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Contents

List of Filmmakers ..... *xvii*

List of Canon Film Titles ..... *xix*

Preface ..... *xxv*

Introduction *1*

Canon Munitions: From the Beginning to 2020 ..... *5*

Listed chronologically according to filmmaker. Films connected with a plus sign (+) share the same capsule review. Period markers appear only on this list, not in the body text; each filmmaking entry comprises its own chapter.

Beginning through First Golden Age (*1950–1959*)
and End of the Interval (*1960–1973*)

Eduardo de Castro *(1 title, 1937)* *6*
Zamboanga: A Fanciful Tale of Moro Sea Gypsies, 1937

Carlos Vander Tolosa *(1 title, 1939)* *7*
Giliw Ko, 1939

Gerardo de Leon & Abe Yutaka *(1 title, 1944)* *8*
Dawn of Freedom, 1944

Gerardo de Leon *(8 titles, 1951–1971)* *10*
Sisa, 1951; *Dyesebel*, 1953; *Pedro Penduko*, 1954; *Sanda Wong*, 1955; *Terror Is a Man*, 1959; *The Moises Padilla Story*, 1961; *El Filibusterismo*, 1962; *Women in Cages*, 1971

Susana C. de Guzman *(1 title, 1949)* *18*
Lupang Pangako [incomplete], 1949

Gregorio Fernandez *(6 titles, 1950–1958)* *20*
Kontrabando, 1950; *Prinsipe Teñoso*, 1954; *Higit sa Lahat*, 1955 + *Luksang Tagumpay* [incomplete], 1956; *Hukom Roldan*, 1957; *Malvarosa*, 1958

Manuel Conde *(1 title, 1950)* *26*
Genghis Khan, 1950

Mar S. Torres *(1 title, 1954)* *27*
Jack en Jill, 1954

Lamberto V. Avellana *(4 titles, 1956–1970)* *28*
Anak Dalita, 1956; *Sarjan Hassan*, 1958; *Nick Joaquin's A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*, 1965; *The Evil Within*, 1970

Tony Cayado *(1 title, 1957)* *32*
Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak, 1957

Armando Garces *(1 title, 1957)* *33*
Sino ang Maysala?, 1957
Ramon A. Estella *(4 titles, 1957–1965)* *35*
Kembali Saorang, 1957; *Samseng*, 1959; *Saudagar Minyak Urat*, 1959; *Pusaka Pontianak*, 1965
Teodorico C. Santos *(1 title, 1957)* *39*
Taufan, 1957
Conrado Conde *(1 title, 1958)* *41*
Talipandas, 1958
Manuel Silos *(1 title, 1959)* *42*
Biyaya ng Lupa, 1959
Pablo Santiago *(3 titles, 1961–1982)* *43*
Amado Pagsanjan's Asiong Salonga, 1961; *Pepeng Kaliwete*, 1982 + *Annie Sabungera*, 1982
George Montgomery *(1 title, 1962)* *47*
Samar, 1962
Irving Lerner *(1 title, 1963)* *49*
Cry of Battle, 1963
Cesar Gallardo *(1 title, 1964)* *51*
Geron Busabos: Ang Batang Quiapo, 1964
Efren Reyes *(1 title, 1965)* *52*
Ang Daigdig Ko'y Ikaw, 1965
Eddie Romero *(4 titles, 1966–1977)* *54*
The Passionate Strangers, 1966; *Savage Sisters*, 1974; *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?*, 1976; *Banta ng Kahapon*, 1977
Danny L. Zialcita *(3 titles, 1967–1983)* *59*
Masquerade, 1967; *T-Bird at Ako*, 1982; *Palabra de Honor*, 1983
Leroy Salvador *(2 titles, 1968–1985)* *62*
Badlis sa Kinabuhi, 1968; *Beloved*, 1985
Lino Brocka *(14 titles, 1970–1990)* *64*
Tubog sa Ginto, 1970; *Stardoom*, 1971; *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang*, 1974; *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, 1975; *Insiang*, 1976; *Jaguar*, 1979; *Bona*, 1980; *Cain at Abel*, 1982; *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim*, 1984 + *Orapronobis*, 1989; *Miguelito: Batang Rebelde*, 1985; *Babangon Ako't Dudurugin Kita*, 1989; *Hahamakin Lahat*, 1990; *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak*, 1990
Celso Ad. Castillo *(6 titles, 1971–1986)* *76*
Asedillo, 1971; *Daluyong at Habagat*, 1976; *Burlesk Queen*, 1977; *Celso Ad. Castillo's Totoy Boogie*, 1980; *Uhaw na Dagat*, 1981; *Paradise Inn*, 1985

Ishmael Bernal *(15 titles, 1971–1985)* *82*
Pagdating sa Dulo, 1971; *Lumapit ... Lumayo ang Umaga*, 1975; *Ligaw na Bulaklak*, 1976; *Nunal sa Tubig*, 1976; *Nonoy Marcelo's Tisoy!*, 1977; *Ikaw Ay Akin*, 1978; *Salawahan*, 1979; *Aliw*, 1979; *Manila by Night*, 1980; *Pabling*, 1981; *Relasyon*, 1982 + *Broken Marriage*, 1983; *Himala*, 1982; *Working Girls*, 1984; *Hinugot sa Langit*, 1985

SECOND GOLDEN AGE (*1974–1986*)
Jun Raquiza *(1 title, 1974)* *94*
Krimen (Kayo ang Humatol), 1974
Joey Gosiengfiao *(2 titles, 1974–1980)* *95*
La Paloma, 1974; *Underage*, 1980
Mike De Leon *(7 titles, 1976–1999)* *97*
Itim, 1976; *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?*, 1980; *Kisapmata*, 1981 + *Batch '81*, 1982; *Sister Stella L.*, 1984; *Bilanggo sa Dilim*, 1986; *Bayaning 3rd World*, 1999
Mario O'Hara *(7 titles, 1976–2003)* *102*
Tatlong Taóng Walang Diyos, 1976; *Condemned*, 1984 + *Bulaklak sa City Jail*, 1984; *Bagong Hari*, 1986; *Sindak!*, 1999; *Pangarap ng Puso*, 2000; *Babae sa Breakwater*, 2003
Kidlat Tahimik *(1 title, 1977)* *108*
Mababangong Bangungot, 1977
Bobby A. Suarez *(2 titles, 1978–1988)* *109*
They Call Her ... Cleopatra Wong, 1978; *Red Roses for a Call Girl*, 1988
Laurice Guillen *(6 titles, 1980–1993)* *111*
Kasal?, 1980; *Salome*, 1981; *Init sa Magdamag*, 1983; *Kung Mahawi Man ang Ulap*, 1984; *Sumayaw Ka Salome*, 1992; *Dahil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story*, 1993
Marilou Diaz-Abaya *(6 titles, 1980–1997)* *116*
Brutal, 1980 + *Moral*, 1982; *Karnal*, 1983; *Sensual*, 1986; *May Nagmamahal sa Iyo*, 1996; *Milagros*, 1997
Fernando Poe Jr. *(6 titles, 1980–2000)* *121*
Ang Panday, 1980 + *Pagbabalik ng Panday*, 1981 + *Ang Panday: Ikatlong Yugto*, 1982 + *Ang Panday IV*, 1984; *Ang Maestro*, 1981; *Ang Dalubhasa*, 2000
Fernando Poe Jr. & Willy Milan *(1 title, 1995)* *125*
Kahit Butas ng Karayom ... Papasukin Ko, 1995
Fernando Poe Jr. & Augusto Salvador *(1 title, 1997)* *126*
Eseng ng Tondo, 1997
Mel Chionglo *(11 titles, 1981–2016)* *128*
Playgirl, 1981; *Sinner or Saint*, 1984; *Nasaan Ka Nang Kailangan Kita*, 1986 + *Paano Kung Wala Ka Na*, 1987; *Babaing Hampaslupa*, 1988; *Developing Stories: Lucia*, 1992; *Sibak: Midnight Dancers*, 1994 + *Burlesk King*, 1999 + *Twilight Dancers*, 2006; *Lauriana*, 2013; *Iadya Mo Kami*, 2016

Romy Suzara *(2 titles, 1981–2013)* *137*
Pepeng Shotgun, 1981; *Tinik*, 2013
Peque Gallaga *(4 titles, 1982–2005)* *139*
Oro, Plata, Mata, 1982; *Virgin Forest*, 1985; *Scorpio Nights*, 1985; *Pinoy/Blonde*, 2005
Peque Gallaga & Lore Reyes *(3 titles, 1988–2013)* *144*
Tiyanak, 1988 + *Aswang*, 1992; *Sonata*, 2013
Maryo J. de los Reyes *(7 titles, 1982–2003)* *147*
Schoolgirls, 1982; *Diosa*, 1982; *Bagets*, 1984; *Kaya Kong Abutin ang Langit*, 1984; *Anak ni Waray vs. Anak ni Biday*, 1984; *Dinampot Ka Lang sa Putik*, 1991; *Magnifico*, 2003
Gil Portes *(3 titles, 1983–1984)* *153*
Gabi Kung Sumikat ang Araw, 1983; *'Merika*, 1984; *Bukas ... May Pangarap*, 1984
Emmanuel H. Borlaza *(3 titles, 1984–1987)* *155*
Bukas Luluhod ang mga Tala, 1984 + *Bituing Walang Ningning*, 1985; *Stolen Moments*, 1987
Tata Esteban *(2 titles, 1984–1995)* *159*
Alapaap, 1984; *Gayuma: Sana'y Mahalin Mo Rin Ako*, 1995
Chito S. Roño *(10 titles, 1984–2018)* *162*
Private Show, 1984 + *Curacha: Ang Babaeng Walang Pahinga*, 1998; *Itanong Mo sa Buwan*, 1988 + *La Vida Rosa*, 2001; *Bakit Kay Tagal ng Sandali?*, 1990; *Alyas Stella Magtanggol*, 1992; *Bata Bata Paano Ka Ginawa?*, 1998; *Caregiver*, 2008; *Boy Golden: Shoot to Kill*, 2013; *Signal Rock*, 2018
Elwood Perez *(4 titles, 1985–2013)* *169*
Silip, 1985; *Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit*, 1989; *Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.*, 1991; *Otso*, 2013
Tikoy Aguiluz *(3 titles, 1985–2000)* *172*
Boatman, 1985; *Segurista*, 1996; *Biyaheng Langit*, 2000
William Pascual *(1 title, 1986)* *175*
Takaw Tukso, 1986

END OF SECOND GOLDEN AGE TO END OF THE PAST MILLENNIUM (*1987–1999*)
Abbo Q. dela Cruz *(1 title, 1987)* *176*
Hubad na Pangarap, 1987
Eddie Garcia *(1 title, 1987)* *177*
Saan Nagtatago ang Pag-ibig?, 1987
Artemio Marquez *(2 titles, 1987–1988)* *178*
The Untold Story of Melanie Marquez, 1987; *Sa Puso Ko Hahalik ang Mundo*, 1988
Pepe Marcos *(1 title, 1988)* *181*
Tubusin Mo ng Dugo, 1988
Nora Aunor *(1 title, 1989)* *182*
Greatest Performance [unfinished], 1989

Augusto Salvador *(2 titles, 1990–1993)* *184*
Ikasa Mo ... Ipuputok Ko, 1990; *Masahol Pa sa Hayop*, 1993
Carlos Siguion-Reyna *(4 titles, 1991–1998)* *187*
Hihintayin Kita sa Langit, 1991 + *Ikaw Pa Lang ang Minahal*, 1992; *Ang Lalake sa Buhay ni Selya*, 1997; *Tatlo ... Magkasalo*, 1998
Toto Natividad *(7 titles, 1992–2017)* *191*
Totoy Guwapo: Alyas Kanto Boy, 1992; *Amang Capulong: Anak ng Tondo, Part II*, 1992; *Ka Hector*, 1994; *Wangbu*, 1998; *Notoryus*, 1998; *Double Barrel (Sige! Iputok Mo.)*, 2017 + *Riding in Tandem*, 2017
J. Erastheo Navoa *(1 title, 1992)* *198*
Totoy Buang: Mad Killer ng Maynila, 1992
Junn P. Cabreira *(1 title, 1993)* *199*
Beloy Montemayor Jr.: Tirador ng Cebu, 1993
Edgardo Vinarao *(1 title, 1993)* *200*
Tatak ng Kriminal, 1993
Jose Javier Reyes *(3 titles, 1993–2003)* *202*
May Minamahal, 1993; *Minsan May Isang Puso*, 2001; *Kung Ako Na Lang Sana*, 2003
Alan Chui Chung-San & Yuen Bun *(1 title, 1995)* *205*
Mabangis na Lungsod, 1995
Francis Posadas *(2 titles, 1997–1999)* *207*
Amanos: Patas ang Laban, 1997; *'Di Puwedeng Hindi Puwede!*, 1999
Joey del Rosario *(1 title, 1998)* *209*
Kahit Pader Gigibain Ko, 1998
Jeffrey Jeturian *(6 titles, 1999–2013)* *210*
Pila-Balde, 1999; *Tuhog*, 2001; *Bridal Shower*, 2004 + *Minsan Pa*, 2004; *Kubrador*, 2006; *Ekstra*, 2013
Ike Jarlego Jr. *(1 title, 1999)* *215*
Tigasin, 1999
Jon Red *(2 titles, 1999–2013)* *217*
Still Lives, 1999 + *Ang Pirata*, 2013

FIRST DECADE OF THE MILLENNIUM (*2000–2009*)
Olivia M. Lamasan *(2 titles, 2000–2004)* *219*
Minsan, Minahal Kita, 2000; *Milan*, 2004
Joyce Bernal *(4 titles, 2000–2009)* *221*
Tunay na Tunay: Gets Mo? Gets Ko!, 2000; *Booba*, 2001 + *Masikip sa Dibdib: The Boobita Rose Story*, 2004; *Kimmy Dora: Kambal sa Kiyeme*, 2009
Miike Takashi *(1 title, 2000)* *225*
The Guys from Paradise, 2000

Yam Laranas *(4 titles, 2001–2020)* *227*
Radyo, 2001 + *Sigaw*, 2004; *Abomination*, 2018 + *Nightshift*, 2020
Joel Lamangan *(3 titles, 2001–2013)* *231*
Hubog, 2001; *Walang Kawala*, 2008; *Burgos*, 2013
Lav Diaz *(3 titles, 2002–2013)* *234*
Hesus, Rebolusyunaryo, 2002; *Florentina Hubaldo, CTE*, 2012; *Norte, Hangganan ng Kasaysayan*, 2013
Rory B. Quintos *(1 title, 2002)* *237*
Kailangan Kita, 2002
Wenn V. Deramas *(2 titles, 2003–2012)* *239*
Ang Tanging Ina, 2003; *Moron 5 and the Crying Lady*, 2012
Mark Meily *(1 title, 2003)* *241*
Crying Ladies, 2003
Khavn *(5 titles, 2005–2017)* *242*
Ang Pamilyang Kumakain ng Lupa, 2005 + *Ang Napakaigsing Buhay ng Alipato*, 2016; *Pusong Wazak: Isa Na Namang Kwento ng Pag-ibig sa Pagitan ng Kriminal at Puta*, 2012; *Desaparadiso: Corrido at Buhay na Pinagdaanan nang Tatlong Principeng Magcacapatid na Anac nang Haring Fernando at nang Reina Valeriana sa Cahariang Berbania*, 2015; *Balangiga: Howling Wilderness*, 2017
Auraeus Solito *(1 title, 2005)* *247*
Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros, 2005
Emmanuel Dela Cruz *(1 title, 2005)* *248*
Sarong Banggi, 2005
Rico Maria Ilarde *(2 titles, 2005–2007)* *249*
Sa Ilalim ng Cogon, 2005; *Altar*, 2007
Sherad Anthony Sanchez *(2 titles, 2006–2012)* *251*
Huling Balyan ng Buhi o ang Sinalirap nga Asoy Nila, 2006; *Jungle Love*, 2012
Cesar Montano *(1 title, 2006)* *254*
Ligalig, 2006
Brillante Mendoza *(5 titles, 2007–2016)* *255*
Foster Child, 2007 + *Tirador*, 2007; *Serbis*, 2008; *Lola*, 2009; *Ma' Rosa*, 2016
Cathy Garcia-Sampana *(1 title, 2007)* *259*
One More Chance, 2007
Adolfo Alix Jr. *(5 titles, 2007–2017)* *260*
Tambolista, 2007; *Imoral*, 2008; *Isda*, 2011; *Porno*, 2013; *Madilim ang Gabi*, 2017
Joselito Altarejos *(3 titles, 2008–2019)* *265*
Ang Lihim ni Antonio, 2008; *Unfriend*, 2014; *Jino to Mari*, 2019
Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil *(2 titles, 2008–2016)* *268*
Boses, 2008; *Indigo Child*, 2016

Francis Xavier Pasion *(1 title, 2008)* *270*
Jay, 2008
Tara Illenberger *(2 titles, 2008–2017)* *271*
Brutus, ang Paglalakbay, 2008; *High Tide*, 2017
Richard Somes *(2 title, 2008–2012)* *274*
Yanggaw, 2008; *Mariposa: Sa Hawla ng Gabi*, 2012
Soxy Topacio *(1 title, 2009)* *276*
Ded Na si Lolo, 2009
Raya Martin *(2 titles, 2009–2013)* *277*
Independencia, 2009; *How to Disappear Completely*, 2013
Vic Acedillo Jr. *(1 title, 2009)* *279*
Ang Nerseri, 2009
Monti Parungao *(2 titles, 2009–2011)* *280*
Bayaw, 2009 + *The Escort*, 2011
Armando Lao *(1 title, 2009)* *282*
Biyaheng Lupa, 2009
Ray Gibraltar *(1 title, 2009)* *283*
Wanted: Border, 2009

SECOND DECADE OF THE MILLENNIUM: FIRST HALF (*2010–2014*)
Mae Cruz-Alviar *(2 title, 2010–2014)* *284*
Babe, I Love You, 2010; *Bride for Rent*, 2014
Chris Martinez *(1 title, 2010)* *286*
Here Comes the Bride, 2010
John Sayles *(1 title, 2010)* *288*
Amigo, 2010
Sheron R. Dayoc *(1 title, 2010)* *290*
Halaw, 2010
Remton Siega Zuasola *(1 title, 2010)* *291*
Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria, 2010
Lawrence Fajardo *(4 titles, 2011–2015)* *292*
Amok, 2011; *Posas*, 2012; *The Strangers*, 2012; *Imbisibol*, 2015
Marlon N. Rivera *(1 title, 2011)* *297*
Ang Babae sa Septic Tank, 2011
Jade Castro *(2 titles, 2011–2019)* *298*
Zombadings 1: Patayin sa Shokot si Remington, 2011; *LSS*, 2019
Ruel S. Bayani *(1 title, 2011)* *300*
No Other Woman, 2011

Brandon Relucio & Ivan Zaldarriaga *(1 title, 2011)* *302*
Di Ingon 'Nato, 2011
Antoinette Jadaone *(3 titles, 2011–2020)* *303*
Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay, 2011; *That Thing Called Tadhana*, 2014; *Fan Girl*, 2020
Dominic Zapata *(1 title, 2012)* *306*
Boy Pick-Up: The Movie, 2012
Marie Jamora *(1 title, 2012)* *307*
Ang Nawawala, 2012
Arnel Mardoquio *(2 titles, 2012–2013)* *308*
Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim, 2012; *Ang mga Tigmo sa Akong Pagpauli (Riddles of My Homecoming)*, 2013
Christian Linaban *(2 titles, 2012–2016)* *311*
Aberya, 2012; *Superpsychocebu*, 2016
Pam Miras *(2 titles, 2012–2017)* *314*
Pascalina, 2012; *Medusae*, 2017
Erik Matti *(1 title, 2013)* *317*
On the Job, 2013
Hannah Espia *(1 title, 2013)* *318*
Transit, 2013
Sigrid Andrea Bernardo *(3 titles, 2013–2019)* *319*
Ang Huling Cha-Cha ni Anita (Anita's Last Cha-Cha), 2013; *Lorna*, 2014; *UnTrue*, 2019
Keith Deligero *(3 titles, 2013–2018)* *322*
Iskalawags, 2013; *Lily*, 2016; *A Short History of a Few Bad Things*, 2018
Giancarlo Abrahan *(2 titles, 2014–2019)* *326*
Dagitab, 2014; *Sila-Sila*, 2019
Perci M. Intalan *(1 title, 2014)* *328*
Dementia, 2014

SECOND DECADE OF THE MILLENNIUM: SECOND HALF TO CUTOFF YEAR (*2015–2020*)

Zig Madamba Dulay *(1 title, 2015)* *329*
Bambanti, 2015
Lemuel Lorca *(1 title, 2015)* *330*
Water Lemon, 2015
Ralston Jover *(5 titles, 2015–2019)* *332*
Da Dog Show, 2015 + *Hamog*, 2015; *Rene Villanueva's Hiblang Abo*, 2016; *Bomba*, 2017; *Latay (Battered Husband)*, 2019

King Palisoc *(1 title, 2015)* *337*
Tandem, 2015
Jerrold Tarog *(1 title, 2015)* *338*
Heneral Luna, 2015
Pedring Lopez *(1 title, 2015)* *339*
Nilalang, 2015
Dan Villegas *(3 titles, 2015–2018)* *341*
#WalangForever, 2015 + *How to Be Yours*, 2016; *Hintayan ng Langit*, 2018
Matthew Abaya *(1 title, 2016)* *344*
Vampariah, 2016
Paolo Villaluna *(1 title, 2016)* *345*
Pauwi Na, 2016
Louie Ignacio *(1 title, 2016)* *347*
Area, 2016
Bagane Fiola *(1 title, 2016)* *349*
Baboy Halas: Wailings in the Forest, 2016
Prime Cruz *(1 title, 2016)* *351*
Ang Manananggal sa Unit 23B, 2016
Jun Robles Lana *(1 title, 2016)* *352*
Die Beautiful, 2016
Mikhail Red *(2 titles, 2016–2017)* *353*
Birdshot, 2016 + *Neomanila*, 2017
Theodore Boborol *(1 title, 2016)* *355*
Vince & Kath & James, 2016
JP Habac *(1 title, 2017)* *357*
I'm Drunk, I Love You., 2017
Arnel Barbarona *(1 title, 2017)* *358*
Tu Pug Imatuy, 2017
Treb Monteras II *(1 title, 2017)* *359*
Respeto, 2017
Irene Villamor *(3 titles, 2018–2020)* *360*
Meet Me in St. Gallen, 2018; *Ulan*, 2019; *On Vodka, Beers, and Regrets*, 2020
Jason Paul Laxamana *(1 title, 2018)* *363*
The Day After Valentine's, 2018
Roman Perez Jr. *(1 title, 2018)* *364*
Sol Searching, 2018
Eduardo W. Roy Jr. *(1 title, 2019)* *365*
Lola Igna, 2019

Veronica Velasco *(1 title, 2019)* *367*
Nuuk, 2019
J.E. Tiglao *(1 title, 2019)* *369*
Metamorphosis, 2019
Kim Bong-han *(1 title, 2020)* *371*
The Golden Holiday, 2020
Dodo Dayao *(1 title, 2020)* *373*
Midnight in a Perfect World, 2020
Dolly Dulu *(1 title, 2020)* *374*
The Boy Foretold by the Stars, 2020

Cessations *375*

Incidental Subject Index *377*

The Author *378*

List of Filmmakers

Abaya, Matthew, *344*
Abe Yutaka – see *de Leon, Gerardo, & Abe Yutaka*
Abrahan, Giancarlo, *326–327*
Acedillo, Vic Jr., *279*
Aguiluz, Tikoy, *172–174*
Alix, Adolfo Jr., *260–264*
Altarejos, Joselito, *265–267*
Aunor, Nora, *182–183*
Avellana, Lamberto V., *28–31*
Barbarona, Arnel, *357*
Bayani, Ruel S., *300–301*
Bernal, Ishmael, *82–93*
Bernal, Joyce, *221–224*
Bernardo, Sigrid Andrea, *319–321*
Boborol, Theodore, *355–356*
Borlaza, Emmanuel H., *155–158*
Brocka, Lino, *64–75*
Cabreira, Junn P., *199*
Castillo, Celso Ad., *76–81*
Castro, Jade, *298–299*
Cayado, Tony, *32*
Chionglo, Mel, *128–136*
Chui Chung-San, Alan, & Yuen Bun, *205–206*
Conde, Conrado, *41*
Conde, Manuel, *26*
Cruz-Alviar, Mae, *284–285*
Cruz, Prime, *351*
Dayao, Dodo, *373*
Dayoc, Sheron R., *290*
de Castro, Eduardo, *7*
de Guia, Eric – see *Tahimik, Kidlat*
de Guzman, Susana C., *18–19*
dela Cruz, Abbo Q., *176*
Dela Cruz, Emmanuel, *248*
de Leon, Gerardo, *6–13*
de Leon, Gerardo, & Abe Yutaka, *10–17*
De Leon, Mike, *97–101*
Deligero, Keith, *322–325*
de los Reyes, Maryo J., *147–152*
del Rosario, Joey, *209*
Deramas, Wenn V., *239–240*
Diaz, Lav, *234–236*
Diaz-Abaya, Marilou, *116–120*
Dulay, Zig Madamba, *329*
Dulu, Dolly, *374*
Espia, Hannah, *318*
Esteban, Tata, *159–162*
Estella, Ramon A., *35–38*
Fajardo, Lawrence, *292–296*
Fernandez, Gregorio, *20–25*
Fiola, Bagane, *349–350*
Gallaga, Peque, *139–143*
Gallaga, Peque, & Lore Reyes, *144–146*
Gallardo, Cesar, *51*
Garces, Armando, *33–34*
Garcia, Eddie, *177*
Garcia-Molina, Cathy – see *Garcia-Sampana, Cathy*
Garcia-Sampana, Cathy, *259*
Gibraltar, Ray, *283*
Gosiengfiao, Joey, *95–96*
Guillen, Laurice, *111–115*
Habac, JP, *357*
Ignacio, Louie, *347–348*
Illenberger, Tara, *271–273*
Ilarde, Rico Maria, *249–250*
Intalan, Perci M., *328*
Jadaone, Antoinette, *303–305*
Jamora, Marie, *307*
Jarlego, Ike Jr., *215–216*
Jeturian, Jeffrey, *210–214*
Jover, Ralston, *332–336*
Kayko, Sixto – see *Roño, Chito S*
Khavn, *242–246*
Kim Bong-han, *371–372*
Lamangan, Joel, *231–233*
Lamasan, Olivia M., *219–220*
Lana, Jun, *352*
Lao, Armando, *282*

Laranas, Yam, *227–230*
Laxamana, Jason Paul, *363*
Lerner, Irving, *49–50*
Linaban, Christian, *310–313*
Lorca, Lemuel, *330–331*
Lopez, Pedring, *339–340*
Mambo, Rico – see *dela Cruz, Abbo Q.*
Marcos, Pepe, *181*
Mardoquio, Arnel, *308–310*
Marquez, Artemio, *178–180*
Martin, Raya, *277–278*
Martinez, Chris, *286–287*
Matti, Erik, *317*
Meily, Mark, *241*
Mendoza, Brillante, *255–258*
Mike Takashi, *225–226*
Milan, Willy – see *Poe, Fernando Jr., & Willy Milan*
Miras, Pam, *314–316*
Montano, Cesar, *254*
Monteras, Treb II, *359*
Montgomery, George, *47–48*
Natividad, Toto, *191–197*
Navoa, J. Erastheo, *198*
O'Hara, Mario, *102–107*
Ongkeko-Marfil, Ellen, *268–269*
Palisoc, King, *337*
Paolo, Steve – see *Esteban, Tata*
Parungao, Monti, *280–281*
Pascual, William, *175*
Pasion, Francis Xavier, *270*
Perez, Elwood, *169–171*
Perez, Roman Jr., *364*
Poe, Fernando Jr., *121–124*
Poe, Fernando Jr., & Willy Milan, *125*
Poe, Fernando Jr., & Augusto Salvador, *126–127*
Portes, Gil, *153–154*
Posadas, Francis, *207–208*
Quintos, Rory B., *237–238*
Raquiza, Jun, *94*
Red, Jon, *217–218*
Red, Mikhail, *353–354*
Relucio, Brandon, & Ivan Zaldarriaga, *302*
Reyes, Efren, *52–53*
Reyes, Jose Javier, *202–204*
Reyes, Lore – see *Gallaga, Peque, & Lore Reyes*
Reyes, Ronwaldo – see *Poe, Fernando Jr.*
Richardson, George – see *Suarez, Bobby A.*
Rivera, Marlon N., *297*
Romero, Eddie, *54–58*
Roño, Chito S., *162–168*
Roy, Eduardo W. Jr., *365–366*
Salvador, Augusto, *184–186*
Salvador, Augusto – see *Poe, Fernando Jr., & Augusto Salvador*
Salvador, Leroy, *62–63*
Salvador, Lou – see *Conde, Manuel*
Sanchez, Sherad Anthony, *251–253*
Santiago, Pablo, *43–46*
Santos, Teodorico C., *39–40*
Sayles, John, *288–289*
Siguion-Reyna, Carlos, *187–190*
Silos, Manuel, *42*
Solito, Auraeus, *247*
Somes, Richard, *274–275*
Suarez, Bobby A., *109–110*
Suzara, Romy V., *137–138*
Tahimik, Kidlat, *108*
Tarog, Jerrold, *338*
Tiglao, J.E., *369–370*
Topacio, Soxy, *276*
Torres, Mar S., *27*
Vander Tolosa, Carlos, *7*
Velasco, Veronica, *367–368*
Villaluna, Paolo, *345–346*
Villamor, Irene, *360–362*
Villegas, Dan, *341–343*
Vinarao, Edgardo, *200–201*
Yuen Bun – see *Chui Chung-San, Alan, & Yuen Bun*
Zaldarriaga, Ivan – see *Relucio, Brandon, & Ivan Zaldarriaga*
Zapata, Dominic, *306*
Zialcita, Danny L., *59–61*
Zuasola, Remton Siega, *291*

List of Canon Film Titles

To minimize confusion, any initial article in any language (including English) was not excluded in alphabetizing the list

Aberya (2012), *311–312*
Abomination (2018), *228–230*
A Fanciful Tale of Moro Sea Gypsies—see *Zamboanga: A Fanciful Tale of Moro Sea Gypsies* (1937)
Alapaap (1984), *159*
Aliw (1979), *87–88*
Altar (2007), *250*
Alyas Stella Magtanggol (1992), *164–165*
Amado Pagsanjan's Asiong Salonga (1961), *43*
Amang Capulong: Anak ng Tondo, Part II (1992), *192*
Amanos: Patas ang Laban (1997), *207*
Amigo (2010), *288–289*
Amok (2011), *292–293*
Anak Dalita (1956), *28*
Anak ni Waray vs. Anak ni Biday (1984), *150–151*
Ang Babae sa Septic Tank (2011), *297*
Ang Daigdig Ko'y Ikaw (1965), *52–53*
Ang Dalubhasa (2000), *124*
Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria (2010), *291*
Ang Huling Cha-Cha ni Anita (Anita's Last Cha-Cha) (2013), *319–320*
Ang Lalake sa Buhay ni Selya (1997), *188–189*
Ang Lihim ni Antonio (2008), *265*
Ang Maestro (1981), *123*
Ang Manananggal sa Unit 23B (2016), *351*
Ang mga Tigmo sa Akong Pagpauli (Riddles of My Homecoming) (2013), *309–310*
Ang Napakaigsing Buhay ng Alipato (2016), *242–243*
Ang Nawawala (2012), *307*
Ang Nerseri (2009), *279*
Ang Pagdadalaga n Maximo Oliveros (2005), *247*
Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim (2012), *308–309*
Ang Pamilyang Kumakain ng Lupa (2005), *242–243*
Ang Panday (1980), *121–123*
Ang Panday IV (1984), *121–123*
Ang Panday: Ikatlong Yugto (1982), *121–123*
Ang Pirata (2013), *217–218*
Ang Tanging Ina (2003), *239*
Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M. (1991), *170–171*
Annie Sabungera (1982), *44–46*
A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino—see *Nick Joaquin's A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* (1965)
Area (2016), *347–348*
Asedillo (1971), *76*
A Short History of a Few Bad Things (2018), *324–325*
Asiong Salonga—see *Amado Pagsanjan's Asiong Salonga* (1961)
Aswang (1992), *144–145*

B

Babae sa Breakwater (2003), *107*
Babaing Hampaslupa (1988), *130–131*
Babangon Ako't Dudurugin Kita (1989), *72–73*
Babe, I Love You (2010), *284*
Baboy Halas: Wailings in the Forest (2016), *349–350*
Badlis sa Kinabuhi (1968), *62*

Bagets (1984), *148–149*
Bagong Hari (1986), *104*
Bakit Kay Tagal ng Sandali? (1990), *164*
Balangiga: Howling Wilderness (2017), *246*
Bambanti (2015), *329*
Banta ng Kahapon (1977), *57–58*
Bata Bata Paano Ka Ginawa? (1998), *165–166*
Batch '81 (1982), *98–99*
Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim (1984), *70–72*
Bayaning 3rd World (1999), *101*
Bayaw (2009), *280–281*
Beloved (1985), *63*
Beloy Montemaryor Jr.: Tirador ng Cebu (1993), *199*
Bilanggo sa Dilim (1986), *100–101*
Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit (1989), *169–170*
Birdshot (2016), *353–354*
Bituing Walang Ningning (1985), *155–156*
Biyaheng Langit (2000), *173–174*
Biyaheng Lupa (2009), *282*
Biyaya ng Lupa (1959), *42*
Boatman (1985), *172*
Bomba (2017), *334–335*
Bona (1980), *69*
Booba (2001), *222–223*
Boses (2008), *268*
Boy Golden: Shoot to Kill (2013), *167*
Boy Pick-Up: The Movie (2012), *306*
Bridal Shower (2004), *211–213*
Bride for Rent (2014), *285*
Broken Marriage (1983), *90–91*
Brutal (1980), *116–117*
Brutus, ang Paglalakbay (2008), *271–272*
Bukas ... May Pangarap (1984), *154*
Bukas Luluhod ang mga Tala (1984), *155–156*
Bulaklak sa City Jail (1984), *103–104*
Burgos (2013), *233*
Burlesk King (1999), *132–134*
Burlesk Queen (1977), *77–78*

C

Cain at Abel (1982), *69–70*
Caregiver (2008), *166–167*
Celso Ad. Castillo's Totoy Boogie (1980), *78–79*
City After Dark—see *Manila by Night* (1980)
Cleopatra Wong—see *They Call Her ... Cleopatra Wong* (1978)
Condemned (1984), *103–104*
Cry of Battle (1963), *49–50*
Crying Ladies (2003), *241*
Curacha: Ang Babaeng Walang Pahinga (1998), *162*

D

Da Dog Show (2015), *332–333*
Dagitab (2014), *326*
Dahil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story (1993), *114–115*
Daluyong at Habagat (1976), *76–77*
Dawn of Freedom (1944), *8–9*
Ded Na si Lolo (2009), *276*
Dementia (2014), *328*
Desaparadiso: Corrido at Buhay na Pinagdaanan nang Tatlong Principeng Magcacapatid na Anac nang Haring Fernando at nang Reina Valeriana sa Cahariang Berbania (2015), *245*
Developing Stories: Lucia (1992), *131–132*
Di Ingon 'Nato (2011), *302*
Die Beautiful (2016), *352*
Dinampot Ka Lang sa Putik (1991), *151–152*
Diosa (1982), *148*
'Di Puwedeng Hindi Puwede! (1999), *208*
Double Barrel (Sige! Iputok Mo.) (2017), *196–197*
Dyesebel (1953), *11*

E

Ekstra (2013), *213–214*
El Filibusterismo (1962), *15–16*

Eseng ng Tondo (1997), *126–127*

F

Fan Girl (2020), *305*
Florentina Hubaldo, CTE (2012), *235*
Foster Child (2007), *255–256*

G

Gabi Kung Sumikat ang Araw (1983), *153*
Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon? (1976), *56–57*
Gayuma: Sana'y Mahalin Mo Rin Ako (1995), *160–161*
Geisha of Death—see *Nilalang* (2015)
Genghis Khan (1950), *26*
Geron Busabos: Ang Batang Quiapo (1964), *51*
Giliw Ko (1939), *7*
Greatest Performance [unfinished] (1989), *182–183*
Gumapang Ka sa Lusak (1990), *74–75*

H

Hahamakin Lahat (1990), *73–74*
Halaw (2010), *290*
Hamog (2015), *332–333*
Heneral Luna (2015), *338*
Here Comes the Bride (2010), *286–287*
Hesus Rebolusyunaryo (2002), *234*
Hiblang Abo—see *Rene Villanueva's Hiblang Abo* (2016)
High Tide (2017), *272–273*
Higit sa Lahat (1955), *22–23*
Hihintayin Kita sa Langit (1991), *187–188*
Himala (1982), *91*
Hintayan ng Langit (2018), *342–343*
Hinugot sa Langit (1985), *92–93*
How to Be Yours (2016), *341–342*
How to Disappear Completely (2013), *277–278*
Hubad na Pangarap (1987), *176*
Hubog (2001), *231*
Hukom Roldan (1957), *23–25*
Huling Balyan ng Buhi o ang Sinalirap nga Asoy Nila (2006), *251–252*

I

Iadya Mo Kami (2016), *135–136*
Ikasa Mo ... Ipuputok Ko (1990), *184–185*
Ikaw Ay Akin (1978), *86*
Ikaw Pa Lang ang Minahal (1992), *187–188*
Imbisibol (2015), *295–296*
I'm Drunk, I Love You. (2017), *357*
Imoral (2008), *260–260*
Independencia (2009), *277*
Indigo Child (2016), *268–269*
Init sa Magdamag (1983), *112–113*
Insiang (1976), *67–68*
Isda (2011), *261–262*
Iskalawags (2013), *322–323*
Itanong Mo sa Buwan (1988), *163–164*
Itim (1976), *97*

J

Jack en Jill (1954), *27*
Jaguar (1979), *68*
Jay (2008), *270*
Jino to Mari (2019), *266–267*
Jungle Love (2012), *252–253*

K

Ka Hector (1994), *193–194*
Kahit Butas ng Karayom ... Papasukin Ko (1995), *125*
Kahit Pader Gigibain Ko (1998), *209*
Kailangan Kita (2002), *237–238*
Kakabakaba Ka Ba? (1980), *97–98*
Karnal (1983), *117–118*
Kasal? (1980), *111*
Kaya Kong Abutin ang Langit (1984), *149–150*
Kembali Saorang (1957), *35–36*
Kimmy Dora: Kambal sa Kiyeme (2009), *223–224*
Kisapmata (1981), *98–99*
Kontrabando (1950), *20–21*

Krimen (Kayo ang Humatol) (1974), *94*
Kubrador (2006), *213*
Kung Ako Na Lang Sana (2003), *204*
Kung Mahawi Man ang Ulap (1984), *113*

L

La Paloma (1974), *95*
La Vida Rosa (2001), *163–164*
Latay (Battered Husband) (2019), *335–336*
Lauriana (2013), *134–135*
Ligalig (2006), *254*
Ligaw na Bulaklak (1976), *83–84*
Lily (2016), *323–324*
Lola (2009), *257*
Lola Igna (2019), *365–366*
Lorna (2014), *320*
LSS (2019), *299*
Lucia—see *Developing Stories: Lucia* (1992)
Luksang Tagumpay [incomplete] (1956), *22–23*
Lumapit ... Lumayo ang Umaga (1975), *82–83*
Lupang Pangako [incomplete] (1949), *18–19*

M

Ma' Rosa (2016), *258*
Mababangong Bangungot (1977), *108*
Mabangis na Lungsod (1995), *205–206*
Madilim ang Gabi (2017), *263–264*
Magnifico (2003), *152*
Malvarosa (1958), *25*
Manila by Night (1980), *88–89*
Mariposa: Sa Hawla ng Gabi (2012), *274–275*
Masahol Pa sa Hayop (1993), *185–186*
Masikip sa Dibdib: The Boobita Rose Story (2004), *222–223*
Masquerade (1967), *59–60*
May Minamahal (1993), *202–203*
May Nagmamahal sa Iyo (1996), *119*
Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag (1975), *66–67*
Medusae (2017), *315–316*
Meet Me in St. Gallen (2018), *360*
'Merika (1984), *153–154*
Metamorphosis (2019), *369–370*
Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak (1957), *32*
Midnight Dancers—see *Sibak: Midnight Dancers* (1994)
Midnight in a Perfect World (2020), *373*
Miguelito: Batang Rebelde (1985), *72*
Milagros (1997), *120*
Milan (2004), *219–220*
Minsan May Isang Puso (2001), *203*
Minsan Pa (2004), *211–213*
Minsan, Minahal Kita (2000), *219*
Moral (1982), *116–117*
Moron 5 and the Crying Lady (2012), *240*

N

Nasaan Ka Nang Kailangan Kita (1986), *129–130*
Neomanila (2017), *353–354*
Nick Joaquin's A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino (1965), *29–30*
Nightshift (2020), *228–230*
Nilalang (2015), *339–340*
No Other Woman (2011), *300–301*
Nonoy Marcelo's Tisoy! (1977), *85–86*
Norte, Hangganan ng Kasaysayan (2013), *236*
Notoryus (1998), *195–196*
Nunal sa Tubig (1976), *84–85*
Nuuk (2019), *367–368*

O

On the Job (2013), *317*
On Vodka, Beers, and Regrets (2020), *361–362*
One More Chance (2007), *259*
Orapronobis (1989), *70–72*
Oro, Plata, Mata (1982), *139*
OTJ—see *On the Job* (2013)
Otso (2013), *171*

P

Paano Kung Wala Ka Na (1987), *129–130*
Pabling (1981), *89*
Pagbabalik ng Panday (1981), *121–123*
Pagdating sa Dulo (1971), *82*
Palabra de Honor (1983), *61*
Pangarap ng Puso (2000), *103–107*
Paradise Inn (1985), *80–81*
Pascalina (2012), *314–315*
Pauwi Na (2016), *345–346*
Pedro Penduko (1954), *12*
Pepeng Kaliwete (1982), *44–46*
Pepeng Shotgun (1981), *137*
Pila-Balde (1999), *210*
Pinoy/Blonde (2005), *142–143*
Playgirl (1981), *128*
Porno (2013), *262–263*
Posas (2012), *293–294*
Prinsipe Teñoso (1954), *21–22*
Private Show (1984), *162*
Pusaka Pontianak (1965), *38*
Pusong Wazak: Isa Na Namang Kwento ng Pag-ibig sa Pagitan ng Kriminal at Puta (2012), *244*

R

Radyo (2001), *227–228*
Red Roses for a Call Girl (1988), *109–110*
Relasyon (1982), *90–91*
Rene Villanueva's Hiblang Abo (2016), *333–334*
Respeto (2017), *359*
Riddles of My Homecoming—see *Ang mga Tigmo sa Akong Pagpauli (Riddles of My Homecoming)* (2013)
Riding in Tandem (2017), *196–197*

S

Sa Puso Ko Hahalik ang Mundo (1988), *179–180*
Saan Nagtatago ang Pag-ibig? (1987), *177*
Salawahan (1979), *87*
Sa Ilalim ng Cogon (2005), *249*
Salome (1981), *111–112*
Samar (1962), *47–48*
Samseng (1959), *36–37*
Sana'y Mahalin Mo Rin Ako—see *Gayuma: Sana'y Mahalin Mo Rin Ako* (1995)
Sanda Wong (1955), *13*
Sarjan Hassan (1958), *28–29*
Sarong Banggi (2005), *248*
Saudagar Minyak Urat (1959), *37*
Savage Sisters (1974), *54–55*
Schoolgirls (1982), *147*
Scorpio Nights (1985), *141–142*
Segurista (1996), *172–173*
Sensual (1986), *118*
Serbis (2008), *256*
Sibak: Midnight Dancers (1994), *132–134*
Sigaw (2004), *227–228*
Signal Rock (2018), *168*
Sila-Sila (2019), *327*
Silip (1985), *169*
Sindak! (1999), *105*
Sinner or Saint (1984), *128–129*
Sino ang Maysala? (1957), *33–34*
Sisa (1951), *10*
Sister Stella L. (1984), *99–100*
Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay (2011), *303*
Sol Searching (2018), *364*
Sonata (2013), *145–146*
Stardoom (1971), *64–65*
Still Lives (1999), *217–218*
Stolen Moments (1987), *157–158*
Sumayaw Ka Salome (1992), *113–114*
Superpsychocebu (2016), *312–313*

T

Takaw Tukso (1986), *175*
Talipandas (1958), *41*
Tambolista (2007), *260*
Tandem (2015), *337*
Tatak ng Kriminal (1993), *200–201*
Tatlo ... Magkasalo (1998), *189–190*

Tatlong Taóng Walang Diyos (1976), *102*
Taufan (1957), *39–40*
T-Bird at Ako (1982), *60*
Terror Is a Man (1959), *13–14*
That Thing Called Tadhana (2014), *304*
The Boobita Rose Story—see *Masikip sa Dibdib: The Boobita Rose Story* (2004)
The Boy Foretold by the Stars (2020), *374*
The Day After Valentine's (2018), *363*
The Dolzura Cortez Story—see *Dahil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story* (1993)
The Escort (2011), *280–281*
The Evil Within (1970), *30–31*
The Golden Holiday (2020), *371–372*
The Guys from Paradise (2000), *225–226*
The Moises Padilla Story (1961), *14–15*
The Passionate Strangers (1966), *54*
The Strangers (2012), *294–295*
The Untold Story of Melanie Marquez (1987), *178–179*
They Call Her ... Cleopatra Wong (1978), *109*
Tigasin (1999), *215–216*
Tinik (2013), *137–138*
Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang (1974), *65–66*
Tirador (2007), *255–256*
Tisoy!—see *Nonoy Marcelo's Tisoy!* (1977)
Tiyanak (1988), *144–145*
Totoy Boogie—see *Celso Ad. Castillo's Totoy Boogie* (1980)
Totoy Buang: Mad Killer ng Maynila (1992), *198*
Totoy Guwapo: Alyas Kanto Boy (1992), *191*
Tough Beauty and the Sloppy Slop—see *Mabangis na Lungsod* (1995)
Transit (2013), *318*
Tu Pug Imatuy (2017), *358*
Tubog sa Ginto (1970), *64*
Tubusin Mo ng Dugo (1988), *181*
Tuhog (2001), *210–211*
Tunay na Tunay: Gets Mo? Gets Ko! (2000), *221*
Twilight Dancers (2006), *132–134*

U

Uhaw na Dagat (1981), *79–80*
Ulan (2019), *360–361*
Underage (1980), *96*
Unfriend (2014), *266*
UnTrue (2019), *321*

V

Vampariah (2016), *344*
Vince & Kath & James (2016), *355–356*
Virgin Forest (1985), *140*

W

#WalangForever (2015), *341–342*
Walang Kawala (2008), *231–232*
Wangbu (1998), *194–195*
Wanted: Border (2009), *283*
Water Lemon (2015), *330–331*
Women in Cages (1971), *16–17*
Working Girls (1984), *92*

Y

Yanggaw (2008), *274*

Z

Zamboanga: A Fanciful Tale of Moro Sea Gypsies (1937), *6*
Zombadings: Patayin sa Shokot si Remington (2011), *298*

PREFACE

The manuscript began as a project with Summit Media. My retirement as tenured professor at Inha University necessitated the sudden uploading of the text I prepared on my blogsite in 2023. That time, the films selected totaled around 120. Since that seemed inadequate to me, I picked out several from the titles initially rejected in the original publication project and embarked on an intensive re-viewing of possibly overlooked material. Several owners and distributors were also warming up to the open-access concept and started uploading their holdings on streaming websites, mostly *YouTube* but also specialized or subscription outlets. For a short spell, the Singapore Film Archives made available its films, including those made for Malay-language distribution by Philippine directors in the 1950s and 1960s; the late Teddy Co alerted me to their availability and forwarded a few others in better or more complete shape. With the advent of artificial intelligence programs, online transcription and/or translation services proliferated online so I was finally able to work out a system for watching these titles, overlooked in all assessments of Philippine cinema except for vague and often incorrect mentions in some historical accounts.

I wish to extend thanks to the editor of the now-defunct *YES Magazine*, Jo-Ann Q. Maglipon, as well as her inhouse staff, for undertaking a film-viewing and deliberation process that was both extensive and intensive. The book title indicates my readiness to let go of canon exercises after this point. I will still be celebrating outstanding work as it comes along, but the practice of determining whether it belongs on an all-time-best list will just have to be taken up by other interested parties—of which I'm sure history will never run out of eager and willing participants. The following are people to whom I owe thanks for calling my attention (whether they were aware of it or not) to titles I may have dismissed or never considered before: Jerome Gomez, Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil, Ricky Lee, Jim Paranal, Emmanuel Dela Cruz, and Monchito Nocon. Crucial to the completion of the mechanics of the project are Park In-kyu, Lee Jinhyoung, Lee Sanghun, Jeong Yeongjae, Kim Min Tae, Choi Hyun, Angelo Magat, Eric Magat, and Sinan Çakiltepe.

I'd opt to acknowledge, if I could, all the students I ever taught, regardless of how they opted to regard me afterward. I only hope that I've managed to seem higher-evolved than I did in the past, although of course several things (starting with the concern for teaching) deserve to remain the same. If I were to pick out just one name to represent the best of the rest, it would be Corina Bedonia Millado, over whom I'd been exultant for the past several decades and who'll deserve more accolades than I could bestow.

I'll also have to acknowledge the specific founding members of the critics group who provided me with examples worth emulating: Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., for his careful, rigorous, and persistent scholarship, and the late Petronilo Bn. Daroy, for his constant upgrading of his analytic skills and his deployment of wit and humor. Other founding members were also useful in showing me the pitfalls and weaknesses to avoid, but I'm sure readers will understand why their names will be better left unmentioned unless I need to undertake a closer critical assessment of film criticism in the country.

An undertaking of this nature requires two forms of indispensable support. The first and more unusual one is constant pampering, which I knew that I could ensure for myself by remaining in Korea after my retirement: I had to be able to watch the film entries in a receptive frame of mind, and accomplish my writing without castigating myself for some overlooked real-life task or other. But it also entailed a hometown support system, which I thought I could avoid calling on if I could complete the project within the lump-sum retirement benefits that I treated as my personal writing grant. When it ran out before I could finalize the writing, I knew that I had to call on my siblings, where we had the unusual and embarrassing understanding that their eldest will have to be their juvenile. Two of my youngest brothers, Aaron and Nides, were ironically the first to depart, but they and my only sister Peewee performed all the considerable support activities that I could not provide for myself. This time around, my next-elder brothers Aris and Nonoy took charge of raising the funds that the completion phase required.

The other form of support was reliable expertise in terms of assessing, discussing, and even sourcing materials. Four friends, two of whom I'd never even met yet in person, allowed themselves to be conscripted in various online message threads and responded as close to real time as they could, considering we were all based in various territories (Manila and two US time zones). All of us shared, in varying degrees and sometimes with different objects, faith in progressive politics, gender critique, popular culture, and star scholarship, with each one having sometimes overlapping areas in terms of temporal and regional familiarities: Jek David's millennial coverage, Jojo Devera's insider expertise, Epoy Deyto's fond familiarity with critically neglected cinema, and Mau Tumbocon's historical and global reach. Our exchanges were sometimes contentious, often funny, always lively—and I maintain that if the capsule reviews I wrote in consultation with this team were to be properly credited, then their names should be part of the book credits. I could not always accommodate everything that they or anyone else recommended, and I'm sure they might have disagreed with some of my choices, but that was always a limitation on my end, not theirs. Anyone familiar with our ad hoc collective will recognize that the full listing is as much theirs as it is mine.

