945	1946	1947	1948	1949
Actor	3	2	0	0	0	0	3	1	2	3
Director	2	2	0	0	0	0	2	2	3	3
Writer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	5	4					5	3	5	6

Function	1950	1951	1952	1953	1954	1955	1956	1957	1958	1959
Actor	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Director	3	2	2	3	2	2	3	2	4	1
Writer	0	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
Total	4	2	3	3	2	3	3	2	4	1

Function	1960	1961	1962	1963	1964	1965	1966	1967	1968	1969	1970	1971	1972 —76
Actor	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Director	3	1	0	1	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0
Writer	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	3	1		1			1					1	

Appendix:

An Archival Summary of the Gregorio Fernandez Filmography

Barring further discoveries or corrections, the *Internet Movie Database* record on Gregorio Fernandez provides entries in three categories: as director, as actor, and as writer. The website’s information on the productions of LVN Pictures is fairly accurate, possibly a result of the close supervision by filmmaker Mike De Leon, grandson of the founder Narcisa vda. de Leon, over the family studio’s legacy. Since the lists are grouped according to decreasing number of output, we find only two credits for Fernandez’s writing (one of which, *Higit sa Lahat*, is still available) and several credits as actor. Nearly half of his acting credits were for his films: in one instance, despite his name appearing after those of the other stars, he was actually one of the lead actors in *Kontrabando*. One of the films, *Carmen* (1941, uncredited in IMDb but confirmed in June 2023 by James de la Rosa—layout provided below), was also Fernandez-directed. In all, Fernandez participated in over 60 film projects, 15 of them in the dual capacity as either actor or writer.



Malvarosa (which I had transcribed on my *Amateurish* blog—see amateurish.com/extras/#fiw) may be the closest to a complete Fernandez film, although several others do not suffer significantly from missing portions. The following are the IMDb-listed works attributed to Fernandez, arranged in chronological order, with additional information on his other roles in the projects as well as their availability and state of completion (where no directorial credit is indicated, the entry should be understood as made by Fernandez).

- 1/5. As actor** (all pre-1937 films were directed by Jose Nepomuceno for Malayan Movies, with *Hot Kisses*, *Ang Lumang Simbahan*, and *Ligaw na Bulaklak* listed as silent; all films are considered lost)
- *Hot Kisses and The Filipino Woman* (1927)
 - *Ang Lumang Simbahan* [*The Old Church*] (1928)
 - *Ang Anak sa Ligaw* [*Child Out of Wedlock*] (1930)
 - *Ang Lihim ni Bathala* [*The Secret of the Pagan God*] and *Moro Pirates* (1931)
 - *Ligaw na Bulaklak* [*Wild Flowers*] (1932)
 - *Ang Kumpisalan at ang Batas* [*The Confessional and the Law*] (dir. Rod Avlas, Philippine Productions, 1937)
 - *Taong Demonyo* [*Demonic Person*] (dir. Tor Villano, Philippine Productions, 1937)
- 2/5. As actor and/or director** (all films are considered lost)
- *Asahar at Kabaang* [*Wreath and Coffin*] (also as actor, Philippine Productions, 1937)
 - *Celia at Balagtas* [*Celia and Balagtas*] (Excelsior Films, 1938)
 - *Ang Magsasampaguita* [*The Sampaguita Vendor*] (Sampaguita Pictures, 1939)
 - *Tatlong Pagkabirhen* [*Three Virgins*] (X'Otic Films, 1939)
 - *Palaboy ng Dios* [*God's Vagrant*] (as actor, dir. Eduardo de Castro, X'Otic Films, 1939)
 - *Takip-Silim* [*Nightfall*] (as actor, dir. Don Dano, Sampaguita Pictures, 1939)
 - *Colegiala* [*Female Coed*] (as actor, dir. Eduardo de Castro, Sampaguita Pictures, 1940)
 - *Katarungan* [*Justice*] and *Señorita* [*Mademoiselle*] (also as actor, both Sampaguita Pictures, 1940)
 - *Princesita* [*Little Princess*] and *Carmen* (also as actor, Sampaguita Pictures, 1941)
 - *Principeng Hindi Tumatawa* [*The Prince Who Never Laughed*] (as actor, dir. Manuel Conde, LVN Pictures, 1946)
- 3/5. LVN Pictures productions**
- *Dalawang Daigdig* [*Two Worlds*] (also as actor; 1946)
 - *Garrison 13* (also as actor; 1946)
 - *Ang Lalaki* [*The Man*] (1947)
 - *Miss Philippines* (also as actor; 1947)—video transfer available
 - *Krus na Bituin* [*Cross-Shaped Star*] (1948)
 - *P1,000 Kagandahan* [*Thousand-Peso Beauty*] (also as actor; 1948)—short entry; video transfer available
 - *Putting Bantayog* [*White Monument*] (also as actor; 1948)
 - *Capas* (also as actor; 1949)—video transfer available
 - *Florante at Laura* [*Florante and Laura*] (as actor; dir.