INTRODUCTION

When a colleague inquired as to what I wanted out of this project, I was stumped. Until we got to talking about some time we shared when I was in graduate school—which was how I remembered a New York icon and blurted out, "To emulate Florence Foster Jenkins and be remembered for a long time, even if I get laughed at for what I'm doing." I wasn't kidding, since the many times I hung out at the classical CDs section of the many record shops in the village, the surest way to initiate pleasant, sometimes hysterical, conversations with strangers was by bringing up her name. And though we may have started out laughing, we somehow wound up with some tone of reverence that enabled us to move on and talk about other personal faves.

Colleague was expectedly amused, but raised the next stump-worthy question: if you're the equivalent of FFJ, what does that make of all the other practitioners? After reflecting on and off for months on my reply that "why should that worry me?" I finally realized that there was no other possible valid answer. The older ones will think I was always mistaken and they were right all along, while the younger ones, if they had any ambition, will be looking for ways to equal or supplant this output. The original critics org where I opted to participate for a few formative years organized an event much later that I labeled Stalinistic, in which the oldest conciliatory founder was soon gone, the current oldest said that I should respect critics who hand out awards and never criticize same-statured colleagues (presumably referring to himself), and the current pre-retired elder one claimed I was wrong because I refused to subscribe to his prescription of honoring independent productions that wallowed in poverty depictions that eschewed mainstream appeal and deployed high-art strategies instead.[1]

After the near-completion of this project, I realized that the introductory essay I drafted for the original digital edition was too extensive, not to mention defensive, and would be better situated in a collection of articles on critical reflexivity. Hence nothing should stop the curious reader from proceeding forthwith to the canonical choices with their respective writeups, although a recounting of the project's origins would be helpful. It started as a top-100 listing and soon broke free of that round number. Since the planned print version never came out in time to enable my retirement clearance, I continued making additions and self-publishing the results on my blog—with the clarification that the project was far from finished at that stage.

With the present "E-Book Edition," it can still be further finalized in future, mainly with the remastering of previously damaged or missing files or the recovery of long-presumed-gone prints such as Celso Ad. Castillo's *Burlesk Queen* (1977) or Lino Brocka's *Mananayaw* (*The Dancer*, 1978). Ironically, the practice I followed was instilled by the critics group I mentioned, which apparently no longer observes it: repeat screenings to ensure that a work is capable of sustaining long-term appreciation for any number of reasons, with research into production circumstances and discussions

[1] See "On Poetics and Practice of Film Criticism in the Philippines–A Roundtable Discussion," *Plaridel: Journal of Communication, Media, and Society*, vol. 13, no. 1, June 2016, pp. 148–150, doi:10.52518/2016.13.1-09cmps.

with experts to see if we can arrive at any form of consensus. Plus another measure abhorred by the founding members since it challenged their admitted capitalist ideal: the recognition of several possible honorees in any given year, along with the jettisoning of fixed technical or performative categories if these have no relevance to any given text under discussion.

The Quanti-Quali Dilemma

We'll start at the end, with a rather awkwardly positioned graph of the entries in this study according to year of release, appearing on the next page. I hope to have made it as scientific as possible via careful selection, but my leftish ideals ensured that a number of titles championed by individuals or institutions would never show up in the text. To make it worse, which is ironically better for me, I conducted this exercise as a final stab, minimizing the possibility of requiring corrections and leaving the task of inspecting post-2020 titles (as well as reinspecting everything from the beginning) up to future interested parties.

Regarding the trends that show up in the graph, we can see a partial confirmation of the claim of the founding members of the Manununuri ng Pelikulang Pilipino or Filipino Film Critics Circle (hereafter FFCC) that 1976, the year of the group's first awards ceremony, was the best of any such period in Philippine cinema. Their self-serving nature, however, is shown up in the output of the succeeding years: more outstanding films came out during the crisis years comprising the first half of the 1980s, culminating in the people-power protests that followed the assassination of Senator Benigno S. Aquino Jr. and leading to the ouster of the Marcos Sr. dictatorship.

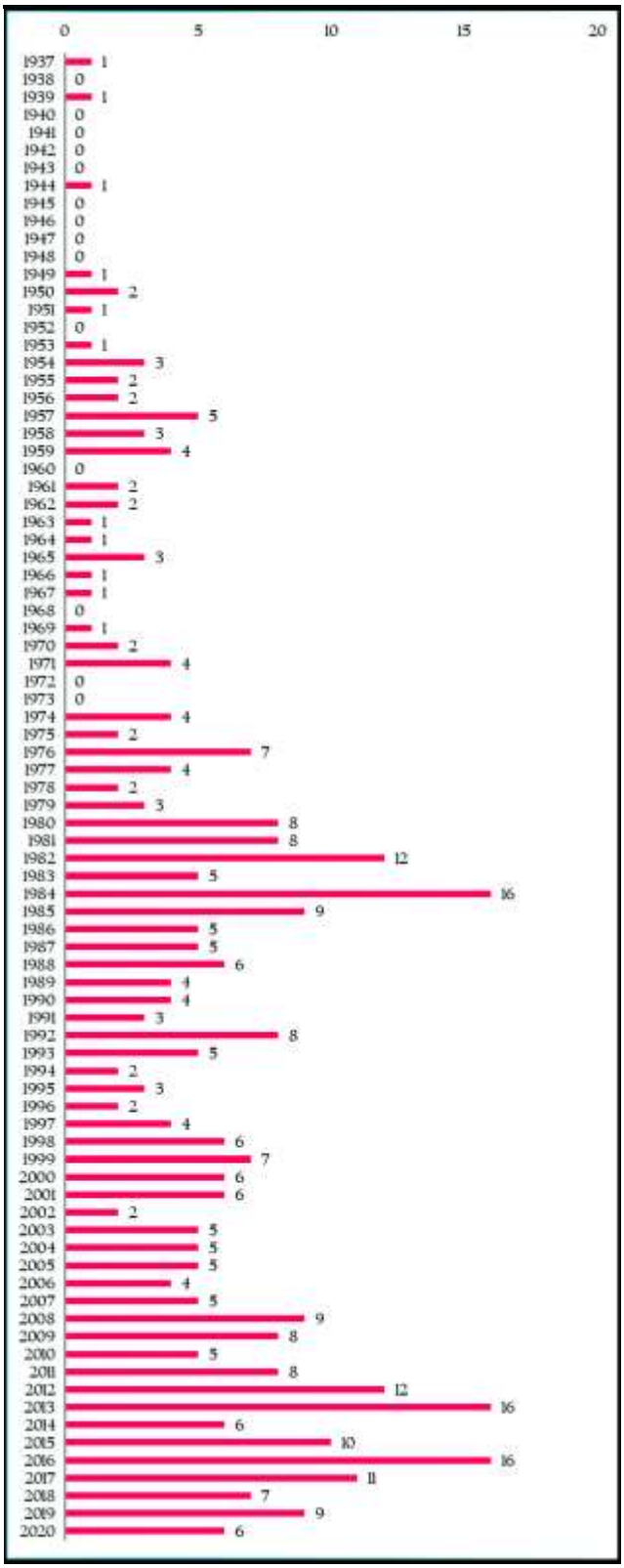
What makes the record remarkable is that anyone who lived through this era would not remember any critical celebration of the achievements of the country's film artists. I'd ascribe this appalling negligence to the orthodox-Marxist orientation of film responders, spelled out in a much-reprinted FFCC member's screed that true artistic progressivity will always be preempted in an antiprogressive system, and therefore the urgent task lies in changing the system itself first. For better or worse, critical thinking had outgrown this constricting reliance on economic determinism as a tool for critical analysis, but the terms of its arrival in the country still had to occur a few years later, accompanied by violent debates instigated by covertly antipopular sectors.

The next rising trend, while not as towering as the first one, occurred during the current millennium, peaking up to the cutoff year of this study. A vulgar materialist would probably readily attribute this to the technological shift from celluloid to digital, although the more impressive results from the preceding period answer the obvious question of why there haven't there been more canonizable works when production costs have significantly diminished since then. The answer may of course be overdetermined by technological shifts in production and strategic adjustments in distribution, paralleled globally by the rise in digitalization and internet patronage. But an unforeseen factor lies in the essential lie that fuels award-giving film activities, that only one winner in permanently prearranged categories can be selected every year, a nonsensical logic that our practitioners have wisely ignored, for the most part.

The decision that emboldened me to pursue this project was not really an exceptional one, if we look at antecedents of cinema: most academically defensible literary canon presentations will find the specification of a decimally round number (meaning one that ends in five but preferably in zero) arbitrary and possibly indefensible. Yet all the film-canon lists I rounded up, including a few of those I was associated with in the Philippines, either observed round-number limits or, in one case, insisted on a lowest-possible total. In this case, serendipitously enough, that final number (350 titles) turned out to be semiround.

Hence to my mind, *Canon Decampment* can stake the claim to creating the first loose canon (awful pun intended) in film listings, anywhere in global film literature that I know. My self-avowed goal was to keep accumulating as many titles as I could defensibly classify as worthy of inclusion, regardless of all possible standard limitations of origin, genre, language, period, budget, format, and so on. The only technical limits I observed were that the entries should be available full-length feature films, using standard global filmfest specs of a one-hour minimum running time.

I needed also to set limits of as liberal a definition as possible of formal and ideological progressivity, since I had to draft capsule reviews for each entry, or occasionally pairs and, in rare instances, a series of entries. No further explications will be necessary beyond this point, since the entries ought to be able to speak for themselves. The best of Philippine cinema once beckoned, and now I can finally take leave.



Total Listed Films per Year, 1937 to 2020

CANON MUNITIONS

FROM THE BEGINNING TO 2020

Several of the tech credits and synopses were done by staff members of YES Magazine. *I cross-checked as best as I could, with group rescreenings providing opportunities to adjust credit and storyline details that were in error. We referred generally to the* Internet Movie Database *with caution, but generally relied on what existing film sources evinced. A measure of how seriously Philippine film preservation has suffered from negligence lies in how many basic credits can no longer be reconstructed, even with deep archival research. The historically invaluable collection of critic-archivist Jojo Devera has proved to be the most helpful in terms of rare-film information. The volume* Lilas: An Illustrated History of the Golden Ages of Cebuano Cinema *by Paul Douglas Grant and Misha Boris Anissimov was likewise a repository of useful data, as were Mike De Leon's* Citizen Jake *outlets, the* Pelikulove *website of feminist output, and the several* YouTube *channels of major Pinas studios. The* Video 48 *posts of Simon Santos and the (currently deactivated)* Baul ni Juan *uploads of James de la Rosa were indispensable for their untampered features of rare print materials. The language specified in each entry will be understood to be the country's current national languages (English and Filipino), unless the spoken language is exclusively or primarily in English. When provided, additional writing sources will also be mentioned. In a few instances, I listed actors who did not appear in the film credits.*

EDUARDO DE CASTRO

(1 film: 1937)

Zamboanga: A Fanciful Tale of Moro Sea Gypsies

Alternate Title: *Fury in Paradise*; *Native Bride*
Languages: English, Tausug
Year of Release: 1937 / B&W
Director: Eduardo de Castro
Screenwriters: Bob Wagner & Billy Icasiano
Producer: Filippine Films
Cast: Fernando Poe, Rosa del Rosario, Johnny Monteiro

> Minda, granddaughter of Datu Tanbuong, is set to be married to the pearl diver Danao. But the leader of another tribe, Hadji Razul, also wants Minda. He connives with a renegade American captain to kidnap the young lady when Danao goes on a journey. When the pearl diver returns, a massive tribal war ensues and ultimately determines Minda's fate.

The earliest available Pinoy feature film until 2021[2] also manages to be the most impressive among all surviving pre-World War II local features. None of the early critical accounts gave it much importance, since it was intended to showcase the country's potential as the Asian counterpart of Hollywood. But those limitations—excessive polish and exoticization, half-naked eye-candy performers, gimmicky underwater photography, manic-yet-dismissible, though also politically incorrect, plot developments—became key to its foreign success and gave it a rare shot at preservation. The current available print has characters speaking native languages, but a voice-of-god narrator overlays the entire proceedings and tells the intended foreign audience how to respond. A seemingly easy-to-forget diversion, whose extreme watchability gives it a distinction that most latter-day films would be grateful to possess, and whose innocent, rambunctious spirit sets it off from the too-reverential though occasionally also prurient handling that marked later treatments of Philippine ethnic material.

[2] Film archivist-historian Teddy O. Co explained in a message that the only known copy of Carlos Vander Tolosa's *Diwata ng Karagatan* (*Spirit of the Ocean*, produced in 1936 by Parlatone Hispano Filipino) "is at the Royal Belgian Film Archives. It's been there for decades, hidden under the title *Wong le tyran*, and dubbed into French. Its movie ad advertised it as having been released in Europe. But it's less than 60 minutes, so a lot has been excised—perhaps the musical parts, to make it a more action-packed film. It was also released (according to Hammy Sotto) under the title *South Seas*. To date no one has acquired a copy yet here so far, but a few people know about it.... It has a very young Rogelio de la Rosa" (*Messenger* exchange, Sept. 9, 2021). See as well an unresolved query about an earlier film (screened at Manila's silent film festival), produced in 1934 and directed by John Nelson, titled "Is Silent Flick *Brides of Sulu* Pinoy or Kano?" (Carmela G. Lapeña, *GMA News Online*, Aug. 27, 2011). On October 31, 2025, film historian Nick Deocampo announced that he was able to confirm in person the existence of the *DnK* filmprint.

CARLOS VANDER TOLOSA

(1 film: 1939)

Giliw Ko

English Translation: *My Beloved*
English Title: *Beloved*
Year of Release: 1939 / B&W
Director & Screenwrtier: Carlos Vander Tolosa
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Fernando Poe, Mila del Sol, Mona Lisa (as Fleur de Lis), Ben Rubio, Precioso Palma, Cecilio Joaquin, Vita Ortega, Nieves Obieta, SSS Trio, Kiko and Conde, Jose Garcia

> Guia, a poor but high-spirited country maiden, is entranced by the prospect of wealth and fame via radio stardom. Her devoted childhood sweetheart, Jose, is considerate about her ambition, but dismayed when she starts falling for Antonio, the son of their landlord, who sponsors her trip to audition in Manila. She makes a splash in the big city but realizes that an urban sophisticate already lays claim to Antonio's affections. When an impressed producer offers to further her singing career, she realizes she has to choose between love and success.

Giliw Ko may appear to be lightweight entertainment, brightened by the presence of Mila del Sol in a film-debut performance that remains as luminous as when it was first screened. It features charming melodies, earnestly delighting in love and the simple life, delivered with all the pleasure that only the best popular performers can bring to musical numbers that they know will gratify audiences in need of exceptional diversions. One may resolve to forget the viewing experience as soon as it ends, but history has been careful enough to add a couple of kicks: This was the first film of LVN Pictures, possibly the quintessential First Golden Age studio, and its polished production values were to persist through a quarter century of active filmmaking. More poignantly, it came out during a time when war clouds were looming in all corners of the world, with the Philippines poised to suffer severely—again!—from foreign incursion because of the presence of a previous invader that the forthcoming masters considered their enemy. No wonder that the most famous admirer of the film, President Manuel L. Quezon, demanded that the US President grant Philippine independence immediately so the country could be spared the ruthless anger of the Japanese Imperial Army.[3] Quezon died in US exile, the Japanese forces were vanquished via nuclear annihilation in their home country, a one-sided dependency relationship with the US was enforced after independence, and the country continues to stagger toward seemingly unattainable prosperity. All the more reason to be grateful that *GK* endures as a reminder that at some point in the past, the dream of a happy existence did not seem too good to be true.

[3] Addressed to Franklin Delano Roosevelt, Manuel L. Quezon's correspondence said that, because the US was prioritizing its war commitments in Europe, the Philippines should be allowed to declare its neutrality as the Pacific equivalent of Switzerland. William Manchester, in his biography of Douglas MacArthur, described "this historic communication [as] the first peal of the Third World liberty bell" (*American Caesar: Douglas MacArthur 1880–1964*, Dell, 1978, p. 281). This insight can be related to Vivek Chibber's provocative assessment of the Vietnam War, where he argues that, despite its pronouncement, the US did not so much fear the domino effect of the spread of Communism, but rather the specter of neutrality, where "other countries will take inspiration from a successful nationalist endeavor and decide on a neutral path" ("Not the Fall of Saigon—Its Liberation," interview with Melissa Naschek, *Jacobin*, April 30, 2025).

GERARDO DE LEON & ABE YUTAKA

(1 film: 1944)

Dawn of Freedom

Alternate Titles: *Liwayway ng Kalayaan*; *Fire on That Flag!*; *Ano Hata o Ute*
Additional Language: Japanese
Year of Release: 1944 / B&W
Directors: Gerardo de Leon [as Associate Director] & Abe Yutaka
Screenwriters: Ryuichiro Yagi & Hideo Oguni
Producers: Eiga Heiku Sa, Toho Company, & X'Otic Films
Cast: Leopoldo Salcedo, Fernando Poe, Angel Esmeralda, Norma Blancaflor, Rosa Aguirre, Shigenobu Kawazu, Ichirō Tsukida, Denjirō Ōkochi, Fred Montilla, Carmen Rosales

> During World War II, Filipino soldiers Captain Reyes, Captain Gomez, and Lieutenant Garcia leave their families in Manila to join the fight against invading Japanese forces in Bataan. Once there, they discover that Filipino troops are abused by their American counterparts. Gomez wanders into the Japanese camp and discovers a different reality, while Reyes and Garcia are betrayed by their American allies.

This singular epic, produced by the official film agency of the Japanese during World War II,[4] provided themes that other Filipino filmmakers would only be able to take up years later, after the emergence of anti-imperialist nationalism in the late 1960s initiated questions about the country's one-sided preference for US domination. Seen today, the images of (homoerotic) fellow-Asian camaraderie set against unmitigated American duplicity are capable of delivering a primeval jolt. It is a wonderment drawn from the parallel-universe speculation of how things might have turned out if the West—as fantasized, understandably, in *Dawn of Freedom*—had lost the war, and probably not as badly as our worst fears might have convinced our forefathers then. After the defeat of the Japanese, Gerardo de Leon managed to avoid the wrath of the returning US colonizers because certain members of his production team testified that he had assisted their guerrilla activities. Since then, he understandably avoided any overt suggestion of the pan-Asian ideal tackled in this film: his immediate postwar output was either silent on the question of the Philippines's Asian identity or, as in the unnecessarily extended World War II prologue in *48 Oras* (*48 Hours*, 1950), insistently and apologetically opposed to any such possibility. *DoF*'s propagandistic function, including

[4] The goal of imperial Japan was to promote a "Greater East Asian Cinema" as an essential component of its "Greater East Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere" (Janine Hanse, "The New Earth: A German-Japanese Misalliance in Film," in *In Praise of Film Studies: Essays in Honor of Makino Mamoru*, ed. Aaron Gerow and Abé Mark Nornes, Kinema Club, 2001, pp. 184–197). For a sample of necessarily pro-American anti-Japanese propaganda, the well-known *Atrocities of the Orient* (also known as *Outrages of the Orient* or *Beast of the East*, directed by Carlos Vander Tolosa with new footage provided by William H. Jansen, 1948) may be sourced at *YouTube*.

footage of the Japanese's victorious battles in the Philippines, may have required false depictions of the realities of the Imperial Army's atrocities as well as of the local resistance to the occupation, but then any number of action quickies produced after the war were similarly guilty of plugging into the reverse bias of being pro-US, and therefore anti-fellow-Asian. Reduced to the question of which type of propaganda film has a more constructive message, *DoF* deserves to be high, if not on top, of the list, its cinematic integrity serving as icing on the cake.

GERARDO DE LEON

(8 films: 1951–1971)

Sisa

Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1951 / B&W
Director: Gerardo de Leon
Screenwriter: Teodorico C. Santos
Based on the title character created by José Rizal in his 1887 novel *Noli Me Tángere* (*Touch Me Not*)
Producer: Premiere Productions
Cast: Anita Linda, Reynaldo Dante, Eduardo del Mar, Eddie Infante, Naty Rubi, Tony Tolman, Pancho Pelagio, Ruben Rustia, Rosita Noble, Bebong Osorio, Francisco Cruz, Fernando Santiago, Don Dano, Andres Benitez, Boy Francisco

> Sisa's life takes an unfortunate turn after her husband is wrongfully jailed. To make matters worse, her sons—altar boys Basilio and Crispin—are falsely accused of stealing from their local church by the head sacristan. The two are severely punished and, although Basilio escapes, Crispin is killed. As Sisa looks for her children, her search leads to one ordeal after another.

How aware was José Rizal that, in fleshing out the narrative of a native woman forced to endure unbearable suffering and loss by all manner of men—from her abusive husband to colonial soldiery, officials, and clerics—he was providing an iconic representation of his own country that would have prevailed into the new millennium? Composited from the experiences of the author's real-life acquaintances, including his own mother, Sisa-as-character affirms a protofeminist strain usually overlooked in appreciations of Rizal's novels. Anita Linda, herself a politicized celebrity who got blacklisted at one point for her pro-labor activities, embodied the role so completely that it became the gold standard for outstanding performance for several decades afterward. As developed by Gerardo de Leon and Teodorico C. Santos, the handling of Rizal's Sisa turned out to be so overpowering and self-contained that even a decade later, when de Leon subsequently attempted an adaptation of the source novel, *Noli Me Tángere* (*Touch Me Not*, 1961), the result paled in comparison.[5] The reason that *Sisa* succeeds where adaptations of the *Noli* have tended to flounder is because of its unqualified and unrelenting critique of patriarchy, in all its naked, malignant prevalence, in the de Leon film.

[5] Another *Noli Me Tángere* (1930), by the legendary Jose Nepomuceno, garnered even more acclaim than any subsequent version, declared by some commentators as the best Filipino movie ever made up to that point. Like another more recent all-time best, Gerardo de Leon's *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api* (*The World of the Oppressed*, 1965), it has been lost to posterity. Other local films through the years took the cue from de Leon's *Sisa* by also featuring characters from Rizal's fiction—e.g., Jun Aristorenas's (as Junar) *Elias, Basilio at Sisa* (*Elias, Basilio and Sisa*, 1972). The last major adaptation of the *Noli* was the 1992 TV series produced by the Cultural Center of the Philippines and directed by de Leon's confrere, Eddie Romero. In 1999, Mario O'Hara directed and wrote his own *Sisa*, where the title character interacted with the real-life Rizal.

Dyesebel

Year of Release: 1953 / B&W
Director: Gerardo de Leon
Screenwriter: Pierre L. Salas
Adapted from Mars Ravelo's *komiks* series
Producer: Manuel Vistan Jr. Productions
Cast: Edna Luna, Jaime de la Rosa, Carol Varga, Fernando Royo, Etang Discher, Max Alvarado, Vicente Madrigal, Mary Williams, Nello Nayo, Luis San Juan, Neonita Bona, Paquito Salcedo, Lito Ansurez, Jesus Lapid, Isa Rino, Belen Campillos, Jose Buencamino, Nieves Abrera Anita Hanna, Loudes Galicia

> [***Note: spoilers provided***] Dyesebel, who is born with a fishtail, is raised by her parents away from civilization to avoid persecution. Diangga, a benign sea-witch, provides her with the ability to breathe underwater like regular merfolk. When she ventures on a beach that she thought was abandoned, she gains the attention of Fredo, who falls in love with her. Fredo's ex-girlfriend Betty gets wind of his new flame and discovers her mercreature condition. Still in love with Fredo, Betty schemes with conniving henchmen to abduct Dyesebel and banish her to a circus, where she becomes a sideshow attraction. Fredo sees the circus announcement in a newspaper and rescues her, but he is overpowered by Betty's goons. He throws Dysebel in the sea, where Diangga perishes in acquiring an amulet for her. When Dysebel reaches shore, Betty espies her and sees the mermaid use the amulet to acquire human legs. Impressed by its ability to endow Dyesebel with perfection, Betty steals the amulet and rubs it like Dyesebel did, but discovers her legs have turned into a fishtail. Fredo and Dyesebel reunite and wed.

Mythical characters, whatever their origin, should all be so lucky as to be launched by the most gifted visual stylist among all Filipino filmmakers. In fact the original *Dyesebel* and its sequel (*Anak ni Dyesebel* or *Child of Dyesebel*, 1964)—both recently rediscovered after having been officially declared lost—had an element that the subsequent versions could already take for granted, but which was then unthinkable for a children's fantasy: a reference to, and constant awareness of, the mermaid's sexual difference. And in stark contrast with Hans Christian Andersen's "Den lille havfrue (The Little Mermaid)," the Dyesebel character has no claim to royalty, whether undersea or on land, and gets spared the fairy tale's cornball metaphysical closure, where the lead character sacrifices herself for love and earns the right to ultimately have a soul. Our heroine fights for her heart's desire although she understandably has to be discreet about it, and endures the several indignities her socially—and anatomically—advantaged rival visits on her. Small wonder that the descriptive term for her kind, *sirena*, eventually became synonymous with queer subjects—and as if to goad along this interpretation, Gerardo de Leon mischievously makes sure to depict the process of mer-transformation as a sight that never fails to freak out "normal" citizens.[6]

[6] A nitrate-stock print of *Dyesebel* and its sequel, *Anak ni Dyesebel* (*Child of Dyesebel*, 1964), also directed by Gerardo de Leon, are the earliest Filipino films I remember watching, double-billed in a second-run provincial theater. Understandably my memory of either is patchy, with certain scenes of one film being confused with the other. Fortunately, I was able to figure out some details from conversations with the late GDL enthusiast Vic Delotavo, most memorably the line of dialogue where Dyesebel's rival asks the male lead, "What does she have that I don't have?"; my recollection of male mer-transformation, which incited what psychoanalysts might describe as a mild form of castration anxiety, is possibly in the sequel's narrative.

Pedro Penduko

Year of Release: 1954 / B&W
Director: Gerardo de Leon
Screenwriter: Ding M. de Jesus
From the *komiks* series by Francisco V. Coching, as serialized in *Liwayway*
Producers: People's Pictures & Premiere Productions
Cast: Efren Reyes, Edna Luna, Lopito, Ramon d'Salva, Ruben Rustia, Lito Anzures, Nello Nayo, Paquito Salcedo, Purita Alma, Dely Atay-Atayan, Felisa Salcedo, Venchito Galvez, Max Alvarado, Juanito Lindo, Francisco Cruz, Francisco Martin, Tony Palomer, Jose Monasterial, Bino Garcia, Benny Panganiban, Onching Balibol, Nina Morales, Renato Robles

> Pedro Penduko, a rural layabout, is goaded by his hunchback pal Terio to assist the limp Amparo, convincing him by saying she might offer them rice cakes. When Tony, a rich suitor, tells them to scram, Terio quarrels with him so Pedro has to help out. Marina, an heiress for whom Terio and Amparo work as househelp, invites Pedro to her welcome party celebrating her return from the US. Pedro's father meantime promises his son an amulet that will protect him from harm, if Pedro agrees to take a bath and court Amparo. Marina though has set her sights on Pedro and maltreats Amparo as her rival, further aggravating Tony's rivalry. Their small-town concerns are brought to a head when Tirong, a bandit, kills Marina's father and abducts Amparo, challenging Pedro to a duel if he wants to win the latter's freedom.

In contrast with the previous year's *Dyesebel*, *Pedro Penduko*, another of Gerardo de Leon's *komiks* adaptations, has its soundtrack intact, although in unfortunately degraded video format. All to the best for Pinas cultural interests, since Francisco V. Coching's material operates on a different plane in relation to literary artists of his era. (For a more straightforward treatment of another of his stories, see Conrado Conde's *Talipandas* or *Traitor*, from 1958.) Even from among contemporary comic heroes, one would be hard-put to find someone who not only prefers to laze around but also whose body odor becomes his defining social marker, not to mention his preference for physically disabled chums. The psychoanalytic implications only intensify even as the characters are able to work through some of their prior hindrances, resulting in the best kind of comic situation: one where laughter is short-circuited by tragic backstories and where the requisite happy endings are well-earned. De Leon mounts an entire slew of contrarian readings by casting the agential roles against type: when hefty action star Efren Reyes in the amusingly harmless title role confronts the benign and contemplative Ruben Rustia as the ruthless outsider, the resulting instability requires an offbeat justification—one that Coching provides, with de Leon ensuring that it smacks the viewer as effectively as it would have on the printed page.

According to archivist-critic Jojo Devera, the existing videocopy available in the Philippines was struck from a film print in Thailand, which replaced the original soundtrack with a Thai-dubbed version and separated the film sound in audiotape format; unfortunately Teddy Co, the tape's custodian, died before he could secure resources to facilitate the sound transfer. Monchito Nocon, member and board trustee of the Society of Film Archivists of the Philippines, directed my attention to *Dyesebel* Film Soundtrack Digitization and Restoration, a private *Facebook* group, that posted a copy of the much-contested tape. Pending further developments (which could take years to realize), the existing *Dyesebel* video may be regarded for now as inadvertently a silent film, a status it shares with Arnel Mardoquio's 2013 entry *Ang mga Tigmo sa Akong Pagpauli (Riddles of My Homecoming)* in this entire canon listing—which is also mainly why this canon entry's storyline is exhaustive.

Sanda Wong

Additional Language: Chinese
Year of Release: 1955 / B&W
Director: Gerardo de Leon
Screenwriters: Ding Santos, Tony Santos, Teodorico C. Santos
From a story by Teodorico C. Santos
Producers: Manuel Vistan Jr. Production & Chapman Productions
Cast: Jose Padilla Jr., Lilia Dizon, Danilo Montes, Lola Young, Gil de Leon, Ligaya Lopez, Vicente Liwanag, Mario Barri, Bruno Punzalan, Ligaya Lopez

> Lau Chien's marriage to Lan Ying is stopped when bandits Sanda Wong and Yuen Fei try to steal from Chien's vast inheritance. Shady garrison captain Koh Loo traps the two robbers to get the wealth for himself but Chien unexpectedly intervenes. Wong and Chien become unlikely allies but their bond is tested throughout Chien's quest to be reunited with Lan Ying and reclaim his wealth.

Gerardo de Leon had already tackled the theme of an armed outsider reforming corruption in "straight" society in *Sawa sa Lumang Simboryo* (*Snake in the Old Belfry*, 1952); although weighed down by a surfeit of pulpy elements, the latter film resonated with the Philippines's anti-US resistance movements, when the foreign occupants slandered our freedom fighters by calling them bandits—exactly the type of characters depicted in the film. In transposing the setting to an indeterminate "ancient China," and introducing a male-bonding strategy that would intensify the conflicts in several of his forthcoming major films, de Leon managed to devise complex character interactions that could serve as the narrative counterpart of his diagonal deep-focus compositions. Moreover, he elevated his level of accomplishment to stake a claim on a type of Asian film that would proliferate later, where a lone hero sets himself or occasionally herself against a backward social order, exposing its barbarism in the process: Easterns, in effect, in contrast to Hollywood's Westerns.

Terror Is a Man

Alternate Titles: *Creature from Blood Island*; *Blood Creature*
Language: English
Year of Release: 1959 / B&W
Director: Gerardo de Leon [as Gerry de Leon]
Screenwriter: Harry Paul Harber
Unofficially adapted from H.G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* (1896)
Producer: Lynn-Romero Productions
Cast: Francis Lederer, Greta Thyssen, Richard Derr, Oscar Keesee, Lilia Duran, Peyton Keesee, Flory Carlos

> When William gets shipwrecked on an island, he is taken in by Dr. Charles Girard. He also encounters the doctor's disturbing experiment: a panther being turned into a human. William argues that the procedure is unethical although Dr. Girard believes otherwise. But when the creature manages to escape, the two men must find a way to stop the monster's murderous rampage.

Because of its association with American B-film production, *Terror Is a Man* was largely overlooked in the home country. Nevertheless this reworking of H. G. Wells's *The Island of Doctor Moreau* performed profitably enough to initiate the Philippines's strongest contribution to US pop culture, before Imelda Marcos came along and provided ready-made punchlines for comic and/or melodramatic material. The Blood-Island film cycle—named after Val Guest's *The Camp on Blood Island* (1958), a fairly successful Malaya-set entry about a Japanese concentration camp, from horror specialists Hammer Films—in fact figured in film historian Robert Sklar's genealogy of the Hollywood Vietnam-War movie genre. According to Sklar (in several books starting with *Movie-Made America: A Cultural History of American Movies*, Vintage Books, 1994), prior to the US's pullout during the fall of Saigon in 1975, Blood-Island movies were the only way that English-speaking white male characters could be shown confronting literally animal savagery in unidentifiable tropical settings. A later rendition, John Frankenheimer's *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996), headlining Marlon Brando, reveled in the material's camp elements—the same singular skill that de Leon would successfully develop much later, notably in his vampire cult films *Kulay Dugo ang Gabi* (*Blood Is the Color of Night*, 1964) and *Ibulong Mo sa Hangin* (*Whisper to the Wind*, 1966), plus his controversial local horror entry *Lilet* (1971). Among straight-faced adaptations of the Wells novel, however, *TIaM* is the version to beat.

The Moises Padilla Story

Year of Release: 1961 / B&W
Director: Gerardo de Leon
Screenwriter: Cesar Amigo
From a story by Leon O. Ty
Producer: MML Productions
Cast: Leopoldo Salcedo, Joseph Estrada, Lilia Dizon, Ben Perez, Oscar Roncal, Rosa Aguirre, Robert Arevalo, Joseph de Cordova, Alfonso Carvajal, Jose Garcia, Mila Montañez, Max Alvarado, Martin Marfil, Bruno Punzalan, Alfonso Carvajal, Mila Montañez, Salvador Zaragoza, Ric Bustamante, Bino Garcia, Paquito Salcedo, Francisco Cruz, Quiel Mendoza, Eddie Arce

> Moises Padilla decides to run for town mayor after witnessing multiple counts of abuse done by the private army of Negros Occidental governor Rafael Lacson. Along the way, Moises gets his former war comrade, who is now the town's police chief, as his bodyguard. But since Lacson controls the area's military and police, he vows to ensure that Moises's mayoral bid will not prosper.

By all credible accounts, Philippine cinema's gravest single loss is that of its best directorial stylist's allegedly best film, *Ang Daigdig ng mga Api* (*The World of the Oppressed*, 1965). An estimate of just how appalling this calamity is can be inferred from the still-existing, fairly competent propagandistic film-biography *Iginuhit ng Tadhana* (*Determined by Destiny*): *The Ferdinand Marcos Story*, directed by Mar S. Torres, Jose de Villa, and Conrado Conde, which Gerardo de Leon's entry was meant to counter when they competed in the first Manila Film Festival: the de Leon film went on to deservingly sweep the industry awards, but it is the Marcos movie that remains

available.[7] A more effective and poignant way would be to take a look at de Leon's earlier exercise in political advocacy, *The Moises Padilla Story*, based on the brutal treatment of a reformist who supported then-Defense Secretary Ramon F. Magsaysay. The narrative creates a polarized situation and unfortunately typecasts as villains Max Alvarado, Martin Marfil, and Bruno Punzalan—three great character actors with East Asian features; it then overlays the plot with the conflictive relationship between the title character and his former World War II guerrilla buddy, depicted as a deeply moving bromantic tragedy by Leopoldo Salcedo and Joseph Estrada respectively. De Leon's solutions to these dramaturgical limitations are mostly technical, but breathtakingly so; the remastered version managed to restore crucial portions of a grisly, extensive, *cenaculo*-worthy torture scene, enabling one to believe that anyone who watched it would have cast a vote for the Guy (Magsaysay's nickname), had he still been alive, all over again.

El Filibusterismo

English Translation: *The Anarchist*
Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1962 / B&W
Director: Gerardo de Leon
Screenwriters: Adrian Cristobal, Jose Flores Sibal, Gerardo de Leon
From the 1891 novel by José Rizal
Producer: Arriva Productions
Cast: Pancho Magalona, Charito Solis, Teody Belarmino, Edita Vital, Ben Perez, Carlos Padilla Jr., Lourdes Medel, Robert Arevalo, Oscar Keesee, Ramon d'Salva, Joseph de Cordova, Paquito Diaz, Boy Francisco, Alfonso Carvajal, Jose Garcia, Nello Nayo, Patring Carvajal, Jerry Pons, Francisco Cruz, Paquito Salcedo, Dadang Ortega, Felisa Salcedo, Primo Yumol, Tommy Nepomuceno, Quiel Mendoza, Manny Ojeda, Fred Ramirez, Turing Ramirez, Johnny Fernandez

> After touring the world, Crisostomo Ibarra returns to the Philippines as the mysterious jeweler Simoun. Wanting to spark a revolution to overthrow the Spanish colonial government, he allies with Basilio—the only one who knows Simoun's true identity. After their initial attempt fails, their new plan will ultimately determine their fates.

Several possible reasons can be propounded as to why José Rizal's much-acclaimed first novel, *Noli Me Tángere* (*Touch Me Not*), did not translate onscreen as well as his second one, or even

[7] Another Ferdinand Marcos Sr. film-bio, Eddie Garcia's *Pinagbuklod ng Langit* (*Joined Together by Heaven*, a.k.a. *Heaven's Fate*, 1969), was produced for the dictator-to-be's successful re-election campaign. A year later, a crony-owned company produced Jerry Hopper's *Maharlika* (*Royalty*), a retelling of the Marcos-concocted myth about his World War II exploits as commander of the Maharlika unit. Possibly intended to justify his claim about having been the most decorated soldier in the Philippines, the movie also featured the story of Isabella, the American female soldier who fought alongside him and died in the effort, and with whom he had fallen in love. Dovie Beams, the American starlet who got the role, claimed that Marcos fell in love with her—in real life. The scandal acquired lurid and surreal dimensions when Beams called a press conference to claim that her life was being threatened by Imelda Marcos, and played apparently authentic and unexpurgated recordings of her intimate sessions with the President. For this reason, the movie's local release was permanently postponed, although it was apparently screened in Guam and elsewhere; a year after the Marcos regime was ousted, however, *Maharlika* was finally shown in Manila.

compared with the former's Sisa subplot, which had been adapted by Gerardo de Leon in 1951. In one of his later books, *The Age of Globalization: Anarchists and the Anti-Colonial Imagination* (Verso Books, 2013, formerly titled *Under Three Flags*), the late Benedict Anderson argued that, among the late 19th-century's several radical options, anarchism was the movement that eventually appealed to Rizal's particular quest for identity and justice. Hence, although *El Filibusterismo* utilized a linear narrative, in contrast with the *Noli*'s use of multiple plot strands, it also had a more focused, nearly dogmatic ideological position. Any reader expecting a repeat of *Noli*'s grand humanist closure, its anti-colonial thrust blunted by its author's still-reformist impulses, would therefore be understandably frustrated. Crisostomo Ibarra's transmutation into Simoun in *El Fili* also heralded a darker, borderline-nihilist resolve in Rizal's new realization: that only the full-scale purgation of the Philippine colonial system could lead to a brighter future for the country. De Leon's ominous lighting and unsettling compositions, as executed by the great black-and-white cinematographic master Mike Accion, unexpectedly served the material better than anyone could hope for. If for nothing else, *El Fili* stands as proof that de Leon's skills extended beyond technical expertise to include adept recognition and handling of politically complex material.

Women in Cages

Alternate Title: *Bamboo Doll House*
Initial Title: *Playpen*
Language: English
Year of Release: 1971
Director: Gerardo de Leon [as Gerry de Leon]
Screenwriters: James H. Watkins & David Osterhout
Producers: New World Pictures & Balatbat Productions
Cast: Judith Brown, Roberta Collins, Jennifer Gan, Pam Grier, Bernard Bonnin, Charlie Davao, Johnny Long, Holly Anders, Dwight Howard, Roberta Swift, Paul Sawyer, Jeffrey Taylor, Marissa Delgado, Paquito Diaz, Sofia Moran, Carpi Asturias, Ruben Rustia, Nick Cayari, Andres Centenera

> Thinking that her double-dealing boyfriend will eventually save her, a woman nicknamed Jeff agrees to be sentenced for drug-dealing at the aptly named Carcel del Infierno. There she meets level-headed Sandy, heroin addict Stokes (who secretly agrees to murder Jeff in exchange for drugs), and Theresa, a native woman who's the girlfriend of Alabama, the sadistic warden. The women come to realize that with all their differences, their only hope for escape is in agreeing to help one another.

The women-in-prison genre (more accurately a hybrid subgenre of several film types including action, melodrama, and soft-core pornography) has been around from nearly the beginning of narrative film history, or ever since producers realized that they could reap profits from catering to the male gaze. Even Gerry de Leon's contribution, *Women in Cages*, was preceded by a few months by Jack Hill's *The Big Doll House*, which shared the same producer and several actors. The Philippines-set confections are remembered for Pam Grier's breakout performances, to be cemented the year after *WiC* with Eddie Romero's proto-blaxploitation entry *Black Mama, White Mama*. Grier's participation alone makes *WiC* worth the attention, despite—or even because of—several eyebrow-raising elements attendant to her prison-warden character: as if swapping the

male-gender casting wasn't unusual enough, she was also a politically aware sadist who picked out the women she fancied for her sexual amusement. In addition to her name, her sarcastic question to the prisoners brought to work at a sugar plantation clues us into her function: "Don't it make you pine for those cane fields in the South?" Her comeuppance in the hands of the maniacal posse she designated to hunt down escapees may be seen as a form of ironic justice, but then it arrives after a series of severe and sometimes mortal punishments that she inflicts on her unruly charges. Small wonder that Grier fan Quentin Tarantino described the film as "just harsh, harsh, harsh" while making sure to reference *WiC* in several of his own exploitation projects and providing Grier with her best role ever, in *Jackie Brown* (1997). More than *Terror Is a Man* (1959), *WiC* proves that de Leon at his peak was capable of drawing in insights and significations from a wide range of film genres and historical traumas, while centering one of the most beautiful foreign actors to ever grace an anonymous Pinas locale.

SUSANA C. DE GUZMAN

(1 film: 1949)

Lupang Pangako [incomplete]

English Translation: *Promised Land*
Year of Release: 1949
Director: Susana C. de Guzman
Screenwriters: Quin Velasco & Susana C. de Guzman
From a story by Susana C. de Guzman
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Leopoldo Salcedo, Mila del Sol, Eusebio Gomez, Tinno de Lara, Engracio Ibarra, Armando Canseco, Lila Luna, Maria Norma, Vita Ortega, Horacio Morelos, Felipe Ortega, Amado Rivera Jr., Bayani Casimiro, Angge, Pablo Vergara

> [***Note: spoilers provided***] Wandering the streets of Manila, Capt. Eduardo Rosales, a World War II veteran, finds an army buddy pretending to be a blind beggar. After introducing himself, they walk together and discover another former fellow soldier busking on the sidewalk, with two kids whom he pretends to be his own; the busker dismisses the kids with the money they collected but regrets his generosity when Eddie admits he's broke. They proceed to meet still another of their mates who operates a small eatery, where Eddie discloses that he was just discharged from a hospital after being diagnosed with a terminal illness. He tells the group that he has to inform the parents of their late comrade of the death of their son. While walking to their distant provincial home, where the parents work as tenants, he gets hit by the car of Cora, the spoiled orphaned heiress, who gets out and scolds him. On his way to the tenants' home, he faints before Cora's residence, where she learns about his terminal condition. But since she was guaranteed ownership of the family property only if she gets married, she offers Eddie some money if he agrees to a sham union. Eddie successfully negotiates for a higher price plus use of a fertile tract of land, and invites his comrades to form a farming cooperative, calling the place Lupang Pangako (Promised Land). He also thwarts the unscrupulous designs of Cora's suitor, who pretends to still be wealthy so he could marry her and claim her wealth for himself. Cora berates Eddie when she realizes that her own tenants are abandoning their work on the farm in order to join his cooperative, but he insists on his husbandly prerogative and forces her to live in a farmhouse. With the help of women farmhands, Cora discovers the appeal of living directly off the land and attends a community celebration as one of her people. ***Missing portion*** (from "Lupang Pangako," *Melcore's CinePlex Blog*, November 16, 2020): Cora's family doctor visits the couple, treats Eddie's condition, and finally declares that Eddie has fully recovered. The couple realize that their pragmatic arrangement was the right one for each of them after all, and agree to live in wedded bliss in the company of tenants who have become their equals.

The first Filipina director of note, Susana C. de Guzman's credentials were aspersion-proof. The clan she belonged to was famed not for wealth but for tremendous talent, so it was no surprise that after she retired from filmmaking, two of her nephews would then commence their film careers—director Ishmael Bernal and composer George Canseco. The music of her brother Constancio, famed for the 1929 nationalist ballad "Bayan Ko (My Country)," was always better than the films he worked on, though fortunately he scored several of her films including the current one. Her uncles Severino Reyes and Lope K. Santos (whose K was the Tagalog spelling for Canseco) were colossi of nationalist literature, so the question should not be why *Lupang Pangako* turned out to be so exceptional that it deserves to be canonized despite its missing last sequence, but why she detoured shortly afterward into wholly dismissible fodder. Meanwhile her own novelistic skill and Marxist sympathies render *LP* a cut above most other Philippine

samples, with its exposition favorably comparable to the similar opening portion of Yu Hyun-mok's *Obaltan* (*Aimless Bullet*, 1961), also a treatise on the consequences of war from the perspective of ordinary citizens. And rather than allow the shrewish heiress to be tamed by her disciplinarian husband, as the Brit bard would have handled it, de Guzman allocates the task to the plantation tenants' womenfolk. The film's missing portion only covers the solution to the plot's primary setback, namely its male lead's curable-afer-all terminal illness, so in fact the entire work resembles a genuine socialist realist text, all the more extraordinary for showing up in a US neocolonial stronghold.[8] [***Important tech note***: Several LVN films, including a few listed in this volume, were transferred using the inexpensive method of telerecording—i.e., projecting celluloid material on a screen and recording the sound and image with a video camera, resulting in flickery images; as of this time, no institution has volunteered to take charge of repairing this problem.]

[8] A cogent summary of Susana C. de Guzman's prodigious clan is provided in Bayani Santos Jr.'s "[Ishmael] Bernal as Auteur: Primary Biographical Notes" in *Kritika Kultura*, vol. 19, August 2012, pp. 14–35, doi:10.13185/1656-152x.1321. The likeliest reason for the crackdown on progressive expressions in cinema would be her studio's enthusiastic participation, via its owner's son Manuel de Leon, in the US State Department's intervention in the film cultural policies of the Southeast Asian region even through the 1960s, after the other countries had lost interest (Lee Sangjoon, *Cinema and the Cultural Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network*, Cornell University Press, 2020, p. 12). Re socialist realism, a warning I sounded out elsewhere: a Philippine film author, whose points were endorsed by a Western author, nesciently claimed that the two most significant city films of the Second Golden Age, Lino Brocka's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila in the Claws of Light*, 1975) and Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980), were samples of socialist realism. One can only hope these purportedly progressive Orthodox-left experts have since read up on historical trends in global cinema and readjusted their clownish misperceptions.

GREGORIO FERNANDEZ

(6 films: 1950–1958)

Kontrabando

English Title: *Contraband*
Year of Release: 1950 / B&W
Director: Gregorio Fernandez
Screenwriter: Armando Garces
From the story "G-2, Ang Tiktik ng Hukbong Pilipino (G-2, The Detective of the Philippine Army)" by Maj. Amado A. Esguera
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Jaime de la Rosa, Celia Flor, Tony Santos, Milagros Naval, Gregorio Fernandez (as G.M.F.), Eusebio Gomez, Ezar Visenio, Armando Garces (as Armando Garcez), Martin Marfil, Jose Corazon de Jesus Jr., Juanito Montes, Citas Javellana, Natoy B. Catindig, Joe Evangelista, Tita Ramirez, Ray Bayona, Mauro Cajigal, Flor Bien, Franco Quintana

> Diego Malvar, a G-2 undercover operative, is able to infiltrate the smuggling syndicate run by Lim. In order to help him bust the trafficking of opium, surreptitiously brought in by deported aliens, his supervisor provides him with a newfangled spy camera as well as a code word, "Divina." In pursuit of his objective, he falls in love with Celia, the daughter of Lim's family friend. Lim's adopted daughter, Minda, comes from Jolo and is secretly promised by Lim to Asad, his Muslim henchman. Unaware of the arrangement, Minda has set her sights on Datu Ali, whom Lim misleads so he can land contraband shipments in Mindanao. As Lim's biggest operation comes to a head, Diego has to find someone he can trust, identify the gang's kingpin whose orders Lim follows, and find the best possible way to survive the risky project with head and heart intact.

Kontrabando is by and large the perfect encapsulation in Philippine cinema of a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Virtually forgotten by subsequent generations, Gregorio Fernandez had enough evidence of then being the most talented director inside the LVN Pictures lot, so it made sense that he was the first filmmaker deployed to fulfill the studio's commitment (via Manuel de Leon, the most enthusiastic Filipino participant in the US-sponsored Federation of Motion Picture Producers in Asia-Pacific) to provide three projects for the cause of anti-Communist agitation.[9] It will be impossible to fully evaluate this trilogy since the second installment, *Korea* from 1952, has been lost for the longest time, despite having been scripted by Benigno S. Aquino Jr. Then again, the fact that this second entry as well as the third one (*Huk sa Bagong Pamumuhay* or *Rebel in a New Life*, 1953) were both directed by Lamberto V. Avellana, suggests that Fernandez failed in what he was tasked to do. In fact, what may have been a

[9] A comprehensive account of the US government's exploitation of film to anathematize Communism in Asia can be found in Lee Sangjoon's *Cinema and the Cold War: US Diplomacy and the Origins of the Asian Cinema Network* (Cornell University Press, 2020). For the specifics of the participation of LVN Pictures, see *Mike de Leon's Last Look Back* (Contra Mundum Publishing, 2022). I also wrote, as far as I know, the first scholarly attempt to recuperate the filmmaker in "A Missing Installation in the Philippine Pantheon: Gregorio 'Yoyong' Fernandez (1904–1973)" in *Pelikula: A Journal of Philippine Cinema and Moving Image*, vol. 9, 2024, pp. 24–35, doi:10.5281/zenodo.20717178, after initially drafting and continually revising a preprint version on *Amauteurish*, my academic website.

propagandistic disappointment has ironically turned out to be a vital contribution to Philippine film culture, with the only definitive evidence of "Yoyong" being the best director-actor we ever had constituting a minor detail in context. The demonization of Chinese nationals was part and parcel of the anti-Commie thrust, but Fernandez reduces the threat to ideologically irrelevant drug smuggling and sets up the distinctively *chinita* Celia Flor as prospective *femme fatale* with a twist, in much the same way that his previous year's *Capas* featured a conflicted Japanese Imperial Army official confronted by a guerrilla masquerading as collaborator. Moreover, the swagger, suavity, and situational ruses enacted by Jaime de la Rosa, drawn from global film sources from all over, predate their amalgamation in the James Bond franchise. Most impressively, Fernandez mounts a challenge to the supposed (Christian) godliness of Western democracy by allowing organized Muslim Filipinos to save the narrative heroes from certain perdition. The question of whether he intended to fail as a Cold War champion becomes inconsequential when set beside such multivalent triumphs in film innovation.

Prinsipe Teñoso

English Translation: *Prince Teñoso*
Year of Release: 1954
Director: Gregorio Fernandez
Screenwriter: Johnny Legarda
Based on an earlier script by Manuel Conde, adapted from the *korido* on Prince Don Juan Teñoso
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Delia Razon, Mario Montenegro, Tony Santos, Alfonso Carvajal, Ven Medina, Frankie Gordon, Oscar Obligacion, Arturo Moran, Carmencita Abad, Cecilia Lopez, Liza Rivera, Lourdes Yumul, Natoy B. Catindig, Mario Taguibulos, G.M.F. (Gregorio Fernandez), Sim Pajarillo, Manuel Lizaso, Merle Fernandez, T. Valenzuela, L.M. Fernandez, Perla Garcia

> Prince Teñoso, an idealistic youth, returns to his father's kingdom and sees a giant who was captured and imprisoned by the king for the sake of sport. After he determines that the prisoner is benign, he steals the giant's magic gemstone from his father's crown to help the creature escape. [Missing sequence: Grateful for the prince's help, the giant provides him with a magical handkerchief. The king realizes what his son had done and banishes him from the kingdom. To atone for his father's anger, Prince Teñoso disguises himself as an old beggar and wanders into a neighboring territory.] The king in the new kingdom is worried that he will be unable to marry off his daughters, who are too independent-minded for their suitors. An assistant suggests a contest of skills, where the princesses can pick the men who impress them. The youngest princess, however, spies on the newly arrived beggar and sees him transform into a handsome young man when he bathes in the river. She decides to favor him during the competition—a decision that baffles the court and angers her father.

Prinsipe Teñoso may be the oldest available Pinoy feature film in color, and for once our luck turned for the better. After several pioneering attempts with Ansco Film, LVN Pictures decided to hand the project, essentially a remake of a prewar Manuel Conde spectacle, to a resident director who was carefully harnessing his crowd-pleasing skills with a distinctly modern sensibility. Gregorio Fernandez's cultural sophistication, in fact, may have been so highly evolved that evaluators of the era (and even up to the present) do not seem to have the necessary handle with which to approach his output. Fortunately for him, LVN has been the most responsible

among the First Golden Age studios in caring for their celluloid legacy, so enough Fernandez movies have been lying around to demonstrate how seriously neglected his stature as major artist has been. *PT* still exhibits some of the limitations of its origin in Spanish-era metric romances, camouflaged by its Ruritanian world-building where monarchs and magic hold sway, with the Christianization project championed above everything. Unlike many of his contemporaries, however, Fernandez raises questions about filial devotion to patriarchs, advocates for specific types of Otherness (in this instance a captive nonindigenous giant as well as a diseased stranger in rags—the title character in disguise), and provides a Muslim partner for one of the princesses. But it is his celebration of female agency that sets the film off from even the typical Hollywood samples of its time: the princesses question the logic of requiring them to be paired off with husbands, accept early widowhood as a welcome option, and pick out the men they want—with the youngest among them insisting on a beggar whose attractiveness she ascertained by snooping on his naked form. Prince Teñoso's self-redemption consists of chastising his future brothers-in-law while saving his bride-to-be's kingdom and acquiring his father's forgiveness in the process, with Fernandez's storytelling skills easing our journey over now-missing portions of the narrative. Surge, splendor, and extravagance are the terms used by film scholar Vivian Sobchack in describing films of this type—but Fernandez made sure to add an edginess that makes *PT* still meaningful for our times as definitely as it provided entertainment way back when.

1—*Higit sa Lahat*

English Translation: *Most of All*
Year of Release: 1955 / B&W
Director: Gregorio Fernandez [as Dr. Gregorio Fernandez]
Screenwriter: Gregorio Fernandez
From a story by Mario Mijares Lopez
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Rogelio de la Rosa, Emma Alegre, Ike Jarlego Jr., Oscar Keesee, Jose Corazon de Jesus Jr., Vic Silayan, Eddie Rodriguez, Cynthia Gomez, Rosa Aguirre, Ludy Carmona, Lita Gutierrez, Gerry delos Reyes, Venchito Galvez, Natoy B. Catindig, Leonardo Fernandez

> Rodrigo is disowned by his rich family when he decides to marry Rosa. He finds work in a factory where his supervisor covets a necklace that Rosa had gifted him with. He decides to hand over the ornament but, while on a trip assigned by the supervisor, the factory goes up in flames. Investigators find the necklace and inform Rosa that her husband had died. When Roberto realizes that his family will receive a substantial amount of insurance money, he decides to maintain the delusion and watches over them from afar.

2—*Luksang Tagumpay* [incomplete]

English Translation: *Mournful Victory*
Year of Release: 1956 / B&W
Director: Gregorio Fernandez
Screenwriters: Mike Velarde & Consuelo O. Padilla

From a story by Mike Velarde, "as inspired by [Sergei] Rachmaninoff's 2nd Piano Concerto" [per opening credit title]
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Jaime de la Rosa, Delia Razon, Rebecca del Rio, Eddie Rodriguez, Rudy Fernandez, Oscar Obligacion, Leonora Ruiz, Fe Galvez, Rudy Llamas, Jesus Caballero, Gerry Gabaldon, Leandro Fernandez, Jaime Palma, Joseph de Cordova, Alfonso Carvajal, Manuel Silos, Oscar Keesee

> [***Note: spoilers provided***] Because her husband, Bustamante, has been presumed dead as a combatant in the Korean War, Anita decides to marry Ricardo, a doctor. But when Bustamante returns, Ricardo treats his blindness and keeps his distance from them. Alone on a night out, Bustamante meets Ricardo's ex-girlfriend and learns from her that Anita and Ricardo were once a couple. Bustamante decides to inflict blindness on Anita but Ricardo warns her of the danger. Ricardo discovers Bustamante fatally wounded by his ex and gets arrested for murder. To save him from certain conviction, his ex-girlfriend confesses.

A definite clue to the downgrading of Gregorio Fernandez's abilities is his specialization in the weepie, the type of melodrama acknowledging and directed at female audiences. (No use in denying that Pinoy action and sex films also rely on melodramatic conventions, even if their target audience endows them with a bit more respect, in the eyes of the hopelessly old-fashioned.) His talent definitely earned him the top industry awards he deserved for *Higit sa Lahat*, a gender-reversed neorealist variation on the Hollywood perennial *Stella Dallas*, whose 1937 King Vidor-directed version is regarded as definitive. Rogelio de la Rosa barely matches Barbara Stanwyck's performance, but it matters little since Emma Alegre is made the object of his (and the audience's) gaze, and she's the most incandescent and skilled performer in any available Fernandez film until Charito Solis's casting a few years later. *Luksang Tagumpay*, although a more ambitious piece, only won for direction. Its narrative is admittedly twisty and resolves more conventionally than any of the titles in Fernandez's remarkable final run at LVN Pictures. Yet its now-lost denouement features the apocalyptic dissolution of the primary male character's domestic environment, referencing both his psychological breakdown as well as his recent wartime traumatic experience. The use of expressive and hyper-exuberant filmic strategies would be introduced to global observers a few years afterward, via the French New Wave as well as the post-Stalinist "thaw cinema" of the Soviet Union; without an equivalent critical team providing an evaluation of the limits of Hollywood classicism and suggesting ways to challenge then-existing standard film language, Fernandez embarked on a critique all his own and attempted a carefully sustained series of formal experimentations that would distinguish his 1950s work as the first uncontestable flowering of artistic genius in local cinema.

Hukom Roldan

English Translation: *Judge Roldan*
Year of Release: 1957 / B&W
Director: Gregorio Fernandez [as Dr. Gregorio Fernandez]
Screenwriter: Consuelo P. Osorio
From a story by Luz del Mundo
Producer: LVN Pictures

Cast: Jaime de la Rosa, Emma Alegre, Nenita Vidal, Oscar Keesee, Alfonso Carvajal, Nela Alvarez, Marie Paz, Boots Socorro, Cholly Ulla, Gerry Gabaldon, Dulo Valenzuela, Vic Cabrera

> Judge Alberto Roldan is an upright official who resists the entreaties of his influential friend, Don Silvestre, against handing down a guilty verdict against a business associate of his. In retaliation, Silvestre blackmails Alberto's wife Cita by getting his accomplice Hernan to drug and photograph her in scandalous circumstances, succeeding in breaking up the couple's union. Alberto sends their daughter Gloria to the US and claims upon her return that her mother is dead. Warned by Hernan that her husband and daughter will be harmed if she reveals the truth, Cita endures her husband's harsh judgment of her character while setting out to earn a decent living on her own while keeping tabs on her estranged family.

The official canonical assessment of Gregorio Fernandez's career has been lopsided and ultimately inadequate. Two of his mid-1950s films, *Higit sa Lahat* (1955) and *Luksang Tagumpay* (1956), garnered nominations and prizes in industry and foreign film-festival competitions whereas superior entries such as *Prinsipe Teñoso* and *Hukom Roldan* were overlooked, while *Malvarosa* (1958), deservingly regarded as his masterpiece, was given a token local award. As a studio-system stalwart (whose career unsurprisingly faltered when the independent production system replaced the First Golden Age players),[10] he demonstrated an unerring capability of critically evaluating his past output and setting up more ambitious thematic and formal challenges while continuing to provide popular entertainment. With *HR*, he set up reversals and ironies one after the other, starting with a switch in narrative emphasis from the masculine title character to his multiply victimized wife, signaled by an onscreen swirling motion that mimics her confusion, interrupted by the major characters directly addressing the audience. These violations of Classical Hollywood conventions (already evident even in his preceding melodramas) were to become standard approaches a short time later in European cinema, and may account for local evaluators' befuddlement with Fernandez's innovations, since these seemingly came from out of nowhere. In retrospect, we should be in a better position to appreciate an intelligent and socially concerned practitioner's dissatisfaction with the limits of genre and storytelling while remaining steadfast in his commitment to his audience as well as to his family of creatives. The charismatic de la Rosa brothers (Jaime and Rogelio) were comfortable working with him—together at one point, while his children (Rudy in *LT*, Merle in *HR*) fleshed out characters who would figure prominently later as grown-ups. More poignantly, reminiscent of

[10] The possibility of scandal would now be entirely circumstantial, considering the circumspection attendant to early Cold War culture. Nevertheless the prospects are compelling: Fernandez's wife Maria Paz, younger sister of prominent actors Carlos and José "Pempe" Jr., died from a self-inflicted gunshot wound in October 1957, with their then-five-year-old-son son Rudy discovering her body; as in the case of Mizoguchi Kenji, though from vastly differing conditions, Fernandez's LVN films exhibited fierce critiques of patriarchy afterward. I submit that possible factors may be adduced from Fernandez's output that build up toward this incident, though I can only maintain that these will be speculative at best: with *Higit sa Lahat* (1955), as an example, he not only reverted to using the title of "Dr." though his degree was in dental medicine, but also assumed scriptwriting responsibility–in which he indisputably also excelled. Three of his films during this period featured a performer exceptional for her performative skill and onscreen magnetism, but who, like Fernandez, largely disappeared from public life afterward. His cessation of film activity did not stop the press from occasionally looking him up as well as from a Lubao, Pampanga townmate, Diosdado Macapagal, prevailing on him to help his presidential re-election campaign by directing a biographical movie, but he had largely retreated by then not just from professional colleagues but also from his immediate family, earning a local reputation as an outstanding cockfighter in his distant provincial dwelling.

how appreciation for his achievements turned out, *HR*'s central mother-daughter tandem is essayed by fully capable performers—Emma Alegre and Nenita Vidal respectively—who had too-short careers in the medium. Serious observers of Philippine cinema who may think they have seen and/or read everything about the country's film history will be rewarded anew by asking themselves who the very best studio system practitioner was and watching Fernandez's films vis-à-vis the standard lineup.

Malvarosa

English Translation: *Geranium*
Year of Release: 1958 / B&W
Director: Gregorio Fernandez [as Dr. Gregorio Fernandez]
Screenwriter: Consuelo P. Osorio
Adapted from the serialized *komiks* by Clodualdo del Mundo Sr.
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Charito Solis, Leroy Salvador, Vic Silayan, Carlos Padilla Jr., Vic Diaz, Rey Ruiz, Eddie Rodriguez, Rebecca del Rio, Linda Roxas, Johnny Reyes, Perla Bautista, Caridad Sanchez, Priscilla Ramirez, Ramon Olmos, Nita Ramos, Johnny Legarda, Levi Celerio, Segundo Maniquiz

> Rosa lives in Manila's slums and is a sister to five brothers who treat her like a servant. Adding to her troubles is how her father's tragic death left her mother catatonic. Fortunately, her fiancé and her fifth (youngest) brother always help her. But just when her luck is about to turn for the better, Rosa faces some major obstacles that make her doubt if her lot will ever improve.

Before Sampaguita Studios launched its Stars '66 batch of talents, complemented by its "smorgasbord" (multiple-stars) presentations, LVN Pictures embarked on what initially appeared to be a commercially motivated project, drawn from a *komiks* serial and featuring their biggest male stars, mostly playing brothers, plus their bombshell attraction, Charito Solis, as youngest sister as well as devoted daughter and upright girlfriend. Exploiting the full potential of its "low-brow" literary origin, *Malvarosa* opens with a palm reader's accurate prediction of five sons and an only daughter being born to a dissolute couple, piles on the irony as well as the slum-colony lingo, and resolves in a large-scale apocalyptic event that cleanses not so much their material suffering as their collective soul, or whatever remains of it.[11] Fluid direction, spitfire performances, and Solis's timeless beauty provide much-appreciated icing for this still-urgent slice of urban life.

[11] An inspection of *Malvarosa*'s exceptional stature in relation to the other prestige productions of the First Golden Age can be found in Joel David, "A Certain Tendency: Europeanization as a Response to Americanization in the Philippines's 'Golden-Age' Studio System," *UNITAS: Semi-Annual Peer-Reviewed International Online Journal of Advanced Research in Literature, Culture, and Society*, vol. 89, no. 2, November 2017, pp. 24–53, doi:10.5281/zenodo.20693614.

MANUEL CONDE

(1 film: 1950)

Genghis Khan

Language: English
Year of Release: 1950 / B&W
Director: Manuel Conde [credited to Lou Salvador]
Screenwriters: Manuel Conde & Carlos V. Francisco
English narration written by James Agee
Producer: MC Productions
Cast: Manuel Conde, Elvira Reyes, Inday Jalandoni, Jose Villafranca, Lou Salvador, Africa de la Rosa, Don Dano, Johnny Monteiro, Andres Centenera, Ric Bustamante, Ely Nakpil, Leon Lizares, Tony Cruz, James Agee, John Storm

> Temujin and his fellow Mongol tribespeople are attacked by a rival tribe led by Burchou. He is soon captured but manages to escape. Upon returning to his village, he learns that his father was killed by Burchou's men. In his quest for vengeance, he and his army bring down his enemy's camp. But when he meets Burchou's daughter, Lei Hai, Temujin's resolve is put to the test.

As a then-prosperous US-aligned neocolonial entity during the Cold War, the Philippines could presume to appropriate and spoof, however good-naturedly, another country's highly cherished historical figure—something it may never be able to do again today—and garner accolades in the process. Those fortunate enough to have attended any of the last few screenings of Manuel Conde's musical comedies will be able to aver that his true genius lay in contemporary satire. To *Genghis Khan*'s advantage, it manifests his capacity for razor-sharp social commentary dispensed with madcap humor, bridging both the meaningful ebullience of *Bahala Na* (*Come What May*, 1957) and the caustic critiques of his long-running also-lost *Juan Tamad* (*Lazy Juan*) series (1947, 1948, 1959, 1960, 1963). The original *GK* print, presumed gone for good, ran for much longer than the hour-and-a-half version that was dubbed in English and sent to the Berlin International Film Festival. As a measure of Conde's achievement, Howard Hughes subsequently produced Hollywood's own Genghis Khan version, Dick Powell's *The Conqueror* (1956), featuring an all-American icon, John Wayne; the movie wound up on a canon listing of its own—Harry Medved and Randy Dreyfuss's *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time (And How They Got That Way)* (Popular Library, 1978).[12]

[12] Some of the final screenings of still-available Manuel Conde musicals were for the one-shot Focus on Filipino Films module of the 1983 edition of the Manila International Film Festival (where I'd been a technical assistant), including *Ikaw Kasi* (*You're the Cause*, 1955) and *Basta Ikaw* (*As Long as It's You*, 1957); both were ironically earlier made than *Bahala Na*, with the former in a monochrome print although it was also supposedly processed in Eastmancolor. While *The Conqueror* (1956) is generally regarded with derision, mention must also be made that the cast and crew suffered from nearly twice the normal incidence of cancer, with director Dick Powell and actors John Wayne, Susan Hayward, Agnes Moorehead, Pedro Armendáriz, and Lee Van Cleef (not all of them smokers) dying from it. Although the federal government announced that their film locale, downwind from a then-still-active nuclear testing site, was safe from radioactive fallout, the fact that even family and guests who visited the production were also subsequently diagnosed with various forms of the disease strongly suggests that an epidemic of illness befell the production. See Rory Carroll, "Hollywood and the Downwinders Still Grapple with Nuclear Fallout," *The Guardian*, June 6, 2015.

MAR S. TORRES

(1 film: 1954)

Jack en Jill

English Translation: *Jack and Jill*
Year of Release: 1954 / B&W
Director: Mar S. Torres
Screenwriter: Luciano B. Carlos
Adapted from the serialized *komiks* novel of the same name by Mars Ravelo
Producer: Sampaguita Pictures
Cast: Lolita Rodriguez, Dolphy, Rogelio de la Rosa, Matimtiman Cruz, Jose de Villa, Horacio Morelos, Etang Discher, Luis Gonzales, Bella Flores, Bruno Punzalan, Luciano B. Carlos, Herminia Carranza, Teroy de Guzman

> Tomboyish Luisa and cross-dressing Gorio are the children of Ambo, a chauffeur for a rich couple and their son, Gardo. When Ambo gets sick, Luisa takes over his job by pretending to be a boy. Later, Gorio is adopted by Gardo's parents when they mistake him for a girl. As the siblings get into all sorts of high jinks, the arrival of Gardo's ladylove complicates matters even further.

Dolphy has always been a difficult figure to revaluate. The strategies he used to attain respectability did not permit much creative leeway, so his innovations as comedian generally tended to observe the limits expected of wholesome family fare. Several of his collaborations with Luciano B. Carlos, another eager-to-please major talent, hold up well as pleasant diversions, particularly during the libertarian *bomba* [soft-core] period of the early 1970s. Among his sex-themed comedies, the ones where he toyed with the concept of masculinity have provided a legacy that several later generations of comedians were able to draw from.[13] Mar S. Torres's *Jack en Jill*, for all its dated assumptions, including its problematic misogyny, marks the moment when the figures of the so-called inverts (effeminate male and masculine female), though prevented from exhibiting same-sex desire and, always in the queer woman's case, falsely provided with the last-minute discovery of their heterosexual tendencies, were foregrounded and set on a quite-lengthy journey to social acceptability.

[13] A later Sampaguita Pictures production, *Kaming mga Talyada (We Who Are Sexy)* from 1962, emblematizes a far more complicated discourse, although its problematic nature makes it too unwieldy to enshrine in the present canon list. Directed by Tony Cayado, it features seven sissy men, desired by seven young women but resistant to harsh military discipline by their absentee father, whose "conversion" to the straight and narrow is expedited when they are deployed to Mindanao and have to suppress an Islamic uprising. The film's selling point was the series of nightclub performances in Manila of Christine Jorgensen, an American inaccurately billed as the first postoperative transgender woman. The essential text that teases out these issues is Susan Stryker's "*We Who Are Sexy*: Christine Jorgensen's Transsexual Whiteness in the Postcolonial Philippines," *Social Semiotics*, vol. 19, no. 1, March 2009, pp. 79–91, doi:10.1080/10350330802655551.

LAMBERTO V. AVELLANA

(4 films: 1956–1970)

Anak Dalita

English Translation: *Child of Sorrow*
English Title: *The Ruins*
Year of Release: 1956 / B&W
Director: Lamberto V. Avellana
Screenwriter: Rolf Bayer
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Rosa Rosal, Tony Santos, Joseph de Cordova, Vic Silayan, Vic Bacani, Leroy Salvador, Rosa Aguirre, Oscar Keesee, Alfonso Carvajal, Johnny Reyes, Eddie Rodriguez, Arturo Moran

> Vic comes home from the Korean War and finds that his mother is not only on the verge of death, but has also been living in the ruins of old Intramuros with nightclub hostess Cita. After his mother dies, he moves in with Cita but they realize that money is hard to come by. Driven by desperation, Vic makes choices that will test his love for Cita and his resolve for a better life.

The first triumphant use of neorealism in Philippine cinema is a testament to an impoverished past—that of World War II devastation—that the country managed to vanquish, only to see it return over and over with increasing regularity, culminating in what has been described by political expert Walden Bello as "the anti-development state" in his eponymously titled 2005 volume. In the context of Cold-War conservatism, when government and religious leaders sought to infantilize the public with wholesome father-knows-best material, *Anak Dalita* made a then-daring decision to uphold as its heroes a highly unlikely pair, a Korean-War veteran turned petty criminal and a prostitute seeking to turn over a new leaf. To attain a hopeful resolution, the narrative requires the conventional intervention of an authoritarian figure, a decorous priest, to help the duo find the light of personal redemption as well as convince slum dwellers to give up their homestead claims. Consistently high-caliber performances nevertheless provide the crucial component of credibility, with star turns by its charismatically hard-edged lead performers.

Sarjan Hassan

English Title: *Sergeant Hassan*
Language: Malay
Additional Languages: Japanese, English
Year of Release: 1958 / B&W
Director: Lamberto V. Avellana
Screenwriter: P. Ramlee
From a story by Ralph Modder
Producer: Malay Film Productions Ltd.

Cast: P. Ramlee, Sa'adiah, Jins Shamsuddin, Salleh Kamil, John Gray, David Downe, Daeng Idris, Aini Jasmin, Nyong Ismail, Leng Hussein, Omar Rojik, Pon M.R., S. Shamsudin, Rashid M.R., M. Raffee, Adek Ja'afar, Kemat Hassan, Habibah Harun, Omar Suwita, Zainol Bakar, Ali P.G.

> Before his father dies, Hassan is entrusted to the family of his father's friend. Unfortunately, his adoptive brother Ajis resents the newcomer and conspires with Buang to bully Hassan. Their friend Salmah defends Hassan although the latter refuses to fight back. When they grow up, Ajis leaves for military training while Hassan is left behind to look after the family. Hassan writes his adoptive father an apology to be able to train as well, upon which the Japanese declare war. Buang arranges with the invaders to volunteer his services as informant and uses his newfound authority to pressure Salmah to marry him. Salmah refuses, since she has fallen for Hassan. But the unit that Hassan and Ajis joined, along with their American commander, falls into enemy hands. Buang arranges for Ajis to be brought to Malacca for execution, informing Salmah that only their marriage will save her brother. Hassan hears about a British-led guerrilla force and realizes that he has to take charge of his fate as well as those of the family and townsfolk that he learned to value as his own.

To celebrate its independence in 1957, the then-Federation of Malaya, with Run Run Shaw producing, conscripted Lamberto V. Avellana to direct a biographical feature on one of the country's World War II heroes, Hassan bin Haji Othman. As a film event, *Sarjan Hassan*'s subject is potentially complex and controversial: awarded a Military Medal by Queen Elizabeth, Othman later became known (and feared) as an anti-Communist crusader. The film itself, however, has been celebrated in Malaysia through the decades, primarily because of the person regarded as the country's superstar, P. Ramlee. One claim is that when Avellana was unable to finish the film, Ramlee took over. His performance as Sergeant Hassan betokens an accomplished performer's easy handling of a role steeped in dramatic heroism—small wonder that he'd been better known for film comedies and musicals.[14] The narrative itself, again owing to Ramlee, is also spared Avellana's usual social conservatism. The tension between Avellana's famed expertise at staging epic material and Ramlee's purveyance of his people's decent charms results in one of the more fascinating war films that our filmmakers had the good fortune to be associated with.

Nick Joaquin's A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino

Alternate Title: *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino*
Language: English
Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1965 / B&W
Director: Lamberto V. Avellana
Screenwriters: Donato Valentin & Trinidad Reyes
From the play *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino: An Elegy in Three Scenes* by Nick Joaquin
Producers: Diadem Pictures & Cinema Artists

[14] See Amir Muhammad's "P. Ramlee, Superstar" in *Moving Image Source*, March 18, 2011, excerpted from *Asia Laughs! A Survey of Asian Comedy Films*, ed. Roger Garcia, Centro Espressioni Cinematografiche, 2011. Additional relevant material can be found in Lee Yow Chong and Candida Jau Emang's "Selling the Past in Films: Shaw Brothers and the Japanese Occupation of Malaya," in *Jurnal Komunikasi—Malaysian Journal of Communication*, vol. 32, no. 2, 2016, pp. 1–16, doi:10.17576/JKMJC-2016-3202-10.

Cast: Daisy H. Avellana, Naty Crame-Rogers, Conrad Parham, Vic Silayan, Sarah K. Joaquin, Nick Agudo, Pianing Vidal, Koko Trinidad, Oscar Keesee, Veronica Palileo, Nena Perez Rubio, Manny Ojeda, Rino Bermudez, Alfred X. Burgos, Nena Ledesma, Polly Anders, Miriam Jurado

> In need of extra funds to maintain their house in Intramuros, the sisters Candida and Paula Marasigan take in a border, the caddishly handsome Tony Javier, also to be able to withstand the insistence of their other siblings to sell the property and live with them. When Bitoy Camacho, a long-unseen family friend, visits them one day, they're delighted by the reminiscences he occasions but eventually figure out, when he admits to being a writer, that he's really snooping around to be able to report on the painting that their father, Don Lorenzo, completed as his final masterpiece, titled "Un retrato del artista como Filipino" (also the Spanish name of the play and film). Tony himself also admits that, when he learned about the existence of the painting, he found an American willing to purchase it for a price that would allow Don Lorenzo and the sisters to live comfortably. But since the patriarch refuses to give up his house, Candida and Paula hang on to the painting to honor his wish. With World War II about to break out, everyone familiar with the family grows increasingly desperate in disposing of the house and selling the painting, with Tony figuring out a way to persuade the sisters using his charm.

The film adaptation of Nick Joaquin's stage masterwork may require some degree of willingness to depart from realism, with what is essentially a staged production in which characters, even vaudeville performers, speak in English. To remark that it may be the most successful existing evidence of a Classical Hollywood achievement in the Philippines would therefore be not much of a compliment, although Joaquin's text does sustain the cumulative power it more efficiently discloses onstage. What Joaquin instead achieves in *A Portrait of the Artist as Filipino* is an implicit critique of Americanization—ironic when considering his deployment of English. Joaquin's detractors correctly point out that his ideological project relies on a dangerous capitulation to colonial nostalgia in preferring Old-World culture. Yet the other aspect of this critical process cannot be discounted: in providing a convincing deconstruction of US influence, he also effectively warns against an uncritical acceptance of other forms of foreign domination. Lamberto V. Avellana enables this reading via opening and closing voice-overs, purportedly from Bitoy Camacho, the least-deluded member of the generation that Candida and Paula belong to. Beyond these admittedly dated issues, the film also endures as a sample of one of the spoken languages (the other being Spanish) that attempted to lay claim on Philippine cinema before Tagalog succeeded in ensconcing itself, with Cebuano being its only serious challenger.

The Evil Within

Alternate Title: *Passport to Danger*
Language: English [dubbed]
Additional Language: Hindi
Year of Release: 1970
Director: Lamberto V. Avellana
Screenwriter: Rolf Bayer
Producers: Arbee Productions & Navketan Studios
Cast: Dev Anand, Kieu Chinh, Tita Muñoz, Vimal Ahuja, Henry Duval, Premnath Malhotra, Iftekhar, Zeenat Aman, Bipin Gupta, Manvendra Chitnis, Allen Fitzpatrick, Rod Perry, Jagdish Raj, M.B. Shetty, Kuljit Singh, Yog Raj, Akbar Bakshi, Dhannalal, Dharamvir, Henry Feist, Sudesh Issar, Fazal Khan, Ken Metcalfe, Joseph Zucchero, Lucita Soriano, Lena, Birbal, Sudesh, Radish Khan, R.B. Henni, Tony Lee, Barbara Allen, Vic Silayan, Kim Ramos

> A violent agent called Fatman evades a series of arrest attempts in Hongkong by killing the people involved, but he's unable to survive an assassination by the opium-smuggling syndicate to whom he offers his services. Superspy Dev Verma is assigned to bust the syndicate in the Golden Triangle, assisting Interpol agent Rod Stevens. They discover that Fatman's death was part of a complex mesh of intrigue, involving the daughter of the handler, all the way up to Kamar Souria, a princess who lives in the desert. To get to her, Dev interrogates her brother's lover, Amal, but then he discovers that her relationship with the princess transcends her lover's ambition to wrest control of the smuggling operation.

Lamberto V. Avellana's problematic stature as a local artist squarely in step with the demands of imperial and authoritarian regimes brings up the similar issue of collaboration raised by Gerardo de Leon's acquiescence to the Japanese occupation's film agency when it embarked on its big-budget propaganda project, albeit minus GDL's subsequent progressive turn as well as the counter-reading instigated by the anti-American messaging of *Dawn of Freedom* (1944, codir. Abe Yutaka). Nevertheless, as a still critically capable practitioner, Avellana has managed to come up with works that enable contrarian readings.[15] *The Evil Within* has the same Cold War superspy configuration as the James Bond series, and indeed announced its intent to launch its lead actor as global heroic star in the mold of Hollywood's cool, wisecracking, sexually confident superstuds. Pujita Guha tracked in expert historical detail how Dev Anand's final stab at breaking into Western film production, after an initially failed attempt in Ted Danielewski's *The Guide* (1965), faltered just as badly this time around. Despite a number of inaccuracies in her evaluation of Avellana's record, Guha also provides the reason for Indian censors' disapproval of the film—i.e., its glamorization in effect of opium-smuggling activities. Yet the actual unnamed reason may have lain in the very factor that Anand could not overcome: he was outshone by the female cast that his character supposedly dominated and outwitted. The youngest, Zeenat Aman, was Indian and killed off too early in the plot; the other two were Vietnamese and Filipina, Kiếu Chinh and Tita Muñoz respectively, playing frenemies who become separately involved with Dev Verma (Anand's character), but who turn out to be as much lovers as rivals. This was in accordance with reports pertaining to Olive Yang, a real-life opium warlord who was eventually captured, released, and lived to a ripe old age until her death in 2017. The fact that Avellana positioned lesbian desire front and center, with two attractive and well-matched performers, will surprise everyone (as it did me) who assumed he would resist the then-raging *bomba* film trend in his home country. To his credit, and despite the fate that befell *TEW*, he managed to embody his delight in cinematic spectacle with a rarely achieved smart and queenly alpha-female pair.

[15] The most highly regarded among the contrarian readings of a Lamberto V. Avellana film was that provided by Petronilo Bn. Daroy. In "Main Currents in the Filipino Cinema," published March 23–29, 1976, in the *Philippines Daily Express*, he pointed out how Gerardo de Leon's *Daigdig ng mga Api* (*World of the Oppressed*, 1965, now lost), copped out in the end by endorsing the agrarian-reform program of then re-electionist President Diosdado Macapagal. Daroy instead posited Avellana's *Anak Dalita* (*Child of Sorrow*, 1956) as a less reactionary work, possibly overwhelmed by its neorealist daring and consequently disinformed by its incipient clericofascism. Pujita Guha's study of Dev Anand appeared in her article "Traversing *The Evil Within* (1970): Transnational Aspirations, Stardom, and Infrastructure in a Cold-War Asia," published in the anthology edited by Monika Mehta and Madhuja Mukherjee and titled *Industrial Networks and Cinemas of India: Shooting Stars, Shifting Geographies, and Multiplying Media* (Routledge, 2021). Her assertion, drawn from Jack Halberstam and inspired by Michel Foucault, that failure can be viewed as "the embodiment of defiance," may be lost to readers unfamiliar with the ironic logic of screen cultural studies; the fact that *TEW* itself was never shown in India, released only in Pinas and possibly in a limited US run, further seals the negligence with which it has been regarded.

TONY CAYADO

(1 film: 1957)

Mga Ligaw na Bulaklak

English Title: *Wild Flowers*
Year of Release: 1957 / B&W
Director: Tony Cayado
Screenwriters: Medy Tarnate & Emmanuel H. Borlaza
Adapted from the serialized *komiks* by Pablo S. Gomez & Petrolino Z. Marcelo
Producer: Sampaguita Pictures
Cast: Daisy Romualdez, Susan Roces, Romeo Vasquez, Tony Marzan, Bella Flores, Eddie Garcia, Marlene Dauden, Nelly Baylon, Bella Flores, Martin Marfil, Bert Olivar, Nori Dalisay

> Cora is lured by a drug syndicate after she encounters a glamorous crook, Greta. Conrado is also recruited by Greta and discovers that his boss, Big Boy, wants him to attract more female patrons to their gang's smuggled opium. But as the authorities get closer to cracking down on the syndicate, Cora's life is imperilled while Conrado begins to plot a takeover of Big Boy's gang.

Film noir is the style that initially lends cover, in a manner of speaking, to this tale of moral corruption in the big city; eventually the noir element takes over everything and lends a solemn aura to the star-oriented house image of Sampaguita Pictures, including the narrative's ingénue, played by the then-barely legal Susan Roces. The sight of the wholesome, winsome teen actress descending into an underworld of gangsters and sex workers eventually enabled her to "stretch" her persona from young-idol vehicles to drama and horror, setting a template that her contemporaries and successors have since been able to benefit from. Tony Cayado's smart, confident direction of material adapted from a then-disreputable source, *komiks* literature, similarly pointed the way for successive generations seeking a balance between pulp pleasure and social discourse. Best of all, the expected antagonist in the virgin-vs.-whore dichotomy, depicted by Bella Flores with her trademark voluptuous swagger, turns out to be strong-woman enough to take the initiative in delivering our innocent from the certain calamity awaiting her.

AMADO GARCES

(1 film: 1957)

Sino ang Maysala?

English Translation: *Who Is at Fault?*
Year of Release: 1957 / B&W
Director: Armando Garces
Screenwriters: Luciano B. Carlos & Armando Garces
Based on the *komiks* by Fausto Galauran
Producer: Sampaguita Pictures
Cast: Rogelio de la Rosa, Gloria Romero, Paraluman, Ric Rodrigo, Lolita Rodriguez, Luis Gonzales, Rosa Mia, Susan Roces, Romeo Vasquez, Van de Leon, Etang Discher, Eddie Garcia, Zeny Zabala, Bella Flores, Panchito, Tony Cayado, Jose de Villa, Aring Bautista, Mercy Guia

> A fairly wealthy family's three daughters and only son revel in their material comforts—clothes, jewelry, cars, lovers—until one wild party night, when their father commits suicide. When they discover that their fortune is all gone, the daughters scramble to maintain as much of their lifestyle as they could salvage. Carmen, the eldest, administers the family's finances and resumes her romance with a formerly impoverished but now-rich suitor, who already happens to be married; Gloria, abandoned by her beau, resolves to focus on her career; Lolita indulges in relationships that she refuses to take seriously. Their youngest brother, Bobby, starts acting out and goes on trial for participating in criminal activity, causing the family to arrive at a reckoning of their transgressions for his sake.

One of the problems in film evaluation still plaguing unreflective academically trained commentators up to the present is the valorization of politicized material invested with the discipline of classical unities, dramatic logic, and Western performative reserve. Which is why works like *Sino ang Maysala?* get overlooked by critics and scholars except for seriously neglected practitioners like the late Johven Velasco. Not only do the characters' concerns remain resolutely domestic and (predictably) increasingly melodramatic, the characters themselves are named after the actors who play them; in the case of Paraluman, her character is called "Carmen" because the original performer was supposed to be Carmen Rosales. The arrangement contributed significantly to the film's popular appeal when "Bobby" Vasquez lived out his bad-boy behavior the way his fictional version did. Yet *SaM* provided more than just motives for its characters' actions. The sisters' survival strategies may have seemed morally unacceptable during their time, but anyone who returns for another viewing will realize that women who take stock of their situation and determine their own future paths (as our very own mostly female Overseas Filipino Workers regularly do) will be preferable to the spoiled spendthrifts that their characters had been at the start. The accumulated effect on Bobby of the decline in their social stature occasions a collective reflection that could have prevented the initial tragedy that befell their father if they had had enough experience of pain and suffering to be able to recognize his situation in time to save him. Hence the judge's climactic sermon actually functions semi-ironically, the way that *SaM* does in Philippine film

history. Velasco points out how the film provides a local counterpart to the universally popular (though similarly belatedly appreciated) Douglas Sirk melodramas of Classical Hollywood, but claims as well that the lost-generation psychological dramas of Nicholas Ray and Elia Kazan were probably just as influential. These are worthy examples for any film product to be compared with, but the best part about *SaM* is that it set out to provide grown-up popular entertainment and made sure that it fulfilled that mission well, before everything else.

RAMON A. ESTELLA

(4 films: 1957–1965)

In memory of Teddy Co

Kembali Saorang

English Title: *One Came Back*
Language: Malay
Year of Release: 1957 / B&W
Director & screenwriter: Ramon A. Estella [with dialogue by S. Sudarmadji]
From a story by Run Run Shaw
Producer: Malay Film Productions
Cast: Sa'adiah, Ahmad Mahmud, Salleh Kamil, Mariani, Daeng Idris, Supatri, Saamah, Habsah, Malik Sutan Muda, Omar Suwita, M. Rafee, Ali Muhammad, Kemat Hassan, Nyak Osman, Shariff Dol, Ibrahim Pendek, H.M. Busra

> Hussain wants to marry his fiancée Aminah, frustrating his best friend Yusof, who has rejected Zaitun. When Aminah's father attempts to collect money from a debtor, he finds the latter dead. Hussain, who looks for the father, is chased by the police and asks Yusof to hide him, a request that Zaitun overhears. Aminah's father searches for Hussain but gets arrested by the police. Meanwhile, Zaitun informs a detective where Hussain is hiding. Hussain flees and jumps into the sea. When the police announce his death, Yusof comforts Aminah by asking his mother to take care of her and her sister in their home. Believing that Hussain has perished, Yusof begins to develop feelings for Aminah, even as Zaitun keeps threatening to expose Yusof's past with her. The *kampung* (Malay village) where they live is small enough so that the characters' personal affairs become public knowledge sooner or later.

Only an excerpt remains of Ramon A. Estella's 1956 triumph *Ang Buhay at Pag-ibig ni Dr. Jose Rizal* (*The Life and Love of Dr. Jose Rizal*), the same condition in which Manuel Conde's *Juan Tamad Goes to Congress* (1959) can be found. But where Conde's Vietnam-set *Krus na Kawayan* (*Let Us Live*, 1956) can be fairly described as propagandistic drivel, the output of several Filipino directors for Sir Run Run Shaw in Malaysia is of a generally noteworthy quality, with none more accomplished than Estella's. Earlier recognized for political controversy over the long-lost *Ako Raw Ay Huk* (*I Was Called a Rebel*, later retitled *Labi ng Bataan* or *Remains of Bataan*, 1948), only one apparently complete local production of Estella's remains. Fortunately most Filipino filmmakers' Malay-language output has been carefully preserved in Singapore, with Estella's debut contribution, *Kembali Saorang*, outshining the rest.[16] Estella admirably navigates a surprisingly complex

[16] Available internet information on Ramon A. Estella is reflective of the negligence with which he has been treated in general, since he always seemed ready to move from place to place in search of work. As of this writing, the *Internet Movie Database* does not list this film as well as *Saudagar Minyak Urat* (*Love Crazy*, 1959), *Darah-Ku* (*My Blood*, 1963), and *Bunga Tanjong* (*Cape of Flowers*, 1963), and lists the earlier version of *Raja Bersiong* (*The King with Fangs*, 1963) in his name rather than K.M. Basker's; it also misidentifies *Pusaka Pontianak* (*The Accursed Heritage*, 1965) under the credit of its assistant director, S. Sudarmaji. The Singapore Fillm Archives contains a comprehensive listing, including an Estella-directed Japan-set film, *Melanchong ka-Tokyo* (*Holiday in Tokyo*, 1964) also produced by Malay Film Productions. A missing Estella Filipino title is *Ang Tagala* (*The Tagalog Woman*, 1941), the Vietnam-set *Kim* (1957), and an unplaceable Italian work, *Consiglio Costoso* (*Expensive Advice*, no date provided)—all from the director's entry in the *Film* volume of the Cultural Center of the Philippines's *Encyclopedia of Philippine Art*, 2nd ed., CCP & University of the Philipppines Diliman Office of the Chancellor, 2017, pp. 449–450.

narrative (in addition to finishing in record time, per reliable accounts) and demonstrates why his producers prevailed on him to make several more films before continuing with his peripatetic explorations.[17] For close comparison, Teodorico C. Santos made a charming effort, *Taufan* (*Typhoon*), later the same year, in the same locale and with many of the same actors; but even in reprising the melodramatic elements, *Kembali Saorang* pulls away with more ambitious scope, appreciation of social forces, and psychological complexity, with a resolution that honors Estella's new sponsors' culture as much as it reflects the maturity of Philippine film artistry.

Samseng

English Translation: *Gangster*
Language: Malay
Additional Language: English
Year of Release: 1959 / B&W
Director: Ramon A. Estella
Screenwriter: Ralph Modder
Producer: Malay Film Productions Ltd.
Cast: Zaiton, Aziz Jaafar, Jins Shamsuddin, Rosnani, Saamah, A. Rahim, Haji Mahadi, Omar Suwita, M. Rafee, Ali P.G., Mohd. Hamid, Kemat Hassan, Sharif Dol, Ismail Abdullah, Ibrahim Hasan, S. Sudharmadji

> Daud serves time in prison after being arrested for forgery. His good behavior impresses the warden, who promises him a job after he is released. His younger brother Ahmad meanwhile deceives his mother by claiming to be a car dealer when he actually engages in extortion and robbery. Their neighbor Kiah sympathizes with the brothers' mother but Ahmad ignores her and takes up with a nightclub hostess. After Daud has served his sentence, he follows up on the job offered him. It turns out to be undercover police work. Daud is assigned to shadow a troublesome criminal gang, unaware that his own brother is its ringleader.

Samseng exists in atypically poor condition, since it appears to be sourced from a TV-broadcast version. But that also attests to its effectiveness as a film-noir favorite. The primary locales—Changi Prison (now Complex), then fairly new and also featured in Ramon A. Estella's *Kembali Saorang*, and the underworld hotspots of Singapore—become as much dramatic players as the performers themselves.

[17] One rudimentary context of Estella's relocation to Malaysia, which I am still in the process of further evaluating, is that his arrival coincided with the announcement of a strike for higher wages by film performers and technicians from Malay Film Productions, through the Singapore Malay Artists' Union, submitted to Shaw Brothers. Although a Filipino actor-director, Eddie Infante, preceded everyone in 1955 with *Gadis Liar* (*Elephant Girl*, apparently unavailable), after an earlier notice concluded amicably in 1954, the near-simultaneous solicitation of a clutch of Noypi directors in 1957 and 1958 raises the disturbing possibility that our talents might have been envisioned to function as safeguards against the possible inactivity of Malaysian and Indian creatives.

However, filmmaker, critic, and historian Amir Muhammed provided a crucial qualification: "I've asked three people who've written about the era and all of them say it was never a policy akin to hiring scabs; it was more like two things that happened in parallel. The strikes were never major enough to cripple production for long. (P. Ramlee's *Panca Delima*, released in 1957, was one of the few films that got delayed; then there was a bigger strike in 1965 where Shaw had to temporarily close.) The Filipino directors were hired based on cultural similarities but also access to more sophisticated 'Hollywood techniques'" (*Messenger* reply, November 5, 2025). For essential basic resources, see the list of references at "Malay Film Productions & Cathay-Keris Studio (1943–1973)," *Wiki.sg* (last edited August 6, 2019).

A well-regarded member of the Philippine social-realist painters circle, Estella understandably upheld verisimilitude even in shifting to cinema, and the result in this case is a tale firmly rooted in time and place. He also apparently valued memorable resolutions (possibly a consequence of his professional musicianship), which nearly saves his *Mata Hari* (1958) from masculinist overvaluation. The device works whoppingly for *Samseng*, where the standard chases, shootouts, and heartbreaks build up to an unforgettable night in the lives of the city's dispossessed.

Saudagar Minyak Urat

English Translation: *Massage-Oil Merchant*
English Title: *Love Crazy*
Language: Malay
Additional Language: English
Year of Release: 1959 / B&W
Director: Ramon A. Estella
Screenwriter: Ralph Modder
Producer: Malay Film Productions Ltd.
Cast: S. Kadarisman, Normadiah, Aziz Sattar, Mariani, S. Shamsuddin, Leng Hussin, Ani Jasmin, Ahmad Nispu, Ibrahim Pendek, Mohd Hamid, Zainom, Saloma, S. Sudarmadji, Sharif Dol, Omar Suwita, Kemat Hassan, Ali P.G., Kassim Masdor, H.M. Busra, Omar Harun, Ismail Abdullah

> Fatimah, a bossy though still-bodacious wife, has her hands full making sure her hubby stays faithful. The philandering Yusof Hamid asks his assistant to take him to a nightclub, where he meets and falls for Hamidah, even arranging to serenade her one night. Since she already has a boyfriend, she resists Hamid, forcing him to look for a miracle. He approaches a witch doctor, who arranges to cast a spell on Hamidah. When Fatimah finds out, she also asks for help from the same magician.

Only the lost *Caprichosa* (*Whimsical Woman*, 1947) and possibly *Kenkoy* (1950) in Ramon A. Estella's previous film record suggest that he might have dabbled in romantic comedy. After assigning him a series of genre exercises—melodrama, horror, war, and gangster films—with generally satisfactory results, Sir Run Run Shaw must have marveled at how he came up with his best Malay-language product at that point. *Saudagar Minyak Urat* is a silly, rambunctious outing from start to finish, with occasional use of slapstick and sped-up footage, but like the best comedy directors, Estella ensured that a dramatically valid foundation was fully developed beforehand. He displays impressive skill in blocking and choreographing groups of performers so that the lines of action crisscross but never result in confusion, and stages a charming open-air musical interlude midway (an effervescent beach number titled "Hula Hoop" that cleverly rationalizes hip-grinding women in skimpy wear), succeeded in later scenes by a feverish song-and-dance number featuring Saloma. He also shows smart gender reversals that may have drawn on the contemporaneous full-scale treatments of Gregorio Fernandez. But until the emergence of the talents behind Juan de la Cruz Productions in the 1970s, nothing we have in available Philippine film samples has as queer a figure the way that Normadiah (as the domineering missus) is configured in *SMU*: garrulous, hotheaded, swaggering pugnaciously, yet winning her battles via judicious deployment of the womanly masquerade. So the great Manuel Conde movies are lost? We have this entry from Estella, and it will fulfill expectations of accomplished old-time Philippine comedy, even if it's set in neighboring territory.

Pusaka Pontianak

English Title: *The Accursed Heritage*
English Translation: *The Pontianak Heritage*
Language: Malay
Additional Language: English
Year of Release: 1965 / B&W
Director & Screenwriter: Ramon A. Estella
Producer: Malay Film Productions Ltd.
Cast: Saadiah, Ahmad Mahmud, Dayang Sofia, Salleh Kamil, Normadiah, Mariam Baharum, Aziz Sattar, Ahmad Daud, Ibrahim Pendek, Ahmad Nisfu, Haji Mahadi, Jah Hj. Mahadi, Omar Suwita, Kuswadinata

> Related individuals from various walks of life keep sighting a distant uncle whom they all regard as wealthy, but the apparitions either disappear or turn scary. They then read a newspaper report that identify the man, Datu Pengiran Sutan Kudus, as having perished in a fiery automobile accident and wishing to gather all his relatives for the reading of his last will and testament. They travel to his estate on a rubber plantation where tigers roam, and await the reading at midnight. The lawyer introduces a young woman as the late datu's wife, who should be his rightful heir. But in acknowledgment of his many descendants, he makes a revelation along with a condition: his ancestors were pontianaks destroyed by his human family and cursed thirteen generations of the human descendants, with the datu as the last of the accursed. Those wanting their share of inheritance must remain on the plantation for four weeks, with those who leave or die forfeiting their share. A few other characters introduce themselves as investigators who find the datu's own death suspicious.

The question of how much closure Ramon A. Estella provided for the most productive phase of his career, in Malay-language cinema, must have been on his producer's mind as well: he was given his third *pontianak* assignment, but with a treatment reminiscent of his most memorable achievement, the musical comedy *Saudagar Minyak Urat*. The further question of how far he was allowed to subvert his material might be impossible to determine by now, except from the historical record that no other *pontianak* movie was produced afterward until well into the next decade. Estella was also making films in Vietnam and Japan around this time, and would continue working in New York, Puerto Rico, and Italy, until finally retiring in Florida with his Japanese wife. As a final intertextual appreciation, a remake of the similarly structured *Ten Little Indians* (dir. George Pollock, 1965) would be released in English-speaking territories only the next year—a testimonial to Estella's accomplished timeliness. The *pontianak* may be considered the Indo-Malayan counterpart of the Philippines's *mananánggal* although the also-female entity possesses the tragic backstory of childbirth trauma. Estella updates his narrative by introducing rock and roll music, with the theme song (translatable as "Rhythm of the Pontianak") performed in doo-wop style by Ahmad Daud and the Swallows, consequently rationalizing the sharia-proscribed arrangement specified by the characters' forebear. As described by film expert Amir Muhammad, the pop brashness "brought the *pontianak* out into the harsh modern light of parody and cynicism, away from the shadows of whispered superstition and taboo where she thrived" (*120 Malay Movies*, Matahari Books, 2010). The characters and their relationships are developed as a drawing-room drama, although the narrative resolution expands the setting in an unexpected yet apposite manner. An aura of gloom nevertheless suffuses the proceedings, derived as much from the nighttime settings as from our awareness that agricultural wealth will not be able to hold its own against a fast-industrializing economy.

TEODORICO C. SANTOS

(1 film: 1957)

Taufan

English Title: *Typhoon*
Language: Malay
Year of Release: 1957 / B&W
Director: Teodorico C. Santos [as T.C. Santos]
Screenwriter: Teodorico C. Santos with dialogues by S. Sudarmadji
From the story "A Storm on Pearl Island" by Chua Boon Hean
Producer: Malay Film Productions
Cast: Ziaton, Ahmad Mahmud, Salleh Kamil, Mariani, Saamah, Aziz Sattar, Baby Suraini, Nyak Osman, Salbiah Kardi, Shariff Dol, Fatimah Osman, Ali Fijee, Jamilah, Mohd Rafee, Omar Suwita, Mustarjo, Kemat Hassan, H.M. Busra, Ibrahim Pendek, Mohd. Hamid

> The fishermen of a coastal *kampung* or traditional village catch so little fish after a strong typhoon that they borrow money from Hamid, who takes advantage of their situation by charging usurious repayment rates. Hamid has set his sights on Fatimah, who has to attend to her father who's ill but owes Hamid money; Hamid offers her medical care if she agrees to be his mistress, abusing his own wife when she criticizes his intention. He intends to get rid of Amir, Fatimah's betrothed, by promising to write off Fatimah's loan if Amir's able to bring him a large pearl from the shark-infested waters. Fatimah protests, but Amir is determined to win her from Hamid and proceeds with the life-threatening mission.