- Vicente Salumbides, 1949)—video transfer available
- *Hen. Gregorio del Pilar* [*General Gregorio del Pilar*] (1949)
- *Kampanang Ginto* [*Golden Bell*] (1949)
- *Candaba* (1950)
- *Kontrabando* [*Contraband*] (also as actor; 1950)—video transfer available
- *Pagtutuus* [*Reckoning*] (1950)
- *Bayan o Pag-ibig* [*Country or Love*] (1951)
- *Dugo sa Dugo* [*Blood to Blood*] (1951)
- *Bohemyo* [*Bohemian*] (1952)
- *Rodrigo de Villa* (also as story writer; 1952)—video transfer available
- *Dagohoy* (1953)—video excerpt available
- *Philippine Navy* (1953)
- *Squatters* (1953)—video transfer available
- *Prinsipe Teñoso* [*Prince Teñoso*] (1954)—remastered copy available
- *Singsing na Tanso* [*Silver Ring*] (1954)—video excerpt available
- *Dalagang Taring* [*Cranky Maiden*] (1955)
- *Higit sa Lahat* [*Most of All*] (also as scriptwriter; 1955)—video transfer available
- *Gintong Pangarap* [*Golden Dream*] (1956)
- *Luksang Tagumpay* [*Mournful Victory*] (1956)—video transfer available, missing final sequences
- *Medalyong Perlas* [*Pearl Necklace*] (segment “Kapalaran” [“Fate”]; other segments dir. Lamberto V. Avellana & F.H. Constantino; 1956)
- *Hukom Roldan* [*Judge Roldan*] (1957)—video transfer available
- *Sampung Libong Pisong Pag-ibig* [*Ten Thousand-Peso Romance*] (1957)—video transfer available
- *Ana Maria* (1958)
- *Ay Pepita!* [*Oh Pepita!*] (1958)
- *Casa Grande* [*Grand Dwelling*] (segment “Gerilyang Patpat” [“Skinny Guerrilla”]; other segments dir. Manuel Conde & F.H. Constantino; 1958)
- *Malvarosa* [*Geranium*] (1958)—remastered copy available

- *Panagimpan* [*Daydream*] (1959)
- *Awit ng mga Dukha* [*Song of the Dispossessed*] (1960)
- *Emily* (1960)—video excerpt available
- *Kung Ako’y Mahal Mo* [*If You Love Me*] (1960)—video transfer available

4/5. Post-LVN Pictures productions

- *Dugo at Luha* [*Blood and Tears*] (Premiere Productions, 1961)
- *The Macapagal Story* (MML Productions, 1963)
- *Ang Nasasakdal!* [*The Defendant!*] (Kamagong Films, 1966)
- *Daing* [*Dried Fish*] (Tower Productions, 1971)