One of the more highly regarded talents of the First Golden Age, with over forty titles to his name as director and several more as scriptwriter (including Gerardo de Leon's *Sisa*), active through the 1970s—yet the only still-available Teodorico C. Santos-directed film, apart from Fernando Poe Jr.'s recently remastered *koboy* entry *...At Sila'y Dumating* (*And They Came*, 1967),[18] was the one he made for Sir Run Run Shaw. The material is old-fashioned melodrama with musical interludes, enhanced by the rural setting and made even more exotic by a cast more reticent and graceful than what we might find in a Philippine production. Santos

[18] The once-popular problematic Western genre was, in simplistic terms, a commemoration of the expansion of Euro-derived civilization from Atlantic-coast US territories into the "wild" Pacific states; the expansion of the US into independent countries such as Hawaii and Guam, leading to the successful colonization of the Philippines and unsuccessful attempt in Vietnam, may be seen as an extension of this impetus. The very first acknowledged narrative film story, Edwin S. Porter's *The Great Train Robbery* (1903), partook of elements that were identified with Westerns, although the overseas popularity of the genre, including the Philippines's *koboy* (from cowboy) samples, may be traced to so-called Italian spaghetti Westerns. Ironically these were acknowledged as influenced by—plagiarized, in fact, from—an Asian hit, Kurosawa Akira's *Yojimbo* (*Bodyguard*, 1961), which in turn led to such coinages as Easterns or ramen Westerns. Teodorico C. Santos's *...At Sila'y Dumating* is saddled by excessive psychotic villainy, with FPJ himself arguably modifying the *koboy* elements in his own *Panday* film series and finally creating a historically inflected peak with *Ang Maestro* (*The Master*, 1981).

benefited from an apparently bigger budget than Philippine-set projects could allot, and made sure none of it was wasted: any plot excuse to follow pearl-diving characters is realized with impressive underwater photography, while Santos frames and blocks his island-set actors with sufficient evidence of technical lessons learned on Gerry de Leon projects. The propensity for excess must have been the national value he brought over; it provides him with a means to revitalize the genre's conventions and gives the story a nervy edge, like a finely woven fishnet stretched to the point where it could easily tear in several places.

CONRADO CONDE

(1 film: 1958)

Talipandas

English Title: *Traitor*
Year of Release: 1958 / B&W
Director: Conrado Conde
Screenwriter: Ding M. de Jesus
From a serialized *komiks* story by Francisco V. Coching
Producer: Sampaguita Pictures
Cast: Rita Gomez, Luis Gonzales, Van de Leon, Carlos Salazar, Rosa Mia, Bella Flores, Zeny Zabala, Bert Olivar, Ely Roque, Art Morado, Lydia Correa, Jaime Javier, Pablo Raymundo, Willie Dado, Sabas San Juan, Matimtiman Cruz, Marcela Garcia, Loida Medina, Apolonia Aguilar

> Having taken the fall for his brother Andy, Bien Lopez confronts his sibling for betraying him by cohabiting with his wife Stella while he was still in prison. Although Stella insists that she was forced into the arrangement, Bien's rejection drives her to stab Andy and commit suicide. Unaware so far of what his wife did, Bien watches a striptease number at Moonlite Cabaret; the performer, Esperanza, migrated to Manila to work at the same place where her mother once performed, to track down the man who ruined her mother's life. Bien and Espie manage to provide comfort and support for each other and develop an alliance just when a besotted customer provides Espie with better lodging and a gang leader named George Mendez takes a prurient interest in the nightclub's hit performer.

The fact that two *komiks*-sourced melodramas from the same year—this and Gregorio Fernandez's *Malvarosa*—featured slum residents living by railroad tracks must have been more than coincidental. Intensely psychological where *Malvarosa* was sociological, *Talipandas* eventually abandons its expository locale when its central female character upgrades to better housing (courtesy of a loaded patron); but the opening scene's train not only brought her to the city in the first place, it also ended the life of her would-have-been rival, the narrative hero's wife. The plot's twists and reversals affirm the serial nature of its origin, although it would take over a decade, with the emergence of Lino Brocka, before such irregular dramatic arcs could be tempered by an adequately prepared talent. What *Talipandas* provides in recompense for its directorial unevenness is a willingness to embrace material that Hollywood's Hays Office would have rejected as extreme if not beyond-legal, from white slavery through suicide and fratricide to incest. The heroine contends with a pair of concerned surrogate mothers, one benevolent (Ely Roque) and another malignant (Bella Flores); but Rita Gomez's sensuous and fiery reading ultimately draws the strands together in an impressive braid, while making it clear why the directors of the next Golden Age considered it a treat to work with her.

MANUEL SILOS

(1 film: 1959)

Biyaya ng Lupa

English Title: *Blessings of the Land*
Alternate English Title: *Bounty of the Earth*
Year of Release: 1959 / B&W
Director: Manuel Silos
Screenwriters: Celso Al. Carunungan & Pablo Naval
From a story by Celso Al. Carunungan
Producer: LVN Pictures
Cast: Rosa Rosal, Tony Santos, Joseph de Cordova, Leroy Salvador, Carlos Padilla Jr., Marita Zobel, Danilo Jurado, Carmencita Abad, Tony Dantes, Miguel Lopez, Priscilla Ramirez, Mario Roldan, Jerry Reyes, Mila Ocampo, Pedro Faustino, Carmen del Ocampo, Vic Cabrera, Narding Pineda, Ricardo Geronimo, Carmen Mariano, Santiago Diamzon, Emerson Medina, Irene Sanchez, Far Eastern University Dance Troupe

> Jose, Maria, and their four children live on a lanzones orchard. All is well until the arrival of Bruno, who resorts to villainy after his pursuit of a new wife was hampered by Jose. To get even, Bruno rapes Jose's daughter. When Jose seeks revenge, he is killed by Bruno. For Maria, this only marks the beginning of the challenges she has to face while sustaining her family and the orchard.

The past tends to be remembered as idyllic, and this film reinforces that impression in several ways: by being set on a modest lanzones plantation (eyed by a covetous wealthy neighbor), upholding family values and the quiet dignity of rural folk, and emphasizing the indispensability of the *bayanihan* or cooperational spirit to communal order and productivity. Even the elements incidental to the narrative—its use of black and white, its half-century vintage, its now-elderly cast—provide a final veneer of nostalgia. Although later filmmakers, notably Lino Brocka, managed to make some of their movie villains understandable, if not sympathetic, *Biyaya ng Lupa* can nevertheless defend its sole shortcoming, the demonization of the *taong-labas* or outsider, as less a matter of malice than an act of naïveté.

PABLO SANTIAGO

(3 films: 1961–1982)

Amado Pagsanjan's Asiong Salonga

Alternate Title: *Asiong Salonga*
Year of Release: 1961 / B&W
Director: Pablo Santiago
Screenwriter: Tommy C. David
From a story serialized in *Bulaklak* magazine by Amado Pagsanjan
Producer: Larry Santiago Productions
Cast: Joseph Estrada, Jose Padilla Jr., Yolanda Guevarra, Guia Gomez, Boy Francisco, Paquito Diaz, Vic Diaz, Vicente Liwanag, Dely Atay-Atayan, Jane Palomar, Nello Nayo, Francisco Cruz, Dencio Padilla, Arsenio Alonzo, Cleng-Cleng Diaz, Fred Ramirez, Bert Silva, Tony Santos

> Nicasio Salonga, better known by his nickname Asiong, uses a combination of charm and propensity for violence to rise in the ranks of the most notorious gangs in the crime-ridden district of Tondo. Because of his notoriety, his elder brother has to give up his job as a police official while his mother dies during one of his incarcerations. He maintains a circle of mostly loyal followers and succeeds in courting Fidela and later convinces Emilia to be his mistress. A lesser-ranking hoodlum, Totoy Golem, starts out as a rival but eventually professes to be his friend and supporter while convincing Erning, one of Asiong's malcontented and unruly recruits, to join his side.

Political democracy never wasted a bigger Philippine talent than it did Joseph Estrada. Newcomers to his screen record might be shocked to find, in the context of his era, a risk-taking performer with solid performative instincts with a willingness to depict the dregs of society—possibly the best we ever had in the action genre. His early starring roles, with *Asiong Salonga* comprising his star turn, were still free of the bad-boy mannerisms and intense-aspirated delivery that had already overtaken contemporaneous stars starting with Fernando Poe Jr. (The latter of course made his mark in other compensatory auteurist terms, starting with film production.) Erap's later self-produced films took advantage of his rising political influence by focusing on personalities associated with the pre-1968 Communist armed movement, a productive mode that he gave up in exchange for the pursuit of presidential and local-government perks. The original cut of *AS* suffered from the excessive moralizing understandably imposed by society's moral guardians, since the real-life model physically resembled Erap too closely and burned out far too quickly. Fortunately, the shortened version posted online by Solar Entertainment makes judicious use of fadeouts and a few jump cuts in the interest of cutting short several onscreen sermons and, in one case, a song number by Erap himself. The file still nears the two-hour mark anyway, an indicator of how incident-packed Salonga's short life was (keep alert for Tony Santos's reflexive cameo where he in effect passes on his bad-boy aura to Estrada via Salonga). The genre-studies principle that melodrama undergirds all the other genres, with the action movie as essentially melodrama for men, starts here before it proceeds to the rest of the the local action-film samples in the forthcoming decades.

1—*Pepeng Kaliwete*

English Translation: *Left-Handed Pepe*
Year of Release: 1982
Director: Pablo Santiago
Screenwriters: Fred Navarro & Alex M. Sunga
Based on a character created by Alex M. Sunga
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Marianne de la Riva, Paquito Diaz, Rodolfo "Boy" Garcia, Anita Linda, Ruel Vernal, Victor Bravo, Vic Varrion, Nello Nayo, Robert Rivera, Amay Bisaya, Ken Metcalfe, Teody Belarmino, George Gyenes, Michael Pigar, Cesar Abejuela, Amy Anzures, Tony Carreon, Ernie David, Diog de Castro, Joe Estrada, Bert Garon, Eddie Gicoso, Romy Guarin, Benny May, Rony Montero, Bob Padilla, Wilson Red, Jimmy Reyes, Eddie Samonte, Thunder Stuntmen, Eddie Tuazon, Rudy Fernandez, Don Pepot

Pepe's father plans to leave the hacienda in Del Pilar because of the owner's avarice and cruelty, but gets gunned down in the presence of his wife and son. The owner entrusts Pepe to the care of Davis, a benign American caretaker who teaches Pepe how to clean and shoot a .45-caliber pistol. When Merill, the abusive American who killed Pepe's father, brings over a female tenant to ravish, Pepe uses the pistol to warn him but winds up shooting Merill dead. Pepe and his mother flee to another town, where he grows up anonymously and acquires a reputation as a defender of the oppressed. His mother understands how he hankers to help the people in Del Pilar, so she tells him to do what his heart desires. Despite the scion of the hacienda owner still being as abusive as his father before him, the town mayor is genuinely people-oriented. Although presenting as a migrant worker, Pepe helps him get rid of corrupt police elements and expresses a desire to join the police force. The mayor instead appoints him chief, and he successfully woos Salud, the mayor's niece; but when the landowner tries to win him over, Pepe declares himself on the side of the workers, earning the enmity of the haciendero.

2—*Annie Sabungera*

English Translation: *Annie the Cockfighter*
Year of Release: 1982
Director: Pablo Santiago
Screenwriter: Tommy C. David
Producer: GPS Film Productions
Cast: Nora Aunor, Ace Vergel, Rey Valera, Marilou Bendigo, Nova Villa, Dencio Padilla, Chito Arceo, Amay Bisaya, Hero Bautista, Ramon d'Salva, Tony Santos, German Moreno, Tintoy, Dodong Gonzales, Protacio Dee, Angie Salinas, Richard King, Samson

Mang Intong has turned to gambling as a way of forgetting the sudden death of his wife. When he gets drunk, he loses his temper and beats up his daughter Annie, but expresses regret afterward. He teaches Annie the best way to raise gamecocks and she proves to be an adept trainee when she takes her father's best rooster and wins a difficult round. Mang Intong's excitement causes him to suffer a fatal heart attack in the cockpit. Like he did for his late wife, Annie devotes her life to cockfighting. Her father appears one night and tells her that he arranged to provide for her a sure winner. Following his instructions, she finds a new gamecock that speaks only to her, names him Samson, and sets out for Manila to try her luck. Her childhood friend, Domeng, carries a torch for her but has to stay behind to work. Annie's triumph with Samson piques the interest of Randy, an apparently well-bred gentleman who's really a henchman for a gambling lord. Randy's boss takes an interest in Samson but Annie refuses to give up her father's gift, so the boss asks Randy to help him trick Annie.

Although the nephew of one of the founders of Premiere Productions, Pablo Santiago succeeded in independent productions for his own outfit as well as for those of his cousins Cirio (famed for foreign coproductions) and Larry. More significantly, he specialized in projects that featured the biggest stars of their time—Fernando Poe Jr. and Joseph Estrada during the First Golden Age, and Nora Aunor and Vilma Santos during the Second. He might have been remembered for "developmentalist" projects such as *Batingaw* (*Church Bell*, 1974) or *Kasal-Kasalan, Bahay-Bahayan* (*Playing Married, Playing House*, 1979), or his later crossover assists between romantic-comedy and action performers; but in one propitious year he accepted assignments for Poe and Aunor that allowed him to foreground the skills and ease he accumulated in over a quarter-century of commercial practice. *Pepeng Kaliwete* had FPJ embarking on his usual role as champion of the oppressed, treading the same ground as the raved-over *Sakada* (*Sugar-Plantation Migrant Workers*, dir. Behn Cervantes, 1976).[19] Its observations of backbreaking labor and dehumanizing treatment are on the mark, although certain concessions to the power structure, notably in depicting a sympathetic local-government official and a persecuted American, threaten to upend its leftist leanings. Fortunately, FPJ himself knew when he had to minimize his crowd-pleasing antics in order to allow the interests of the populace to be filtered through his persona, and comes close to violating the taboo against allowing his character to die, although only in a symbolic sense. *Annie Sabungera* is an even further throwback, to an era when fantastic developments were allowed to intervene in a lead character's material predicaments. The real miracle lay in Aunor's resolve to play the proceedings straight, layering her performance with the same set of superior performative skills that she brought to her prestige projects;[20] this had always been her approach

[19] Another film with exactly the same title was made in 1958 and produced by Premiere Productions, Fernando Poe Jr.'s home studio. Apparently so-far unrecovered, it starred Poe but featured an entirely different set of actors, under the direction of Cirio H. Santiago, from a script by Augusto Buenaventura based on Alex Manansala's *Bulaklak* serialization. Paradoxically, it's the personal FPJ production that's more overtly political, its story sourced from material by Alex M. Sunga, a progressive industry figure.

[20] Appropriately enough, the first time cockfighting was documented by a Westerner was when Antonio Pigafetta observed the sport upon arriving in what is now the Philippines, in *Relazione del primo viaggio intorno al mondo* (*An Account of the First Voyage Around the World*), his 1525 chronicle of Ferdinand Magellan's voyage; even the subsequent film-crazed colonizers came up with a B-movie entry, Gus Trikonis's *Supercock* (a.k.a. *Fowl Play*, 1975), where an apple-pie wholesome American brings over Friendly, a white rooster, to compete with the top-performing jungle fowls of a family of gangsters and participates in an endless series of phallic double-entrendres. A contemporary cockfight specialist who recollected the films he had seen, took exception with *Annie Sabungera*'s fantasy elements, but nevertheless observed how the film had "a considerable amount of *sabong* vocabulary employed as well as some handling and conditioning techniques"—see Rolando S. Luzong, "Finally, a New *Sabong* Movie in the Making," *Animal Scene Magazine* (supplement of *Manila Bulletin*), March 2009 issue.

The film referenced in the article title was Rozie Delgado & Miguel Kaimo's *Sabungero* (*The Cockfighter*, 2009), although a more recent release, Bryan Kristoffer Brazil's *Lost Sabungeros* (2024), has become an unusual cause célèbre because of its civic significance: produced by GMA Public Affairs, the documentary raised questions about the abduction and disappearance of thirty cockfighters whose interests conflicted with those of politically connected gambling lords. Possible intertextual predecessors of Annie Sabungera, both of which feature talking gamecocks, would be Joe Macachor's *Ang Manok ni San Pedro* (*St. Peter's Rooster*), the first Cebuano-language color film, shot in 1977 in super-8mm.; and Armando Garces's *Texas* (*Ang Manok na Nagsasalita*, or *The Talking Rooster*, 1952), from a komiks serial by Mars Ravelo. One final observation about the Pablo Santiago film, never made anywhere,

throughout her career, but one only has to inspect any other local actor of equal or lesser status to find how exceptional her achievement was. The buildup to an unexpectedly devastating resolution, where social corruption prevails over supernatural powers, requires a complex of conflicting responses that would have defeated most capable actors. Aunor's description of her fallow moments as a consequence of downgrading by film critics who should have known better, only revealed how impossible it was for them to fulfill their worst expectations of her. [***Tech note***: existing video transfers of *Annie Sabungera* suffer from an unacceptable cropping of the right portion of the screen, in addition to the usual degraded surface.]

might be historical in nature, inasmuch as the backstory of Annie's father resembles the real-life narrative of Gregorio Fernandez, a major First Golden Age director-actor (also represented in *Canon Decampment*): the death of his wife apparently led to his eventual abandonment of career and family, fostering a new vocation as champion cockfighter in his hometown of Lubao, Pampanga.

GEORGE MONTGOMERY

(1 film: 1962)

Samar

Language: English
Additional Languages: Filipino & Spanish
Year of Release: 1962
Director: George Montgomery
Screenwriters: Ferde Grofé Jr. & George Montgomery
Producers: MAM & Winchester
Cast: George Montgomery, Gilbert Roland, Ziva Rodann, Joan O'Brien, Nico Minardos, Mario Barri, Henry Feist, Tony Fortich, Johnny Cortez, Carmen Austin, Esperanza Garcia, Danilo Jurado, Luciano Lasam, Pedro Faustino, Joaquin Fajardo, Pamela Saunders, Rita Moreno

> In 1870 in the Philippine Islands, "a colony of imperial Spain—ruled with an iron hand" (per an opening title), Dr. John David Saunders, an American, criticizes the occupation government and is banished to the prison island of Samar. He manages to befriend Col. Juan Sebastian Salazar, the penitentiary's commandant, and learns of the former's aspiration: to organize a trek to a difficult-to-access wilderness abundant in gold. Salazar conscripts the prisoners, with Saunders serving as his right-hand person. Unfortunately Capt. de Guzman, an old army nemesis, gets wind of Salazar's plan and attempts to sabotage the migrant party.

John Saxon had more film projects, Pam Grier was on the verge of recognition, Marlon Brando was already more famous, but George Montgomery's involvement in Philippine film production held a few distinctions of its own. Seeking to boost his Hollywood standing after a stint as a leading man whose options had started to dwindle, he persuaded financiers to invest in a country where their funds could still yield A-scale results. His six projects, all except the first made during the 1960s, were way less than ten percent of his total output as film actor, but they were all modestly budgeted and color-processed; even more significantly, all except the first and last were directed by him. Interestingly, all films except the present one were set during or right after World War II. And unlike Saxon's and Grier's projects, which benefited from the participation of local creatives (in contrast with the technicians and performers whom Montgomery maintained), Montgomery's films played fast and loose with historical and geographic realities. *Samar*'s false premises bookend its outlandish El Doradoish myth-making: not only does a mountain of gold not exist anywhere on the island, Samar never was a penal colony. Amazingly, even more egregious errors mark Montgomery's other Philippine-set films.[21] He also did himself scant

[21] George Montgomery's team may have been proceeding from an awareness of the Iwahig Prison and Penal Farm (hence the film's more accurately situated German title, *Der Rebell von Palawan*); even then, the Iwahig setup was conceived and implemented during the American occupation. Montgomery's first Philippine-set project was John Barnwell's *Huk!* (1956), a propagandistic effort where he played a plantation owner in conflict with Communist guerrillas, whose organization the characters mispronounce to rhyme with "fuck" and whose World War II anti-Japanese freedom fighters were imprisoned ... in Iwahig. Montgomery-as-auteur's Pinas career started in earnest with *The Steel Claw* (1961), which he directed, but which was mostly set on a ship at sea, hence largely exempted from having to acknowledge historical events. In *From Hell to Borneo* (1964), his character travels from Manila to Mindanao to defend his island property from interlopers, but never really strays away from local territory despite the

favors by being a less capable actor than any of his aforementioned American confreres. Nevertheless *Samar* still endures more than Montgomery's other films, primarily because its pre-American setting enables him to provide an unsparing critique of foreign occupation, without necessarily looking forward to more benevolent rule by the next occupants, inasmuch as US interest in the islands was still a few decades in the future. His jokester persona also provides a refreshing contrast with the narrative's actual lead, the dream-driven Spanish officer. And although the always-pernicious demonizing of indigenous tribespeople continued apace here, the practice tended to endure to the recent past in local genre works and is only now encountering pushback. But with the fiction's sufficient distance from the Philippines's neocolonial center of power, certain possibly unintended historical resonances unapologetically occupy center stage during their respective moments: the hanging of blood-drained rebels' bodies from trees, for one thing, and the climactic celebratory pealing of a church bell (reminiscent of the anticolonial Philippine army's commemoration in Samar, which peeved the Americans seriously enough to confiscate the church bells of the town in retaliation). We may also note in addition that *Samar* preceded Irving Lerner's *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1969) and Werner Herzog's *Aguirre, der Zorn Gottes* (*Aguirre, the Wrath of God*, 1972), both better-received El Dorado tales set in the actual locales ravaged by Spanish explorers; for further, immediate, but perhaps futile, intertextual reference, the main character in Montgomery's *From Hell to Borneo* (1964), still Philippine-set despite its title, welcomes companions to his property in Mindanao, with its name unannounced but displayed over its entrance: El Dorado, none other.

film's title. In *Guerrillas in Pink Lace* (1964), he plays an army officer evading deployment by masquerading as a priest, but gets stranded on an island with a bevy of go-go dancers; their panic is occasioned by news of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor a few days earlier, despite the fact that the attack on the Philippines was historically scheduled the same day, though reckoned in 1941 on the 8th of December instead of the 7th because of the International Date Line, delayed by only a few hours because of cloudy weather over the attack base in Taiwan. Montgomery's final Philippine film, *Warkill* (1968), was directed by his regular scriptwriter, Ferde Grofé Jr. (Ferdinand Rudolf Grofé Jr., son of the celebrated composer of *Grand Canyon Suite*), an overt and fairly astute combat film that's only undermined by a comparatively less-distinguished use of film style compared to what Montgomery managed to brandish.

IRVING LERNER

(1 film: 1963)

Cry of Battle

Alternate Titles: *Officers and Men*; *Grido di battaglia*
Language: English
Additional Language: Filipino
Year of Release: 1963
Director: Irving Lerner
Screenwriter: Bernard Gordon
From the 1951 novel *Fortress in the Rice* by Benjamin Appel
Producers: Allied Artists Pictures Corp. & Petramonte Productions
Cast: Van Heflin, Rita Moreno, James MacArthur, Leopoldo Salcedo, Sidney Clute, Marilou Muñoz, Oscar Roncal, Liza Moreno, Michael Parsons, Claude Wilson, Vic Silayan, Oscar Keesee, Hal Bowie, Francisco Cruz

> David MacVey, the son of a shipping magnate, escapes in his car from his family plantation when bandits attack and kill his caretakers. He's assisted by Manuel Careo, an anti-Japanese guerrilla, and brought to a peasant home where the owner's daughter teaches him some Tagalog words. Joe Trent arrives and mistakes David for his same-named father, who has ongoing trade relations with the Japanese. Joe decides to take David under his wing, but while David wanders outdoors, Joe gets drunk early in the day and rapes the owner's daughter. David is angered but has to flee with Joe when the daughter keeps screaming even at him. They make the acquaintance of another guerrilla group led by Atong and befriend Sisa on their way to meet Colonel Ryker, whom Careo endorsed for army protection. Ryker sends them on a mission with a guide, but the latter gets killed by the Japanese they were planning to ambush. Joe and Sisa attempt to negotiate for replenishments from town elders, but when they're told that their stocks are reserved for Careo, Joe ambushes them and takes what they have by force. After Joe kills Atong, Sisa aligns with Joe although she also spends a night with David. Careo returns to the town where they're resting and presents the Americans with a list of Joe's transgressions. When David refuses to testify, Careo places both of them under house arrest.

One of the most remarkable overseas productions ever made in the country, *Cry of Battle*'s reputation has been surpassed by its source novel, also a peak achievement in antiwar and anticolonial fiction. Director Irving Lerner is better remembered for *The Royal Hunt of the Sun* (1969), his unsatisfactory adaptation of Peter Shaffer's play on the Spanish conquistadors' 16th-century incursion into the territory now called Peru and their incredibly barbaric betrayal of the Inca emperor in order to amass the kingdom's entire store of gold. A victim of Joseph McCarthy's anti-Communist blacklisting, Lerner may have engaged in pro-Soviet espionage and worked for a producer, Joe Steinberg, who raised funds via his brother Harry (who Anglicized his family name to Stonehill—and became notorious for allegedly paying off previous, present, and forthcoming Philippine presidents in the course of building his business empire). All these complications may have been part and parcel of the Cold War situation, which might also account for some of the film's departures from the novel it was based on.[22] Nevertheless it's an impressive,

[22] The acknowledged exegesis on the novel is E. San Juan Jr.'s "Benjamin Appel's *Fortress in the Rice*: Forging the Radical Conscience of the Empire," in *Lineages of the Literary Left: Essays in Honor of Alan M. Wald*, edited by Howard Brick, Robbie Lieberman, and Paula Rabinowitz, Michigan Publishing, University of Michigan Library, 2015, pp. 227–244. The Harry Stonehill story was recollected after his death in Amando Doronila's four-part

unfairly forgotten achievement, far superior to *TRHS* and unsparing in its delineation of American sexism, juvenility, and cupidity, factors unbecoming of imperialist aspirants (not that imperialism can ever be justified) and back on flagrant contemporary display in its corridors of power. *CoB*'s literary origin precludes the staging of extensive combat scenes, which is all for the better for material that requires careful exposition of conditions that would intensify further, after the narrative's resolution, when the unstable alliance between American forces and Filipino guerrillas would result in a peasant-based war on land reform that has persisted to the present. The contention between old-line lawlessness mentoring yet being resisted by youthful-though-opportunistic idealism is all-too-neatly eroticized in the lead American characters' competition for the affection of a Filipina guerrilla fighter (poignantly rendered by Rita Moreno), with the two sides arriving at some form of accord by admitting that they both need each other amid their irresolvable mutual hatred. With its paradisiacal backdrop, Pinas has proved irresistible to talents from Hollywood and elsewhere looking to present war stories, including conflicts that actually took place in the country. *CoB*, with its intelligent grasp of global politics and unstinting proclivity for the interests of the neglected, deserves to be upheld as the definitive benchmark.

series in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer*, all uploaded on the periodical's website: "Stonehill and Pork: Prelude to Farce?" (September 9, 2013); "The Inside Story of the Raids on Stonehill Firms" (September 10, 2013); "The Curse of Stonehill's 'Blue Book'" (September 12, 2013); and "[Jose W.] Diokno Sacked, Key Witness Murdered" (September 20, 2013).

CESAR GALLARDO

(1 film: 1964)

Geron Busabos: Ang Batang Quiapo

English Translation: *Geron the Tramp: The Quiapo Kid*
English Title: *Geron the Tramp*
Year of Release: 1964 / B&W
Director: Cesar Gallardo
Screenwriter: Augusto Buenaventura
Producer: Emar Pictures
Cast: Joseph Estrada, Imelda Ilanan, Oscar Roncal, Vic Andaya, Bebong Osorio, Avel Morado, Boy Alvarez, Angelo Ventura, Angel Confiado, Larry Silva, Leni Trinidad, SOS Daredevils

> Geron is known for defending his fellow slum dwellers of Quiapo. But this earns the ire of a gang that mulcts the people of the area. Along the way, Geron befriends the hustler Digno and street kid Beto and tries to win the love of *sampaguita* [jasmine] vendor Nena. But when Digno's shady past is revealed, he joins the locally feared gang and they hatch a plot that puts Geron's life at stake.

Like, yet unlike, Fernando Poe Jr., disgraced former President Joseph Estrada also possesses his own set of unfulfilled promises that might have affirmed his artistic reputation if he had not allowed politics to intervene in his film career. *Geron Busabos* and the more pointed, though also more deeply flawed, *Asiong Salonga* (1961, dir. Pablo Santiago) demonstrate why Erap and Da King functioned as yin and yang to each other: unlike FPJ, Estrada started out as movie villain and, in what was then a star-text innovation, clambered up the ladder to lead roles by maintaining, rather than jettisoning, his bad-guy persona. Through most of his career he remained resistant to the heroic gentrification that Poe came to prefer, and the fact that his real-life stint as villainous Chief Executive reflected his fictional persona turned out to be a disappointment not just for his film stature, but for his historical legacy as well. Though less moralistic than Pablo Santiago's *Amado Pagsanjan's Asiong Salonga* (1961), *GB* plays safer by stressing from the beginning the lead character's occasionally misperceived obeisance to law and order; what distinguishes the film from a long list of Pinoy noirs is in its well-observed distillation of Quiapo-district archetypes. Estrada's insistent and eloquent championing of society's underdogs, coupled—at least in his early breakout films—with finely honed delivery, makes understandable how he managed to capture the imagination of the widest segment of the voting public in any Philippine presidential election.

EFREN REYES

(1 film: 1965)

Ang Daigdig Ko'y Ikaw

English Translation: *My World Is You*
Additional Languages: Hiligaynon, Cebuano
Year of Release: 1965 / B&W
Director: Efren Reyes
Screenwriter: Fred Navarro
From a story by Efren Reyes
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Susan Roces, Oscar Keesee, Lito Anzures, Victor Bravo, Pablo Virtuoso, Dencio Padilla, Vic Varrion, Mario Escudero, Rudy Meyer, Philip Coo, Marilou Murray, Esther Vizconde, Romy Nario, Resty Sandel, Angelo Buenaventura

> At the Manila Yacht Club, Don Larrazabal has asked his men to lock his daughter Vicky in the cabin of his vessel, to take her away from Daniel, the man she wants to marry. When they arrive at Matabungkay Beach in Batangas, however, they remain unaware that she jumped overboard and swam to shore. She finds a dilapidated cargo truck driven by Roman, who has stopped for lunch with his two employees. She steals their food and boards the open-air cargo section. Roman and his companions think that one of them has been sneezing, but when they stop they discover Vicky. She pleads with them to take her to Baguio, offering to help in their work and even drive the truck herself. Since her clothes are wet, they offer her Roman's spare clothes while Roman later says he can provide her with work if she needs it. When her father and his men pass by in their car, the truck occupants hide her and deny they've seen her. But when the father finds out that Daniel has gone to Baguio, he and his men proceed to the summer capital, believing they might find Vicky there.

Male actors who became directors were such a guarantee of film quality that one or two overlooked names would not be such a big deal. (In a satisfying twist of fate, the country's last excellent actor-director was a woman, Laurice Guillen.) As a performer, Efren Reyes also lingered in the shadow of Gerardo de Leon, another actor-director. Fortunately he made a number of films for yet another actor-director, Fernando Poe Jr., whose most significant contribution was ... as producer. FPJ spent a major portion of his fortune on maintaining prints of his films, even those produced by others. He may have been artistically limited as a consequence of this commitment, but the rewards—the best video transfers of any official distributor in Philippine cinema, not to mention occasionally excellent titles not stored at the Singapore (now Asian) Film Archive, by directors who would have otherwise remained unrepresented—are available for anyone with a passing interest in local pop culture. *Ang Daigdig Ko'y Ikaw* acquired a patina of nostalgia for its distinction of being the first film where FPJ teamed up with Susan Roces, over a decade since their emergence as major stars of competing First Golden Age studios, when their respective personas were already fully formed. Not surprisingly, these factors, alongside Poe's and Roces's equally matched levels of charm and ability, enable *ADKI* to sustain more strongly than most other first-time star teamups. The film's success is evidenced in several more of their costarred projects over the next couple of decades as the most enduring lead duo in local cinema prior to the emergence later in the decade of the so-called Guy & Pip tandem of Nora Aunor and Tirso

Cruz III, although Roces's tradition-enforced inactivity after her marriage to Poe must be counted as a regrettable loss, considering the superiority of her skills set relative to most of her star-level contemporaries. Their status as film royalty also contributed to a certain anxiety over the presumably dismissive response to their first project together: subsequent Roces-Poe movies were marked by a striving for allegorical serviceability, seemingly apologetic over the excessive pleasures provided by *ADKI*, which was supposedly further compromised by several moments reminiscent of its obvious source of inspiration, Frank Capra's *It Happened One Night* (1934). Yet *ADKI* does not aim to surpass the Capra, providing instead a credibly indigenous counterpart. It elects to resolve as an open tribute to another local film, outstanding but now lost: Cesar Amigo's *Sa Atin ang Daigdig* (*The World Is Ours*, 1963)[23]—proof that it had not just its heart in the right place, but also its feet on the right turf.

[23] ***Spoiler alert***: Both *Ang Daigdig Ko'y Ikaw* and *Sa Atin ang Daigdig* function as romantic comedies; the former is expanded by scope and locale in constituting for the most part a road trip, but the latter manages to focus more effectively on class differences. One might remark that the references to *It Happened One Night* diffuse the concentration of *ADKI*, but then again, social commentary is not its primary purpose. The parallels with *SAD* might be suggested by the commonality of the Filipino word for "world" in their titles, but the ending of *ADKI* dispels any doubt when it mounts a variation on the climax of *SAD*, where the central pair, played by Robert Arevalo and Nida Blanca, arrive at an understanding of their possibly irresolvable differences and the less-privileged Blanca character walks away from Arevalo, toward the camera; when Arevalo realizes he wishes to work out their relationship and calls to her, she continues advancing but this time with a knowing smile as he starts running, upon which the film ends.

Film critic and scriptwriter (and National Artist for Theater and Literature) Rolando S. Tinio went on record to describe *SAD* as the best Filipino film he had ever seen, circa the early 1980s; I had included it as one of two black-and-white titles, along with Gregorio Fernandez's *Malvarosa* (1958), in my top-ten canon—see Joel David and Melanie Joy C. Garduño, "The Ten Best Filipino Films Ever Made," *National Midweek* (July 4, 1990), pp. 125–136, rpt. in *Fields of Vision: The Digital Edition*, Amauteurish Publishing, 2014, posted online. A local article that interrogates instances of film appropriations is "Imitation and Indigenization in Melodramas in the Late 1950s," *Huwaran/Hulmahan Atbp.: The Film Writings of Johven Velasco*, University of the Philippines Press, 2009, pp. 113–124. For a useful recent discussion that teases out the complexities of cross-cultural appropriation from relatively marginal locales to the center, see Alex Taek-Gwang Lee's "From Porcelain to Chips: A Genealogy of Global Technology and Capitalism," *Everyday Analysis* (August 29, 2025), posted online.

EDDIE ROMERO

(4 films: 1966–1977)

The Passionate Strangers

Language: English
Additional Language: Filipino
Year of Release: 1966 / B&W
Director & Screenwriter: Eddie Romero
From a story by Cesar Amigo and Reuben Canoy
Producer: MJP Productions
Cast: Michael Parsons, Valora Noland, Mario Montenegro, Celia Rodriguez, Vic Diaz, Butz Aquino, Claude Wilson, Jose Dagumboy, Bong Calumpang, Cesar Aguilar

> In trying to uncover his wife's affair with another man, Adam accidentally kills a labor union leader. An initial investigation insinuates the involvement of the American company Adam works for, inasmuch as its previous negotiations with the slain union leader did not push through. Soon, Adam's crime of passion escalates into a murder dealing with issues of racial difference.

As a protégé of Gerardo de Leon, Eddie Romero's curse also became his advantage: as long as he could work with de Leon, he never needed to worry about focusing on directorial expertise, just as de Leon could always count on a pool of outstanding writers for his scripts. The best Romero films would therefore tend to be so well-written that their technical shortcomings can be overlooked. An outstanding sample would be the now-lost *Sa Atin ang Daigdig* (*The World Is Ours*, 1963, credited to Cesar J. Amigo but claimed in interviews by Romero, who's credited as scriptwriter). *The Passionate Strangers* is even more ambitious in tackling neocolonial US presence, labor unrest, and interracial romance, unfolding the tinderbox situation via the opportunistic investigations conducted by a cynical, perceptive, yet paradoxically humane local-government official—wonderfully essayed by the usually taken-for-granted Vic Diaz. Despite its US B-film pedigree, this entry, rather than Romero's well-received apology for US military presence, *The Day of the Trumpet* (a.k.a. *Cavalry Command*, 1958), earns its designation as "Filipino" more than most other projects by him, if not by other Filipinos. Adults who mess up their lives despite their best intentions: that appears to have been Romero's recurrent theme, and it has never been encapsulated any better than in this overlooked gem.

Savage Sisters

Language: English
Additional Language: Filipino
Year of Release: 1974
Director: Eddie Romero
Screenwriters: H. Franco Moon & Harry Corner
Producers: Cinema Projects International & Hemisphere Pictures

Cast: Gloria Hendry, Cheri Caffaro, Rosanna Ortiz, Sid Haig, Eddie Garcia, Rita Gomez, Leopoldo Salcedo, Vic Diaz, Dindo Fernando, Angelo Ventura, Romeo Rivera, Alfonso Carvajal, Robert Rivera, Subas Herrero, John Platter, Bruno Punzalan, Joonee Gamboa, Max Rojo, Johnny Long, John Ashley

> Jo Turner, a white American fighting for the same cause as her revolutionary lover Ernesto, has been arrested along with her Asian comrade Mei Ling. The two are brought along with other women to a correctional, where a black warden, Lynn Jackson, recognizes Mei Ling as a former sex-work colleague. Jo and Mei Ling are aware that Ernesto's team plans to swipe a million dollars from a government delivery vehicle so they can be rescued and overthrow the corrupt military regime running the island territory. Ernesto and his friends, however, are double-crossed by the mercenaries who promised to help them for a share of the money. Jo and Mei Ling plot to escape so they can recover the funds but when Lynn learns about their plan, she volunteers to help them for an equal portion. Working as a threesome, the women encounter Billingsley, whom the mercenaries contacted to provide them with a ship to get off the island. When he tells them that he wants to be of help, they have to determine first whether he can be trusted.

Although dismissive of his coproduction projects, Eddie Romero was able to claim some bragging rights when an American colleague, Jonathan Demme, managed to parlay his B-filmmaking training (spent partly in the Philippines) into critical acclaim, culminating in an Oscar for *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).[24] His Demme collaboration was the project prior to *Savage Sisters*, *Black Mama White Mama* (1973), which provided Pam Grier with her blaxploitation breakout role. *SS* proceeded from *BMWM*'s pointed critiques of race and power, but evades the latter's heavy-handedness by adding not just an extra racial subject (via an Oriental character) but also an expanded number of satirical targets, mostly patriarchal but including an oversexed prison matron. The proliferation of players dilutes the film's ideological purpose just enough to enable it to provide the diversions required of genre entertainment, inasmuch as the locales of these projects, extending back to the Blood Island films of the 1960s, were never meant to be identifiable in the first place. Ironically, Romero's immersion in exploitation-film practice may have been key to his further (though not complete) distancing from Cold War ideals. Filmic expertise had never been a previous component of his store of capabilities, since he could always rely on Gerardo de Leon to accomplish his vision; but with the latter's semi-retired status, Romero had no choice except to overcome his hesitation about creating films for American drive-in audiences and reached a point, with *SS*, from which he was able to embark on his most successfully realized material in his next film, *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (*As We Were*, 1976).

[24] Eddie Romero's unbecoming and objectionably classist assertion appears in Bliss Cua Lim's article "'American Pictures Made by Filipinos': Eddie Romero's Jungle-Horror Exploitation Films," *Spectator* vol. 22, no. 1, April 2002, pp. 23–45. The Blood Island film cycle (drawn from the reissue title of Gerardo de Leon's *Terror Is a Man*, 1959) was in fact appropriated from an earlier Hammer Films release, Val Guest's *The Camp on Blood Island* (1958), which was all about Japanese atrocities during World War II set on a Malayan island—see the capsule review of *Terror Is a Man* in the relevant de Leon entry. The Noypi series, all reworkings of or variations on H.G. Wells's 1896 novel *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, covers about a dozen titles made throughout the 1960s to the early 1970s, by either de Leon and/or Romero, plus Al Adamson's *Brain of Blood* (1971); Hammer Films, for its part, returned to the Oriental setting with a prequel, *The Secret of Blood Island* (Quentin Lawrence, 1965) and coproduced with Shaw Brothers a hybrid East-meets-West entry, *The Legend of the 7 Golden Vampires* (Roy Ward Baker, 1974). A new Pinas-grown cycle, in which *Savage Sisters* may be counted, emerged in the early 1970s, comprising far more pliable narratives of women in island prisons breaking out in pursuit of various personal or political agendas. The new imprisoned-women genre is actually subsumable under a longer exploitation-film tradition directed at the male gaze.

Ganito Kami Noon … Paano Kayo Ngayon?

English Translation: *This Was How We Were Then … What Happens to You Now?*
English Title: *As We Were*
Additional Languages: Spanish, Chinese
Year of Release: 1976
Director: Eddie Romero
Screenwriters: Eddie Romero & Roy Iglesias
Producer: Hemisphere Pictures
Cast: Christopher de Leon, Gloria Diaz, Eddie Garcia, Dranreb, Leopoldo Salcedo, Rosemarie Gil, E.A. Rocha, Johnny Vicar, Tsing Tong Tsai, Jaime Fabregas, Peque Gallaga, Odette Khan, Laida Lim-Perez, Teresita Non, George Albert Romero, Alfonso Carvajal, Andres Centenera, Joonee Gamboa, Joey Romero, Ernie Zarate

> After his hut burns down, Kulas meets a priest who asks the young man to bring his illegitimate son to Manila. Kulas and the priest's son soon meet a traveling theater group. Though Kulas falls for the actress Diding, he prioritizes his assignment. Upon arriving in Manila, he becomes a sophisticate with the help of the priest's lawyer. But he will face a bigger change just as Diding re-enters his life and the country, confronted by US imperialism right after expelling its Spanish colonizers, marks a pivotal point in its history.

Rarely has a Filipino film project had better timing than *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?* Eddie Romero had just ended a fairly successful run of Fil-Am co-productions; his mentor Gerardo de Leon had just completed his last movie even as Lino Brocka was leading the charge in effectively announcing a renewed film consciousness; an uncertain stability had been forcibly imposed by the military takeover of film-censorship functions barely three years after the declaration of martial rule; and someone had to be able to demonstrate that people from the previous Golden Age could still productively contribute to the then-dawning new cinema. Like the earlier volumes of the martial-law government's official *Tadhana* (*Fate*) book series on Philippine "history," *Ganito Kami Noon* also benefited—where Romero's subsequent *Aguila* (1980) did not—from maintaining a focus on the past. The project could by then successfully formulate a progressive perspective regarding the influx of foreign invaders and the emergence of a native bourgeois class. Despite a whiff of sexism in the movie's moral downgrading of a strong woman character, Romero's cosmopolitanism served him well against the usual accusation of xenophobia that accompanies nationalist texts: *GKN* was one of the first films on Philippine history that acknowledged the revolutionary contribution of Chinese-Filipino citizens.[25] On the whole, its humanism turned out to be just right for a narrative that sought to present multiple conflicting

[25] Worth mentioning is the fact that accounts of uprisings by the Chinese community in the Philippines during the Spanish period had appeared in historical records: the Parián de Arroceros transformed from a marketplace into a Sangley ghetto adjacent to Intramuros, which effectively excluded its residents from the Walled City and made them vulnerable to abuses by colonial forces. Some of these narratives found their way into literature and even film samples prior to *Ganito Kami Noon*. In the previous year, *Xing long fu hu* (*Sleeping Dragon*), a film codirected by Ishmael Bernal and Jimmy L. Pascual and cowritten by Wilfrido D. Nolledo and Ophelia San Juan, was set during the Parián rebellion of 1603. It was screened in the country as well as overseas, but the full print is apparently lost and only a trailer is available. See Andrew Leavold, "*Sleeping Dragon* (1975)," *The Bamboo Gods Project* (November 4, 2023), posted online.

points of view. And though such an equal-opportunity approach could not permit intensive discursive analysis, Romero's wit and humor allow the viewer to digest the proceedings with less of the bitterness that tends to lace grand-scale historical conflicts.

Banta ng Kahapon

English Translation: *Yesterday's Warning*
English Title: *Doublecross*
Year of Release: 1977 / Sepia (faded coloration)
Director & Screenwriter: Eddie Romero
Producers: Hemisphere Pictures & Shelter Films
Cast: Bembol Roco, Vic Vargas, Chanda Romero, Roland Dantes, Lito Legaspi, Roderick Paulate, Ruben Rustia, Celita de Castro, Romeo Rivera, Karim Kiram, Olvia O'Hara, Henri Salcedo, Johnny Vicar, Jose Garcia, Roma Roces, Rose Gacula, Gil Arceo, Herman Magsipok, Roger Robles, Zahn Garduce, Joe Watts, Ramon "Palaka," PMP Stuntmen

> In the present time, Greg pauses from working as a janitor in a colonial government building to take a look at the political headlines on a broadsheet. He recalls an earlier period, the turbulent election year of 1969, when a mute convict, addressed as Mangubat by the prison warden, is released after serving his time. He's followed by shady characters in a car to his home in the slums, where he arrives just as his father dies from an illness and his sister berates him for failing to assist their situation. When he steps out, the men following him address him as Kuwago [Owl] and offer him a well-paying one-shot job to assassinate an elected official. After he turns over his earnings to his sister, his contacts double-cross him but he's able to escape them. Police bring him to a hospital where more men arrive to finish him off. He flees the hospital and encounters a street urchin, Berto, who offers to help him by asking his sister, who lives on a small island community, to help in his recovery. Greg, who's helping Bobby, the son of the assassinated politician, to track down the people who want his father killed, follows Kuwago to the island and offers him help in arresting the men who double-crossed him.

Eddie Romero tended to have better results when he worked on small-scale undertakings, with the singular exception of *Ganito Kami Noon ... Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (*As We Were*, 1976). Aside from the titles selected in the current canon listing, his unfortunately lost peak achievement would include the screenplay of Cesar J. Amigo's *Sa Atin ang Daigdig* (*The World Is Ours*, 1963). Intended as part of a loose series on Philippine history, *Banta ng Kahapon* covers the more-or-less contemporary era, after *GKN* tackled colonial transition and *Kamakalawa* (*The Day Before Yesterday*, 1981), too directorially slapdash to be given more than passing attention, depicted the magical world of the country's precolonial era yielding to social governance and material productivity; a special case would be *Aguila* (1980), an epic tale appropriately headlined by Fernando Poe Jr., which was so much a celebration of Philippine history that it was willing to accept the lies and excesses of the fascist dictatorship in arriving at its present period. Like *The Passionate Strangers* (1966) and unlike his epic works, the characters in *BnK* do not seek to influence or disrupt Philippine history, doing instead the best they can to claim what they regard as their rightful share while adhering to their idea of principled behavior. They eventually get overpowered by forces beyond their control, but like the great film-noir

heroes, their best efforts provide us with illumination, if not much inspiration. We can count ourselves fortunate that the most dismissible narrative element in *BnK*, the framing story, is set in the historical present, knowing how enthusiastically Romero welcomed the avowals of Ferdinand Marcos Sr.'s New Society. His depiction of the violence-ridden recent past managed to bring out the light-handed cynicism that constantly elevated his outstanding output—of which, in this particular instance, apparently and alarmingly what remains is the telecine transfer of a faded copy of the print created for the 1983 Manila International Film Festival's Focus on Filipino Film module.

DANNY L. ZIALCITA

(3 films: 1967–1983)

Masquerade

Year of Release: 1967 / B&W
Director: Danny L. Zialcita [as DLZ]
Screenwriter: Danny L. Zialcita [uncredited]
Producers: BZ Productions
Cast: Bernard Bonnin, Marlene Dauden, Liberty Ilagan, Ben Perez, Vic Silayan, Martin Marfil, Vic Andaya, Alfonso Carvajal, Maria Hernandez, Jack Davis, Eddie Arenas, Eddie Fernandez, Perla Bautista, Nancy Roman, Elvie Gonzales, Eddie Mercado, Nel dela Ysla, Baby Alvarez, Paquito Benitez, Bert Asuncion, Bert Samonte, Douglas Prieto

> Arriving from a foreign trip, Jonathan Rayfus rounds up a group of people, mostly unknown to one another, to invite them to a mansion on an isolated island as dinner guests of a certain Mr. X, whom none of them know. They include a judge, Dante Soriano, General Dan Moreno, two young people (Veronica de Villa and Philip Monteverde) who become lovers, a neurotic woman named Emily Verzosa, several other well-off individuals (Dr. Hernando Marquez, Allan Alindogan, Rustico Roman), and two servants, Matilde and Telesforo Africa. During the night of their arrival, Telesforo plays a recording of Mr. X's voice, informing everyone present that each of them had crossed him in the past and that he intends to make them pay by killing them off. As the first of them unexpectedly die from various deadly weapons, they become suspicious of one another while seeking to create alliances. Some survivors discover funeral wreaths in the basement where Emily died from fright while locked in a coffin and are shocked to realize that all their names are on each ornament.

The Cold War superspy genre found its peak in the James Bond films of British cinema, the English-language adjunct of Hollywood, although most other national cinemas were not spared the impact of a mode of practice that celebrated wealth, masculinity, whiteness, and technology, while downgrading what it regarded as the socialist alternative. One could respond that by featuring non-Western cultures and performers, other cinemas were implicitly resisting the originative samples while taking advantage of their profitability. This simplification found further elaborations even in Western centers, with the proliferation of nihilist or subversive heroes and narratives; British cinema worked out a Bond-less mystery narrative with an updating of Agatha Christie's *Ten Little Niggers* (1939), republished and filmed in the US as *And Then There Were None* (dir. René Clair, 1945) and retitled *Ten Little Indians* in the 1965 remake by George Pollock. *Masquerade* alludes to the Western link by opening with an American character, Jonathan Rayfus, issuing invitations to eight characters to travel with him to the premonitorily named Diablo Island for a dinner party hosted by the mysterious Mr. X. His identity as coordinative character gets subsumed once the other guests begin explicating their personal concerns—pointedly as well, when a number of them are provided with internal monologues. The temper of Cold War-era conservatism gets played out in the usual arenas of class and gender, but is more concretely demonstrated when the more respectable individuals maintain a façade of distant coolness even as they engage in the

same process of alliance-building to allay their paranoia over who among them might be the Mr. X who stranded them on his property, the better to torment them before finishing them off in unexpected ways. It would not be delusory to regard this unstable combination of congenial exterior and underlying tension as typical of Danny L. Zialcita's approach to filmmaking, with formal and narrative disruptions permitted to intervene toward the end. In order to inspect how another Filipino talent optimized a similar structure and setting, one would have to look far overseas, in Ramon A. Estella's *Pusaka Pontianak* (*The Accursed Heritage*, 1965), his final Malaysian production for Sir Run Run Shaw.

T-Bird at Ako

English Translation: *Lesbian and I*
Year of Release: 1982
Director: Danny L. Zialcita
Screenwriter: Portia Ilagan
Producer: Film Ventures
Cast: Vilma Santos, Nora Aunor, Suzanne Gonzales, Dindo Fernando, Tommy Abuel, Odette Khan, Leila Hermosa, Johnny Wilson, Dick Israel, Rosemarie Gil, Subas Herrero, Liza Lorena, Alvin Enriquez, Baby Delgado, Johnny Vicar, Rustica Carpio, Anita Linda

> Bar dancer Isabel is charged with homicide after killing a man who tried to rape her. Lesbian lawyer Sylvia offers to represent her for free. But while their relationship as client and counsel starts off as professional, things change when Sylvia begins to have feelings for Isabel. As lust mixes with legal concerns, they soon realize that winning their case will be a much more complicated matter.

The next major showdown between the country's top stars since Ishmael Bernal's *Ikaw Ay Akin* (*You Are Mine*) four years earlier confirmed that the tables between them had definitely turned. Vilma Santos could still play coquettish and sensuous more convincingly than most "bold" stars of the time, but Nora Aunor could summon conflictive inner lives—lonely, lustful, and Sapphic while being outwardly contented, principled, and sexually disinterested—like only few veteran performers could pull off. Danny L. Zialcita had at least two potentially superior entries: *Hindi sa Iyo ang Mundo, Baby Porcuna* (*The World Is Not Yours, Baby Porcuna*), now lost, from 1978; and *Ikaw at ang Gabi* (*You and the Night*), somewhat overrated, a year later. He had also become a film-buff favorite for a long list of well-received loquacious melodramas and sex comedies, including Eddie Garcia's most successful dirty-old-man "Manóy" vehicles. *T-Bird at Ako* falls squarely between his "quality" and "commercial" attempts, exhibiting the best, as well as the worst, of both options, and intensifying the fireworks between two talents whose histrionic duels would persist into the next millennium.

Palabra de Honor

English Translation: *Word of Honor*
English Title: *On My Honor*
Year of Release: 1983
Director: Danny L. Zialcita
Screenwriter: Danny L. Zialcita (as Mike Vergara)[26]
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Eddie Garcia, Hilda Koronel, Elizabeth Oropesa, Beth Bautista, Amy Austria, Jackie Lou Blanco, Gloria Diaz, Dindo Fernando, Ronaldo Valdez, Tommy Abuel, Mark Gil, Suzanne Gonzales, Virginia Montes, Mario Escudero, Augusto Victa, Tony Angeles, Bert Asuncion, Lucy Quinto, Rolly Papasin, Bert Dizon, Lilian Laing, Christian Espiritu, Josie Tagle

> The elderly widower Don Adolfo's family and employees squabble over their share of wealth while making sure, as he does, to claim their objects of pleasure, illicitly if necessary. His daughter Cristy endures a loveless marriage with David but gets pregnant from her affair with Louie, who administers the Don's educational institution. Louie's wife Olivia objects to their new hire, an instructor with a liberal-activist background, incurring the wrath of the instructor's wife. David meanwhile decides to blackmail Louie so he can start anew with Elma, whose husband Arthur, a lawyer for the school, wishes to collect on the promise he extracted from the instructor's wife in exchange for his support. Don Adolfo finds comfort in his fiancée Victoria, but his possessive daughter tries to dig up dirt so she won't have to lose her father.

After several attempts at sex comedies, Danny L. Zialcita welded his immensely profitable approach to a small-town family saga and triumphed with an offbeat, sophisticated entry. The bedroom-to-boardroom roundelay avoids redundancies by adopting a wide variety of class and gender perspectives, and reserves the juiciest revelations toward the end. With the Marcos Sr. authoritarian system still firmly in place, the film could casually portray sexist acts, but it mitigates these blunders with humor and strong-women characterization (including a distaff brawl that's funny and shocking in equal measure). Its final twist depicts how the titular word of honor gets qualified by several levels of irony; the complaint of most know-it-all commentators at the time, that these types of films don't possess any understanding of the upper-class lifestyle that they exploit, actually reflects on said critics' own limitations. *Palabra de Honor* sets out to disparage, not document, its nominal heroes—and succeeds, to the lasting benefit of Pinas pop culture.

[26] For *Palabra de Honor* and two succeeding films, Danny L. Zialcita used a name that did not have any other Philippine film credit before or after. Some posters and publicity materials, however, listed him as writer. Film archivist and researcher Monchito Nocon pointed out in a private exchange (*Messenger*, January 28, 2025) that "Mike Vergara is Danny's son. His mom, Danny's wife, was Leonor Vergara. Ergo, that's really just Danny using another person's name" inasmuch as the real-life Michael Vergara Zialcita, who'd appeared in some of his father's previous films, would still have been a preteen at the time. Several possible reasons may have accounted for Zialcita's decision. Relevant to film criticism would have been the shrill denunciations by members of the critics' award-giving group for his alleged plagiarism of fairly accessible Western film samples. This behavior, premised on an "originality as [postcolonial] vengeance" slogan that originated in the national university, indicates an unexamined variation of colonial mentality where local authors and artists are expected to restrict themselves in realms of practice that Westerners would describe as tribute or homage if it occurred among themselves.

LEROY SALVADOR

(2 films: 1968–1985)

Badlis sa Kinabuhi

English Translation: *Line of Life*
English Title: *Hand of Fate*
Alternative English Title: *Destined*
Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 1968 / B&W
Director: Leroy Salvador
Screenwriter: Junipher (Leroy Salvador & Gloria Sevilla)
Producer: MG Productions
Cast: Gloria Sevilla, Mat Ranillo Jr., Frankie Navaja Jr., Felix de Catalina, Danilo Nuñez, Martha Dee, Aurora Villa, Siux Cabase

> Celia lives a peaceful life with her husband Domeng and their son Lito. The only thorn in her side is her foster father Simon, who disapproves of her marriage because of his lust for her. When Simon's incestuous behavior goes too far, Celia kills him. But this traumatizes Lito and leads Domeng to abandon her. As Celia's trial unfolds, her fate hangs in the balance.

Philippine cinema must have been granted a much-needed stroke of luck in that even in a degraded pre-restored state, the fullest available single sample for a long time, from early regional production,[27] has turned out to be one of our best commercial films ever. This will be news mainly for Manila-centrified observers, since *Badlis sa Kinabuhi* is not only fondly remembered among elderly Cebuano audiences, it was also the first Filipino feature to screen at the Berlin International Film Festival. Director Leroy Salvador must have picked up insight and inspiration from the several genres he appeared in as an LVN Pictures performer; surrounded by practitioners who were out to prove themselves equal to Manila's output, he and they managed the tricky balance between heavy melodrama and judicious humor, with a genuinely involving race-against-time finale. Gloria Sevilla, a rare instance of a popular figure who also encompasses folk-artist significance, combines strong presence with skilled delivery—enough to make her plight sympathetic even to those who barely understand the language.

[27] The 2015 Cinema Rehiyon festival featured as opening film a basic digital remastering of the available print, still with missing sound in the equivalent of one reel; this may be the closest we might ever be able to get at present to the original screening. In 2026, social networks started casually sharing a Cebuano-language film, also from 1968, uploaded on a Russian website. Titled *Dugay Na sa Maynila (Tonto Ka Pa)* or, roughly, *You've Been a While in Manila (And You're Still Moronic)*, the Gem Productions comedy was directed by Luis San Juan from a screenplay by Johnny Pangilinan and a story by Bert Ariola.

Beloved

Year of Release: 1985
Director: Leroy Salvador
Screenwriter: Orlando Nadres
Based on the *komiks* by Nerissa Cabral
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Nora Aunor, Hilda Koronel, Christopher de Leon, Dindo Fernando, Deborah Sun, Fred Montilla, Virginia Montes, Metring David, Rudy Meyer, Tino de Lara, Nick Lizaso, Danny Cruz, Roy Alvarez, Herminio "Butch" Bautista, Mario Taguiwalo, Encar Benedicto, Ena Alli, Susan Soler, Lucy Baldorado, Arthur Nieto

> After a friendly encounter on a flight to Manila, Adora and Renée meet again when Adora's boyfriend Dindo lands a job at the company owned by Renée's father. Renée also succeeds in hiring Adora as her secretary. Due to her attraction to Dindo, Renée quickly promotes him, which angers sly sales manager Ver. What follows is a chain of events fueled by lust, betrayal, revenge, and greed for power.

Those who regard Nora Aunor's populist persona as necessarily opposed to the original Viva Films' house image (mainly represented by glossy melodramas) will find their logic challenged by this offbeat entry. Rather than bring up the expected gender issues, the movie superimposes the characters' class dynamics and observes how gender differences play out within this framework. The central quartet of mature performers ensures that the sudden shifts in character behavior turn out to be revelations rather than inconsistencies, and intensify the tugs-of-war with just the right balance of charm and deviousness, so that it becomes impossible to pinpoint a definitive winner among all four of them once the dust has settled.

LINO BROCKA

(14 films: 1970–1990)

Tubog sa Ginto

English Translation: *Gold-Plated*
English Title: *Dipped in Gold*
Year of Release: 1970
Director & Screenwriter: Lino Brocka
Adapted from the serialized *komiks* by Mars Ravelo
Producer: Lea Productions
Cast: Eddie Garcia, Mario O'Hara, Lolita Rodriguez, Jay Ilagan, Hilda Koronel, Marissa Delgado, Jimmy Morato, Veronica Palileo, Luis Gonzales, Joonee Gamboa, Joe Avelino, Lorli Villanueva, Angie Ferro, Tony Carreon, Glenn Bernardo, Josie Perez, Baby K. Jimenez, Inday de la Cruz, Lito Franquelli

> Businessman Don Benito goes to great lengths to conceal his homosexuality. But one night, he crosses paths with the handsome Diego and they become lovers. Benito decides to hire his lover as his driver so they could continue their affair. Along the way, Benito's wife Emma and his son Santi learn of his secret. Worse, Benito discovers that Diego's motives are more sinister than he had let on.

The breakout film that would make Lino Brocka a force to reckon with already cast his weaknesses and strengths in stark relief. The hot-button material of same-sex desire would gain increasing topicality in years to come, although the treatment in *Tubog sa Ginto,* regarded as shockingly new during its time, would seem current only to those who still believe that moral discomfort should be minimized in popular culture. Eddie Garcia was not new to the character, either: he'd portrayed the role of a closeted manly man about a decade earlier, in Tony Cayado's 1962 comedy *Kaming mga Talyada (We Who Are Sexy)*; but his and Brocka's fierce-spirited attack made *TsG* more definitive than Brocka's several subsequent attempts at repudiating his own homophobic prejudices. Refusing to be upended by the novelty of Garcia's role—which still endures as a benchmark for male performance—Lolita Rodriguez and Jay Ilagan provide credible support as the wife and son who cope with their family head's devastative desire.

Stardoom

Year of Release: 1971
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriters: Lino Brocka & Orlando Nadres
Producer: Lea Productions
Cast: Lolita Rodriguez, Eddie Garcia, Hilda Koronel, Walter Navarro, Jimmy Morato, Caridad Sanchez, Lotis Key, Tita Muñoz, Mario O'Hara, Edmund Cupcupin, Mary Walter, Ruben Rustia, Veronica Palileo, Joonee Gamboa, Celeste Legaspi, Estrella Kuenzler, Marissa Delgado, Joseph Estrada, Eddie Mercado, Gloria Romero, Daisy Romualdez, Jeanne Young

Toyang's primary realization is that her hopes will keep getting dashed. As a starstruck collegian, she hopes to be discovered for the movies as her classmates acknowledge her standout beauty, but the nuns who teach her disapprove of such plans. When her father dies and leaves their family destitute, a film producer contacts her with plans to launch her as a star, but World War II forces him to flee. She marries a man who she thinks is wealthy but he turns out to be some well-off family's driver, so she neglects their elder son. When her husband forces himself on her and she gives birth to another son, fortune immediately begins to smile on the kid and Toyang displaces onto him all the dreams she failed to fulfill for herself. What she failed to anticipate is that the showbiz world is filled with lust, intrigue, and treachery, which her son Joey now has to face up to, with or without his mother's (often unwelcome) help.

Lino Brocka described his tenure with Lea Productions in unflattering terms. As the most active studio during the period between the First and Second Golden Ages, Lea certainly had none of the luxury of slating noncommercial (mostly neorealist) products for foreign film-festival exhibitions, even as it struggled for the industry dominance that Regal, Viva, and the Marcos government's Experimental Cinema of the Philippines later enjoyed. Apparently without being aware of it, Brocka wound up with crowd-pleasing expertise—a skills set he readily set aside when he attempted to replicate the "quality production" processes that the old studios used to proffer their favored filmmakers. *Stardoom* may now be revaluated as Brocka's road-not-taken, fortunately only until he rebelled against another set of limits: that of polished realist protest filmmaking unofficially stipulated as his ticket to successful Euro filmfest domination. Observers who were equally admiring and scandalized by his return to audience-friendly strategies toward the end of his career would have found his roots in his Lea phase. We might be even tempted to state that these early films' reliance on generic play preempted the sanctimonious bourgeoisification of the characters in his "serious" breakout texts. Both mother and son's cynical willingness to weaponize their bodies as a means of escaping the multilayered oppression of slum life in Manila betoken a step forward from the moralistic attitude toward perverse promiscuity in *Tubog sa Ginto*, an early indication of Brocka's capacity for critical self-regard that he upheld throughout the rest of his career.

Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang

English Title: *Weighed but Found Wanting*
Year of Release: 1974 / Color with Sepia
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Mario O'Hara
From a story by Lino Brocka
Producer: Cinemanila Corporation
Cast: Lolita Rodriguez, Mario O'Hara, Christopher de Leon, Eddie Garcia, Lilia Dizon, Hilda Koronel, Rosa Aguirre, Laurice Guillen, Alicia Alonzo, Joseph Sytangco, Ernie Zarate, Lorli Villanueva, Joonee Gamboa, Lily Miraflor, Estrella Kuenzler, Cita Javellana, Ursual Carlos, Bey Vito, Lota Garcia, Jerry O'Hara, Anita Linda, Orlando Nadres, Chito Ponce Enrile, Rolly Papasin, Nina Lorenzo, Melvi Pacubas, Paz Brosas, Dante Balois, Lito Cruz, Fred Alvarez, Ernie David, Edwardo Montiel, Robert Miller, Minda D. Azarcon, Roger Mariscal, Max Azacon, Lily Gamboa Mendoza, Avi Mendoza, Lupa, PETA Kalinangan Ensemble

While most townspeople mock madwoman Kuala, the equally derided leper Berto sees in her a second chance to have a family. Junior, the mayor's son, befriends the two as he becomes increasingly critical of the many excesses of his father's and friends' lifestyles. When Kuala gets pregnant with Berto's child, the ostracized couple, with Junior as their only advocate, have to find ways to defend themselves from the hypocritical interventions of the townsfolk.

Independent cinema was redefined for the future with *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang*; prior to Lino Brocka's coming-of-age text, the term "independent" had referred to the mostly performer-owned studios that successfully challenged the 1950s' vertically integrated system of producers who monopolized the means of distribution, consequently discouraging competition, by also owning their theaters. After a long-term studio contract had run its course, Lino Brocka rounded up reform-minded financiers, engaged the talents of personalities from theater and "serious" cinema, drew an ambitious narrative from his small-town upbringing, and embarked on speaking tours in schools and offices across the country. He was rewarded with a sleeper hit and a slew of industry prizes although, as even observers during the time pointed out, the film was too self-serious to take to heart. *TKNK*'s delightful slice-of-life satire eventually devolves into a high-minded moralistic assault on hypocrisy, wherein an entire town is virtually forced to genuflect before its martyred Others and an angry young man handsomely lifts up an infant who might represent a future that they still have to earn. Essential viewing for wide-eyed indie-film aspirants who wield Brocka's name as their messianic ideal and fixate on his mid-career European successes, discounting his later self-critical adjustments.

Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag

English Title: *Manila in the Claws of Light*
Alternate Title: *The Nail of Brightness*
Year of Release: 1975 / Color with B&W
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Clodualdo del Mundo Jr.
Adapted from the 1968 novel *Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* by Edgardo M. Reyes
Producer: Cinema Artists
Cast: Bembol Roco, Hilda Koronel, Lou Salvador Jr., Joonee Gamboa, Tommy Abuel, Tommy Yap, Lily Gamboa, Pio de Castro III, Pancho Pelagio, Danilo Posadas, Jojo Abella, Joe Jardi, Spanky Manikan, Edipolo Erosido, Pancho Pelagio, Purita Yap, Josephine Gutierrez, Gina Zegui, Ronnie Magalong, Anna Marie Nicolas, Victor Diendo, Lily Gamboa Mendoza, Abelardo Reyes, Joe Gruta, Julie de Guzman, Nina Lorenzo, Brenda Fajardo, Mely Mallari, Cita Avellana, Juling Bagabaldo, Ellen Cacho, Fred Capulong, Chiqui Xeres-Burgos, Rikki Jimenez, Sabrina, Pitay, Veronica, Jun Macapinlac, Jerry O'Hara, Bobby Roldan, Rudy Hermano, Orlando Nadres, Ricardo de Guzman, Socrates B. Jose, Greg Llenado, Estrella Kuenzler, Edwin O'Hara, Lorli Villanueva, Arturo Soquerata, Mario O'Hara

> Julio leaves for Manila to look for his childhood sweetheart Ligaya. Once there, he becomes a construction worker but is exposed to exploitative labor conditions. He loses his job and ends up in the company of male hustlers, but eventually he crosses paths with Ligaya. Their reunion proves to be bittersweet, however, as she divulges the tragic fate she suffered since she left their hometown.

To be fair, many of the problems evident in *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* stem from the movie's source novel, an impassioned semi-autobiographical pro-labor account that still impresses the type of left-leaners who regard its portrayal of weak helpless women and sex-crazed exploitative Chinese as minor setbacks that the novel's searing social perspective overrides. This trend among progressive artists of the time may have been rooted in the colonial bias against East Asians that worsened during World War II and the Cold War, and led to objections by

Chinese-Filipino community leaders and to critiques by major scholars like Caroline S. Hau. The artists' intent may have been well-intentioned—i.e., to foster suspicion of foreign domination by using a minority as a sample; yet the fact that the said minority has become vulnerable to violent reprisals, like the rash of kidnappings for ransom during the 1990s, shows how fundamentally flawed this line of thinking was. By adding an extended improvised sequence—originally running for nearly a quarter of the film's total running time—where lead character Julio Madiaga gets drawn into the gay-for-pay underworld of male prostitution,[28] Lino Brocka added homophobia to this list of injuries, but was ironically denounced for it by the novelist and his more-homophobic-than-thou supporters. Nevertheless Brocka at this point had enough conviction and skill to focus on the plight of the appealing and always-wholesome young man overwhelmed by the big bad city, creating an unforgettable impression of beauty and wonder from all the filth and squalor of the reality he had sought to capture. Despite the aforementioned limitations, *MSKL*'s appeal has remained so overwhelmingly transcendent that several observers through the years uphold it as the best Filipino film of all time.

Insiang

Year of Release: 1976
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriters: Mario O'Hara & Lamberto E. Antonio
From a story by Mario O'Hara
Producer: Cinemanila Corporation
Cast: Hilda Koronel, Mona Lisa, Ruel Vernal, Rez Cortez, Marlon Ramirez, Nina Lorenzo, Mely Mallari, Carpi Asturias, Joe Jardi, Danilo Posadas, Tommy Yap, George Atutubo, Eddie Pagayon, Estrella Antonio, Jimmy Calaguas, Belen Chikote, PETA Kalinangan Ensemble

> The relationship between Tonya and her daughter Insiang becomes strained with the arrival of Dado, who becomes Tonya's young lover. In truth, Dado had long been lusting after Insiang and manipulates his arrangement with Tonya so he could live in the same house as the two women. After he rapes Insiang, he convinces Tonya that it was her daughter who seduced him. Insiang plots her own revenge against her mother, Dado, and her feckless boyfriend Bebot, still unaware of how her scheme would also transform her own character.

[28] Having viewed the initial run of *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* only once and learning from scriptwriter Clodualdo del Mundo Jr. that the deleted material might be lost for good, I attempted to reconstruct the missing sequences with crowdsourced assistance from scriptwriter Rody Vera and actor Bernardo Bernardo. The results are in my Queer Films Series volume *Manila by Night: A Queer Film Classic*, Arsenal Pulp Press, 2017, pp. 64–66; see as well "Thinking Straight: Queer Imaging in Lino Brocka's *Maynila* (1975)," *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society*, vol. 9, no. 2, August 2012, pp. 21–40, doi:10.52518/2013.9.2-02dvd. Elwood Perez rendered a homage to the lost sequences by providing a similar misadventure for his lead character, played by Brocka protégé Christopher de Leon, in *Masikip, Maluwang: Paraisong Parisukat* (*Tight and Loose: Square Paradise*, 1977), his well-made adaptation of a hit play in the Brocka-supported Philippine Educational Theater Association. As typical celluloid-era misfortunes go, the entire film, prematurely dismissed by supposedly knowledgeable observers, is now presumed lost.

Although it was overshadowed by the scope and political daring of the previous year's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*, *Insiang* demonstrated Lino Brocka's capacity for self-critical reassessment. Confining the dramatic highlights to the domestic sphere, he finally found a means of focusing on women's social and sexual privations, extracting career-peak performances from Mona Lisa and Hilda Koronel in the process. This time the reservation regarding the title character being too beautiful for the milieu she lives in can be more easily justified by the reduction in scale: the mother's and daughter's contrasting personalities meld effectively with their reckless competition for the affection of the slum superstud, who turns out helpless in the face of their womanly onslaughts.

Jaguar

Year of Release: 1979
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriters: Jose F. Lacaba & Ricky Lee
Based on "The Boy Who Wanted To Become 'Society,'" from the 1977 book *Reportage on Crime: Thirteen Horror Happenings That Hit the Headlines* by Quijano de Manila
Producer: Bancom Audiovision Corporation
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Amy Austria, Johnny Delgado, Anita Linda, Menggie Cobarrubias, Mario Escudero, Jimmy Santos, Deborah Sun, Aida Carmona, Dexter Doria, Cloyd Robinson, Tonio Gutierrez, Roi Vinzon, Cloyd Robinson, Joe Cunanan, Fred Param, Nonoy de Guzman, Eddie Gicoso, Nando Tiongson, Eddie Laburiante, Domingo Landicho, Estrella Antonio, Joey Luna, Joey Zuniga, Peachy Carmona, Ellen O'Hara, Eddie Pagayon, Greg Sta. Inez, Ram Xerex-Burgos, Boy C. de Guia, Lando Jacob, Joe Viterbo, Cloyd Robinson

> Poldo's dream of living amid luxury comes true when Sonny, whose father owns a publishing company, turns him from security worker to personal bodyguard. The playboy Sonny gets into a tussle with his friend, Direk San Pedro, over Cristy, a nightclub dancer that Direk had discovered and was building up for the movies. Although Sonny succeeds in convincing Cristy to leave Direk for him, she winds up falling for Poldo. When Direk attempts to extract revenge on Sonny, Poldo has to defend his boss by killing Direk. From hereon, Poldo's dream suddenly transforms into a living nightmare.

The commendable aspect of Lino Brocka's career is easy to pass over in favor of the early triumphs that introduced him to European film-festival audiences: most of his subsequent films, mistaken for and downgraded as supposed recyclings of his earlier material, are actually rectifications of his youthful missteps in the admittedly slippery arena of identity politics. *Jaguar* picks out a lumpen character, an on-the-run former bodyguard who wound up killing his boss's friendly rival, the very type who would have harassed Julio Madiaga and probably participated in lynching him at the end of *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975). By carefully distilling an actual crime story from literary journalist Nick Joaquin, and getting a pair of Joaquin's younger colleagues to refashion the material into a contemporary narrative, Brocka wound up with an entry that provided a few firsts. From the point of view of Philippine film productivity, *Jaguar*'s well-received qualification at the Cannes Film Festival competition section was only incidentally significant: it introduced a credible and versatile action star in Phillip Salvador, and initiated a genuine "noir" look via the shadows-and-fog tenebrism of Conrado Baltazar, the best cinematographer during and beyond his unfortunately short moment.

Bona

Year of Release: 1980
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Cenen Ramones
Adapted from the same author's teleplay written for *Babae (Woman)* series
Producer: NV Productions
Cast: Nora Aunor, Phillip Salvador, Marissa Delgado, Raquel Monteza, Venchito Galvez, Rustica Carpio, Nanding Josef, Spanky Manikan, Archi Adamos, Rene Hawkins, Joel Lamangan, PETA Kalinangan Ensemble

> Slum resident Bona is such a fan of bit player Gardo that she doesn't hesitate to help him out after a band of men gang up on him for violating the sister of one of the men. Her father beats her up for staying out all night so she returns to Gardo's shanty and lives there in exchange for assisting him. She witnesses how he can't resist temptations to drink and womanize, but one night he opts to sleep with her, raising her hopes about their arrangement. When she realizes that he counts her as just another of his conquests, her demeanor toward him and her stature in his life darkens.

Bona was the first film that provided insurmountable evidence that Nora Aunor could read the proverbial phone directory and still come up with an intelligent, credible, humane, and insightful performance. Lino Brocka was similarly functioning at the peak of his abilities, although the material that he had chosen nearly tripped him up despite his casting of some of the best supporting players of the period, mainly because the narrative's fuller queer potential went over his head. Both artists learned to be more discerning about identifying promising intellectual properties, after virtually saving each other from near-disaster; but their subsequent respective choices of superior media projects never resulted in another collaboration of this order. Of the few other reflexive films she performed in, *Bona* remains Aunor's showcase, with another production of hers, *Greatest Performance* (which she also wrote and directed), having the potential to show all the other Second Golden Age filmmakers how her extraordinary personal narrative could have been put to better use, if she had opted to complete the project. One sample of how insistently encompassing Aunor in *Bona* has been lies in how the only other star-reversed reflexive project of the period, Emmanuel H. Borlaza's *Bituing Walang Ningning* (Viva Films, 1985), needed to identify its villain as a "superstar" in order to clear the field, in a manner of speaking.

Cain at Abel

Year of Release: 1982
English Title: *Cain and Abel*
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Cine Suerte
Cast: Christopher de Leon, Phillip Salvador, Carmi Martin, Cecille Castillo, Baby Delgado, Mona Lisa, Ruel Vernal, Michael Sandico, Venchito Galvez, Tonio Gutierrez, Bey Vito, Joe Jardi, Fred Capulong, Jumbo Salvador, Greg Sta. Inez, Naty Mallares, Dante Balois, Ryan Soler, James Acuesta, Jonathan Romulo, Roger Moring, Eddie Ortega, Baby Shanny, Grace Torres, SOS Daredevils

Señora Pina blames her eldest son for the heart attack that befell his father and treats him as a scoundrel, withholding the support he needs to run the family hacienda efficiently; as a result, Lorenzo or Lorens hangs out with influential but outcast members of their town. When his younger brother Ellis arrives with his new girlfriend Zita and announces his intention to drop out of college, Pina decides to replace Lorens with Ellis in order to dissuade the latter from marrying Zita. Becky, Lorens's wife, is upset because Pina already coddled their housekeeper when Ellis impregnated her, in order to have a grandchild by her favored son. Becky reaches her tipping point when she learns that Pina intends to designate Ellis as her sole heir, in effect precluding their children from the fruits of Lorens's years of labor. Becky's confrontation of Pina turns violent, but Ellis's attempt to push the pregnant Becky away results in a tragic accident that Lorens counts as Ellis's blood debt. Matters between the brothers keep escalating, with their friends and loved ones becoming collateral victims of their resentments and retaliations.

The action-film genre was the country's most popular movie category, until the Marcos Sr. regime's opportunistic provisions of exemptions from censorship made sex films even more profitable. Lino Brocka's tremendous empathy with victims of domestic abuse and social injustice made the action genre ideal for the skills set he cultivated alongside his preferred circle of performers and technicians. In *Cain at Abel*, he proceeds from a seemingly carefully knit pattern of professional and familial relations that start to tear along the lines of toxic interactions induced by a phallic mother playing favorites between her two differentially neglected and emotionally stunted sons. The members of this tragic trinity insist on imposing their version of righteousness on one another, realizing too late that their anger and hatred have plunged the town they rule over into modes of distrust, secrecy, and frequent shootouts. Underappreciated when it first came out, the film deserves to be celebrated as evidence of Brocka at peak technical ability, alongside the emergence of Phillip Salvador as our most capable male lead actor; a film he produced and headlined around this time, *Ako ang Hari* (*I Am King*, 1981), just as satisfyingly turned out to have been Mike Relon Makiling's personal best, although it could no longer be found.

1—*Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim*

English Translation: *My Country: Clutching a Blade*
English Title: *Bayan Ko: My Own Country*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Jose F. Lacaba
Based on "A Strike" by Jose F. Lacaba and "Host or Hostage" by Jose N. Carreon
Producers: Malaya Films & Stephan Films
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Gina Alajar, Venchito Galvez, Ariosto Reyes Jr., Bey Vito, Aida Carmona, Khryss Adalia, Nomer Son, Paquito Diaz, Raoul Aragonn, Rez Cortez, Claudia Zobel, Carmi Martin, Mona Lisa, Louella, Gamay Arkoncel, Peachy Atutubo, Rey Malte-Cruz, Adjay de la Cruz, Cesar Dimaculangan, Bituin Rada, Tony Rubio, Evelyn Vargas, Jess de la Paz, Lorli Villanueva, Bongchi Miraflor, Tanya Shipley, Connie Chua, Mae Paner, Raul Aragon, Fred Capulong, Jippi Reyes, Roger Moring, Fred Param, Thunder Stuntmen, Allan Noble, Maharlika, Lost Eden Dancers, Gerard Peter Models, SOS Daredevils, Nanding Fernandez, Edna May Landicho, Bing Magtoto, Nanette Venturanza, Lucita Soriano, Lucy Quinto, Greg Sta. Inez, Joe Taruc, PETA Kalinangan Ensemble

Desperate to maintain his only source of income, printing press laborer Turing has no other choice but to turn his back on his co-workers when they launch a labor strike. His problems grow when his wife, Luz, experiences a difficult pregnancy. Pushed to his breaking point when the hospital refuses to release his wife and newborn unless he can cough up some payment, Turing agrees to join a burglary gang but winds up facing worse consequences than he initially imagined.

2—*Orapronobis*

English Translation: *Pray for Us*
English Title: *Fight for Us*
Additional Language: Latin
Year of Release: 1989
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Jose F. Lacaba
Producers: Bernadette International Association & Special People Productions
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Dina Bonnevie, Gina Alajar, Bembol Roco, Abbo de la Cruz, Ginnie Sobrino, Pen Medina, Joel Lamangan, Gerard Bernschein, Ernie Zarate, Jesus O. Ramos, Obby Castañeda, Pocholo Montes, Bon Vibar, Raquel Villavicencio, Joe Taruc, Dodie Lacuna, Thea Cleofe Salvador, Archie Adamos, Fred Capulong, Rene Hawkins, Ester Chavez, Estrella Kuenzler, Ruben Rustia, Apo Chua, Tess Dumpit, Raquel Tan, Suzette Rigor, William Lorenzo, Mae Quesada, Ramon Hodel, Lito Tiongson, Madeleine Nicolas, Mari Roberts, Larry Marshall, Nanding Josef

> Freed political detainee Jimmy visits a rural town to investigate the massacre of alleged rebels caused by the Orapronobis vigilante cult. He soon meets ex-girlfriend Esper and their love child Camilo, even as he learns that the military actually supports the cult's activities. But when Esper and Camilo are suddenly apprehended by the cult, Jimmy's investigation turns into a personal crusade.

Associates of Lino Brocka date his full commitment to nationalist politics alongside the anti-dictatorship movement that emerged after the 1983 assassination of Senator Benigno S. Aquino Jr. In fact, his political awakening was such a turnaround from his earlier less-progressive orientation that it resulted in a pair of hard-hitting topical films, both written by Jose F. Lacaba, that were banned by two successive presidential regimes. The first, the Marcos-era *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim*, demonstrates the risks that attend advocacy filmmaking; not only because it made Brocka a target for repression, but also because its guerrilla-filmmaking style and predilection for melodrama make it most definitively a product of its time. Fortunately—for the film, not the title country—the Philippines has retained several characteristics that render *BKKP* as timely as ever. Brocka had become such a filmmaking expert that the movie could risk offending formalism-obsessed viewers yet move them at the same time—thus turning into an ironic anomaly in its director's filmography: a work whose achievement, despite itself and Brocka's track record, lies in an impressive stylistic consistency rather than in well-wrought raw material. Not long after accomplishing one major collective project in the dismantling of the Marcos dictatorship, Brocka found himself leading the charge against Marcos's supposedly democratic successor. Not only did many of his former allies find *Orapronobis*, the embodiment of his disillusionment with the Corazon Aquino government, too much too soon, in spite (or maybe because) of its technical prowess; critics who prided themselves on fairness regarded its conflation of discrete historical personalities and events improper, to put it mildly. In an interview, Lacaba recalled how Brocka, presented during this period with possible radical options, expressed a preference for anarchy. Brocka's intention to tackle an adaptation of José

Rizal's material would have been a tantalizing prospect, considering recent speculation on Rizal's own political growth. As it turned out, all that fate has left us are the likes of *BKKP* and *Orapronobis*: films that are accomplished in articulating their maker's social conscience and that simultaneously exemplify his long-overdue awakening to the medium's potential to impact an audience.

Miguelito: Batang Rebelde

English Translation: *Miguelito: Rebel Child*
Year of Release: 1985
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Jose Dalisay Jr.
Producer: D'Wonder Films
Cast: Nida Blanca, Eddie Garcia, Gloria Romero, Aga Muhlach, Liza Lorena, Beth Bautista, Rey "PJ" Abellana, Ronaldo Valdez, Robert Arevalo, Mario Montenegro, Ric Rodrigo, Delia Razon, Paquito Diaz, Leni Santos, Lito Pimentel, Gretchen Barretto, Chito Babasa, Fred Capulong, Edgar Garcia, Jun Vizconde, Ding Alvaro, Maricar Jurado, Caloy Salvador, Reymond Rodriguez, Sammy Dehitta, Jonas Mariano, Vangie Labalan, Aida Carmona

> Auring is set free after serving fifteen years in jail for a crime she did not mean to commit. She now aims to get justice and reclaim Miguelito, her son from an affair she had with town mayor Venancio. Soon, Miguelito learns the truth about Auring and finally meets her. But their reunion can possibly be cut short by Venancio's desire to keep things the way they were before Auring's interference.

Unassailable proof that despite his defensive pronouncements, Lino Brocka was capable of recognizing where he may have faltered and how he might be able to stage a rebound. Small-town politics, angry young man, wronged woman, corrupt official of a father: this was *Tinimbang Ka Ngunit Kulang* (1974) all over again, except that this time, the exercise could hardly be bettered. The teen at the center is torn between his understandably resentful mother and his nurturing legal parents; his father's political valences point to beyond-personal abuses that wound his immediate constituency; and coolest of all, our hero is able to count on the ready and efficient support provided by a gangster and a couple of, well, former virgins. Though predictable, the moral tragedy at the close of this trajectory—the sacrifice of innocent victims, as in *TKNK*—occasions a catharsis that this time is fully earned, no longer directed against hapless-though-hypocritical small-town inhabitants. It also provides a more pointed anti-authoritarian critique, inspired by the then-raging anti-Marcos protest movement, to instill hope—both in the responsiveness of a people in crisis, and in the self-aware abilities of a major Filipino filmmaker.

Babangon Ako't Dudurugin Kita

English Translation: *I Will Rise and Crush You*
English Title: *Sweet Revenge* (TV adaptation title)
Year of Release: 1989
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Joen Chionglo
Adapted from the serialized *komiks* by Gilda Olvidado

Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Sharon Cuneta, Hilda Koronel, Christopher de Leon, Bembol Roco, Mona Lisa, Ruben Rustia, Tom Olivar, William Lorenzo, Tony Tacorda, Jimmy Reyes, Pocholo Montes, Gina Perez, Fred Capulong, Joe Jardi, Nanding Josef, Beth Mondragon, Evelyn Loreto, Boy Roque, Ver de Guzman, Millet Advincula, Eva Ramos, Bituin Rada, Archi Adamos, Joel Adesas, Ding Mirasol, Thunder Stuntmen

> Because of filial piety, Salve obeys her father's request to marry a man with a bright future, which he saw in Alfred. Via, a rich lady with political ambition, believes that Alfred will have greater success as her life partner. They arrange for Via's feckless cousin to date-rape her, to provide Alfred with an excuse to leave her. After her father dies from witnessing her heartbreak, she works for a series of abusive employers. Finally, she winds up homeless and unconscious in the rain, where Rod, a gangster who grew up in poverty, brings her to his home and shows her the strength she had in her all along.

The most memorable collaboration between the country's biggest directorial name and its biggest star, circa the late 1980s, was also a crucial juncture in their individual journeys. He was attempting to meld political commentary with popular appeal, effectively abandoning the commerce-vs.-art binary he insisted on for most of his career, while she was bent on dumping her wholesome-teenybopper persona for good. It was an all-too-unexpected shift for either of them, so no one took any notice except for her mass followers. Sharon Cuneta should have had more exciting future projects if Lino Brocka's car didn't make that fatal swerve along a desolate stretch of road on his way home after meeting with prospects for future projects. Even the transformations he required of her—a Smoky Mountain scavenger in an earlier project, *Pasan Ko ang Daigdig* (*I Carry the World*, 1987), and a feminist avenger after this, in *Biktima* (*Victim*, 1990)—provided her with offbeat imagery that she still occasionally tried out afterward, with upgraded performative skills though lesser fierceness. *Babangon Ako't Dudurugin Kita* remains a satisfying watch and the ideal appetizer for *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak* (*Dirty Affair*, 1990), Brocka's next (and sadly final) peak achievement, while all the Cuneta movies not long afterward have been just as watchable ... but that dream Cuneta-Brocka project will just have to reside in our imagination.

Hahamakin Lahat

Alternate Title: *Hahamakin ang Lahat*
English Title: *All Be Damned*
Year of Release: 1990
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Vilma Santos, Snooky Serna, Gabby Concepcion, Eric Quizon, Dennis Roldan, Maritoni Fernandez, Perla Bautista, Ruben Rustia, Gina Perez, Pocholo Montes, Archi Adamos

> Two married couples play out a tragic game of love and obsession in a small urban capital. Lucinda uses her influence as the town mayor's wife to help out her cousin Theresa, although in fact she aims to rekindle her affair with Theresa's hot-headed husband Renato. She goes to the extent of arousing her philandering husband's interest in Theresa and setting up the latter with her own boy-toy blackmailer, all in order to isolate Renato and claim him for her own. When she pleads for help with her biological father, whom she had refused to acknowledge all her life for abandoning her mother, she realizes how similar they turned out to be in their ruthlessness and readiness to exploit other people.

Overshadowed by the fireworks display of *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak*, *Hahamakin Lahat* has nevertheless maintained over the years as evidence that even given vastly reduced resources, Lino Brocka could still shine through with his artistic and political integrity intact. He happened to be operating at a juncture where a post-Marcos trend he started—of badmouthing elected officials for their willingness to engage in corruption—became a profitable theme in commercial Philippine cinema. He'd also successfully extracted an all-time-great performance from Lorna Tolentino for playing a postfeminist character, a strong manipulative woman, in *Maging Akin Ka Lamang* (*If You Were Only Mine*, 1987), and managed an equivalent feat here with Vilma Santos.[29] His insistence on never losing sight of the cause of the downtrodden might make even the major entries in his body of work predictable, but whenever he ventures to overlay the proceedings with filmmaking skills never beheld before or since on local screens, an attentive viewer will have no other choice except follow, in anticipation of the marvelous revelations he constantly conjures up with ease.

Gumapang Ka sa Lusak

English Translation: *Crawl through the Muck*
English Title: *Dirty Affair*
Year of Release: 1990
Director: Lino Brocka
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Dina Bonnevie, Christopher de Leon, Eddie Garcia, Charo Santos-Concio, Bembol Roco, Alan Paule, Francis Magalona, William Lorenzo, Perla Bautista, Anita Linda, Lucita Soriano, Timothy Diwa, Maureen Mauricio, Ernie Zarate, Tess Dumpit, Ray Ventura, Fredmoore de los Santos, Fred Capulong, Jimmy Reyes, Archi Adamos, Rey Malte-Cruz

> Rachel has become the mistress of unscrupulous mayor Edmundo Guatlo. Rowena, the mayor's wife, pressures him to find a way to silence his paramour, since he soon has to launch his congressional campaign. In promising to leave him and his wife in peace during the campaign, Rachel extracts a promise from Edmundo that her boyfriend Levi will be freed from jail. Edmundo however contracts Levi to assassinate the mayor's rival, upon which the mayor's henchmen kill him and abduct Rachel's parents. Jonathan, a slum teen who likes to hang with his better-off peers and who develops a crush on Rachel, calls upon his friends to find ways they can help Rachel.

Final and tragically insufficient evidence that Lino Brocka was capable of building on not just his early material, but on his own revision of said material. *Gumapang Ka sa Lusak* was meant to be a sequel to *Jaguar* (1979), which itself was a culmination-of-sorts of his problematic

[29] Lino Brocka's generally sure hand with female actors imbued him with an indispensable expertise during an age when female stars exceeded the impact of their male counterparts. Aside from capstone performances of Nora Aunor (in *Bona*), Lolita Rodriguez (*Stardoom*), Mona Lisa and Hilda Koronel (*Insiang*), Nida Blanca (*Miguelito*), and Dina Bonnevie (*Gumapang Ka sa Lusak*), to name the titles included in this list, he also directed Chanda Romero's personal best in the still-unrecovered *Mananayaw* (*The Dancer*, 1978), a film once feared to have been lost to posterity but still awaiting overdue retrieval as of this writing, from Philippine government officials.

approach to the socially dispossessed. As it turns out, *GKsL* reintroduces the (renamed) *Jaguar* character briefly, only to see him snuffed out, and proceeds to follow his girlfriend, now the drug-addled mistress of a corrupt and ambitious mayor. The *Jaguar* type is also reprised, this time as a fun-seeking teen still too attached to his better-off pals. With this "reunited" (though mismatched) couple, Brocka steps into postmodern practice for the first time, boldly and winningly, his fearlessness finally finding an aesthetic component. He whips into the mix all the genres he had ever attempted, tosses in a few reworked historical personages, and builds up a frenzy where all the major players find their comeuppances in a deadly power game. And lest anyone think this could not be further improved on: he made the movie to please not his Euro-festival crowd, but the local mass audience, who responded excitedly as early as *GKsL*'s extended trailer screenings, and remembered to pay their respects not long after, during Brocka's funeral wake.

CELSO AD. CASTILLO

(5 films: 1971–1986)

Asedillo

Year of Release: 1971
Director & Screenwriter: Celso Ad. Castillo
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Barbara Perez, Jose Romulo, Carlos Padilla Jr., Rebecca, Imelda Ilanan, Paquito Diaz, Lito Anzures, Angelo Ventura, Jose Villafranca, Vic Varrion, Mario Escudero, Resty Sandel, Ding Salvador, Robert Talabis, Ruel Vernal, Cristina Reyes Johnny Long, Robert Talby, Miguel Lopez, Nonoy de Guzman, Belo Borja, Norma Anzures, Elvie Escaro, Pancho Pelagio, Luis Benedicto, Tessie Cantry, Geny Enriquez, Cesar Bakal, Romeo Mabutol, Ben Escalante, PMP Riders, Dencio Padilla Jr., Andy Nicholas

> Schoolteacher Teodoro loses his job as a police chief after being falsely accused of stealing by corrupt local officials. He founds a rebel labor group that aims to help the poor but is denounced as a troublemaker by the authorities. Though Teodoro clears his name and gains his hometown's support, his enemies stop at nothing to take him down.

A genealogical line can be drawn from Gerardo de Leon through Celso Ad. Castillo to Ronwaldo Reyes, although conventional wisdom might argue that the returns tend to diminish the farther we get from the maestro. In fact it's Reyes, better known as Fernando Poe, Jr., who links up directly with the other two: his father had worked on a few de Leon projects (including the controversial *Dawn of Freedom*, 1944), while Poe himself had *Kamay ni Cain* (*Hand of Cain*, 1957), *Apollo Robles* (1961), *Ako ang Katarungan* (*I Am Justice*, 1962), *The Walls of Hell* (1964, co-directed with Eddie Romero), and *Juan de la Cruz* (1976, unfinished) as his filmographic associations. With Castillo, Poe had done *Ang Alamat* (*The Legend*, 1972); he can also boast of at least one de Leon-worthy achievement in his own *Ang Maestro* (*The Teacher*, 1981). *Asedillo* is where Castillo's and FPJ's now-dated masculine heroics found full expression as populist entertainment. The visual style predictably overwhelms FPJ's commercially determined persona. But the material abides, drawn from a real-life account during the period of intermittent anti-colonial resistance during the American occupation. Such distant global-political issues have rarely been given popular attention and continue to fascinate as samples of lost history. Nick Joaquin narrated the possibly apocryphal account of how FPJ's Muslim fans rioted when his character was killed in the film, but this can be read today as a demonstration of the love for country and preference for populist narratives by the star who would have been Philippine President.

Daluyong at Habagat

English Translation: *Surge and Tempest*
Year of Release: 1976
Director: Celso Ad. Castillo
Screenwriter: Mauro Gia Samonte
Producers: Associates and Celso Ad. Castillo Company, Sampaguita Pictures

Cast: Vic Vargas, Ricky Belmonte, Pinky de Leon, Lito Anzures, Alma Moreno, Rez Cortez, Joonee Gamboa, Angel Confiado, Mario Escudero, Pedro Faustino, Subas Herrero, Odette Khan, Nello Nayo, Ruel Vernal, Miniong Acosta, Joe Baltazar, Belo Borja, Ben Dato, Nonoy de Guxman, Ysmael Laguna, Marvin Mercado, Robert Talby, Vic Varrion, Tony Villar

> Igus's father dies when the bombshell he's defusing for Don Anselmo Araneta explodes. Igus asks Don Anselmo for hazard-pay funds for his father's burial but gets given an inadequate token amount. His wife, Cielo, resorts to nightclub hostessing to raise the funds they need but Igus flies into a rage at her workplace when he finds out. Cielo falls seriously ill but Don Anselmo dismisses Igus this time since his son, Jake, is about to get married. Igus takes Jake's bride hostage but Jake is able to track his hideout. Igus manages to shoot Jake and paralyze him, but he is caught by police and thrown in jail. He gets paroled for good behavior but the Aranetas are bent on meting their own kind of punishment on him, while Cielo returns to the only kind of job available to poor abandoned women like her.

Set right after the devastation of World War II and the frenzy of recovery induced by a newly independent republic, *Daluyong at Habagat* might sound like a compendium of the worst possible circumstances that could befall an urban proletariat family of its time and place; even more incredibly, the story is based on actual events. Celso Ad. Castillo mounted a steep uphill climb for legitimacy, after a lengthy period as a commercially successful specialist in action and sex films. Critics seemingly could not be persuaded that anything of import could come of *D&H*, although they also acknowledged its director's impressive visual acuity. Their negligence resulted in shabby treatment for what has turned out to be a far more daring critique of Philippine society and governance than any film produced in over a decade. The parallels drawn between a gang lord and a wealthy industrial capitalist, as well as the mounting confrontations among organized crime, unionized workers, and state-supported bourgeoisie raise the issue of just how well an earlier critical generation was paying attention. A framing account, where a reporter draws out Igus's narrative from the recollection of his widow, results in the usual stating of the obvious, but it also enables viewers from the present to witness how an entire set of toxic class and gender values is capable of destroying lives as a matter of course, most tragically those of the most vulnerable members of society.

Burlesk Queen

English Translation: *Burlesque Queen*
Year of Release: 1977
Director: Celso Ad. Castillo
Screenwriters: Mauro Gia Samonte & Celso Ad. Castillo
Producer: Ian Film Productions
Cast: Vilma Santos, Rosemarie Gil, Rolly Quizon, Leopoldo Salcedo, Roldan Aquino, Joonee Gamboa, Chito Ponce-Enrile, Dexter Doria, Yolanda Luna, Rio Locsin, Celso Ad. Castillo, Estrella Kuenzler, Pat Ilano, Mervyn Samson, G.V. Misa, Grace Zaldivar, Bino Garcia Jr., John Ad. Castillo, Bayani Casimiro, Romy Brion, Canuplin, Popoy, Poleng Mendoza, Nora Linda, Samuel Almariego, Neverly Brothers, Brown March, Bing Bigotillo, Fakir

> Chato assists striptease star Virgie Nite for a living. Eventually, she aspires to be just like Virgie and is able to do so when a window of opportunity arrives. Chato's disabled father urges her to stop but she ignores him. She even falls in love and elopes with a mayoral candidate's son. But when a series of personal setbacks occur, Chato takes some drastic measures as a means of defying the abuses that fate has dealt her.

Celso Ad. Castillo was perhaps the most ardent disciple of Gerardo de Leon's visual innovations. But in appropriating GDL's predilection for the perverse, Castillo tended to miss out on de Leon's sympathy for women characters. That is, until a well-loved child star and wholesome teen idol decided to level up by going the so-called bold route. Brimming with raw talent and soulful innocence, Vilma Santos rendered the character of a woman awakening to both economic hardship and sexual desire as if these had been actually happening to her, which they well might have been. Her performance, capped by a rarely equaled climactic monologue, pulls together the film's uneven production elements; the pathos her character experiences serves to justify the movie's condemnation of cultural hypocrisy—a then-daring critique mainly because of the martial-law situation—while ostensibly championing striptease as a performing art. Even in *Burlesk Queen*'s fast-deteriorating video format, with all celluloid copies destroyed by unimaginable negligence,[30] Santos makes the movie worth revisiting, as a precursor of the strong-woman roles that she would also be dominating thereafter.

Celso Ad. Castillo's Totoy Boogie

Alternate Title: *Totoy Boogie*
Year of Release: 1980
Director & Screenwriter: Celso Ad. Castillo
Producer: Lea Productions
Cast: Eddie Garcia, Marissa Delgado, Rossana Ortiz, Pia Moran, Dennis Roldan, Lloyd Samartino, Roderick Paulate, Anita Linda, Celso Ad. Castillo, Irish Buendia, Martin Marfil, Luis Benedicto, Alma Bonnevie, Erwin Garcia, SOS Daredevils, Joe Quirino, Alfred Yuson, Samuel Almariego, Rosemarie de Vera, Maribeth Biscara, Alfred Yuson, Discor Dancers

> Totoy and his parents live in a dilapidated building in a seedy section of Quiapo district, where their Estacio's Academy of Modern Dance subsists beside the Buddhist Yaw-Yan Temple. Working-class customers along with the occasional slumming rich matron attend for lessons on ballroom skills from boozehound Peping (Joe Estacio's nickname), famed for his skills during his younger days, with Totoy sometimes helping to demonstrate some difficult steps. While hanging out at one of the discos where he shows off his abilities, he notices the zippy, frisky moves of Susan and realizes he's fallen for her after he gets to know her. Although she readily makes out with him, Susan maintains a steady relationship with a rich bully and introduces to Totoy an icy lady who hires him as her personal dance instructor. Realizing how his parents have kept him from a more exciting future in showbiz, Totoy quarrels with his father and moves out on his own. Talent agents start noticing him and he gets a tempting proposition from a famous film director.