5/5. Availability and contact information: A summary of the available works of Fernandez, all from LVN, is as follows: *Miss Philippines* (1947); *Isang Libong Pisong Kagandahan* (1948); *Capas* (1949); *Kontrabando* (1950); *Rodrigo de Villa* (1952); *Dagohoy* (1953, excerpted along with *Singsing na Tanso* & Lou Salvador Sr.’s *Doce Pares* [both 1954]); *Squatters* (1953); *Singsing na Tanso* (1954, excerpted along with *Dagohoy* [1953] & Lou Salvador Sr.’s *Doce Pares* [1954]); *Prinsipe Teñoso* (1954); *Higit sa Lahat* (1955); *Luksang Tagumpay* (1956, missing final sequences); *10,000 Pisong Pag-ibig* (1957); *Hukom Roldan* (1957); *Malvarosa* (1958); *Emily* (1960, excerpts); and *Kung Ako’y Mahal Mo* (1960). Video material may be found at Mike De Leon’s *Citizen Jake* pages (on either *YouTube* or *Vimeo*). Remastered and subtitled copies of *Prinsipe Teñoso* and *Malvarosa* may be ordered from the *Facebook* page of ABS-CBN Film Restoration, while the *YouTube* page of ABS-CBN Star Cinema occasionally posts censored copies of the organization’s collection.

Joel David obtained his PhD in Cinema Studies at New York University and retired as Professor of Cultural Studies at Inha University in Korea, where he continues to lecture. He was founding Director of the University of the Philippines Film Institute, where he started teaching in 1987. He was also the former Head of the Writers Division at the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines and resident film critic of *National Midweek*. His books on Philippine cinema include *The National Pastime*, *Fields of Vision* (first winner of the National Book Award for Film Criticism), *Wages of Cinema* (UP Centennial Book Awardee), the two-volume *Millennial Traversals*, the short manual *Writing Pinas Film Commentary*, and *Canon Decampment*. He was the first Filipino to be given a life-achievement prize for film criticism and scholarship, at the 2016 edition of the Filipino Arts and Cinema International Festival in San Francisco, California. His monograph-length study of *Manila by Night* came out in Arsenal Press’s acclaimed Queer Films Series. He maintains an archival blog at amateurish.com.