Totoy Boogie's a difficult film to take to heart. It has the same end-of-an-era treatment that Celso Ad. Castillo expended on *Burlesk Queen*, but it's too carefully done, and consequently too languidly paced, to make a strong first impression. Not surprisingly, after its box-office failure, he never attempted anything like it again. Yet Castillo firmly belongs to that Pantheon of Filipino filmmakers who've fully earned the right to pursue material as seemingly personally indulgent

[30] One of the final clarifications made by the late Teddy O. Co concerned the rediscovery of a print in a private Western collection. Negotiations for the recovery of an item that is part of the country's patrimony will have to be conducted; unfortunately the Philippine government at that point still had to carry out its duty.

as the crises in and transformations of mass-patronized art forms induced by shifting global trends. The unexpected revelation, for those who allow *TB* to function the way its creator must have preferred, is that it delivers his usual concerns with class differences and affinity for working-class culture, but undergirds the presentation with utter compassion for the protagonists contending with the trauma of inevitable change. The benevolence will be undeniable in the characterization of the title character's parents, with Eddie Garcia and Marissa Delgado delivering exquisite performances that will be (and have been) easy to overlook; but Castillo was also careful enough to realize where he could falter, which is where *TB* attains a measure of integrity that, say, the preceding attempts of Lino Brocka could not match. This is where he introduces queer supporting characters of both genders, who're saddled with the defeatist resolutions then expected by an authoritarian system where women still had to stake their claim on historical development. He cast Rosanna Ortiz in the role of lesbian ballbuster (even using her nickname, Osang, as the character's own), succeeding in turning Totoy's flighty and promiscuous girlfriend into a more responsible individual. More sensationally and subversively, the director who successfully hits on Totoy first appears on TV crowing over his achievement with *Asedillo* (1971) and remains unnamed. His real-world identity as well as his features are of course Castillo's, treating his followers to the closest he'd ever gotten to his dream project, *Ang Lalakeng Nangarap Maging Nora Aunor* (*The Man Who Dreamed of Becoming Nora Aunor*). As cis-het as it's possible to get, he nevertheless intended to direct and star in it, thus leaving the rest of us to wonder what other flights of imagination he could have left behind, if he'd been accorded the proper recognition due his uniquely off-kilter genius.[31] [***Warning for audiences***: the original print of *TB* might be imperilled by copyright issues, regardless if the original soundtrack adds to the film's distinctive quality; watch out for any remastering that remixes the musical numbers, or better yet, try securing any older, though possibly deteriorated, video transfer.]

Uhaw na Dagat

English Translation: *Thirsty Sea*
English Title: *Burning Seas*
Additional Language: Bikol
Year of Release: 1981

[31] Under a more supportive system, Celso Ad. Castillo might have been able to realize his ironic-reflexive dream project, and possibly provide the Philippines with a few more salient queer film-texts made by a straight filmmaker, where the treatment of outlaw sexuality becomes a means of pursuing sociopolitical critique. In the same year of *Totoy Boogie*, Ishmael Bernal staked his claim on queer film discourse with *Manila by Night*, with subsequent attempts by straight-male filmmakers suffering from the expected lack of empathy compounded by intellectual limitations. Women directors as well as queer filmmakers of all genders persisted in credible and authentic imaging into the present millennium. Interestingly, the year after Castillo died in 2012, an action director, Romy Suzara, provided one final and remarkably heartfelt entry in *Tinik* (*Thorn*), his penultimate film. For a survey focused on bisexualities in Philippine cinema, see the survey article I contributed to the *Journal of Bisexuality*, titled "Di/Visibility: Marks of Bisexuality in Philippine Cinema," vol. 19, no. 3, September 2019, pp. 440–454, doi:10.1080/15299716.2019.1656474.

Director & Screenwriter: Celso Ad. Castillo
Producer: Bancom Audiovision
Cast: Gloria Diaz, Elizabeth Oropesa, Isabel Rivas, Dennis Roldan, Roland Dantes, Lito Anzures, Eddie Garcia, Yehlen Catral, Irish Buendia, Marilou Dytioco, Max Laurel, Gil Guerrero, Paeng Giant, Miniong Goliath, Eddie Killer, Popeye, Angel Face, Mar Gutierrez, Buli-Buli, Ipe Crisostomo, Oca Barako, Domingo Gaciong, Rey Big Boy, Egoy, Arsenio Palomar, Jun Turko, Joe de Cazale, Mar Razon, Jimmy Durante, Eddie Alberto, Johnny, Albia, Rene Miranda, Orlando Miguel, Ric Esguerra

> Magda lives with her two younger sisters, whose conduct she oversees, on an island where they are the only inhabitants. Before leaving to fight in World War II, their father had instructed them to raise goats but not for food. So when a boatload of famished sideshow performers sends their speech-impaired muscleman Golem to capture a kid for a meal, Adelfa, the middle sister, threatens him with the only gun they possess. Golem falls for and pursues Adelfa, who in turn eventually accepts him. Crisanto, a straggler from the war, arrives on the island to seduce Magda so he can claim the treasure that the women's father told him about. Only the youngest, Teresa, is shielded from worldly temptations. Eventually, Satur, who has also learned of treasure on the island, arrives with enough firepower to overcome all resistance.

Whatever egotism Celso Ad. Castillo might have displayed was always tempered by (or even understood in the context of) his eccentricity. His carnivalesque sensibility enjoyed free rein in his sex-themed projects, which provided him with opportunities for humor, playfulness, and occasional idiosyncratic insight—major advantages for an artist confronted by moralistic censorship. With the then-forthcoming Manila International Film Festival offering the prospect of major profits, Bancom Audiovision gave Da Kid unprecedented access to a blockbuster budget, large cast, and enough fireworks for a month of New Year's Eves, all of which he lavished on his otherworldly scenic resort in Siniloan Municipality in Laguna Province. *Uhaw na Dagat* may just as well stand in for all the Castillo-as-perverse-visionary films, from *Nympha* (1971) through *Ang Pinakamagandang Hayop sa Balat ng Lupa* (*The Most Beautiful Animal in the World*, 1974) to *Virgin People* (1984), although these also deserve at least a single going-over, with *Nympha* requiring every possible recovery effort alongside Castillo's astounding horror entry *Kung Bakit Dugo ang Kulay ng Gabi* (*Night of the Zombies*, 1973). Even *UnD* has wasted away over the decades in a slipshod video transfer, proof that its period of emergence boasted of a cornucopia of film delights but with certain titles privileged over the rest by virtue of their favorable standing with local and global tastemakers.

Paradise Inn

Year of Release: 1985
Director: Celso Ad. Castillo
Screenwriters: Celso Ad. Castillo & Oscar Miranda
Producer: Amazaldy Film Production
Cast: Lolita Rodriguez, Vivian Velez, Michael de Mesa, Dennis Roldan, Jinggoy Estrada, Robert Arevalo, Armida Siguion-Reyna, Lito Anzures, Rodolfo "Boy" Garcia, Lucita Soriano, Odette Khan, Bomber Moran, Joseph de Cordova, Bing Davao, Mary Walter, Virginia Montes, Renato del Prado, Jaime Fabregas, Jestoni Alarcon, Vic Varrion, Jean Carlos, Vicky Suba, Lucy Quinto, Luis Benedicto, Cris Daluz, Nick Alladin, Mylene Angelo, Telly Babasa, Joe de Cazale

> Ester runs Paradise Inn, a nightclub on a hilltop, but wants to shield her daughter Daria from the dissolute lifestyle that led her to this fate. Daria elopes with Al, whose family is prepared to accept her despite her family background. Ester,

however, scandalizes Al's family, forcing Al to break up with Daria. When Al decides to run for mayor against the incumbent Anton, Ester convinces the latter to get rid of the competition. Meanwhile Anton's wife, Sonia, wishes to get rid of Paradise Inn in order to reclaim her husband. The carnal and political dynamics of the situation lead to a confrontation where no one can claim to have a satisfactory resolution.

Celso Ad. Castillo was more forward-thinking than people realized at the time. Moralists, including left-leaning ones, may have been relieved that *Paradise Inn* was a departure from his turgid though consistently amusing hard-core melodramas, if not exactly a return to the progressive treatments of historical figures. In fact, the symbolic elements, as well as the retention of prostitution as discursive material, indicate an intent to provide a summation of his filmmaking concerns at this stage, a sort of updating of *Burlesk Queen*. Yet the closest to a political reading, circa the mid-1980s, suggested a few crucial disruptions with the conflict between two strong-women figures. If the long-suffering proprietress was Corazon Aquino, why did she continue to practice her work as a sex professional? If the self-righteous privileged challenger was Imelda Marcos, why did she have (unlike the real-life former First Lady) the entire Catholic support group behind her? The benefit of hindsight allows us to see that Castillo was talking about the future, rather than the present, in terms that Lino Brocka would eventually adopt after his falling out with the post-Marcos dispensation. Undoubtedly *PI* was far from an empty exercise in high cinematic style then, although those surface values—inclusive of peak achievements by, among others, cinematographer Romy Vitug and actor Lolita Rodriguez—continue to guarantee as much spectatorial pleasure today as they did then.

ISHMAEL BERNAL

(15 films: 1971–1985)

Pagdating sa Dulo

English Title: *At the Top*
Alternate English Title: *Reaching the Top*
Year of Release: 1971 / B&W
Director & Screenwriter: Ishmael Bernal
Producers: Mever Films & Frankesa Films
Cast: Rita Gomez, Vic Vargas, Eddie Garcia, Rosemarie Gil, Ronaldo Valdez, Elvira Manahan, Zeneida Amador, Rosemarie Gil, Subas Herrero, Joonee Gamboa, Ernie Zarate, Ellen Esguerra, Ramon Moral, Edwin Tecson, Robert Arevalo, Panchito, Nida Blanca, Lillian Laing, Eddie Mesa, Romy Nario, Barbara Perez, Jerry Pons, Pepito Rodriguez, Gloria Romero, Tange, Ramon Zamora, Johnny F. Capistrano, Delia Javier, Letty de Guzman, Manny Habalo, Noel Mallonga, Roy Alvarez, Pete Daroy, Jonas Sebastian, Noel Anonuevo, Edru Abraham, Victor Velasco, Max Taeza, Bert Maclang, Zosimo Silvestre, Eddie Villanueva, Felimon T. Diño, Boy Garner, Ben Emasa, Val Hidalgo, Roque Garces, Reynaldo Abaya

> Driven by great financial need, Ruben, a filmmaker, reluctantly agrees to helm a *bomba* or soft-core sex movie and launches nightclub dancer Ching as leading lady. To ensure that no one discovers her background, Ching creates a fake backstory and assumes a new name. She then convinces her former lover Pinggoy to enter showbiz too. But the dangerous allure of celebrity life soon triggers Ching and Pinggoy's downward spiral.

Having returned from higher studies in film and literature in India and France respectively, Ishmael Bernal may have picked up a cosmopolitan sensibility that accommodated both European and native values. Flaunting this same sensibility before media practitioners were convinced that it could work in "low" cultural exercises, he risked getting fired from his first film project—Luis Enriquez's *Ah Ewan! Basta sa Maynila Pa rin Ako!* (*I Don't Care! I Still Prefer Manila!*, 1970)—and needed to get together a team of investors just to be able to finance his own low-budget debut. *Pagdating sa Dulo* proceeds from the English-language pun of a taxi driver falling in with a taxi dancer, then ventures into the tragicomic world of showbiz sexploitation. Bernal's subject, for the most part of his career, had been the fallen Pinay; though one could sense the tension between his highly schooled training and his enthusiastic acceptance of mass culture, his sense of literary proportion and critical perspective on social issues provide heft to potentially lightweight material, and his propensity for satire spices it up.

Lumapit ... Lumayo ang Umaga

English Translation: *The Morning Arrived ... and Departed*
English Title: *Near, Far the Morning*
Year of Release: 1975
Director & Screenwriter: Ishmael Bernal
Based on the story by Liwayway Arceo serialized in *Liwayway* Magazine
Producer: Lea Productions
Cast: Dante Rivero, Elizabeth Oropesa, George Estregan, Anita Linda, Caridad Sanchez, Renato Robles, Estrella Kuenzler, Michael Cavestany, Joseph Cavestany, Carmen Jimenez, Baby Alwin dela Cruz, SOS Daredevils

Innocent about the ways of men because of having grown up fatherless, Amy falls for a handsome stranger who keeps showing up at the market stall where she works as a fish vendor. She and Vic start a family after her mother dies, but Vic's criminal past catches up with him and he has to take leave of his family on the pretext that he has to work in Mindanao. After an absence of over seven years where neither Amy nor her friends can track him, William, the Chinoy owner of the shop where Amy works, offers her marriage even after finding out that she has a son by another man. The new family have a prosperous and contented existence, until Vic returns to reclaim the family he left.

Ishmael Bernal continued working for Lea Productions long after Lino Brocka cut off ties with the studio. Evaluators unthinkingly downgraded Bernal's 1975 studio entry in favor of Brocka's independently produced *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag*. As it turned out, *Lumapit ... Lumayo ang Umaga* outshines all the other available Lea films (except possibly for a now-lost 1967 title, Armando de Guzman's *Maruja*). Understandably, Brocka's abhorrence of compromise garnered better notices—and more trophies—than the delicate balance between popular appeal and the sober dissection of social relations in Ishma's attempt. Elizabeth Oropesa's performance, a first in Filipino film naturalism, exemplifies the manner in which a typical everyday provincial-accented Pinay strives to acquire wisdom and sophistication in accordance with her rise in social status. In final contrast with *MSKL*, the film acknowledges how a Chinoy may fall for a native lass but without necessarily turning monstrous out of lust. The film may have definitely benefited from a period in Bernal's career before he turned too arch and satirical for his own good, but Brocka may have also been taking notes, as his own personal aesthetic development eventually circled back to this very same set of filmmaking values.

Ligaw na Bulaklak

English Title: *Wildfllower*
Year of Release: 1976
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Edgardo Reyes
From his novel titled *Bulaklak ng Apoy* [*Flower of Fire*] serialized in *Kislap* Magazine
Producer: Crown Seven Film Productions
Cast: Vic Silayan, Marissa Delgado, Yvonne, Charina Alonzo, Anita Linda, Jun Mariano, Alma Moreno, Elvie Escarro, Edgar Garcia, Ria, Jesse Lee

Abandoned as a child, Evelyn is raised in a working-class *kabaret* (taxi-dance hall) by its proprietor and manager; like everyone else, Evelyn calls her Mommy, although she happens to be Evelyn's godmother. Although delayed in her studies, Evelyn finishes her elementary education in their town's public school, where the principal insists on civic propriety for her entire constituency. Mang Juan, the school gardener, lives on the premises and takes a fatherly interest in the young woman. When Mommy drives her away for using her jewelry for her graduation ceremony, Evelyn winds up sharing Mang Juan's on-campus living quarters. And when the principal's promiscuous son visits his mother during vacation, he too is drawn to Evelyn's pubescent charms.

One of the mysteries in a close tracking of Ishmael Bernal's career trajectory is how he could come up with such an impressively edgy depiction of Philippine rural existence—then abandon the approach in his future major film projects; for all their merits, *Nunal sa Tubig* (1976) and *Himala* (1982) both assumed the perspectives of outsiders looking in. Bernal was such a creature, after all,

but *Ligaw na Bulaklak* possessed sufficient urban resonances with, say, an earlier period when Manila residents were more naïve and easy-going. His familiarity with that type of milieu can be perceived in how he managed to sneak in a critique of authoritarian developmentalist policies in what is essentially a psychosexual study of desire and how, unbridled, it easily transmutes into a destructive force. Most observers focused on the interaction among randy stud, willing nymphet, and repressed senior disabled worker, but the truly powerful figures in their narrative situations are the ones who drive the increasingly malevolent succession of events: the whorehouse madame whose unflinching honesty enables her to assess the readiness of her hapless ward for sex work, and the upstanding school principal whose hypocrisy dictates that she police her students' and employees' moral behavior even while she maintains a paramour on the downlow. The bleakly lurid future that the town faces will hold no glad tidings for the triangle at the story's center, but these two opposing forces will likely be able to move on from what will be for them just one of many possible setbacks.

Nunal sa Tubig

English Translation: *Mole on the Water*
English Title: *A Speck in the Water*
Year of Release: 1976
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Jorge Arago
Producer: Crown Seven Film Productions
Cast: Elizabeth Oropesa, Daria Ramirez, George Estregan, Ruben Rustia, Pedro Faustino, Nenita Jana, Ven Medina, Leticia de Guzman, Tita de Villa, Ella Luansing, Rustica Carpio, Paquito Salcedo, Lem Garcellano, Carlos Padilla Jr., Tony Carreon, Bong Perez, Joey Bolisay, Rey Tabla, Ida Bautista, Al Garcia, Jimmy Preña, Erna Menesses, Ricky Garcia, Bles Cruz, Milo Sario, Santiago Balse

> Benjamin shares his affection between island natives Chedeng, who is a midwife, and Chedeng's friend Maria. Chedeng decides to practice her profession in a nearby town and leaves the island. Benjamin also leaves so he can join the navy, but only after he gets Maria pregnant. Upon Chedeng's return, her relationships with her lover and her friend require some drastic adjustments.

Ishmael Bernal's friendly rivalry with Lino Brocka resulted in a productive series of projects for both of them, although Brocka's flashier attempts tended to outshine Bernal's. Nevertheless, after his debut in 1971, Bernal managed a more consistent level of quality from one project to the next, in contrast with Brocka's uneven output. *Nunal sa Tubig* typifies Bernal's predicament: a writerly obsession with abstract issues pertaining to material and medium, so that the result yields insights over time rather than make a strong first impact. This also explains why Bernal tended to utilize exploitative strategies, specifically raunchy language and scenes of sexual coupling, in addition to his offbeat humor. In this specific outing, which was set in a fishing village too far away from his deep-urban comfort zone, he appears to have had no other choice except to fall back on his extensive documentarian training. So startlingly well-observed it could trump most real-life footage from the same period, *Nunal* was nevertheless genuinely "bold" (the then-current term for sexually frank cinema) in depicting its trio of characters' awakening to erotic desire. It

was also forward-looking in terms of the ecological effects of development and empathetic regarding the plight of rural labor. If the viewing experience, as affirmed by agitated mass audiences during the movie's initial release, turned out to be occasionally tedious, the long-term rewards will be worth every effort.

Nonoy Marcelo's Tisoy!

Alternate Title: *Tisoy!*
Year of Release: 1977
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Nonoy Marcelo
From the comics strip originally featured in *Manila Times*
Producer: NV Productions
Cast: Christopher de Leon, Jay Ilagan, Lorli Villanueva, Bert "Tawa" Marcelo, Ruffy Mendoza, Dexter Doria, Soxy Topacio, Pongay, Jun Morales, Moody Diaz, Nora Aunor, Dranreb Belleza, Feling Cudia, Marianne de la Riva, Johnny Delgado, Angie Ferro, Ernie Garcia, Sandy Garcia, Trixia Gomez, Hilda Koronel, Edgar Mortiz, Orestes Ojeda, Elizabeth Oropesa, Rolly Quizon, Bembol Roco

> Preceded by Tikyo, who loads his companion in an ambulance, Tisoy arrives with Clip from the US and is met by his rich friend Boy. He seeks out Maribubut, the girlfriend he left behind, who resents him for not keeping in touch. Tisoy explains that he left to find his American father, but returned because he heard that his father traveled to Pinas. They round up their old friends Pomposa, a compulsive eater, and Gemmo, an artist who's not beneath swiping someone else's commission so he can earn extra. Clip meanwhile visits his mother Aling Otik, who still lives atop the Intramuros wall but also joined Imelda Marcos's crew of street sweepers, the Metro Manila Aides. They see Tikyo at his campaign sortie for barangay captain, but he knows nothing about Tisoy's father. The wander around Manila's scenic areas and nightspots to help Tisoy's mission, while Tikyo amuses his American friend by trading puns in various global languages.

Tisoy! is an illustrious undertaking involving the best film talents working at peak capacity, from Ishma Bernal to a more-than-game cast, plus Nora Aunor in her less-appreciated function as film producer. Its source material was from the country's top comics artist, Nonoy Marcelo, although ultimately its weakness will have to be tracked to the team deciding (unusual for Bernal) to take his script at face value. The director and performers deliver a procession of puns, witticisms, in-jokes, foreshadowings, and reflexive references with a zippy energy that might prove too fast even for contemporary viewers, and manage to slip in a few satirical barbs that the martial-law censors decided were unacceptable enough to cause the film to be unavailable for the rest of the fascist dispensation (typical example: before cast members danced to Festival's "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" in a disco in *Manila by Night*, "Pamulinawen" gets played here on the way to Pangasinan, whence the friends stage a beauty contest where Pomposa mouths the First Lady's tourism bromides).[32] Most of these elements were of course ascribable to Marcelo, although the

[32] "Don't Cry for Me Argentina" was a song from *Evita* (1976), initially a concept album and later a musical by Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice; despite the multimedia success of the pair's previous musical *Jesus Christ Superstar* (1971), Imelda Marcos disallowed the staging of *Evita* because of her denial of any similarities between herself and Eva Perón, although its hit song could not be targeted because of its ubiquity, especially in discos. "Pamulinawen" (literally "alabaster") is an Ilocano folk song allegedly sung by Ferdinand E. Marcos to his mistress Dovie Beams, whose voice she recorded along with their bouts of fornication; the audiotape managed to be copied

overriding quest of a son seeking to reunite with his father, plus the revelation of who said father might be, would be obvious to any Disney-raised preteen. The measure of how impressively the film prevailed can be seen in how, a few years later, most of the same cast was reassembled for Mike de Leon's *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?* (*Are You Nervous?* 1980), but could barely recapture the spirit of loony inspiration that marked their presence in *Tisoy!*

Ikaw Ay Akin

English Translation: *You Are Mine*
Year of Release: 1978
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Jose N. Carreon
From a story by Ishmael Bernal & Jose N. Carreon
Producer: Tagalog Ilang-Ilang Productions
Cast: Nora Aunor, Vilma Santos, Christopher de Leon, Nick Romano, Ellen Esguerra, Zandro Zamora, Odette Khan, Ven Medina, Ernie Zarate, Anton Juan, Angel Confiado, Rene Requiestas, Ricky Rivero, Ogie Sanchez, Eddie Recto, Rose Gacula, Joey Sison, Cris Vertido, Catherine Santos, Charmie Benavidez, Philippine Air Force Sky Diving Team, Apolonio de Jesus Jr., Ed Calvo, Aida Carmona, Estrella Antonio, Edgar Zabala, William Tan, Helen Plata, Louella, Butch Borromeo, Ricky Alvendia, Ernie Plata, Evelyn Vargas, Sandy Andolong

> Jeepney manufacturing company executive Rex and orchid cultivator Teresita have been lovers for five years. But when Rex meets artist-designer Sandra, sparks fly and an affair ensues. When Teresita discovers this, Rex has to decide which woman he truly wants to be with in his life.

With the qualified success of *Nunal sa Tubig* (*Mole on the Water*, 1976) and the impressive mark made by *Ikaw Ay Akin*, Bernal started being called a "poet of the middle class"—a description that never caught on, fortunately. In fact, a careful inspection of the present film would demonstrate that his insider status becomes evident only once, in a highly proscribed milieu, one that used to be called "bohemian." His decision to aestheticize the middle-class situation leads to similar-yet-different results as with the rural village in *NsT*; for one thing, the man caught between two equally desirable women, played by long-time friends and rivals Nora Aunor and Vilma Santos, this time endeavors to articulate his dilemma to each one of them, instead of running away. And while it may be true that Filipinos, Pinays included, rarely engage in moments of silence, Bernal's approach—highlighted in the dialogue-less confrontation that serves as the film's closure—provides a certain weight that any native who has experienced any kind of tongue-tying befuddlement will recognize.

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and circulated among media practitioners, including rebel broadcasters at DZUP during the Diliman Commune of February 1971, and was transcribed for the "X-Rated Sex Tapes" chapter of Hermie Rotea's *Marcos' Lovey Dovie*, Liberty Publishing, 1983, pp. 143–181. Apart from the parody of the Kabataang Barangay, the updating of Aling Otik as a Metro Manila Aide, while far from satirical per se, harbored some political baggage: the workers, mostly elderly working-class women, were initially assigned frontline work during street protests—a harebrained and mercifully short-lived decision.

Salawahan

English Translation: *Fickle-Hearted*
Year of Release: 1979
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Jose N. Carreon
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Jay Ilagan, Mat Ranillo III, Sandy Andolong, Rio Locsin, Rita Gomez, Mark Gil, Ruthie Roces, Rene Requiestas, Bongchi Miraflor, Lily Miraflor, Stella Ruiz, Pinky Arambulo, Boots W. Fernandez, Joey Aquino, Lea Soriano

> Cousins Manny and Gerry always seem to strike out when it comes to love. Manny is a playboy and easily gets into trouble with his many girlfriends. Gerry values monogamy but takes too long before he makes his move. When they agree to switch dating styles to see where it takes them, a myriad of comic misadventures ensues, involving their respective girlfriends as well as Marianne, an elderly sex researcher.

Ishmael Bernal had been interrogating middle-class lifestyles for so long—from early in his career with *Daluyong!* (*Storm Surge!*) (1971) up to as recently as 1978's *Ikaw Ay Akin*—that when he provided the equivalent of a mid-career summation, only his mass audience took note. Yet *Salawahan* stands as tall as anything since 1976 to the end of the decade, and has aged better than any title in, say, its year of release, which saw Lino Brocka's *Jaguar* being the toast of local awards groups and the Cannes Film Festival. To be sure, *Salawahan*'s comic façade, which enabled it as well as several other Bernal films around this time to sneak past the militarized board of censors, undoubtedly resulted in mainstream critics downgrading its worth. Perversely, the same body would occasionally ban harmless entries for no perceivable reason except to keep practitioners on the alert—so in retrospect, *Salawahan* was more daring than people had presumed. Also, a minor to-do among critical observers over who delivered the year's best male performance—i.e., Dindo Fernando in Danny L. Zialcita's *Ikaw at ang Gabi* (*You and the Night*) vs. Phillip Salvador in *Jaguar*—would have been easily averted if everyone had paid closer attention then to Jay Ilagan.

Aliw

Alternate Title: *Aliw, Sir*
English Title: *Pleasure*
Additional Languages: Japanese, Spanish
Year of Release: 1979
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Cecille Lardizabal[33]
Producer: Seven Star Productions

[33] The screenwriter repudiated her credit in a letter to newspaper editors when the film was nominated for the Urian awards; her name was replaced by those of Franklin Cabaluna & Ishmael Bernal. For a structural reading of *Aliw*, see Joel David, "From Hostesses to Working Girls: Sex Workers in Late 1970s Philippine Cinema," *Kritika Kultura*, vol. 40, February 2023, pp. 276–319, doi:10.13185/1656-152x.2028.

Cast: Lorna Tolentino, Amy Austria, Suzette Ranillo, Butz Aquino, George Estregan, Jojo Santiago, Rustica Carpio, Manny Castañeda, Laura Danao, Menggie Cobarrubias, Dick Israel, Ruby Regala, Ruthie Roces, Juan Rodrigo, Cesar Topacio, Junix Inocian, Edmund Farolan, Antonette Bass, Alma Bonnevie, Ramon Recto, Edmund Farolan

> Ayet, Lingling, and Esper are nightclub hostesses dealing with a bevy of problems. Ayet is torn between easy money and true love. Lingling keeps ending up with men who stifle her independence. Esper struggles to support a family (her own and her mother's) while maintaining a relationship with a married man, with whom she raises their love child. As they deal with issues of money, addiction, professional rivalry, abusive lovers, and social prejudice, they find that their pursuit of personal happiness will constantly have to be deferred.

One would expect that critics would have given Ishmael Bernal, with all his extensive academic and practical training in film, the benefit of the doubt when he turned to low-end aesthetic strategies. Unfortunately the type of US film-studies influence that first arrived here must have come from directly across the Pacific, with Hollywood the locus of application. Otherwise, with *Aliw* on hand, observers should not have been too surprised when its expanded version, *Manila by Night* (1980), emerged right afterward. The conceptual and creative intelligence that went into the seemingly casual outing that was *Aliw*, distinguishes it as the first successful instance of a multicharacter film narrative—i.e., one where the number of lead performers exceeds the standard singular or dual (hero/antihero) arrangement. After the box-office trauma of *Nunal sa Tubig* (1976, financed by the same producer as *Aliw*), Bernal's sharpened sense of commercial contingency enabled the movie to market itself as part of an unnamed subgenre of local melodrama. In retrospect, and with a nod to Korean film scholars, we may now refer to these types of movies as the "tragic-hostess" films, where the socio-economic conditions underlying women's sex work are exposed, as a way of implicating patriarchy and martial rule. Apart from its innovative storyline, *Aliw* endows its material with a mix of pathos, humor, insight, and accuracy, automatically rendering less consequential all other films in its league.

Manila by Night

Censors-Approved Title: *City after Dark*
Additional Languages: Hiligaynon, Chinese, Japanese
Year of Release: 1980
Director & Screenwriter: Ishmael Bernal
Script consultants: Jorge Arago, Toto Belano, Jose Carreon, Ricky Lee, Peque Gallaga, George Sison
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Charito Solis, Alma Moreno, Lorna Tolentino, Rio Locsin, Cherie Gil, Gina Alajar, Orestes Ojeda, William Martinez, Bernardo Bernardo, Maya Valdes, Johnny Wilson, Jojo Santiago, Aida Carmona, Sharon Manabat, Lucy Quinto, Abbo de la Cruz, Dante Castro, Dennis Marasigan, Tony Angeles, Rolly Lapid, Rey Tomenes, Bong Benitez, Roger Saulog, Perry Fajardo, Vangie Labalan

> Drug-addicted nightclub singer Alex employs the services of blind masseuse Bea. She, in turn, is the object of affection of lesbian drug pusher Kano. Meanwhile, playboy taxi driver Febrero juggles affairs with naïve waitress Baby, night nurse Adelina, and gay couturier Manay Sharon, who also eventually manages to pick up Alex. Manay is persuaded by Alex to help Bea by soliciting the help of Adelina. As these interactions among them and with their families and friends grow more complex, each person is led to a path where the line between salvation and doom becomes harder to perceive.

The Filipino entry that towers over everything else made by Ishmael Bernal and, by extension, the rest of Philippine cinema. The storytelling element alone (over a dozen lead characters) already invites comparison to few other examples in global film, and Bernal's refusal to provide closure raises the possibility of its singularity among existing multicharacter film texts. Too easily taken for granted is a further accomplishment, one that eluded even Bernal himself in most of his future attempts at implementing the format: the successful depiction of dramatic themes drawn not from any (anti-)hero in the narrative, but from the equal-emphasis interaction of all the major characters. As a consequence, the city of Manila emerges as an ultimate abstract super-character, ensnaring everyone in its seductive web of deceit and desperation. Once more, critics were (and still are?) misled by Bernal's reliance on Third-World aesthetics, where the proliferation of misery onscreen ironically heralds a richness of conception and unconditional sympathy for a wide range of social misfits and rejects.

Pabling

English Translation: *Playboy*
Year of Release: 1981
Director & Screenwriter: Ishmael Bernal
Unofficially adapted from *Ah Ewan! Basta sa Maynila Pa rin Ako!* (dir. Luis Enriquez, 1970)
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: William Martinez, Maricel Soriano, Gina Alajar, Joel Alano, Alfie Anido, Michael de Mesa, Subas Herrero, Jay Ilagan, Alma Moreno, Balot, Jimi Melendez, Al Tantay, Chanda Romero, Bernardo Bernardo, Chito Alcid, Angge, Amy Austria, Bernardo Bernardo, Tirso Cruz III, Vincent Daffalong, Debraliz, Opalyn Forster, Cherie Gil, Mark Gil, Cecilia Guevarra, Tonio Gutierrez, Jay Ilagan, Rio Locsin, Alfie Lorenzo, Sharon Manabat, Anna Marin, Albert Martinez, Ronnie Martinez, Mike Moreno, Edgar Mortiz, Orestes Ojeda, Bibeth Orteza, Palito, Daria Ramirez, Jenny Ramirez, Rene Requiestas, Bembol Roco, Celia Rodriguez, Chanda Romero, Snooky Serna, Gay Pobre, Joy Pobre, Douglas Quijano, Peewee Quijano, Charito Solis, Lucita Soriano, Deborah Sun, Macoy Symaco, Al Tantay, Noel Trinidad, Mitch Valdes

> Suave playboy Berto and sassy charmer Maya leave their rural town in search of greener pastures in Manila. Once there, some shared misfortunes help them to strike a friendship that slowly leads to love. As they take up several odd jobs, Berto gets into all sorts of high jinks with various women and eventually loses contact with Maya. Eventually, however, their paths cross again as their fortunes change.

Even when Ishmael Bernal took a much-deserved breather from his visionary contributions to Philippine cinema, he could not help his newfound innovative bent. Hitting upon an update of Luis Enriquez's long-lost *Ah Ewan! Basta sa Maynila Pa rin Ako!* (1970), his first script project and repudiated directorial debut, he imbued the picaresque narrative with situations from and references to his own and his colleagues' popular films. In addition, he opted to surrealize as well as satirize the absurdity of the triteness of the situation. And just as 1980's *Manila by Night* was his ethnographic answer to the excessive romanticism and unexamined stereotyping of Lino Brocka's *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (1975), so was *Pabling* a playful reversal of many of *Maynila*'s narratory obsessions. It commences with a rural couple's migration to the big city and realizes a central twist in the girlfriend managing to survive—and exploiting her lover in the process. In the end, social and emotional developments generically conspire to restore a semblance of the normative, a criticism that attended all of the major Bernal movies up to this point. However, as in the aforementioned films, it's the journey, not the destination, that matters.

1—*Relasyon*

English Translation: *Relationship*
English Title: *Affair*
Year of Release: 1982
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriters: Ricky Lee, Raquel N. Villavicencio, & Ishmael Bernal
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Vilma Santos, Christopher de Leon, Jimi Melendez, Lucy Quinto, Ernie Zarate, Manny Castañeda, Bing Fabregas, Beth Mondragon, Thaemar Achacoso, Dante Castro, Tony Angeles, Olive Madridejos, Augusto Victa, Dante Castro, Myrna Rosales, Evelyn Loreto, Christopher Tuazon, Gigette Reyes, Raquel Villavicencio

> After temporarily parting ways with his wife, Emil moves to an inherited house with his mistress, Marilou. Things start well but later on, Emil's chauvinistic attitude causes Marilou to leave him. She eventually misses their relationship and returns to her lover. But Emil and Marilou's supposedly happy reunion hits a snag when Emil's wife suddenly returns, and Marilou discovers that Emil has a potentially fatal illness.

2—*Broken Marriage*

Year of Release: 1983
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriters: Jose N. Carreon & Bing Caballero
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Vilma Santos, Christopher de Leon, Harlene Bautista, Richard Arellano, Len Santos, Lito Pimentel, Rey Ventura, Orestes Ojeda, Tessie Tomas, Spanky Manikan, Cesar Montano, Rey Ventura, Laura Hermosa, Beth Mondragon, Evelyn Vargas, Idda Yaneza, Marivic Mercado, Lucy Quinto, Tony Angeles, Frank Rivera, Tony Rubio, Zorayda Sanchez, Tirs Calin, Miriam E. Agustin, Sandy Andolong, Rey "PJ" Abellana, Nick Lizaso, Rudy Meyer

> Over the years, Rene and Ellen's marriage has been gradually crumbling. They decide to temporarily split up, with Rene living with his friends and Ellen taking care of their two children. But soon, their separation makes matters worse as their marital problems start to affect their jobs and their family. Eventually, they are forced to reevaluate the terms of their relationship.

The plight of the other woman has been a recurrent theme in Philippine film and literature, and will persist for as long as the country remains the only secular nation where divorce is unavailable. *Relasyon* is as close to an archetypal film sample as we can get, and the fact that Ishmael Bernal and Ricky Lee had previously succeeded in painted-women narratives might have had a bearing on the degree of empathy and quality of insight that the film manifested. Vilma Santos, whose consummate performances lay elsewhere, nevertheless gives the role her best shot—meaning a load of charm and feminine flourishes alongside an occasional misfire. At his peak, Bernal could be pressured to repeat himself, but he would always manage to wind up with something new. After the success of *Relasyon*, its producer Regal Films brought together the movie's lead performers and had the director tackle once more the theme of disorder and early sorrow in modern relationships. Both actors emerged with better performances than in the earlier film, and the feminist slant is developed with more subtlety, mainly by contrasting the central relationship with those of several others—from a giggly engaged couple to an elderly single-male parent, plus

a ground-breaking depiction of a fairly viable same-sex arrangement. Although *Relasyon* is more distinctive as a study of the other woman, in contrast with *Broken Marriage*'s overworked wife, any imperfect film by Bernal can still trump the best efforts of most other filmmakers anywhere.

Himala

English Title: *Miracle*
Year of Release: 1982
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines
Cast: Nora Aunor, Veronica Palileo, Spanky Manikan, Gigi Dueñas, Vangie Labalan, Laura Centeno, Ama Quiambao, Ben Almeda, Pen Medina, Aura Mijares, Cris Daluz, Rey Ventura, Tony Angeles, Joe Gruta, Lem Garcellano, Vicky Castillo, Joel Lamangan, Estela de Leon, Cesar Dimaculangan, Mahatma Canda, Vicky Castillo, Richard Arellano, Erwin Jacinto, Potenciano Guzman, Reynaldo Mababangloob III, Nelson Obach

> Crowds gather at Cupang, a drought-stricken town, in search of Elsa, a girl who claims that she saw the Virgin Mary and could now heal the sick. Inundated by the sick and the fortune-seekers, Cupang begins to prosper but material values take hold of everyone. Eventually, Elsa and her friend Chayong are raped, causing Chayong to hang herself and Elsa to lose her confidence in healing. When some unusual natural events occur, people believe that miracles are possible once more and clamor for Elsa again. But this time, she has come to her own moral awakening.

The challenge for Manila-based artists when they explore areas beyond the metropolis is how to depict what may essentially be a foreign world while being true to the place as well as to their roots. The Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, which produced *Himala*, was already guaranteed an authentic "rural" narrative, period-historical at that, with Peque Gallaga's *Oro, Plata, Mata* (1982). *Himala*, which in contrast was set in the north, also decided on a different tack by exploring how "Manila" becomes an imagined ideal, distant yet somehow attainable, in the lives of people in the rest of the country. Even the least secular personality, a faith healer, aspires to the politicized stature of a media celebrity and realizes her ethical predicament too late, via her own process of enlightenment. The fact that the project had managed to cast Nora Aunor in the central role gave the film institutional value beyond the issue of the separate worth of her performance—which, if it ever still needed pointing out, was as unassailable then as it remains today. *Himala* was initially welcomed with qualified enthusiasm, since commentators may have been put off by its makers' refusal to create clear-cut moral identities as well as by the movie project's authoritarian sponsorship. Since then, though, it has grown in stature and represents Bernal's ability in responding to classical-humanist filmmaking challenges with his critical intelligence intact.

Working Girls

Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Amado Lacuesta
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Hilda Koronel, Rio Locsin, Gina Pareño, Tommy Abuel, Carmi Martin, Chanda Romero, Maria Isabel Lopez, Baby Delgado, Robert Arevalo, Edu Manzano, Joel Lamangan, Raul Aragon, Chris Michelena, Johnny Wilson, Koko Trinidad, Eddie Arenas, Roy Alvarez, Gamaliel Viray, Romeo Rivera, Ben Almeda, Robert Campos, Delia Razon, Orestes Ojeda, Jaime Fabregas, Victor M. Ordonez, Alma Lerma, Aura Mijares, Luis Benedicto, Jesse Lee, Madeline Nicolas, Lou Veloso, Jograd de la Torre, Beverly Salviejo, Mon Carpo, Cesar Montano, Encar Benedicto, Pinky Arambulo, Vicky Suba, Susan Katigbak, Edgar Garcia, Peter Corpuz, Mario Taguiwalo, Evelyn Vargas, Leila Lopez, Shalimar Alcantara, Tanya Gomez, Gregg de Guman, Marilou Diaz-Abaya, Zorayda Sanchez

> Seven women show the ups and downs of working in a corporate world ruled by men. Carla has to compete with a womanizing coworker for a promotion. Isabel suddenly gets pregnant but is too meek to stand up for herself. Suzanne and Rose use womanly wiles to reach their goals. And while Nimfa and Amanda compete to marry the same man, Anne tries to keep her crumbling marriage from affecting her job.

Ishmael Bernal's tribute to, and documentation of, the then-raging anti-dictatorship protest movement might appear to be asking to be differentiated from the typical entries, notably Mike De Leon's *Sister Stella L.* (1984) and Lino Brocka's *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (*My Country: Clutching a Blade*, 1985). Yet *Working Girls* partakes of certain elements of these related texts, specifically the women-centeredness of *Sister Stella L.* and the labor-rights issues of *Bayan Ko*; otherwise *Working Girls* stands apart, in terms of its middle-class milieu, its multicharacter structure, and its comedic strategies. Another way of understanding it is to regard it as another version of *Aliw* (1979), updated and expanded but also gentrified, becoming more conventional in its equal-rights feminist argument but also more distinctive as the rare protest (and multicharacter) film with a happy ending—and just as vital at present, if not more so, than its contemporaries.

Hinugot sa Langit

English Title: *Wrenched from Heaven*
Year of Release: 1985
Director: Ishmael Bernal
Screenwriter: Amado Lacuesta
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Maricel Soriano, Charito Solis, Dante Rivero, Al Tantay, Amy Austria, Rowell Santiago, Rey Ventura, Ronald Bregendahl, Gamaliel Viray, Tony Mabesa, Mario Taguiwalo, Jaime Asencio, Susan Africa, Cris Michelena, Loida Domondon, Antonio B. Pascua, Arbie Antonio, Malou de Guman, Santy Valenciano, Amiel Leonardia, Leticia Tison, Virgilio Hidalgo, Elba Abanco Allan, Mercy Santa Maria, Evelyn Vargas, Aurora Yumul, Madeleine Gallaga, Dante Castro, Vic Jose, Tony Rubio, Perry Fajardo, Pen Medina, Cesar Montano, Ronnie Valdez, Jonas Mariano, Josie Galvez, Eva Ramos

Carmen gets into an affair with a married man despite having a persistent suitor. When she becomes pregnant, her cousin Stella tells her to get an abortion. Carmen's overly religious landlady Juling discourages her. As Carmen mulls her unborn baby's fate, a series of events and personal issues cause her to evaluate her role in society as a woman.

Stung by ill-considered criticism of his technical abilities, Ishmael Bernal spent the most part of his late career polishing his films' surfaces, prior to committing to orthodox-left ideals and succumbing to substance dependency—all arguably unnecessary for someone of his stature and capabilities. An occasional project, such as *Hinugot sa Langit*, would engage him with its impossible-to-resolve ethical and sociological questions, specifically on the usefulness of abortion as a legally unavailable option in a national culture that aspires toward liberal ideals yet makes impossible demands on its female citizens. Confronted with a clutch of thorny questions, Bernal could focus once more on his discursive strengths and provide entertainment that could endure extended evaluations. Significantly, and sadly, he had to step back afterward—to the vicinities of television and advertising, theater performance, and café proprietorship—to allow his peers, notably Lino Brocka, an opportunity to assimilate the lessons he had accumulated in film form, structure, characterization, and thematic development. But with Brocka's sudden demise, Bernal's spirit (as he himself averred) also seemed to give out. Yet no one since has been able to consistently transform complex material into accessible, even occasionally fun-to-watch, film presentations. A woefully early end to an extremely productive career.

JUN RAQUIZA

(1 film: 1974)

Krimen (Kayo ang Humatol)

English Translation: *Crime: You Be the Judge*
Year of Release: 1974
Director: Jun Raquiza
Screenwriter: Jose F. Sibal
From a story by Jun Raquiza
Producer: Ilocandia Productions
Cast: Jun Raquiza, Gina Pareño, Marianne de la Riva, Maribel Aunor, Shongho, Omar Camar, Tony Gosalvez, Edison Lee, Bob Breult, Eddie Villamayor, Susanna Navarro, Leila Hermosa, Nick Romano, Arnold Mendoza

> Newly freed after a stint in jail, Angel discovers that his wallet has been lifted by underage pickpockets. He tracks the thieves to their mastermind Toni, a tomboy who dutifully returns what they stole. As Toni and her den of petty criminals begin to get fond of Angel, he hooks up with Myra, an affluent but rebellious daughter whose parents abandoned her to her vices. Myra consorts with a number of shady characters who drag Angel into their conflicts with her and even attack Toni and her wards, leaving Angel with no choice but to exact revenge.

A deceptively light-handed exercise involving the reconfiguration of generic tropes that has unexpectedly worn well through its half-century of being more admired than respected, *Krimen (Kayo ang Humatol)* refutes Bienvenido Lumbera's claim that a "new" Philippine cinema started only two years later.[34] Even if we discount the self-serving coincidence that the award-giving critics group he founded was launched in 1976, Lino Brocka's impactful two-in-a-row juggernaut had already made its mark before then, and enjoyed healthy competition from Ishmael Bernal, Celso Ad. Castillo, Elwood Perez, and the unfortunate Jun Raquiza, who died too early and whose well-received debut, *Dalawang Mukha ng Tagumpay* (*Two Faces of Triumph*, 1973)—which featured Nora Aunor in a first of a series of reflexive projects—can no longer be found. Raquiza nearly pulls off the director-actor stunt in *Krimen*, but had a sufficiently healthy appreciation for good performances to allow Gina Pareño to run away with the presentation. Despite her Toni being saddled with the generic containment of being condemned and punished for her several transgressions against her gender and civic tasks, she navigates the potentially awkward transitions with remarkable aplomb and makes her presence in *Krimen* an indispensable precursor to her masterstroke in Jeffrey Jeturian's *Kubrador* (*The Bet Collector*) over three decades later.

[34] Bienvenido Lumbera's periodization, which has no end date, appears in at least two of his most widely quoted sources: "New Forces in Contemporary Cinema" from *Revaluation: Essays on Philippine Literature, Cinema and Popular Culture* (Index, 1984); and "Brocka, Bernal and Co.: The Arrival of New Filipino Cinema" from *Re-Viewing Filipino Cinema* (Anvil Publishing, 2011).

JOEY GOSIENGFIAO

(2 films: 1974–1980)

La Paloma

Alternate Title: *La Paloma: Ang Kalapating Ligaw*
English Translation of Alternate Title: *Paloma: The Wild Dove*
Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1974 / B&W
Director: Joey Gosiengfiao
Screenwriter: Wilfrido Nolledo
Producer: Juan de la Cruz Productions
Cast: Celia Rodriguez, Orestes Ojeda, Vina Cansino, Mona Lisa, Tommy Abuel, Michael Murray, Angelina Ocampo, Ruel Vernal, Juanito Romulo, Ricky Belmonte, Ruel Vernal, Angge

> Following instructions sent her in a letter from her aristocratic lover, Paloma, a famous actress, sets out for his distant manor with her loyal servant. Upon arrival, she discovers that Don Lorenzo de Leon has died; moreover, he was married, and his widow Anida understandably resents her presence. Lorenzo's mother however insists that she stay on. Joel, an itinerant musician, offers to teach Paloma guitar-playing, but Anida asks him to tend to her garden. The dysfunction between Lorenzo's mother and wife, with Paloma drawn in, leads to a court case over the disposal of his wealth, that invites the attention of the residents of the town.

The critical consensus on *La Paloma* upon its release was that it was a noble attempt that somehow fell short. One could more readily see today how the harshness was unfounded. As the closest to an art-film project of the youthful and irreverent Juan de la Cruz Productions, it dared to regurgitate several elements of First Golden Age virtuoso Gerardo de Leon's *Lilet* (1971), even appropriating the monochromatic properties of his earlier achievements; notably, that film's star, Celia Rodriguez (playing *LP*'s title character), was involved in a long-running press war with Rita Gomez, whom the cognoscenti favored for the same year's *Pagdating sa Dulo* (*Reaching the Top*), Ishmael Bernal's official debut. *LP*'s superiority to *Lilet* would be easier to maintain today, primarily because the campy approach honed by the Juan de la Cruz team trumps the self-conscious seriousness that plagued Manong Gerry since his emergence from the 1950s as a respectable figure. The screenplay furnished by novelist Wilfrido Nolledo revels in the comic-gothic possibilities of the material, imbuing his female characters with wit, cattiness, and a readiness to discard their façades of modesty when hot and hungry hunks wander into view. The older maestro himself was aware that a new generation was emergent and capable of work that experts of his generation could only dream of accomplishing; if only our film critics had been just as prepared.

Underage

Year of Release: 1980
Director: Joey Gosiengfiao
Screenwriter: Toto Belano
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Dina Bonnevie, Maricel Soriano, Snooky Serna, Jimi Melendez, Mark Gil, Gabby Concepcion, Bella Flores, Celia Rodriguez, Domingo Sabado, Lucita Soriano, Lily Miraflor, Mila Ocampo, Deborah Sun, Rosemarie Gil, Bambi Arambulo, Carmen Barredo, Joy Virata, Jonas Sebastian, Tony Carreon, Dennis Cid, Alex Imperial, Carmen Sanchez, Edgar Colina, Dennis Marasigan, Edgar Mande, Armand Contreras, Edward Gavierrez

> After their mother's death, teenage sisters Celina, Cecilia, and Corazon are taken by their aunt out of their rural home and into a boarding house in the city. Once there, Celina catches the eye of the school heartthrob, Cecilia bonds with her much older teacher, and Corazon develops feelings for one of the male boarders. But a grave incident will test the girls' maturity despite their young age.

At his peak, roughly during the late 1970s through the early '80s, Joey Gosiengfiao was considered the primary purveyor of Pinoy film camp. But "camp" then was popularly misunderstood, since in its original sense, it has to be performed in earnest then read against the grain by its audience in order to attain authenticity. Similarly, Gosiengfiao's significance had been too eagerly preempted. The fact that his films were usually profitable signaled to left-leaning culturati that he'd been implicated by his own drive for box-office success and the enthusiastic patronage of producers. More than the strangely celebrated *Temptation Island*, which came out during the same year, and 1978's accomplished though still misogyny-mongering *Bomba Star*, *Underage* proves he was capable of reflexive satire, gleefully skewering as it does the conventions of the poor-little-rich-girl formula. It tinkers with enough of the elements—three nymphets rather than the usual overgrown *naïf*, plus genuinely menacing villains—to also make it an admirable sample of how a genre can be upheld yet transformed by infusing it with elements from seemingly incompatible sources: comedy, the musical, and the sex film, in this instance.

MIKE DE LEON

(7 films: 1976–1999)

Itim

English Translation: *Black*
English Title: *The Rites of May*
Year of Release: 1976
Director: Mike De Leon
Screenwriters: Clodualdo del Mundo Jr. & Gil Quito
Producer: Cinema Artists
Cast: Tommy Abuel, Mario Montenegro, Charo Santos-Concio, Mona Lisa, Sarah Joaquin, Susan Valdez-LeGoff, Moody Diaz

> Photographer Jun meets Teresa, a woman who sporadically yet involuntarily slips into bizarre moods. It is later revealed that Teresa is actually being possessed by her sister, Rosa, who died years earlier though the cause is shrouded in mystery. As Teresa divulges the story behind her sister's death, Jun discovers that he may have found a connection to Rosa.

It would take a few more years before Filipino students of cinema could attempt their own low-end exercises, and a couple of decades before the technology could allow them to present their own full-length projects as a matter of course. As the scion of studio owners, Mike De Leon mustered his family resources and elite-school training and proved himself worthy of the privilege. Several other debuting directors during this period also opted for horror-mystery challenges, but none of them turned out to be as accomplished as *Itim*. Part of the project's continuing relevance derives from its critical inspection of the relationship between the materialistic function of media technology and the anxiety provoked by supernatural phenomena. De Leon's casual, almost documentarian surrender to the "reality" of the gothic upholds several concerns that he would be focusing on afterward, including class and gender critiques, the rejection of authoritarian figures, and an abiding confidence in the power of cinema.

Kakabakaba Ka Ba?

English Translation: *Are You Nervous?*
English Title: *Will Your Heart Beat Faster?*
Alternate English Title: *Thrilled*
Additional Languages: Japanese & Chinese
Year of Release: 1980 / Color with B&W
Director: Mike De Leon
Screenwriters: Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., Raquel N. Villavicencio, & Mike De Leon
Music: Lorrie Ilustre & Jim Paredes
Producer: Lvn Pictures
Cast: Christopher de Leon, Charo Santos-Concio, Jay Ilagan, Sandy Andolong, Boboy Garrovillo, Johnny Delgado, Armida Siguion-Reyna, Leo Martinez, Moody Diaz, Joe Jardi, Danny Javier, George Javier, Nanette Inventor, Jim

Paredes, Bert Miranda, Tommy Yap, Ella Reyes, Marietta Sta. Juana, Roger Vivero, Manny Tibayan, Lily Miraflor, Ike Jarlego Jr., Danny Rojo, Marlene Natividad, Pinky Buencamino, Yamin Olfindo, Thaemar Panuncialman, Lea Locsin, Ding Achacoso, Cesar Hernando, Noli Gamboa, Romy Dollero, Joseph Olfindo, Fred Punzal, Precy Beltran, UP Concert Chorus, New Minstrels

> Japanese Yakuza and Chinese gangsters chase two young couples, after one of the four accidentally obtains a cassette tape that contains high-grade opium concentrate. The quartet ends up seeking refuge in a church in Baguio, but they later realize that this will occasion a zany adventure, complete with musical numbers, that will reveal just how significant the tape really is.

Among the variety of genres that Mike De Leon decided to tinker with, his second stab at the musical—after *Kung Mangarap Ka't Magising* (*If You Should Sleep and Then Awaken*, a.k.a. *Moments in a Stolen Dream*, 1977), strictly speaking a realist film with music—proved to be distinctive not just for his record, but for Philippine cinema as well. This time around, he opted to begin with realistic elements including diegetic, or plausible and plot-specific, singing; then, via the intensification of absurd humor, he progressed to fantastic and geopolitically allusive developments, along with the traditional musical feature of non-diegetic performances, where characters burst into song and dance without any onscreen evidence of musical instruments and motivation for design changes. One may complain that the in-jokes in *Kakabakaba Ka Ba?* fail to steer clear of racial and gender stereotyping, the music is too pop-Western, the protagonists are distinctly privileged, and so on; yet the level of technical invention and performing-arts discipline on display here would be worthy of Manuel Conde, the country's one certifiable film-musical genius, who had also once worked at the De Leon family outfit. *KKB* can in fact make one momentarily forget that the many equivalent accomplishments of Conde can no longer be found, since De Leon virtually stamps himself here as a true master's disciple. Hip and high, polished and elaborate, with a disco number guaranteed to bring the house (of worship) down.

1—*Kisapmata*

English Translation: *Blink*
English Title: *In the Wink of an Eye*
Additional Language: Ilocano
Year of Release: 1981 / Color with B&W
Director: Mike De Leon
Screenwriters: Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., Raquel N. Villavicencio, & Mike De Leon
Based on "The House on Zapote Street," from the 1977 book *Reportage on Crime: Thirteen Horror Happenings That Hit the Headlines* by Quijano de Manila
Producer: Bancom Audiovision Corporation
Cast: Vic Silayan, Charo Santos-Concio, Jay Ilagan, Charito Solis, Ruben Rustia, Aida Carmona, Juan Rodrigo, Cora Alforja, Dindo Angeles, Edwin O'Hara, Mandy Bustamante, Melly Mallari, Monette Alfon, Teresita R. Sanchez

> Dadong, a retired police officer, has such inordinate control over his daughter Mila that, when she gets pregnant and marries her boyfriend Noel, the couple stays under his roof. Unable to bear his father-in-law's excessive domination, Noel tries to convince his wife to move with him to his house instead. He unfortunately fails and ends up leaving her behind. But when Mila escapes to join her husband, Dadong is driven to desperation and violence in a way that reveals a well-kept family secret.

2—*Batch '81*

Year of Release: 1982
Director: Mike De Leon
Screenwriters: Clodualdo del Mundo Jr., Raquel N. Villavicencio, & Mike De Leon
Producer: MVP Pictures
Cast: Mark Gil, Sandy Andolong, Ward Luarca, Noel Trinidad, Ricky Sandico, Jimmy Javier, Rod Leido, Mike Arvisu, Dodo Cabasal, Edwin Reyes, Bing Pimentel, Dang Cecilio, Mike Arvisu, Vic Lima, Dodo Cabasal, Nanette Inventor, Joe Jardi, Ed Trinidad, Joseph Olfindo, Charito Solis, Armida Siguion-Reyna, Chanda Romero, Johnny Delgado, Chito Ponce-Enrile, Buddy Sta. Juana, Ronnie Portugal, Gilbert Serrano, Gerry Perez, Jan Bernardo, Teng Salazar, Orlan Abaliel, Audie Gemora, Dick Alcaraz, Jose Almojuela, Raquel Villavicencio, Pancho Escaler, Annie Silva

> College student Sid and seven others make it as the latest potential members of the Alpha Kappa Omega (AKO) fraternity. While various hazing rituals force other neophytes to quit, these only strengthen Sid's desire to be a full-fledged member. But AKO's intensifying conflict with a rival frat will soon prove to be the neophytes' biggest hurdle yet.

If only the Pinoy critical community had been ready: the series of protest films that Mike De Leon made during the late Marcos period should have occasioned debates on the progressive usefulness of two devices, metaphor as opposed to metonymy. *Kisapmata* and its successor (actually delayed predecessor), *Batch '81,* both functioned metaphorically, specifically as referents to unidentified authoritarian systems. Metonymy, where one or more textual signifiers directly implicate the system being described, is considered more useful for critical purposes because of the grounding it provides. That having been said, one would still be hard-put to find better anti-martial law metaphors than these two titles. De Leon facilitates this analogy by making clear who the victimizers as well as the victims are, and whose side he supports. He also pays extra attention to the alpha-male characters' performers (Vic Silayan and Mark Gil, both now-deceased), draws from his extensive knowledge of global cinema to evoke dread and decadence through locally unmatched audiovisual virtuosity, and dares to end with downbeat, in-your-face catastrophes.

Sister Stella L.

Year of Release: 1984
Director: Mike De Leon
Screenwriters: Jose F. Lacaba, Jose Almojuela, & Mike De Leon
Additional dialogue by Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Vilma Santos, Jay Ilagan, Gina Alajar, Laurice Guillen, Tony Santos, Anita Linda, Liza Lorena, Eddie Infante, Ruben Rustia, Adul de Leon, Rody Vera, Malou De Guzman, Fernando Modesto, Pen Medina, Jojo Sanchez, Raquel Villavicencio, Fred Capulong, Joe Jardi, Waldo Reyes, Jimmy Reyes, George Wendth, Maharlika

> Moved by the stories of a namesake nun about the plight of laborers in her area, Sister Stella Legaspi leaves her job as counselor to unwed mothers to support workers' protests. When her safety gets threatened, the young nun is ordered back to her convent. She finds a way to return to the workers but soon discovers that her commitment to activism has arrived at a crossroad.

The first overtly political effort by Mike De Leon had all the fervor and indignation of someone who had been holding back (forced to resort to metaphors?) for too long. Yet he'd wound up disavowing all the appreciative responses to the film, denigrating it as propaganda, after it made a near-clean sweep of the critics' awards. One could retort that any text with a message propagandizes by default. In the case of *Sister Stella L.*, certain problematic elements, starting with the notion that religion and progressive politics can be compatible, become worrisome in retrospect, after the recent history of Catholic-church meddling in state affairs. The movie also rises above the run of attempts at persuasive communication via the use of so-called third-cinema devices—mostly drawn, as the term suggests, from Third-World film practice. Notable among these are direct-to-camera address, discursive dialogue, and documentary-footage insertions—all of which materialize right at the point when the narrative wraps up. The unstable fusion of transitory issues and innovative technique has resulted in a fascinating spectacle, a work that evokes its historical moment as much as it remains defined by it. The best way then to be fully rewarded by the viewing experience, which may also explain the movie's then-disappointing box-office performance, is to immerse in the historical experience of resisting a fascist system via united-front organizing.

Bilanggo sa Dilim

English Title: *Prisoner in the Dark*
Year of Release: 1986
Director: Mike De Leon
Screenwriters: Mike De Leon, Jose Almojuela, and Bobby Lavides
From the 1963 novel *The Collector* by John Fowles
Producer: Solid Video
Cast: Joel Torre, Cherie Gil, Rio Locsin, Edu Manzano

> After obsessing over Marissa from her fashion-model photographs, Eddie successfully executes his plan to kidnap her and imprison her in his home away from the city. He tells her that his goal is to keep her until she gets to know him, confident that when she does, she will fall in love with him. He's beset by his memory of how he had lured Margie, an attractive woman who engaged in prostitution to support her college studies and who ultimately disappointed him because of her lower social status. When Marissa finds the letter that Margie hid before she died, she realizes the full extent of the nature of the man who introduced himself to Margie as Lito.

Filmmaker Mel Chionglo, who had once worked on Mike De Leon's early films, once described *Bilanggo sa Dilim* as the quintessential MDL text. As usual with such statements, as much error as truth resides in that kind of declaration. No other De Leon narrative presents as intensive an inward turn as *BsD*, except perhaps for the dream sequence of the main character in his first film, *Itim*; this was in fact drawn from his 1975 short film "Monologo (Monologue)," which however was too abstract to be productively interpreted. More a sequel than a strict adaptation of *The Collector*, *BsD* enables us to understand more fully the abductee's condition by articulating the hopes and suffering of her predecessor. The performers' intertextual significations in recently concluded martial law-era cinema mediates their characters' mutual entrapment—Marissa and

Margie in their captor's fiendishly located and constructed prison, and Eddie/Lito in the necessity of constantly exercising unrelenting and unrelieved tyranny, with violent killing becoming a welcome form of release. Though planned and executed in a format vastly superseded by today's state-of-the-art digital technology, *Bilanggo* puts to shame many contemporary attempts at advancing "personal" film statements, proof positive that any medium can only be as valuable as the vision that an artist invests in it.

Bayaning 3rd World

English Title: *3rd World Hero*
Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1999 / B&W
Director: Mike De Leon
Screenwriters: Clodualdo del Mundo Jr. & Mike De Leon
Producer: Cinema Artists
Cast: Ricky Davao, Joel Torre, Cris Villanueva, Joonee Gamboa, E.A. Rocha, Daria Ramirez, Rio Locsin, Cherry Pie Picache, Lara Fabregas, Lui Manansala, Lawrence David, Jay Español, Bon Vibar, Edru Abraham, Keno Agaro, Jan Alexis Rutaquio, Benjamin Jr. Vasquez Barcellano, Kenneth Bruan, Max Newton, Jonic Magno, Aimee Murillo, Juie Galino, Jun Pamfilo, Wilfredo J. Calderon, Morris Hamsi, Nor Domingo, Jesus Diaz Ramirez, Richard Khab, Wylie Casero, Ana Agabin, Liza de Ocampo, Manolito Bolpa, Xox, Alessandra Rigon, Ermie Concepcion, Mike Sandejas, Kit Anthony, Zaldy Feliciano, Joseph Miller, Essi Nassiri, Mazzoud Moghaddan, Jon Achaval, Jim Figueroa, Ronnie Martinez, Bella Llaban

> As two (unnamed) filmmakers research for a movie they plan to make about national hero José Rizal, the main issue they face is whether, the night before his execution, he actually retracted his criticisms of the Catholic Church. As they conduct interviews with Rizal and several people related to him, the filmmakers realize that they may have bitten off more than they can chew.

The so-far final but soon-to-be-penultimate Mike De Leon feature was supposed to have been a mainstream entry, by then-active GMA Films (previously known as Cinemax), on the life and death of José Rizal. De Leon's resistance to standardized treatment resulted in the original movie being produced anyway (as *José Rizal*, 1998, directed by Marilou Diaz-Abaya), plus a number of other tributes to the national hero—and then this: a project that acknowledges postmodernism by being reflective, ironic, multiplanar, and open-ended. As focalized by the issue of whether he had retracted his rejection of his Catholic principles, Rizal remains the same elusive figure at the end that he was at the start. Yet, contrary to the movie's naysayers, that should be an essential component of the text's triumph, not its shortcoming. Rizal may require further understanding, but as *Bayaning 3rd World* suggests, this may not necessarily lead to any definite revision of his historical worth. The movie characters actually being subjected to critique are in fact the contemporary artists—and, by association, the members of the audience—who seek an advantage to gain in separating Rizal's myth from his person.

MARIO O'HARA

(7 films: 1976–2003)

Tatlong Taóng Walang Diyos

English Title: *Three Godless Years*
Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1976 / Color with Sepia
Director & Screenwriter: Mario O'Hara
Producer: NV Productions
Cast: Nora Aunor, Christopher de Leon, Bembol Roco, Orlando Nadres, Peque Gallaga, Mario Escudero, Yolanda Luna, Edwin O'Hara, Joey Galvez, Dante Balois, Soxy Topacio, Licerio Tabalon, Tommy Yap, Nina Lorenzo, Estrella Antonio, Melvin Flores, Jon Garcia-Ariño, George Atutubo, Peachy Callo, PETA Kalinangan Ensemble, Joel Lamangan

> As the global conflicts of World War II intrude upon the peaceful existence of a rural town, Rosario bids farewell to her boyfriend Crispin before he joins some local guerrilla fighters. One night, she is raped by a half-Filipino Japanese officer named Masugi. She initially rejects his apologies but learns to love him later on, and bears his child. When victorious American troops defeat the Japanese, Rosario and the two men who love her face the harsh consequences brought about by the war.

Since Mario O'Hara's only earlier film, the feverishly envisioned although distressingly misogynistic *Mortal* (1976), had been legally suppressed and had never been recovered until recently, *Tatlong Taóng Walang Diyos* effectively functioned as his default debut for several decades. Because of the remarkable performance of local film artists during the year of its release, its merit was definitely largely overlooked. Its all-forgiving humanist perspective on the contending parties during World War II may be too solicitous to possess useful critical value: noble Japanese-Filipino and earnest pro-US guerrilla compete for affections of true-hearted (though easily confused) barrio lass. This willingness to tackle difficult historical questions positions *TTWD* on the same plane of ambition as 1976's major achiever, Eddie Romero's *Ganito Kami Noon...Paano Kayo Ngayon?* (*As We Were*). Unlike the latter, however, *TTWD* not only proffers an even more traditional take on gender roles, with the woman, representing the nation as usual, victimized by her contending lovers' ideological differences. It also gives the parish priest unnecessary moral ascendancy and, more problematically, depicts the women-led rural mass as an unrecognizable (because Western-style) lynch mob. Nevertheless O'Hara's propensity to inspect the darker side of humanity's psyche would be a recurrent source of strength in a quite distinguished career as Pinoy film auteur.[35]

[35] An unusual development in the archival predicament of *Tatlong Taóng Walang Diyos* is that, because of the existing print's deterioration, critic-archivist Jojo Devera so successfully experimented with processing the material in black-and-white that ABS-CBN Film Restoration decided to perform the same treatment, although it neglected to officially acknowledge Devera's innovation. The resulting copy made the film closer to the solid Cold War sensibility that it exemplified, although several 1950s works by Gregorio Fernandez were able to match or even break free of such strictures.

1—*Condemned*

Year of Release: 1984
Director: Mario O'Hara
Screenwriters: Jose Javier Reyes, Mario O'Hara, Frank Rivera
Producer: Golden Dragon Films & NV Productions
Cast: Nora Aunor, Gina Alajar, Gloria Romero, Rio Locsin, Dan Alvaro, Leni Santos, Connie Angeles, Ricky Davao, Toby Alejar, Sonny Parsons, Len Santos, Alicia Alonzo, Romnick Sarmenta, Mandy Bustamante, Ruby Ann Bonanza, Yoly Unabia, Joe Andrade, Albert Jose, Greg Rocero, Ador Cajucom, Mando Pangilinan, Oscar Reyes, Chito Zulueta, Nelson Armiza, Ric Esguerra, Dante Balois, Jess Gaston, Rey Revanlas, Lito Santacera, Carlos Sta. Maria, Marietta Sta. Juana, Jess Gatchalian, Renato del Prado, Martin Gaspar, Joe Jardi, Fred Capulong, Jet Velasco, Evelyn Vargas, Daniel Martin, Artemio Portugal, Jerry O'Hara, Perry Fajardo, Dante Castro, Larry Correa, Arthur Cassanova, Ben Almeda, Roger Aquino, Raffy Agoncillo, Buddy Aguilar, Larry de Leon

> Yolly sells flowers in the tourist district of Ermita while her brother Efren works as a henchperson for Connie, a criminal mastermind. Efren decides to blackmail Connie after discovering how her son turned out to be a violent killer, but her ruthlessness results in his death. Yolly grieves for the only family member left to her, and resolves to avenge the loss of her brother.

2—*Bulaklak sa City Jail*

English Translation: *Flower at City Jail*
English Title: *Flowers of the City Jail*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Mario O'Hara
Screenwriter: Lualhati Bautista
Based on her novel serialized in *Liwayway* (1982–1983)
Producer: Cherubim Films
Cast: Nora Aunor, Gina Alajar, Celia Rodriguez, Perla Bautista, Mitch Valdes, Zeneida Amador, Maritess Gutierrez, Gloria Romero, Shyr Valdez, Ricky Davao, Bella Flores, German Moreno, Tom Olivar, Augusto Victa, Alvin Enriquez, Toby Alejar, Mandy Bustamante, Carmen Enriquez, Gigette Reyes, Aida Arellano, Rod Francisco, Romy Nario, Renato Morado, Edwin O'Hara, Estrella Antonio, Yoly Unabia, Jack Alejandro, Virgo Antonio, Sarah Gayotin, Cris Daluz, Ruben O'Hara, Josie Galvez, Tony Aguilar, Vejouhn Olson Mariette, Ruben de Samparo, Marietta Sta. Juana, Tessie Portugal, Nanding Salcedo, Ricardo de Guzman, Carlos Sta. Maria, Christopher Lou, Gil Arceo, Greg Rocero, John Portugal, Hashim Salazar, Danny Cruz, Boy Gayotin, Paquito Alonsabe

> Angela is jailed for allegedly trying to kill the wife of a man with whom she has fallen in love. While pregnant with the man's child, she, along other female detainees, experiences the inhumane conditions of prison life. One night, Angela manages to escape and has to deliver her baby while hiding in the city zoo. But after being apprehended by cops, Angela contemplates what lies ahead for her and her newborn.

Mario O'Hara would turn out to be the filmmaker most closely associated with Nora Aunor, both of them smart, playful, temperamental, stubborn, self-destructive. So much so that most of his major Aunor-less projects resonate with her absence: *Bagong Hari* (*New King*, 1986) starred the actor to whom Aunor played elder sister and avenging angel in *Condemned* (1984); *Fatima Buen Story* (1994) would have been perfectly cast with her in the title role; and *Pangarap ng Puso* (*The Heart's Dream*, a.k.a. *Demons*, 2000) benefited from Aunor's adoptive daughter's performance. To demonstrate the various ways in which their collaboration can be extended: *Bulaklak sa City Jail* grows beyond its potentially exploitative women-in-prison theme when regarded as the

midpoint of an Aunor noir series, following the twisted thriller *Condemned* and preceding the happily concluded *Tatlong Ina, Isang Anak* (*Three Mothers, One Daughter*, 1987), where the then-infant Matet de Leon, subsequent lead of *Pangarap ng Puso*, is introduced. The sensible viewer is therefore advised to proceed to the rest of O'Hara's and Aunor's marvelous oeuvre, where even the rest of their uneven output separately and together manage to complement each other. As a bonus, try tracking down the now-rare Aunor-directed *Greatest Performance* (1989), which she also produced and wrote, a paradoxically unfinished-yet-complete, subsequently shelved movie, where she gives her best O'Hara performance, with O'Hara the absent element this time.

Bagong Hari

English Title: *The New King*
Year of Release: 1986
Director: Mario O'Hara
Screenwriter: Frank Rivera
Producer: CineVentures
Cast: Dan Alvaro, Carmi Martin, Joel Torre, Robert Arevalo, Perla Bautista, Celso Ad. Castillo, Elvira Manahan, Glaiza Herradura, Ruel Vernal, Lito Anzures, Max Laurel, Toby Alejar, Joel Lamangan, Greg Sta. Inez, Becky Misa, Dante Balois, Jerry O'Hara, Don Pepot, Gil Arceo, Greg Rocero, Bobby Henson, Jojo Gamay, Yno Gonzales, Ding Franco, Buddy Aguilar, Liza Lorena

> Living with his devoted mother, Addon Labrador pursues a regular working-class existence with his girlfriend Rina, despite his several skills in combat. His estranged father, however, betrays the provincial governor to work as a henchman for their town's ambitious mayor. When the governor feels threatened by the mayor's electoral bid, her son Rex takes matters in hand. After Addon agrees to win a gladiatorial showdown with the reigning underworld "king" in order to raise funds for his mother's operation, Rex kidnaps and tortures Rina in order to coerce him to assassinate a target from behind—who turns out to be his father. Addon's rampage goes beyond Rex to include the town's political leadership.

Mario O'Hara's first definitive masterpiece nearly fell victim to the vagaries of celluloid-era distribution and preservation. After being refused entry in the Christmas season's film festival because of censorship issues, it was screened to near-empty theaters during the historical period when audiences were caught up in the snap election that eventually resulted in the end of the martial-law regime that it allegorically addressed. After no print could be found during the current millennium, critic-archivist Jojo Devera managed to track down an imperfectly transferred video copy, which is all that remains of the original. A measure of the achievement of *Bagong Hari* is that much of its engaging suspense and excitement can still be gleaned even in its debased condition, as befits the literally last major action-film release of the Second Golden Age: the people-power uprising occurred a month after its screening, paralleling its narrative's fairly hopeful ending. Despite the fact that action films constituted the most successful censorship-era genre of the period, too few samples were preserved and even fewer have been able to sustain their original impact over time. The availability of *BH* is the kind of small mercy that more-than-adequately serves the purpose of representing and celebrating a now-mostly-lost filmmaking tradition.

Sindak!

English Translation: *Panic!*
English Title: *Terror*
Year of Release: 1999
Director & Screenwriter: Mario O'Hara
From a story by Ronnie Tumbokon
Producers: Crown Seven Ventures & MetalDog Productions
Cast: John Rendez, William Martinez, Gardo Versoza, Rita Magdelena, Aya Medel, Mike Magat, Allen Dizon, Maria Isabel Lopez, Carlos Morales, Edwin O'Hara, Mon Confiado, Dennis Coronel, Dante Belen, Josie Tagle, Eugene Domingo, Rina Rosal, Olga Natividad, Lawrence Roxas, Janice Mendoza, Joel Masilungan, Gilbert Onida, Koko Teodoro, Paolo O'Hara, Evelyn Camasura, Cris Maruso, Nemie Samson, Max Paglinawan, Anna Rose Bautista, Trixie Alcazar, Japh Bahian, Jeff San Juan, Jerson Ramos, Edwin Amado

> A military officer named Rabago discovers and saves a nearly dead combatant in what we later find out was a clash with insurgents, allowing him to recover on his monkey breeding farm. He then brings the survivor, Mulong, to rehabilitate in the same territory where four fun-loving male friends—Terry, Raul, Ed, and Lar—work as nighttime security guards, then indulge in drinking and carousing after work in their slum neighborhood. Alerted to the presence of a murderous rapist who stalks and abducts lone women, Terry encounters Mulong during his rounds and, discovering a dead body where he came from, gives chase but is unable to capture him. While drinking one night, they recognize Mulong and overpower him, taking him to an isolated locale where they beat him up and goad one another into shooting him. A few months later, however, when a violent presence turns their already messy lives inside-out, they realize that Mulong might have somehow survived his summary execution, a fact confirmed when Rabago shows up to explain why Mulong is different from most other men.

Yet another unheralded masterwork, ironically because of the repudiation performed by the filmmaker himself. Mario O'Hara should not have been excluded once more from completing any project this late in his career. As in a number of early films by Ishmael Bernal, as well as his own *Mga Bilanggong Birhen* (*The Captive Virgins*, 1977), the directors had every right to complain of this infringement on their creative prerogatives—as much, painful to say, as the producers needed to ensure that they could fully recover their investment, if not earn more from it. Yet we should also be prepared to accept the principle of the stopped clock in these undertakings: that once in a rare while, serendipity can and will slip out. O'Hara had expended most of his efforts on noir material, with even his romcoms and fantasy films invested with his sardonic sense of nihilism and bloodletting. *Sindak!* would then be the equivalent of a five-finger exercise after the virtuosic peak of *Bagong Hari* (*The New King*, 1986) and the perfect preparation for the next year's *Pangarap ng Puso* (*Demons*). Even more wondrously, in the worst sense possible, the displays of rough masculinity that escalated into rational toxicity here can be regarded as a harbinger of the real-life restoration of the fascist order that stood tall on the accumulation of the bodies of summarily executed citizens, a blot on the national conscience that ought to be explicated to the body politic by film artists led by the likes of O'Hara, if he'd only opted for a corporeal solution to the illness that felled him.

Pangarap ng Puso

English Translation: *The Heart's Longing*
English Title: *Demons*
Additional Languages: Cebuano & Hiligaynon
Year of Release: 2000 / Color, B&W
Director: Mario O'Hara
Screenwriters: Rey de Castro & Mario O'Hara
From a short story by Rosario Cruz Lucero, with poetry by Amado V. Hernandez, Florentino Collantes, and Denise O'Hara
Producer: Good Harvest Productions
Cast: Hilda Koronel, Anita Linda, Matet de Leon, Leo Rabago, Lucita Soriano, Alex Alano, Mike Magat, Arman de Guzman, Judy Teodoro, Eugene Domingo, Dido de la Paz, Robynne von Hagel, Christian Alvear, Ruben Gatmaitan, Lilia Cuntapay, Lalaine de Gola, Sammuel Ebaristo, Judy Lou de Pio, Ruben O'Hara, John Portugal, Edwin O'Hara

> Nena grows up in her parents' hacienda on Negros Island, nourished by nationalist poetry and her nanny's tales of the mythological *kapre*, a dark-skinned tree-dwelling giant who stalks any maiden he finds attractive. Although her parents are sufficiently enlightened to assist their workers whenever they can, the escalation of the antidictatorship movement in response to the assassination of Senator Benigno S. Aquino Jr., coupled with the government's corrupt mismanagement of the sugar industry, leads to severe poverty and grassroots malcontent. Nena extends what help she can to Jose, who comes from the family of their most impoverished tenant, although she keeps her charity a secret so as not to hurt his pride. Matters worsen when the grownup Jose is suspected of aiding rebel forces and his household is raided by militia troops, with bloody (though historically verifiable) results for him and his family. When Nena seeks him out to extend her sympathy, his anger over the abuses of the ruling class extends to her and he attempts to avenge on her what his enemies did to him.

Pangarap ng Puso is saturated with anomalies, from its emergence in a filmography marked by its director's dodgy social and religious approaches, through its attempt at negotiating progressive politics from the perspective of a class-privileged character, to its possibly oblivious harnessing of third-cinema principles[36] that led to severe and undeserved marginalization by Philippine evaluators. Fortunately for its filmmaker and any prospective appreciator, the film is accomplished enough to reveal any objections to it as originating from careless misinformation. Its departure from its credited literary source indicates how much more willing Mario O'Hara was in prospecting for a resolution that steps way beyond karmic justice, toward a visualization of the horrific consequences of class conciliation as well as a critique of the romanticization of autochthonous cultural signifiers. The fact that the project was implemented as part of its producer's B-movie program (called *pito-pito,* or seven location days plus seven post-production

[36] The movement known as Third Cinema is ascribed to the 1969 manifesto written by Fernando Solanas and Octavio Getino, partly based on their experience with their 1968 agitprop documentary *La hora de los hornos* or *The Hour of the Furnaces*; see "Towards a Third Cinema: Notes and Experiments toward the Development of a Cinema of Liberation in the Third World," translated by Julianne Burton and Michael Chanan, in *Twenty-Five Years of the New Latin American Cinema*, edited by Michael Chanan, Channel Four Television & BFI Books, 1983, pp. 17–27. Its distinction from Third World cinema lies in its rejection of conventions associated with First World film practice, with Hollywood as apex, even if these might appear in Third World contexts. Written without caps, third cinema upholds the movement's principles without direct organizational links. The concept necessitates some problematization, which I have implicitly attempted in certain selections and citations elsewhere in this canon listing.

days under severe budgetary constraints) aligns it appositely with Ishmael Bernal's early documentary-style explorations of his multicharacter narrative options. Even his signature performer, Nora Aunor, lends her presence via the startlingly perceptive performance of her adoptive daughter. The Philippine cultural establishment's oversight notwithstanding, the film secures a sui generis claim as a radical masterpiece in global cinema, the only question being how long before its achievement attains the appreciation it merits.

Babae sa Breakwater

English Title: *Woman of the Breakwater*
Additional Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2003
Director & Screenwriter: Mario O'Hara
Producer: Entertainment Warehouse
Cast: Kristofer King, Katherine Luna, Gardo Versoza, Yoyoy Villame, Alcris Galura, Lou Veloso, Lucita Soriano, Amy Austria, Daniel Fernando, Dick Israel, Rez Cortez, Odette Khan, Wilson Morales, Metring David, Joey Galvez, Julia Taylor, Estrella Kuenzler, Nonong de Andres, Ian Valdez, Bong Aragon, Dante Balois, Peewee O'Hara, Vanessa de Bico, Lilia Cuntapay, Judy Teodoro, Benson Dayao, Roger Iral, Joshua Adajar, Anthony Griar, Ronnie Paroni, Bong Villagracia, Tony Leyba, Norman David, Jenny Operario, Ronnie Francisco, Rey de Castro, Ching Danseco, Omar Breakwater, Lupa, Chato Yson

> Brothers Basilio and Buboy leave their home in Leyte and end up in the slums by Manila Bay, where they form a mystical connection with its waters. City life takes its toll on Buboy and he goes missing. Basilio finds loving comfort in Paquita, a prostitute. But Dave, a disabled ex-cop who has subjugated the slum dwellers, turns jealous and makes life difficult for the two lovers.

Given the opportunity and resources to fashion a film epic, most Filipino filmmakers, like their foreign counterparts, wind up with results that range from middling to disastrous. Mario O'Hara's an exceptional case: an artist with certain problematic quirks: upbeat endings since the trauma of the box-office flop of *Tatlong Taóng Walang Diyos* (*Three Godless Years*, 1976), for example, or an uncritical acceptance of religious authority. In common with front-rank masters, he nevertheless possessed an increasingly prodigious philosophy that enabled him to rise above the industry's limitations. *Babae sa Breakwater* is ultimate proof of this, where an adequate budget and a proliferation of talent serve a Rabelaisian vision—grotesque, bawdy, and fantastic, often in wondrous combinations—of the city's dispossessed populace. The degree of inventiveness is vibrant enough to almost offset the use of a physically handicapped, psychologically imbalanced, and sexually impotent villain, standing in for the big bad city, as an ultimately defeatable figure.

KIDLAT TAHIMIK

(1 film: 1977)

Mababangong Bangungot

English Title: *Perfumed Nightmare*
Language: English (overlaying Filipino)
Year of Release: 1977
Director & Screenwriter: Kidlat Tahimik
Producer: Kidlat-Kulog Productions
Cast: Kidlat Tahimik, Mang Fely, Dolores Santamaria, Georgette Baudry, Katarina, Hartmut Lerch

> Kidlat takes his jeepney out of his rural hometown to go on a trip to Cape Canaveral in America and meet his idol, rocket scientist (and former Nazi official) Wernher von Braun. But he ends up in France and Germany, where the modernized surroundings initially leave him in awe. However, the longer his journey takes, the more he realizes that the modernization he admires comes at a price.

One of the rare cases of a famous Philippine film virtually unknown in its own country of origin is the exception that proves the rule. *Mababangong Bangungot* has been taken to heart by a number of foreign observers. These included the Berlin International Film Festival (which gave it critics' prizes) to Francis Ford Coppola's Zoetrope Studio (which distributed it in the US), as well as a handful of prestigious commentators including Fredric Jameson and J. Hoberman, who commended it for its complex yet playful portrayal of postcolonial dreams and realities in the Third World. In this respect *MB* was more than just ahead of its time: it represents independent cinema's less-traveled road, its foreign triumph mimicked by latter-day local aspirants to Kidlat Tahimik's stature. Unfortunately its populist sentiments and gentle humor are regularly displaced, in today's typical indie output, by academically esteemed alienating devices such as long and deliberately uninvolving takes, oblique lines of dialogue, obscure class-entrenched issues that often mask conventional approaches—and consequently the wholesale rejection of the native audience's values and preferences.

BOBBY A. SUAREZ

(2 films: 1978–1988)

They Call Her ... Cleopatra Wong

Alternate Titles: *Cleopatra Wong*; *Female Big Boss*
Language: English
Year of Release: 1978
Director: Bobby A. Suarez [as George Richardson]
Screenwriter: Romeo N. Galang
From a story by Bobby A. Suarez
Producer: BAS Film Productions
Cast: Marrie Lee, George Estregan, Dante Varona, Johnny Wilson, Kerry Chandler, Franco Guerrero, Alex Pecate, Philip Gamboa, Danny Rojo, Bobby Greenwood, Jesse Lee, Joaquin Fajardo, Victor Romero, Joe Cunanan, Steve Havarro, Avel Morado, Romy Misa, Bernie Bernardo, Joe Canlas, Tony Castro, Mark Sherak, Clem Persons, Paul Mejares, Robert Mendez, Buddy Philipps, Don Gordon Bell, Robert Mallet, Skip Kriegel, Mike Youngblood, Bill James, John Stewart, Thunder Stuntmen, PIS Stuntmen

> Instructed by Manila Interpol, Cleo hies off to Singapore to investigate the proliferation of fake currencies across the major ASEAN countries; she passes herself off as a counterfeiter so she could be picked up by a middleman. After subduing him and his goons, she's then assigned to Hong Kong, to track the arrival of fake money in jars of strawberry jam. This leads her and her Interpol detectives to a convent in Baguio, where they attempt to uncover the mystery of why a religious order would engage in a global criminal operation.

Long appreciated more outside than within his home country, Bobby A. Suarez turned out to be just the right candidate to export for overseas film production. An ardent B-movie aficionado, familiar with the latest contrivances that popular entertainment had on offer, he lucked out with an assignment that enabled him, though on an apparently tight budget, to shoot in three countries with a large cast. The resulting poverty-row epic featured some of the wildest flights of imagination ever witnessed in a Filipino-directed action film, complemented by the wit and charm of Singaporean actress Marrie Lee, who was sharp enough to know that the entire enterprise shouldn't be taken too seriously, but provides just the right amount of nimble-footed intensity to be able to foreground the work's campy elements. Subsequent Suarez projects affirmed his belief in the transnational crime-control function of Interpol, but *Cleopatra Wong* marks the point right before his professional competence and influential outreach overpowered the several *mésalliances* that managed to proliferate in the present narrative.

Red Roses for a Call Girl

Alternate Titles: *The True Confession of Diana*; *Rose Tattoo*
Language: English
Year of Release: 1988
Director & Screenwriter: Bobby A. Suarez
Producer: BAS Film Productions

Cast: Maria Isabel Lopez, Robert Marius, Werner Pochat, Julia Kent, Manfred Seipold, Amanda Amores, Pia Moran, Arnold Mendoza, Vangie Labalan, Don Gordon Bell, Werner Pochath, Nigel Hogge, Vic Santos, Mike Cohen, Joseph Zucchero

> In Germany, a streetwalker named Marian gets abducted because she hasn't been able to repay the money she owes her pimp, Ringo. The same woman, who now calls herself Barbara, reappears at the Ninoy Aquino International Airport and makes the acquaintance of Klaus Timberg, who arrives because his profligate son, Peter, is given over to drag racing and nightlife. Klaus secretly hires a local sex worker, Diana, to induce his son to fall in love. As it turns out, Diana's procurer is Ringo, who relocated to evade criminal prosecution in Germany. When Barbara, via Klaus, finds out about Ringo, she attempts to seek vengeance; Klaus's predicament gets even more complicated when Peter discovers that Diana is really a sex professional.

The first notable element in *Red Roses for a Call Girl* is how it departs from the usual war-set or futuristic action (and even horror) material that foreign coproductions insisted on when they selected the Philippines as location for their film investment, in the wake of the initial success of the Marcos-era Manila International Film Festival. Opting for a loose reworking of *La Dame aux Camélias* by Alexandre Dumas fils, Bobby A. Suarez instead devised a low-budget drama that nevertheless expands on the original's themes of exploitation, familial bonds, and cross-cultural romance. The far-from-ideal production values and performances (excepting the native talents, unsurprisingly) accrue their own level of charm, the way that Third World ventures occasionally succeed in doing, in contrast with the Hollywoodish aspirations of the typical local productions of the period.

LAURICE GUILLEN

(6 films: 1980–1993)

Kasal?

English Translation: *Wedding?*
English Title: *The Marriage*
Year of Release: 1980
Director: Laurice Guillen
Screenwriter: Mario O'Hara
Producer: Trigon Cinema Arts
Cast: Christopher de Leon, Hilda Koronel, Jay Ilagan, Chanda Romero, Gloria Romero, Johnny Wilson, Bobby Ledesma, Mia Gutierrez, Luis Benedicto, Lino Brocka, Menggie Cobarrubias, Janice de Belen, Johnny Delgado, Dindo Fernando, Edgar Mortiz, Phillip Salvador, Charito Solis

> In preparing to get married, Joel and Grace strive to be honest with each other about their past. They begin by admitting that they had fallen in love with people in previous relationships: Grace with Ernesto, a dissolute musician who wound up in a loveless marriage with Ellen, and Joel with Lani, an elusive woman who first confessed she loved him but suddenly kept her distance until she vanished from his life. Indulged by his widower father, Joel is amused that Grace's parents believe their daughter is still a virgin, while Grace is apprehensive that she has not yet let go of Ernesto.

The splash that Laurice Guillen made with her debut film certainly sustains effectively through nearly the half-century since she completed it. She demonstrated not just a solid sense of audience appeal (drawn from her tenure in a long-running daily TV drama), but she also had enough dramaturgical discernment and cinematic sensibility from her years as a highly regarded theater and film performer. One reservation raised about *Kasal?* is that its material does not provide as much of a challenge as any number of first films before and (most especially) since. Such a remark will seem more ornery at present, when even veteran filmmakers usually betray too much desperation in conveying the pleasures that should have inhered in any successful creative undertaking. Guillen shades what would have been a typical romantic comedy with enough darkness to make us wonder whether the inevitable happy ending will hold for its protagonists what the wedding's observers believe. Along the way, she draws out indelible readings from a trio of supporting players (Jay Ilagan, Chanda Romero, and Mia Gutierrez) and, in the final sequence, stages a parade of cameos that attests to the warm support she enjoyed from her colleagues in the industry.

Salome

Year of Release: 1981
Director: Laurice Guillen
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
From a story by Laura Guillen
Producer: Bancom Audiovision Corporation

Cast: Gina Alajar, Dennis Roldan, Johnny Delgado, Bongchi Miraflor, Bruno Punzalan, Tony Santos, Armida Siguion-Reyna, Lily Miraflor, Venchito Galvez, Edna May Landicho, Jimmy Santos, Koko Trinidad, Cris Vertido, Panggoy Francisco, Carpi Asturias, Eduardo Matanguihan, JP Aguilar Jr., Alfonso Andaya, Mia Gutierrez

> As news of a young man's murder rocks a sleepy seaside village, all fingers point to Salome as the culprit. Salome argues that she killed the man because he was trying to rape her. Villagers believe that Salome's seductiveness led the man to his death, as it did to other men on many previous occasions. Macario, her husband, confides his own version of events to a defense lawyer, that upends the other narratives. From such conflicting testimonies, a still-untold story holds the truth behind the crime.

Critic-historian Bienvenido Lumbera once cited *Salome* as the primary example of the 1980s' filmmaking generation's breakaway efforts, from their predecessors' emphasis on material to the new directors' exploration of various approaches to reality. The film benefits from a vivacity that preempts its increasingly sordid story and transforms it into a triumph of the picturesque, showcasing Romeo Vitug's cinematography at its height, enhanced by an unorthodox but astute decision to shoot on Fuji Photo film stock. Its obvious touchstone may have been *Rashomon* (1950), but the movie dispenses with Akira Kurosawa's dated humanism and attempts a more realistically derived release from the conflicting versions of a sensational crime of passion. Gina Alajar serves as the medium—lustrous, unpredictable, and ethereal—through which the tale first unfolds, re-unfolds a few more times over, and then collapses unto itself.

Init sa Magdamag

English Translation: *Warmth for the Night*
English Title: *Midnight Passion*
Year of Release: 1983
Directors: Laurice Guillen
Screenwriter: Raquel Villavicencio
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Lorna Tolentino, Dindo Fernando, Joel Torre, Anita Linda, Wendy Villarica, Leo Martinez, Bebong Osorio, Ding Salvador, Franklin Llama, Remy Novales, Melissa Mendez, Elsa Agana, Conrado Lamano, Raquel Villavicencio, Wilma Carbonel, Maribel Lastimosa, Tet Gozo, Boots Enrile, Junar Gonzales, Mon Carpo, Nonoy Zuñiga

> When Irene's lover dies from a bad fall, she abandons the body and assumes a new personality. In her self-identity as Becky, Armand falls for her and plans to marry her. The woman arranged for him by Armand's family confronts Becky, threatens to expose her past life, and gives her money so she can leave Armand to her (the fiancée). Despite bearing Armand's child, she obeys and transforms once more into Leah, a socialite. This time she attracts the attention of Jaime, who turns out to be an abusive partner. When Armand encounters her by accident, her skills at evading and masquerading are challenged by the claims made on her by both men.

The mutability of women is understood as their means of coping with a complex and judgmental system that proceeds on the assumption of their guilt in refusing their acceptance of their subservience in relation to men. *Init sa Magdamag* provides a demonstration of this long-acknowledged principle (first articulated by Joan Riviere in her 1929 article "Womanliness as Masquerade") by tracking the several transformations of a character who claims to be various persons whenever the stability of her circumstances is challenged or upended. (Remarkably,

scriptwriter Raquel Villavicencio does not regard the central character as a dissociative-identity case, which accounts for the character's deliberate control of her personality shifts.) Regarded as an admirably executed abstraction when it came out, the film has been able to accrete resonances with the sudden designation of Filipinas in public life after the ignoble collapse of the country's authoritarian experiment—from executive management (including political office) to overseas income-earning. Lorna Tolentino navigates the necessarily extreme and inexplicable shifts in character with scary conviction, embodying each new personality with subtle adjustments in ardor, sharpness, wariness, and honesty, to the point where the unstable mix of passion and frustration of her partners becomes entirely comprehensible.

Kung Mahawi Man ang Ulap

English Translation: *If Ever the Clouds Clear Up*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Laurice Guillen
Screenwriters: Orlando Nadres & Lualhati Bautista
Adapted from the *komiks* by Gilda Olvidado
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Hilda Koronel, Christopher de Leon, Amy Austria, Eddie Garcia, Isabel Rivas, Michael de Mesa, Gloria Romero, Tommy Abuel, Yasmin Ayesa, Ester Chavez, Jimmy Javier, Rudy Meyer, Moody Diaz, Josie Shoemaker, Virginia Montes, Metring David, Josie Tagle, Vangie Labalan, Sean-Sean Canilao

> Catherine learns that her inheritance from her mother is being used up by her scheming stepfather Pablo. Rita, Pablo's eldest child, also causes Catherine to break up with her lover, Rustan. Catherine is then wrongfully jailed after killing her stepbrother Jojo, who had attempted to rape her. As she gives birth in prison to Rustan's son, she longs for the day she will be able to avenge herself.

Laurice Guillen's first attempt at glossy melodrama has remained her most accomplished, with its advantages foregrounded and its weaknesses minimized. Its departures from standard-issue samples include sympathy for the oppressed, acknowledgment of women's strength, allocation of dramatic reversals, including the last-minute vengeance of the underdog, and the tempering of villainy via the use of camp drollery, a technique perfected by Regal Films' inhouse blockbuster directors. At the moment when Philippine culture had grown disillusioned and impatient with authoritarian masculinism, it was small wonder that a major studio, Viva Films—ironically accused of having been assisted by the dictatorial regime—was able to thrive on the purveyance of these specific gender-progressive pleasures. The larger historical irony, for a Marcos-sympathetic outfit, is that in a couple of years, this emergent cultural critique of masculinity arguably contributed to the downfall of Ferdinand E. Marcos's old-line patriarchal system.

Sumayaw Ka Salome

English Translation: *Dance, Salome*
Year of Release: 1992
Director: Laurice Guillen
Screenwriter: Joen Chionglo

From the story by Ric Aquino, as serialized in *Superstar Komiks*
Producer: Seiko Films
Cast: Rita Avila, Jestoni Alarcon, Cesar Montano, Daria Ramirez, Joonee Gamboa, Maritoni Fernandez, Barbara Perez, Metring David, Rafael Roces, Guila Alvarez, Christopher Rojas, Malou de Guzman, Joey Galvez, Ernie Zarate, Perry de Guzman

> Salome is brought up by an abusive mother, who blames her for impeding her dreams of becoming a famous dancer. She trains Salome to join small-time dance competitions and forces her grown-up daughter to work at a bar and entertain wealthy clients. The mother's paramour, who expresses interest in Salome, is confronted by his legal wife, resulting in a knife fight where Salome unexpectedly attains her freedom. Despite welcoming the devotion of Fermin, a cab driver, Salome pursues her mother's dream of material success for herself. Upon spotting wealthy bachelor Leo Vergara, she asks Manolo, an etiquette professional sympathetic to her predicament, to coach her in the social graces necessary to win her target. She keeps her sex-work past a secret but realizes that Leo has a dark backstory all his own.

Like Marilou Diaz-Abaya, Laurice Guillen early enough realized the advantage she possessed as a biological woman director in the male-dominated Philippine film industry—that she could present women's problems and not be suspected or accused of exploitative or mercenary incentives. Guillen's preference was to focus on psychoanalytic dynamics, in contrast with Diaz-Abaya's interest in the sociological, notwithstanding significant overlaps between them. *Sumayaw Ka Salome* may be regarded as the culmination of Guillen's interest in exploring womanly trauma, coupled with her triumphant discovery of the ways in which these concerns could be infused in genre assignments. The sign that a confident woman is in charge lies not so much in the presentation of a phallic mother (already a staple in the works of many of her contemporaries), but in the contrast she sets up between the title character and the similarly traumatized rich man she marries: where Leo Vergara could give vent to his overwrought passions everytime he recalls the scandal his still-doting mother visited on him, Salome constantly has to make sure she maintains the same clear mind that enabled her to survive the hazards that confronted her in the past, even when severely battered by the man she decided to honor as her husband. This may be a way of explaining how our women-directed films managed to sustain where the vast majority of action films faltered: the requisite of justifying bloody vengeance by the male hero usually entailed the inundation of unmitigated violence on the women in his orbit, with the presumption that they could neither resist nor avenge themselves, and that the prerogative of retaliation is not theirs to claim either. *SKS* does not evade this realistic observation, but it nevertheless modifies the generic resolution granting the abuser his self-destructive proclivity instead of enduring the retribution meted out by a heroic avenger.

Dahil Mahal Kita: The Dolzura Cortez Story

English Title: *Because I Love You*
Year of Release: 1993
Director: Laurice Guillen
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
From the biography written by Ceres Doyo and serialized in *Philippine Daily Inquirer*
Producer: OctoArts Films

Cast: Vilma Santos, Christopher de Leon, Charito Solis, Nonie Buencamino, Jackie Aquino, Mikee Villanueva, Richard Chaney, Saameer, Jaime Blanch, Eula Valdez, Charles Tolentino, Michael Allen, CJ Ramos, Jason San Pedro, Charlotte Lugo, Percival Mendoza, Mark Anthony Martinez, Neil Laurence, Pocholo Montes, Malou Crisologo, Ernie Zarate, PETA Kalingan Ensemble, Maila Gumila, John Gaddi, Cris Michelena, Shamaine Buencamino, Evangeline Concepcion, Amiel Leonardia, Randy Gamier, Phil Noble, Perlyn Bunyi, Alma Conepion, Christine Bersola, Mimi Yaptiongco, Candy Pangilinan, Gigette Reyes, Mia Gutierrez, Nonong Talbo, Tess Dumpit, Gil Portes, Dennis Adobas, Ross F. Celino Jr., Bong de Leon, Ed de Leon, Gerry Ocampo, Veronica Samio, Rod Samson

> Pregnant by her army-officer boyfriend in her Mindanao hometown, Dolzura Cortez agrees to his suggestion to live with him. When she arrives at his house, however, he introduces another pregnant woman as his wife. She refuses to live with the two of them but he manages to convince her to try it out. After her third child, she decides to leave him and migrates to Manila with her kids. She works at a variety of jobs in the hospitality profession, occasionally going on dates with foreigners for money. She agrees to be a rich foreigner's kept woman but when another Arabic man tricks her into spending the night with him, her sponsor drops her. She then makes the acquaintance of Paolo, with whom she gets along well; but one day he fails to show up for their date. Although careful about getting regular checkups, she suddenly falls sick from a series of serious infectious diseases and gets diagnosed with a fairly advanced stage of AIDS, since standard tests for sex workers still did not include HIV detection. Paolo arrives from overseas studies to conduct research on the then-new epidemic. He unexpectedly reconnects with Dolzura when he visits her hospital room, and eventually convinces her to be the first "out" patient of the still-misunderstood plague.

The third and so-far final collaboration between Laurice Guillen and Vilma Santos turned out to be their most satisfactory outing, notwithstanding the organized critics' bizarre persistence in championing them in order to downgrade Nora Aunor: their previous collab, *Ipagpatawad Mo* (*Forgive Me*, 1991), earned the dubious distinction of being the only critics' winner in a year when all the other recognition bodies, including new critics' organizations, upheld Elwood Perez's Aunor-starrer *Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.* (*The Real Life of Pacita M.*).[37] The real-life biographical content of *Dahil Mahal Kita* benefits from the colorfully transgressive existence led by its subject who, as she remarks at one point, strove to elude the clutches of patriarchal domination, only to be swiped by a pandemic illness that lay in wait during one of the moments when her safe practice may have been compromised or overpowered by one of her clients. The film conveys her inevitable and understandable bitterness and provides a mercifully short glimpse of the physical suffering she had to endure, but it also complements Cortez's generosity of spirit by refusing to pass moral judgment on her choices—some of which were admittedly reckless, but only because of the existence of a then-still-incurable illness; an emblematic epilogue restores the youth and beauty that would have been Cortez's birthright, in a fairer world. Santos is peerless in embodying the travails of a woman who insists on living as full a life as fate and society would allow, realizing only too late that history will have ways of playing mean tricks on its Others and consequently embarking on a maturation process in order to cope with the situation. Cortez herself was struck down in the prime of her life, as millions of other victims all over the world were; an even more effective pandemic would soon happen along and would have proved far more tragic, if not for the knowledge and guidance that sufferers like her first imparted.

[37] I have written extensively about this matter elsewhere, but in terms of the aforementioned collaborations: Laurice Guillen expressed the only known misgiving about winning the critics' prize for her direction of her first Vilma Santos film, *Kapag Langit ang Humatol* (*Heaven's Judgment*, 1990). For the next year's controversial upraising of *Ipagpatawad Mo*, her direction was overridden despite its fundamental function in the film. Although the best of the three and arguably also the best of its year of release, the only major critics' prize garnered by *Dahil Mahal Kita* was for lead performance. For a consideration of the critics' preferential treatment of Santos at the expense of Nora Aunor, see Joel David, "Predicaments of Prestige: Negotiations and Symbolic Violence in Philippine Cultural Film Practice," *Forum for World Literature Studies* vol. 17, no. 2, June 2025, pp. 272–294, doi:10.5281/zenodo.20716814.