Endnotes

- 1 Andrew Sarris, *The American Cinema: Directors and Directions 1929–1968* (London: Octagon Books, 1982). In “Auteur Criticism: A Non-Recuperative Reappraisal” (in *Wages of Cinema: The Digital Edition*, Amateurish Publishing, 2014, amateurish.com/2014/04/21/wages-of-cinema-subjectivities/#auteur-criticism), I argued for a reconsideration of the author function based on Michel Foucault’s concept of the discursive formation that enables artists in popular culture to challenge repressive colonial and postcolonial regimes.
- 2 James F. English, *The Economy of Prestige: Prizes, Awards, and the Circulation of Value* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 2005). I must admit to an ambivalence regarding the activity of award-giving. When it becomes possible to push for a tiered system (with any number of winners selected in categories made available according to the achievements of the participants), with citations provided by the winners, then I would be willing to consider participating in some form or other.
- 3 Joel David, “Canon Decampment,” *Amateurish Publishing*, November 14, 2023, accessed January 23, 2025, amateurish.com/2023/11/14/canon-decampment/. An e-book version will be forthcoming, possibly as early as 2024.
- 4 Petronilo Bn. Daroy, “Main Currents in the Filipino Cinema,” in *Readings in Philippine Cinema*, ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero (Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983), 95–108.
- 5 In two of the most comprehensive canon surveys covering Philippine cinema, we can track the persistence of the stature of *Biyaya ng Lupa*. In “Ten Best Filipino Films Up to 1990” (Joel David & Melanie Joy C. Garduño, in *Fields of Vision: Critical Applications in Recent Philippine Cinema* [Quezon City: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1995], 125–36), it was ranked one rung behind *Anak Dalita*. In the 2013 poll “100 Greatest Pinoy Films of All Time” (Skilty Labastilla, “100 Greatest Pinoy Films of All Time,” *Society of Filipino Film Reviewers*, 2013, accessed on January 23, 2025, pinoyrebyu.wordpress.com/httpspinoyrebyu-wordpress-com20150731greatest-pinoy-films-of-all-time-nos-100-51/), it was the only pre-1970s film in the top ten. It also holds the distinction of being the second Filipino film to be the sole subject of a book publication, after my entry *Manila by Night: A Queer Film Classic* (Vancouver, Canada: Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017). Another entry would be Edward delos Santos Cabagnot’s *Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time and Manuel Silos’s Biyaya ng Lupa* (Quezon City: University of the Philippines Press, 2018). Still a third book, Clodualdo del Mundo Jr.’s *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api: Remembering a Lost Film* (Manila: Film Development Council of the Philippines & De La Salle University Press, 2022), tackled the archival stature of still another “best” film by yet another National Artist, Gerardo de Leon.
- 6 Camp may have been around for decades, but its acceptance by evaluators only became possible after Susan Sontag paid tribute to it in her essential 1964 essay “Notes on ‘Camp,’” *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Dell Publishing, 1966), 277–93. In Philippine film practice, campy humor became the staple, starting in the 1970s, of a loose group of directors who used to convene at the Lateral Apartments and later supported one another in a series of omnibus projects and whose output was consequently downgraded by high-minded film evaluators. Yet once more, Fernandez preceded everyone in this circle. As a sample, in one of *Malvarosa*’s several familial tragedies, the following exchange occurs between the youngest and only female sibling, Rosa, and her gangster brother Leonides, who has killed a prospective holdup target and is now engaged in a shootout with Philippine Constabulary soldiers (in the provocative spirit of camp, Vic Diaz, who plays Leonides, references his physical appearance):
 LEONIDES (*opens door and lets her in*): Why did you come here? Have you gone crazy?
 ROSA: You’re the one who’s crazy! You’re deluded! Don’t you know that the law rules above us all? What you’re doing has no hope of winning! Best that you can do is surrender.
 LEONIDES: Surrender? So that they can barbecue me on the electric chair? Leonides hasn’t lost his marbles yet!
 ROSA: That won’t happen. You might not know it, but the law is just. If you’re innocent, you won’t be punished.
 LEONIDES: Idiots! I’m far from innocent! If I weren’t guilty, why would I be hiding?
 (*Malvarosa*, dir. Gregorio Fernandez, scr. Consuelo P. Osorio, trans. Joel David, LVN Pictures, 1958)
- 7 While I would generally downgrade quantitative measurements of achievement, especially those based on periodical award-giving, the canon project I mentioned in the opening section claims to provide more accurate assessments of individual filmmakers’ accomplishments: it allowed for as many, or as few, or even no available titles for every year covering the history of Philippine cinema, with works under contention re-viewed for as many times as would be necessary by a team of sufficiently informed evaluators to arrive at an assessment. Without going into quantitative specifics, I can say that Gregorio Fernandez had, after Gerardo de Leon, the most entries, with all the rest of their contemporaries limited to one or two films each. It would also be relevant to note here that De Leon made movies all the way to the end, with at least one unfinished epic, titled *Juan de la Cruz*, for Fernando Poe, Jr.; Fernandez, in contrast, remained largely inactive after his LVN Pictures heyday.
- 8 David, *Manila by Night*, 34–40.
- 9 Bienvenido Lumbea, “Pelikula: An Essay on Philippine Cinema,” in *Tuklas Sining: Essays on the Philippine Arts*, edited by Nicanor G. Tiongson (Cultural Center of the Philippines, 1991), page 216.
- 10 Rap Fernandez, grandson of Gregorio Fernandez via his son Rudy and the latter’s wife Lorna Tolentino, replied to my query on the allegation by stating: “I was only made aware of the rumor through the research I conducted for my thesis on Gregorio, but I know for a fact that this is blatantly untrue. There were even rumors that my father was Merle and Gregorio’s secret son, but that’s just completely false.” A niece of Merle, Jane Po, affirmed not just the falsity but also the implausibility of such a scenario. (Both exchanges were conducted in 2020 via Facebook Messenger.)
- 11 Gregorio Fernandez introduced his daughter Merle to his industry contacts through Armando Garces, a former scriptwriter and actor in Yoyong’s films who subsequently

became a producer; Fernandez’s influence, however, “had waned at that point. Merle returned from Hong Kong where she worked as a singer then decided to give the movies another shot around 1964 [when she was in her mid-20s]. After four years in the industry, she introduced Rudy to Deo Fajardo, who became his manager until when *Bitayin si ... Baby Ama!* [Execute ... *Baby Ama!*, Rudy’s first starring role] got made in 1976” (Facebook Messenger account of Merle Fernandez as told to Rap Fernandez, November 2024). Merle also expressed grief over Rudy’s death from a terminal illness, maintaining that she had lost someone she deeply cared for (interview with Andrew Leavold & Daniel Palisa, directors, in *The Last Pinoy Action King*, Reflection Films, Death Rides a Red Horse, and Quiaopost Productions, 2015). The worst charge that may possibly be leveled at Fernandez in relation to his children is that of the current US showbiz denunciation of nepotism. The available evidence, however, preempts this line of thinking. Rudy and Merle were ably coached child performers in *Luksang Tagumpay* and *Hukom Roldan*, respectively; moreover, in *Higit sa Lahat*, Yoyong cast Ike Jarlego Jr., the son of his long-time editor Enrique Jarlego, who eventually became an outstanding editor and director himself.

- 12 Standard internet information sources, including Wikipedia and the *Internet Movie Database*, also mistakenly identify Fernandez’s wife as Pilar Padilla. On the basis of her filmographic record, the prospect is certainly believable since she apparently made at least one film with Fernandez as director and actor, titled *Dalawang Daigdig* [*Two Worlds*], and chose to be inactive not long afterward. However, no source lists her year of death—which again is entirely factual because, as of this writing (December 2023), she holds the record, at 94 years, as the country’s longest-living star-level performer. Below is the *MyHeritage* genealogy website where both names, Pilar and Paz, are announced, with the difference between them unresolved, followed by a photo of the tombstones of Gregorio, Paz, and their son (and Rudy’s older brother) Jose, who had also killed himself, ten years after his mother passed away.
- 13 It would make sense to place Gregorio Fernandez’s peak in the 1950s, a decade ahead of Gerardo de Leon’s, since the latter was nearly ten years younger. Gerry de Leon’s *Terror Is a Man* (1959), *Women in Cages* (1971), *Kulay Dugo ang Gabi* [*The Blood Drinkers*] (1964), and *Ibulong Mo sa Hangin* [*Blood of the Vampires*] (1964) hold varying degrees of favorable regard for cineastes who specialize in B-film production.
- 14 Lee Sangjoon’s *Cinema and the Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2020) maintains that as of the 1960s, “Manuel de Leon of the Philippines was likely the only influential Southeast Asian film producer still participating in the FPA [the US-sponsored Federation of Motion Picture Producers in Asia-Pacific]” (“Introduction: The Cultural Cold War and the Birth of the Asian Cinema Network”). This fact can be correlated with the account in *Mike De Leon’s Last Look Back* (Manila: Contra Mundum Publishing, 2022) of LVN Pictures participating in the FPA’s anti-Communist project by volunteering three films. Of these three, Fernandez’s *Kontrabando* (1950) was the first, but the other two (*Korea*, scripted by Benigno S. Aquino Jr. but deemed lost, from 1952; and *Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay or Rebel in a New Life* from 1953) were by Lamberto V. Avellana. While Fernandez’s non-renewal might imply that his effort disappointed the FPA, *Kontrabando* in fact demonstrates some gestures of resistance to the propagandistic slant required by anti-Communist propaganda: the expected demonization of Chinese nationals is tempered by ascribing their transgression to the ideologically neutral crime of drug trafficking.



Screenshot of My Heritage page by the author; bottom photo courtesy of Rap Fernandez.