MARILOU DIAZ-ABAYA

(6 films: 1980–1997)

1—*Brutal*

Year of Release: 1980
Director: Marilou Diaz-Abaya
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Bancom Audiovision Corporation
Cast: Amy Austria, Charo Santos-Concio, Gina Alajar, Jay Ilagan, Perla Bautista, Johnny Delgado, Joonee Gamboa, Nello Nayo, Robert Tongco, Boy Sabiniano, Ogie Martinez, Jun Villena

> Monica is accused of killing her husband Tato and his two friends. Clara, a feminist journalist, believes that there is more to the crime than meets the eye. Since Monica has become too traumatized to talk, Clara gets in touch with Monica's mother, Tato's family, and Monica's best friend Cynthia. As Clara gets closer to finding the truth, a disturbing revelation will determine Monica's fate.

2—*Moral*

Years of Release: 1982
Director: Marilou Diaz-Abaya
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Seven Star Productions
Cast: Lorna Tolentino, Gina Alajar, Sandy Andolong, Anna Marin, Juan Rodrigo, Michael Sandico, Ronald Bregendahl, Lito Pimentel, Mia Gutierrez, Laurice Guillen, Dexter Doria, Claire de la Fuente, Amy Austria, Manny Luna, Christopher Ng, Odette Khan, Ernie Garcia, Lyman Lagman, Ramil Rodriguez, Sim Pajarillo, Arthur Nieto, Rustica Carpio, Jesus O. Ramos, Rino Fernan, Rey Ventura, Pen Medina, Victor M. Ordonez, Jose Alvior, Sonia Fernandez, Cora Marin, Yvette Quijano, Ernie Zarate, Tagumpay Esguerra, Perry de Guzman

> Four college women become friends with different goals and pursuits. Joey leads a dissipated lifestyle as her way of dealing with an overbearing mother and with her unrequited love for a politically committed activist. The talentless but ambitious Kathy sells her body to attain her dream of fame as a singer. Sylvia longs to work things out with her husband after he leaves her for a gay-bar dancer. Maritess sets her dreams of writing poetry aside to be full-time wife and mother to an old-fashioned male chauvinist. With each other's support as well as criticism, the ladies try to cope with their respective situations.

Brutal, the first overtly feminist Filipino film, might be showing signs of age by now, but that's a reflection on how far feminism, or more accurately a variety of feminisms, has journeyed. One might imagine a third- or even late second-wave proponent arching an eyebrow today at how the more transgressive character, the coed call girl—who lives alone, speaks her mind, and insists on her terms even when it comes to sex—is forced to bow before the squarish values of the domestic-violence survivor; or, moreover, how the middle-class journalist is privileged with framing the narrative via her investigative research. Yet the same elements that incited enthusiasm and appreciation among viewers then are still palpable: the cinematographic, almost televisual flatness that facilitates the fluid deployment of flashbacks and flashforwards, the sharp

attunement to pop culture, the on-the-mark coaching of performers.[38] Marilou Diaz-Abaya's follow-up effort, *Moral*, is that rare occurrence: a commercial project that successfully demonstrates a conceptual abstraction. Inspired by her mentor, Ishmael Bernal, Diaz-Abaya sought out answers to difficult questions whenever her circumstances allowed her, and with producer Jesse Ejercito providing carte blanche, Ricky Lee was able to draft for her a one-of-a-kind narrative that fused Marxist dialectics with dramatic logic, all while observing an ever-evolving process of change through conflict. The result was a multicharacter plot that branched out in unpredictable though never less-than-satisfactory ways—as close to feminist epistemology (the use of gender politics to restructure human knowledge) and radical aesthetics as our mainstream movies have been able to get. Yet the final output has remained as approachable as *Brutal*, the team's previous collaboration; this was due to Diaz-Abaya's elegant, masterly handling, an object lesson in how plastic skills acquire value only in terms of their usefulness in thematic, histrionic, and literary applications. Diaz-Abaya endured a whole set of bum raps throughout her career, but no other non-writing director paid as much attention to the development of material as she did. On the strength of these two early projects, it was no surprise that she managed to garner the admiration of the best writer-directors in the industry.

Karnal

English Translation: *Carnal*
English Title: *Of the Flesh*
Year of Release: 1983
Director: Marilou Diaz-Abaya
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
From the legal narrative "To Take a Life" by Teresita Añover Rodriguez
Producers: Cine Suerte & Yalung Group of Companies International
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Cecille Castillo, Vic Silayan, Charito Solis, Joel Torre, Grace Amilbangsa, Pen Medina, Ella Luansing, Joonee Gamboa, Rolando Tinio, Vangie Labalan, Gil de Leon, Rustica Carpio

A storyteller narrates a tale her mother told her. Narcing returns to his hometown of Mulawin with his wife Puring. Soon, Puring, who looks like her late mother-in-law, attracts her father-in-law's lascivious attention. Puring's fate worsens when her friendship with a deaf-mute laborer is mistaken for an affair. When Narcing finally intervenes in favor of his wife, he winds up killing his father and landing in jail. Narcing escapes and hides with Puring but the long arm of the law and the shadow cast by tradition will not allow them to live in peace.

[38] One of my pet peeves, elaborated at length elsewhere in this publication, is all about the obsession with originality, expressed in accusations of plagiarism—fortunately less of an affliction today than it used to be. One of the risible charges raised against *Brutal* by a recently deceased former member of the local critics group was that it filched the structure of Ingmar Bergman's *Aus dem Leben der Marionetten* (*From the Life of the Marionettes*, 1980). In contrast, when *De stilte rond Christine M.* (*A Question of Silence*, 1982), by subsequent Oscar winner Marleen Gorris, was screened in Manila, no one brought up the question of why its basic narrative elements closely resembled those of *Brutal*. Such is the scourge of postcolonial mentality.

At the point where Marilou Diaz-Abaya resolved to impress observers as a directorial stylist, she enlisted her long-term collaborator, Ricky Lee, and reworked a sensational journalistic account into a period narrative. The project harnessed a number of elements associated with theater classicism—timeless and placeless settings (actually a rural town in the 1930s) for stylized performances with elements drawn from Greek tragedy: hubristic hero and his patriarchal nemesis, an omniscient single-person chorus with her occasional direct-to-audience speeches, vengeful townfolk who torment the central couple, and so on. The technique of appropriating universal strategies is typically associated in contemporary local cinema with the "low" genres of comedy and horror, so to find them used fairly successfully in a high-art project raised issues of adaptation and appropriation, proof that Diaz-Abaya regarded entertainment as capable of bearing discursive ambition.

Sensual

Additional Language: German
Year of Release: 1986
Director: Marilou Diaz-Abaya
Screenwriter: Jose Javier Reyes
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Barbara Benitez, Charito Solis, Lito Gruet, Chanda Romero, Rolando Tinio, Tony Mabesa, Hero Bautista, Lara Jacinto, Vangie Labalan, Cris Daluz, Josie Galvez, Arvie Antonio, Sarah Alonzo, Romeo Enriquez, Ella Luansing, Crispin Medina, Reiner Uckely, Lyn Francisco, Amy Leah, Filipinas Adnono, Charry Velarde, Marivin Choco, Dante Figueroa, Agnes Vergara, Lucy Baldorado, Elena Santos, Ming-Ming Talens, Donna Pineda, Leslie Reyes, Liza Muñoz, Rhea Flores, Dahlia Delgado, Cherry Vibar

> Preparing for college in Manila, Niña grows up in a once-prosperous but now-impoverished rural household. Turing, her mother, insists on discipline and sensible behavior, but her grandmother Lola Senyang indulges her granddaughter's every whim as well as her own, despite doctor's and financier's warnings. Niña develops a close friendship with her childhood friend Elsa, which eventually leads to physical intimacy. But a handsome scion, Ariel, arrives from his foreign sojourn and begins courting Niña, who's intrigued by him but is warned by Turing of the incompatibility of their class status and resented by Elsa, who fears losing the only person she loved.

A precursor of the next phase of Marilou Diaz-Abaya's filmmaking career, *Sensual* exemplifies her readiness to tackle inadequately developed material with the full force of what may have been the most impressive technical arsenal of any Second Golden Age talent. In subsequently abandoning her specialization in women-themed subjects, however, she also gave up a few non-tech skills that no other woman filmmaker in the country had been able to match: an intimate understanding of feminine dilemmas and the conflicted sentiments that heterosexual attraction induces. An additional expertise in depicting lesbian intimacy served her well in her subsequent efforts, notably *Milagros* (1997). It may be too late to acknowledge her as our primary queer Filipina director, but her record speaks for itself. *Sensual* adds to these endowments an additional treat—an attempt by cinematographer Conrado Baltazar to appropriate the painterly polychromatic approach of Romy Vitug and succeeding magnificently in his first try. Who knows what further direction he planned to take, whether with Diaz-Abaya or any other director, if fate had not intervened on another movie set two years later?

May Nagmamahal sa Iyo

English Translation: *Someone Loves You*
English Title: *Madonna and Child*
Additional Language: Chinese
Year of Release: 1996
Directors: Marilou Diaz-Abaya
Screenwriters: Ricky Lee, Shaira Mella Salvador
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Lorna Tolentino, Ariel Rivera, Claudine Barrretto, Stefano Mori, Emman Abeleda, Archi Adamos, Cita Astals, Lilia Cuntapay, Cris Daluz, Renato del Prado, Jaclyn Jose, Vangie Labalan, Alma Lerma, Michael Macasio, Gina Pareño, Tom Taus, Rolando Tinio, Gamaliel Viray, Romy Romulo, Lora Luna, Jim Pebanco, Mae Ann Adonis

> Unable to afford caring for her out-of-wedlock son, Louella brings her child to the parish priest for adoption. After a few years of saving money as a nanny in Hong Kong, she uses her employers' decision to migrate as an occasion to return to the Philippines. Nestor, a police officer who held a flame for her, encourages her to look for the son she gave away. The orphanage where they hope to find him was demolished to make way for highway construction, so they proceed to the next place where the wards were brought. Conrad, a trouble child about the same age as Louella's son, hums the same lullabye she used to sing to him as a child. Despite a few doubts brought up by Nestor, Louella takes to Conrad, who in turn readily accepts her as his long-lost mother and turns into an exemplary resident of the orphanage. The day she finishes preparing the documents necessary to reclaim her offspring, the orphanage director brings up unsettling news that poses a challenge for Louella and the family she was hoping to form.

Admirers of Marilou Diaz-Abaya's discursive film treatments must have been taken aback when she came up with a straightforward genre exercise. Except for its moderate budget and use of popular performers, *May Nagmamahal sa Iyo* shared the same properties that her earlier potboilers exhibited. Yet the passage of time has demonstrated how the film affirmed its director's unwavering commitment to critiques of class and gender, in addition to her ability to uncover a kernel of truth that may have been difficult to accept but that has since proved essential in our citizens' confrontation with the detrimental impact of labor export on the family unit. This amounts to a redefinition of what constitutes a real family, with blood relations becoming a secondary, if not dispensable, consideration, and with the country's women tasked with moving toward this inescapable shift. One can only further admire Diaz-Abaya's militancy (an unexpected decriptor that can only be perceived in retrospect) when the narrative's singularly villainous character happens to come from the social class that she represents. Star Cinema has been the most insistent chronicler of overseas Filipino workers' concerns, with films preceding and succeeding *MNsI*; ironically, its least financially successful entry turned out to be the most forward-thinking of the lot, and may now be unreservedly taken to heart by the audience who once hesitated to approach it.

Milagros

Additional Language: German
Year of Release: 1997
Director: Marilou Diaz-Abaya
Screenwriter: Rolando Tinio
Producer: Merdeka Film Productions
Cast: Sharmaine Arnaiz, Dante Rivero, Elizabeth Oropesa, Joel Torre, Raymond Bagatsing, Nonie Buencamino, Mia Gutierrez, Rolando Tinio, Joe Jardi, Tanya Gomez, Jim Pebanco, Telly Babasa, Tony Tayag, Jeannie Canlas, Dennis Selis, Daniel Candido, Nino Emmanuel Villanueva, Ces Millado, Bessie Lorais, Manny Rodriguez, Rhea Santos, Leonardo Bernardo, Tata Villaflor, Lois Locsin, Cherry Mae Rieta, Manny Mendoza, Molly Pontijas, Anthony Cervino, Manuel Arvesu, Butchoy Panaglina, Rose Pucharon, Cherry Labadan, Joy Tan, Ken Ruiz, Ramon Reyes

> Nightclub dancer Lagring learns that her estranged father Cirilo has died. Upon hearing her mother worry about paying off the debts he had accumulated, she unexpectedly volunteers to pay these off by working as a maid for their landowner, Nano, and his three sons: married photographer Junie, blind Ramonito, and playboy Bennet. Her alluring charms cause discord among the four men, but she aspires to someday visit the holy mountain of Banahaw.

Marilou Diaz-Abaya bid farewell to women-centered discourses in Philippine cinema with this controversial, demanding release—not surprising, considering her track record in rejecting easy answers to vexed questions. Her subsequent focus on men's issues never fared as successfully, and several observers consider *Milagros* a precursor to her comparatively fallow period. Even then, a lesser achievement by Diaz-Abaya's standards could still yield popular and critical acclaim, as evident in several of her post-*Milagros* films, notably *José Rizal* (1998). The first, most urgent issue about *Milagros* is its refusal to acknowledge feminist political correctness, beginning as it does with a young sex worker who volunteers to repay her late father's debts, and agrees to a form of indentured slavery by servicing an all-male household. The seeming sordidness is held at an aesthetic distance and enables Diaz-Abaya to build up to a spiritual culmination, with a pilgrimage to mystical Mount Banahaw as the title character's object of fulfillment. From a career packed with a wide range of approaches to outcast women's characters—witness *Baby Tsina* (1984) and *Sensual* (1986) for a comparative sampling—Diaz-Abaya unsurprisingly manages to endow her wise, stouthearted tragedienne with ironic loverly treatment. An ecstatic finale has had audiences cheering, wondering, protesting, and weeping, sometimes in succession.

FERNANDO POE JR.

(6 films: 1980–2000)

1—*Ang Panday*

English Translation: *The Blacksmith*
Year of Release: 1980
Director: Fernando Poe Jr. [as Ronwaldo Reyes]
Screenwriter: Fred Navarro
Adapted from the *komiks* by Carlo J. Caparas
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Max Alvarado, Lito Anzures, Bentot Jr., Liz Alindogan, Paquito Diaz, Victor Bravo, Vic Varrion, Martha Sevilla, Bert Olivar, Max Laurel, Lito Anzures, Vic Varrion, Victor Bravo, Rosemarie Keller, Eddie Gicoso, Ernie David, Eric Navarro, Pedro Borlongan, Joe Estrada, Buddy Dator, Jun Montano, Efren M. Reyes, Buddy Lanuza, Zaldo Cruz, Mario Fernandez, Eddie Fernandez, Linda Peralta, Thunder Stuntmen

> Virtuous blacksmith Flavio is forced to brand innocent children as an order from Lizardo, the evil ruler of the land. One night, a meteor lands near Flavio's house and is turned by the blacksmith into a dagger that has special powers. This prompts Flavio, his young ward Lando, his elderly mentor Tata Temio, and Temio's granddaughter Monica, on a quest to stop Lizardo's reign of terror.

2—*Pagbabalik ng Panday*

English Translation: *Return of the Blacksmith*
Year of Release: 1981
Director: Fernando Poe Jr. [as Ronwaldo Reyes]
Screenwriter: Tommy C. David
Adapted from the *komiks* by Carlo J. Caparas
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Max Alvarado, Tina Revilla, Lito Anzures, Bentot Jr., Rosemarie Gil, Lillian Laing, Jose Romulo, Ernie David, Lillian Laing, Michael Pigar, Eddie Gicoso, Mary Ann Galapin, Sarah Carino, Amy Anzures, Clint de Castro, Efren Belardo, Buddy Dator, Eric Navarro, Cesar Abejuela, Mario Fernandez, Joey Padilla, Rosemarie Keller, Linda Peralta, Muzette Mendez, Frank Raagas, Thunder Stuntmen, Liz Alindogan, Paquito Diaz, Michael Locsin

> Lizardo, vanquished in the first film, is revived by black magic and seeks to recover his dominion. Flavio, disturbed by a Black Book prophecy that he will be defeated by a masked warrior, hears about undead corpses terrorizing other towns and seeks them out to provide assistance. On the way, he is overpowered by a monster and awakens in the company of the flying villagers who saved him. He learns that the disturbances are caused not by Lizardo but by another villain, Wanda.

3—*Ang Panday: Ikatlong Yugto*

English Translation: *The Blacksmith: Third Installment*
Year of Release: 1982
Director: Fernando Poe Jr. [as Ronwaldo Reyes]

Screenwriter: Fred Navarro
Adapted from the *komiks* by Carlo J. Caparas
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Dang Cecilio, Max Alvarado, Lito Anzures, Bentot Jr., Monette Garcia, Eddie Gicoso, Pons de Guzman, Romy Guarin, Eric Navarro, Remy Javier, Buddy Dator, Ernie David, Bert Garon, Jun Medrano, George Wendth, Thunder Stuntmen, Michael Locsin

> A destructive alien lands on earth and wreaks havoc on rural villages. Flavio has to resolve his romantic issues, since two women have fallen for him yet the Black Book has said that he should never marry in order to maintain his role as heroic savior. While searching for lost children, Flavio meets and is slain by the masked warrior, as predicted in the previous film. But his spirit now resides in the Black Book and his allies are able to use it to restore him to life.

4—*Ang Panday IV*

English Translation: *The Blacksmith IV*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Fernando Poe Jr. [as Ronwaldo Reyes]
Screenwriter: Fred Navarro
Adapted from the *komiks* by Carlo J. Caparas
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Marianne de la Riva, Max Alvarado, Lito Anzures, Bentot Jr., Eddie Infante, Mario Escudero, Robert Rivera, Monette de Guzman, Ruben Ramos, Aida Pedido, Rowell Santiago, Christopher Paloma, Imelda Caparas

> An adventurer, Don Cirilo, seeks to prove the existence of evil spirits and accidentally releases a malevolent one—which possesses and resurrects Lizardo. Lando, now grown-up, courts a woman who turns out to be a *manananggal* (self-segmenting viscera feeder). Flavio is able to transform his sword into a shield via the power of a mysterious asteroid, but his group stumble on an opening that transports them into a new dimension where nightmares can become reality. Upon escaping from this place, he seeks a final showdown with Lizardo.

How ironic that Fernando Poe Jr.'s directorial legacy should be maintained primarily by a quadrilogy of children's fantasy outings. The less-productive fantasy of what he could have come up with if he had survived the trauma of necessarily dirty electoral politics should not detract us from recognizing that Flavio was the character that his self-conscious, easily parodied, spare and severe performance style matched perfectly. And before we lament that the series slipped irretrievably downhill after Poe had let go of it, we might derive some comfort in the awareness that George Lucas may have continued to hold on to his *Star Wars* prerogative for a spell, but that never stopped the smart-kid franchise from turning into a cineastic nightmare either. The Poe-directed cycle fares better, with an utter lack of pretension as well as careful attention to pre-digital special effects, during the moment when the expertise of local practitioners was at its height. FPJ supposedly insisted on upgrading Carlo J. Caparas's realist *komiks* source to include fantasy and sci-fi elements, and the gamble certainly paid off beyond merely financial terms. Poe was similarly canny enough to start modestly and build up the sequels in increasingly ambitious terms. Although the heroics are unexpectedly old-fashioned, adults need not cringe, inasmuch as the series provides a decent share of humor, scares, strong-women roles, even a few queer-positive turns. Poe's Panday legacy persisted after he let go of it, with actors-turned-politicians

laying claim to the film character, plus a number of television series, including local TV's first animated one; worth tracking down would be the first non-Poe take-off, Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes's *Dugo ng Panday* (*Blood of the Blacksmith*, a.k.a. *The Blacksmith's Legacy*, 1993), starring the controversial senator Ramon "Bong" Revilla Jr. as the son of Flavio.

Ang Maestro

English Title: *The Master*
Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1981
Director: Fernando Poe Jr. [as Ronwaldo Reyes]
Screenwriter: Fred Navarro
From a story by Carlo J. Caparas
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Chat Silayan, Mario Escudero, Romy Diaz, Paquito Diaz, Jose Romulo, Mario Escudero, Bert Olivar, Max Laurel, Nello Nayo, Ruben Ramos, Edmund Cupcupin Don Pepot, Don Umali, Lorie Mumar, Carlos de Leon, Michael Pigar, Lito Anzures

> Don Roque extracts a promise from swordsperson Maestro Carpio never to instruct any other trainee except his son, Ignacio de la Vega. But that night Hernan de Zuñiga, son of Carpio's late friend Don Alfredo, arrives with a note from his father requesting that Carpio ensure his son's expertise in swordfighting. Trained in secret, Hernan grows up to learn that his sister Carmen was abducted by Don Roque and imprisoned in a dungeon. While searching for her, he runs into Amanda, who's studying swordfighting so she can challenge Ignacio to a duel to avenge her brother.

To say that Fernando Poe Jr. broke out in 1981 as an outstanding director-actor is high praise enough, with the best entry in his *Panday* series coming out the same year, although certain still-existing work from Gerardo de Leon, Gregorio Fernandez, and Ramon A. Estella from the First Golden Age exceed most work by their contemporaries and can also successfully challenge anything made by FPJ. Yet Da King deserves to be honored for the additional function that no other Filipino auteur excelled in—not (far and away) as performer, but as film producer. Toward this end, his readiness to indulge in syncretistic modes of production can be seen as a means of appealing to the widest possible reach, although it would be unfair and inaccurate to conclude that he repudiated all logic or tradition in his output. *Ang Maestro*, as an instance, draws mainly from the *koboy* films (the Pinas counterpart of spaghetti Westerns) that enabled him and his rival-cum-ally, Joseph Estrada, to rule the local box-office during most of the 1960s. The admixture of elements—drawn from such sources as the costume drama, swordfight epic, social realism (with both the hero's family's impoverished circumstances as well as the leading lady's Romani-esque affiliation[39]), and revenge narrative—resolves in a sui-generis product that may be easy for aesthetes to resist, though fortunately movie fans will always be more receptive.

[39] The Sama-Bajau, who inhabit a number of territories in maritime Southeast Asia including a number of southern islands in the Philippines, are also called "sea gypsies" because of their nomadic lifestyle. They are not, however, Roma descendants, nor are any other ethnic group in the country.

Ang Dalubhasa

English Translation: *The Expert*
Year of Release: 2000
Director: Fernando Poe Jr. [as Ronwaldo Reyes]
Screenwriters: Pablo S. Gomez & Manny R. Buising
From a story by Fernando Poe Jr.
Producer: Millennium Cinema
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Nanette Medved, Maritoni Fernandez, Cris Villonco, Paquito Diaz, Ricardo Cepeda, Berting Labra, Bob Soler, Romy Diaz, Zandro Zamora, Johnny Vicar, Marco Polo Garcia, Dindo Arroyo, Gerald Ejercito, R.G. Gutierrez, Bong Francisco, Manjo del Mundo, Nonoy de Guzman, Tony Carreon, Marita Zobel, Maita Sanchez, Cecile Buensuceso, Bon Vibar, Dedes Whitakeer, Dante Castro, Jesette Rospero, Naty Santiago, Nanding Fernandez, Bert Olivar, Vic Varrion, Eddie Tuazon, Leo Gamboa, Steve Alcarado, Tony Bernal, Rea Valle, Jimmy Reyes, Lily Bartolome, Rhey Roldan, Jaira Gomez, Tony Martinez, Tom Alvarez, Robert Miller, Bert Garon, Alas Stuntmen, Thunder Stuntmen

> Dr. Jaime de Guzman, a military neurosurgeon, suffers survivor's guilt when his family gets killed during a burglary. He tries to start anew in Cebu with a fiancée and gets attached to her younger sister, Sheila. When the latter requires a sensitive operation, he volunteers for the job, but the girl dies after the procedure. To evade the blame and condemnation heaped on him by Sheila's family, he flees to Manila and lives anonymously in a slum area. In volunteering to assist in a community clinic, evidence of his skill is discovered by Connie, one of the doctors, with whom he also develops a closeness. When a renegade military gang hides out in the neighborhood and requires his expertise, he recognizes the patient he has to heal and realizes that he has to resolve his past issues.

In terms of the genre practice from which he rarely strayed, *Ang Dalubhasa* was the last serious Fernando Poe Jr. film and may safely be regarded as the valedictory he unintentionally bequeathed. Its appearance though was so left-field that it barely got noticed except for his usual loyal patrons. The key to its achievement lies in how FPJ opted to confront the one property that distinguished (though "disadvantaged" might be more appropriate) his persona from all other major action stars in the country: his characters' tendency to aspire toward elite respectability. Unfortunately for progressive-minded observers, he didn't aim to deconstruct this property this time out; that might have arrived in a later film summation, if he'd managed to survive the soul-crushing consequence of a nasty presidential campaign. The measure of his creative restlessness lay in how he deployed aspiration in order to develop a narrative arc more attuned to his old and weary bearing. Hence aficionados might not be surprised in how regularly his character requires assistance from the allies who accompany him, but most may be astonished in realizing, in retrospect, that he'd managed to avoid staging action sequences for most of the film. Not that he hadn't tried out something similar before: his lead role in Eddie Romero's *Aguila* (1980) was epically complex enough to demand a lot more dramatic highlights from him than he ever tackled before or after. But where Romero wasted the potential of the material on already-crumbling Cold War ideals, Poe invests *AD* with a renewed fondness for the common people along with his usual bemusement and respect for strong women and feminized men. A final sequence where this agglomeration of Others is mingled with performers who usually get cast as villains in his own films, all awaiting his heroic return by gambling to pass the time away, provides enough subtle transgression to make Poe's untimely departure afterward a grievous loss for Philippine popular culture.

FERNANDO POE JR. & WILLY MILAN

(1 film: 1995)

Kahit Butas ng Karayom ... Papasukin Ko

English Translation: *I Will Go Through Even the Eye of the Needle*
Year of Release: 1995
Directors: Fernando Poe Jr. & Willy Milan [as Ronwaldo Reyes & Wilfredo "Willy" Milan]
Screenwriters: Eddie Romero & Manny Palo
Producer: Libran Films
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Bing Loyzaga, Subas Herrero, Paquito Diaz, Roy Alvarez, Lito Legaspi, Bing Davao, Caridad Sanchez, Roberto Garcia, Luis Gonzales, Sunshine Dizon, Mona Margarita, Jimmy Garcia, Rex Lapid, Ernie David, Tony Bernal, Danny Riel, Bobby Benitez, Rolly Lapid, Nonoy de Guzman, Jonathan Gabriel, Bert Garon, Bong Varona, Jess Vargas, Commando Stuntmen, Feroz Stuntmen, V. Hawk Stuntmen, Marife Necesito

> Taking his young daughter to school, Sgt. Daniel Torres nearly hits the car of a spoiled rich kid, who complains to his father about the incident. The father wants to have Sgt. Torres killed as punishment, but his superior, a colonel awaiting promotion to general, arranges to have him and his family assigned to the conflict in Mindanao instead. Along the way, Sgt. Torres stops extortionists from victimizing a Muslim, Halim. Upon arrival, he finds that the men assigned to him behave abusively, so he whips them into shape by a combination of brawn and proper behavior. Rina, his daughter's new teacher, takes an interest in him, but he also has to contend with a corrupt mayor and hypocritical officials, a disgruntled Muslim populace (led, as it turns out, by Halim), and rapacious business interests from faraway Manila.

With Fernando Poe Jr. gone, it will take another star of equivalent stature and influence before a more definitive commercial film on the Mindanao conflict can be accomplished. Nevertheless with *Kahit Butas ng Karayom ... Papasukin Ko*, we can still count our blessings. The Willy Milan co-directing credit might make us brace for another relentless onslaught of machismo, compounded by issues of war and religious difference, but FPJ's growing acknowledgment of feminine values enables him to set apart a hero who actually has moments of masculine tenderness, particularly in his fondness for his unruly, zany, yet suicidally plucky dirty-dozen squad. With Eddie Romero in their final collab, he finally had the epic scope of Romero's hidebound *Aguila* (1980) and the careful focus on character of *Ang Padrino* (*The Godfather*, 1984, which he directed), with much less of Romero's usual humanistic fence-sitting, possibly owing to the credit shared with Manny Palo. From hereon we also witness an elderly action star actually behaving his age, allowing his young daughter to outdo him in the manospheric enterprise of auto repair, and giving up when overpowered in a brawl so he can later resort to the same dirty trick his opponent utilized. But his commitment to the oppressed is where the unexpected takes place: the heartfelt and frankly romantic pledge in the film title is uttered by his army-commander character Daniel Torres not to any family or professional associate but to a Muslim rebel leader, upon confirming that the latter is fighting for his people's rights against the encroachment of folks primarily represented by the likes of Sgt. Torres himself. The ultimately frustrating aspect of *KBKPK* is that satisfactory endings, even open-ended ones, can only occur in pop culture; but stars worth their salt can lead the way and leave it up to the rest of us to follow.

FERNANDO POE JR. & AUGUSTO SALVADOR

(1 film: 1997)

Eseng ng Tondo

English Translation: *Eseng of Tondo*
Year of Release: 1997
Directors: Fernando Poe Jr. [as Ronwaldo Reyes] & Augusto Salvador
Screenwriters: Pablo S. Gomez & Manny Buising
"Inspired by a true story" [opening credit title]
Producer: FPJ Productions
Cast: Fernando Poe Jr., Ina Raymundo, Jenny Syquia, Chuck Perez, Mandy Ochoa, Anita Linda, Zandro Zamora, Johnny Vicar, Bob Soler, Marita Zobel, Bing Davao, Eddie Arenas, Jose Romulo, Gerald Ejercito, Bong Francisco, Rudy Meyer, Tony Bernal, Tony Carreon, Nanding Fernandez, Robert Rivera, Bernard Atienza, Romy Diaz, Jimmy Reyes, Joey Padilla, Nonoy de Guzman, Robert Talby, Art Veloso, Lily Rose, Boy Sta. Maria, Steve Alcarado, Joone Ranillo, Dante Castro, Bert Vivar, Chanel Fernandez, Jaera Gomez, Joan Salazar, Paul Vivo, Ding Alvaro, Shiela Sanchez, Boy Diaz, Orlando Miguel, Zernan Manahan, Bon Vibar, Vic Varrion, Ernie David, Leo Gamboa, Richard Duran, Thunder Stuntmen, Scorpio Stuntmen, Alas Stuntmen

> Lt. Eusebio Natividad, nicknamed Eseng, is an officer in the police detachment of Manila's Tondo district, known for its slum community and gangland activities. His brother Belo keeps attempting to take advantage of his good name by running gambling rackets, wearing down Eseng's patience until he decides to arrest Belo himself. His wife Digna worries over Eseng's late work hours—not only because of the dangers he faces but also because of the many temptations that come his way at night. Unknown to her, the school where she teaches is preyed on by the spoiled scion of Villafranca, a rich and influential crime boss; along with his friends, he entices a student of Digna to pose for model photos so they can gang-rape her. Eseng tracks them to a bar, where he makes the acquaintance of Elvie. He foils the latter's fencing of stolen goods but winds up accepting her as his mistress. After Eseng raids Villafranca's headquarters, the latter hires an assassin to get rid of him. The gang members then target Digna herself and succeed in abducting her, forcing Eseng to step up his investigation.

As the country's top action-film star, Fernando Poe Jr. consolidated his status by relying on several impositions and performative quirks, to the point where his persona became an object of satire.[40] One could sense him trying to break free every so often—allowing news of the death of his character to overwhelm his family in Eddie Romero's *Aguila* (1980), or opening another movie with his character's actual death but enabling his twin brother to avenge him in the self-directed *Ang Probinsyano* (*The Provincial Man*, 1996, unsurprisingly spun off into the most successful series

[40] The standard imposition in any Fernando Poe Jr. movie is that the hero he plays should never be permitted to die, supposedly occasioned by Muslim fans rioting in theaters over the ending of Celso Ad. Castillo's historical drama *Asedillo* (1971), as recounted by Nick Joaquin a.k.a. Quijano de Manila in *Ronnie Poe & Other Silhouettes* (National Book Store, 1977). His gender-progressivity is also generally acknowledged, although (as far as I know) never cited anywhere beyond a master's thesis at the national university. The histrionic devices associated with his persona include: the exhalation in the delivery of final words to signify intense emotion—an affectation eventually adopted by his friendly rival Joseph Estrada; the slightly stooping stance (enhanced by signature low-waist denim jeans) to signal a more relaxed pose, in contrast with his enemies' tensed-up posture; the quick-drawing of handguns with supreme sharpshooting skills, to ensure he always wins during showdowns; and the impressively swift delivery of abdominal punches (termed *bara-bara*) guaranteed to overpower any overconfident bully.

in local TV). With *Eseng ng Tondo*, he relinquished total control over his directorial function and toyed with narrative material that treated the flourishes beloved by his fans as throwaway or comic moments, even tacking on an open ending for good measure. The resultant product is as rewarding as any that can be reasonably expected from the major male auteur that Philippine cinema had endowed us with. Around this time, young turks were upping the ante as local action cinema's final shot at significance, rendering the typical FPJ film as too stately paced to match. Yet *EnT* manages to hold its own, partly because its relatively dignified approach complements its elderly performer, and also because its conscientious exploration of Tondo's much-exploited territory, enhanced by the absence of FPJ's usual aspirational tendency, confers on its denizens a stature and vibrance equal to the star of the picture. As if to confirm that its intentions are indeed forward-looking, it sets its climax in a distinctly working-class event, a so-called *byucon* (open-air beauty contest) that ends with cat-fighting participants, with Tondo imprinting itself by ensuring that the organizers and contestants comprise cross-dressers. [***Tech note***: Make sure to source an integral copy rather than the official distributor's anomalously censored version.]

MEL CHIONGLO

(10 films: 1981–2016)

Playgirl

Additional Language: "Swardspeak" [Philippine gay lingo]
Year of Release: 1981
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricardo Lee
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Charito Solis, Gina Alajar, Phillip Salvador, Alicia Alonzo, Mary Walter, Al Tantay, Gabby Concepcion, Lily Miraflor, Jimi Melendez, Ernie Zarate, Deborah Sun, Emma Valeros, Joonee Gamboa, Renee Johnson, Butch Jumamoy, Juling Serrano, Helen Blanco, Perla Urtulla, Letty Sembrano, Eliang Vitales, Mamerto de los Reyes, Danny Labra, Ely Prado, Ben Tan, Boy Robles, Ed Zabala

> Tonya endures her profession as a middle-aged Chinatown hooker to enable her daughter to finish high school. Cindy, however, prefers to audition at singing contests despite having no talent, and hang out with her good-time pals, through whom she meets Boogie, a smooth-talking pimp. Tonya's discovery that Cindy never completed her studies drives the latter to finding any available job. When Tonya learns that Cindy has become a prostitute, she drives her daughter away, further intensifying Cindy's resolve to succeed in sex work. [***Note***: A censors-imposed written epilogue states that Tonya renewed her orientation and found a more decent source of income, and that Cindy married a Japanese who uplifted her quality of life.]

Although he had dabbled in other aspects of film production, Mel Chionglo became best known as a production designer, prior to debuting as a filmmaker. Not surprisingly, *Playgirl* foregrounds this element (with Benjie de Guzman in charge), with a deliberately measured pace allowing its audience to partake of its impressively detailed environment. What got overlooked, in the initial flurry of reservations regarding languid sensibility and sordid subject matter, was the carefully calibrated treatment that inhered in Ricky Lee's screenplay. The women realize that it may be next-to-impossible to break out of the life, but it also motivates them to redefine the terms of their relationships with men and, when afforded an opportunity, with their exploiters as well. Its compassionate dissection of mothering evokes several high points in Classical Hollywood cinema (notably King Vidor's 1937 *Stella Dallas*), with *Playgirl* qualifying the female parent's readiness to sacrifice by counterweighting it with an essential component of righteous rage.

Sinner or Saint

Year of Release: 1984
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Claudia Zobel, Charito Solis, Gloria Romero, Patrick dela Rosa, Ricky Davao, Raffy Bonanza, Rey Malte-Cruz, Julio Diaz, Joey Galvez, Rani Regaliza, Rony Montero, Jun Santos, Dyna Joy Balfermoso, Yeng Romero, Marie Paz

Raniel, Lucy Quinto, Rose Gacula, Susing Sayson, Mamerto de los Reyes, Boy Ybanez, Bobby Garcia, Ely Prado, Luis Reyes, Ringo Rio, Christopher Paloma, Mia Villavicencio, Tony Angeles

> Despite being a wife to Fred and a mother to their child, Dina cannot resist her youthful restlessness. Against familial objections, she goes to Manila to pursue her studies but ends up having an affair with a classmate. When Fred learns of this, he takes his wife back to their hometown where they have another child. But it does not take long before Dina's promiscuity gets her into trouble again.

Sex goddess Claudia Zobel died in a vehicular accident right after completing work on a film whose narrative bizarrely paralleled her peripatetic and unconventional existence, and uncannily predicted her tragic end. Based on the tabloid report of a woman who kept abandoning her well-appointed rural middle-class family for a series of dangerous big-city encounters, the film maintained the abject elements of her tale while providing Dina, the central character, with heightened self-awareness, as a sometime student of literature and occasional critic of traditional gender roles. Despite the harrowing depths of Dina's self-degradation, the film is remarkably non-judgmental about the decisions she makes and their effects on her family and lovers—a rare local achievement in film naturalism.

1—*Nasaan Ka Nang Kailangan Kita*

English Translation: *Where Were You When I Needed You*
Year of Release: 1986
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Susan Roces, Hilda Koronel, Snooky Serna, Janice de Belen, Eddie Garcia, Aga Muhlach, Richard Gomez, Chanda Romero, Anita Linda, Katrin Gonzales, Vangie Labalan, Ernie Zarate, Alfred Barretto, Alma Lerma, Babalu, Ernie Zarate, Ronnel Victor, Angel Confiado, Tina Godinez, Avel Morado, Gamay Arconcel, Jojo Sanchez, Robert Talby, Paquito Salcedo, Ruby Santos, Belo Borja, Nonoy de Guzman, Ernie Forte, Rose Gacula, Eddie Nicart, Ed Santiago, Tony Angeles, Mary June Gonzalez, Bert Olivar, Lucy Alvarez, Linda Silvestre, Babalina, Cristy Lopez, Jordan Castillo, Arthur Domingo, Anna Marie Gonzalez, Amado Friginal, Jennifer B. Tan

> Cristy finishes high school at the top of her class, but her mother Rosa informs her that she cannot afford to send her to college, asking her instead to help her expand her food-catering operation. Cristy instead seeks help from her estranged father Julio, whose wealthy wife resents Cristy's presence in their household. Rosa refuses to reconcile with Cristy and instead pressures her younger daughter to work harder so she can prove to Julio that his abandonment did not crush her. The older generation's concerns intensify with the younger people as their pawns, until Julio's undiscovered medical condition gets the better of him.

2—*Paano Kung Wala Ka Na*

English Translation: *What Will Happen When You're Gone*
Year of Release: 1987
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Regal Films

Cast: Susan Roces, Eddie Gutierrez, Charo Santos-Concio, Snooky Serna, Miguel Rodriguez, Mona Lisa, Marissa Delgado, Debraliz, Ramil Rodriguez, Chanda Romero, Romeo Rivera, Linda Montenegro, Raquel Villavicencio, Becky Misa, Malou de Guzman, Luis Benedicto, Ester Chavez, Luis Benedicto, Tintoy

> After raising Ampy, a mature and level-headed daughter, Raffy feels suffocated by his marriage to Ruby and wishes he could start anew with Doris, his mistress. Ampy meanwhile is perturbed when her boyfriend Don insists on going abroad for further training even after she tells him that she's pregnant with their child. Sonny, her long-time admirer, takes a job in Raffy's firm so he could get closer to Ampy. Ruby's old flame Gary also starts hanging out with Ruby even though he's still married to a mutual acquaintance of theirs. As someone who believes in propriety and keeping her feelings to herself, Ruby realizes that she has to undergo a process of adjusting to a messy and constantly changing world.

Despite some problems brought on by her attempting monopolistic control as well as by the meddling of self-appointed culture authorities led by then First Lady Imelda Marcos, Lily Monteverde was a true-blue cinema fan who made sure to introduce old-time talents, genres, and traditions whenever the opportunities presented themselves. Her success with First Golden Age movie queen Susan Roces had all the hallmarks of laudatory tributes, at a time in Philippine production history when such attempts were too retrograde for the hip crowd yet too advanced for screen-culture scholars. No matter though, since the films were warmly welcomed by their intended audiences and earned Roces a younger set of admirers. Around this time "Mother" Lily also successfully revived the Guy & Pip tandem, the country's most successful multimedia love team; but it's the Roces films that set the template. Both focus on conflicts in the domestic sphere, with the interests of mothers and daughters colliding with shifting social values. *Nasaan Ka Nang Kailangan Kita* negotiates class-crossed outings while *Paano Kung Wala Ka Na* confines itself to the privileged sector. Each one makes sure to arrive at a point where the women can have a satisfactory resolution, with Roces's histrionic confidence building up as the earlier film leads to the later one. No one will commit the mistake of wishing she tackled the historical and/or working-class tragediennes on which, say, Anita Linda or Nora Aunor founded their reputations, but within the circumscribed terms that her persona observes, no one will wish that someone else had taken her part either.

Babaing Hampaslupa

English Title: *Vagrant Woman*
Alternate Title: *Babaeng Hampaslupa*
Year of Release: 1988
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricardo Lee
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Maricel Soriano, Richard Gomez, Edu Manzano, Rowell Santiago, Gina Alajar, Janice de Belen, Liza Lorena, Leni Santos, Carmina Villaroel, Anita Linda, Mario Escudero, Vangie Labalan, Roscoe Martin, Eva Ramos, Lucy Quinto, Josie Galvez, Rosanna Jover, Sylvia Garde, Maribel Legarda, Tita de Villa, Aida Carmona, Ilonah Jean, Alma Lerma, Evelyn Vargas, Joe Jardi, Malou de Guzman, Hazel Atuel, Bing Davao, Edgar Palomar, Elaine Eleazar, Lollie Mara, Bon Vibar, Valerie Mayor, Patty Calupitan, Romy Bermudo, Troy Martino

After their mother elopes with a neighborhood suitor, Remedios assumes responsibility for her two younger sisters. She couldn't make ends meet via farmwork, so she entrusts her sisters to relatives and migrates to Manila. She finds work as a dunk-tank girl in a carnival, where Vincent, a slumming entrepreneur, takes pity on her and recruits her for his bus company. She agrees to be a ticket conductor since it's the only job opening at the moment, and becomes fast friends with another lady conductor as well as her route driver, Jimmy, who offers her residential space in his small family home. When Vincent finally finds a less stressful position for her, she realizes that he and Jimmy are both interested in her and resolves to pursue her pragmatism, since it had enabled her to upgrade her stature in society.

Maricel Soriano's star persona was popularly described as *taray* (fierce or sassy) but its expansion in film roles necessarily transmuted into street-tough combativeness (*butangera* would be the closest equivalent), where its comic roots served to temper her characters' harsh behavior. That she would turn out to be the most successful among the Regal Babies crop of young talents also indicated a perfect fit with the company's (and its owner's) unruly reputation, constantly running into trouble with the hypocritical moral guardians of the martial-law regime of the earlier Ferdinand Marcos. *Babaing Hampaslupa* provides what may be the closest to a standard version of her persona's trajectory: a ferocious personal struggle against destitution that mirrors her real-life narrative, leading to early triumph via charm, talent, and chutzpah, with an ill-advised turn into the excesses and indulgences of the high life leading either to catastrophic loss or, as in this film, to (re)discovering fulfillment in returning to the family and community she once left behind. The moralism of this type of closure might have accounted for the apparent cold reception by conservative critics resistant to the challenges posed by genre studies, consequently missing out on a vital opportunity to connect popular culture with then-emerging trends in feminist empowerment and queer politics after the collapse of the military dictatorship.

Developing Stories: Lucia

Alternate Title: *Lucia*
Year of Release: 1992
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricardo Lee
From a story by Lino Brocka
Producers: Manila Inter-Film Productions, BBC Television, Television Trust for the Environment, One World Group of Broadcasters
Cast: Lolita Rodriguez, Gina Alajar, Suzette Ranillo, Elvira Baldomero, Jonathan Darca, Lorenzo Mara, Mario Escudero, Aurelio Estrada, Marilou Garingalao, Nanding Josef, Vangie Labalan, Mark Jason, Aida Carmona, Pocholo Montes, Malou de Guzman, Dante Balois, Eva Ramos, Edgar Santiago, Carmen Serafin, Mike Montey, Evelyn Vargas, Fred Capulong, Estrella Antonio, Reggie Lasam, Joel Lamangan, Rey Malte Cruz, Prones Gonzales, Jun dela Paz, Domingo Landicho, Renato Morado, Edna May Landicho, Nonie Buencamino, Pons de Guzman, Loida Damondon, Chie Concepcion, Kess Burias, Rody Vera, Rey Ventura, Lucy Quinto, Josie Galvez, Mari Sambilay, Ireneo Flores, Lucita Soriano, Sylvia Sanchez

After an oil-tanker spill, most residents of a fishing village migrate outward, to be able to earn a living. Since Lucia's husband and father refuse to leave, she stays on with her family. After her husband and his fellow fishermen are gunned down for venturing too close to privately owned fish pens, Lucia decides to move her family to Manila, although her daughter Cynthia remains to be with her husband Ador, a peasant organizer. In Manila, her daughter Chedeng, who also lost her spouse in the same incident where her father was killed, is able to secure sweatshop work. Lucia however could

not watch over her younger daughter Jenny, who gets drawn into the red-light district overrun by foreign pedophiles. She sends her young son to school but he gets waylaid by child hoodlums and soon partakes of their use and selling of illegal drugs. When Cynthia clandestinely asks to see Chedeng to report that Ador was abducted by soldiers and that she has become a wanted figure, Chedeng also confides her involvement in union work. Lucia's family and neighbors are driven out of the slum area by a developer and reduced to scrounging for resellable scraps at the notorious Smokey Mountain landfill.

Lucia stands as the best-realized of the many projects left behind by Lino Brocka, after his sudden death in a 1991 vehicular accident.[41] It exhibits his late-career preference for incident-packed storytelling, resembling *Orapronobis* (1989) but with the narrative driven by a woman whose heroic efforts at overseeing the welfare of her family are thwarted by the inhumane malignancy of uneven neoliberal development. Only Brocka could have bestowed full justice to this tale, but Chionglo manages with enough compensatory achievements to make the film worth one's time. His sense of socioeconomic milieu is arguably superior to Brocka's—no mean achievement by any measure, and essential in a narrative that barrels ahead almost without pause for its characters' (and audiences') recovery. Even more impressively, he extracts from Lolita Rodriguez veristic depths that she was never able to display in any of her outings with Brocka, enabling her to claim to being one of Philippine cinema's acting greats. Anyone who still harbored doubts about Chionglo attempting a global master's material might find further confirmation in his then-forthcoming trilogy on male erotic dancers, a takeoff from *Macho Dancer* (1988), Brocka's biggest overseas hit.

1—*Sibak: Midnight Dancers*

English Translation: *Hacked: Midnight Dancers*
Alternate Title: *Midnight Dancers*
Year of Release: 1994
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Tangent Films International
Cast: Alex del Rosario, Gandong Cervantes, Lawrence David, Luis Cortes, Richard Cassity, Danny Ramos, John Mendoza, Leonard Manalansan, Perla Bautista, Ryan Aristorenas, Soxy Topacio, Gino Paul Guzman, Maureen Mauricio, Jeffrey Suarez, Ray Ventura, Nonie Buencamino, RS Francisco, Cherry Pie Picache, Cezar Xerez-Burgos, Romy Romulo, Anthony Taylor, Leonard Obal, Gino Fernando, Frannie Zamora, Armando A. Reyes, Cherry Cornell, Edel Templonuevo, Archi Adamos, Francis Villacorta, Chie Concepcion, Roden Biag, Herbie Go, Frank Rivera, Juan de la Paz, Edgar Santiago, Faustino Ferrer, Lito Martinez, Luvie Gamao, Ronnie Falcasantos, Victor Falcasantos, Ronnie Francisco, Ronnie Salamat, Bryan Rosal, Miguel Palo, Rommel Ricafort, Arnold Tanchinco, Patricia, Cristina, Tet, Vicvic Villavicencio, Rene Pascual, Mother Joy, Frank Caunca, Charlie Caunca, Andy Fianza, Carmelo Brinces Jr., Alexander Delantar

[41] *Lucia* was a project that Lino Brocka agreed to develop for the International Institute for Sustainable Development's *Developing Stories* series; it was projected to be completed in 1992, a year after his unexpected demise. A total of six feature films from the global South were simulcast during the IISD's Earth Summit debate (the other countries were Burkina Faso, Brazil, India, Trinidad & Tobago, and Lebanon). Unfortunately no specific broadcast schedule was provided in the IISD's *Sourcebook on Sustainable Development* (1992, p. 56).

Arriving from Cebu to join his family, Sonny is informed by his mother that the family can't afford to fund the continuation of his studies yet. His brothers bring him to their workplace, a gay bar, so he can observe them and maybe earn some money from customers who invite him to their tables; eventually the manager notices his popularity and asks him to try his luck in dancing, like his brothers. Dave, who once lived with Joel, visits the place again because he couldn't stand being apart and accepts Joel's married status and desire to continue working. Dennis, Sonny's other brother, gets fired because of his drug habit and winds up jacking cars with a small gang. He also meets Bogart, an apparently homeless youth, and brings him to their residence to be fed and sheltered. The family's links to the underworld, despite their careful conduct, leads to dangerous consequences when it shows up to haunt them.

2—*Burlesk King*

Year of Release: 1999
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Seiko Films
Cast: Rodel Velayo, Leonardo Litton, Elizabeth Oropesa, Raymond Bagatsing, Cherry Pie Picache, Gino Ilustre, Nini Jacinto, Joonee Gamboa, Joel Lamangan, Tonio Ortigas, Ross Rival, Frannie Zamora, Joseph Buncalan, Arthur Casanova, Joey Galvez, Joseph Pe, Sofia Valdez, Aila Marie, Lucy Quinto, Teresa Jamias, Jazzi Oropesa, John Wayne Sace, Jake Mendoza, Edgar Santiago, Eric Hegazy, Dante Gomez, Jonathan Paguio, Jhim Tarrosa, Dennis Coronel, Jude Molato, Marvin Lim, Patrick Suarez, Natz Ordon, Jerry de Vera, Reden Villar, Bojo Roa, Leandro Reyes, Jun dela Paz, Alex Cabudil, Marcel Geronimo, Francis Angeles, Jeffrey Lopez, Raneth Jordan, Yessa Jordan, Gino Fernando, Diding de Andres, Daniel Isherwood, Kevin Isherwood, Patrick Richardson, Lee Walco, Amid Eton, Mark Dionisio, Rey Fernando, Justine Perez, Pinky Roces, Remy Aquino Talents

Harry is introduced to a croupier's job by his best friend James. After the latter fends off extortionists who target the gambling den, they attack him on the street and he winds up killing one of them. He and Harry then flee to Manila, where they find employment as erotic dancers. Harry's only quirk is his refusal to accommodate American customers, since he still remembers having been traumatized by his American father. He and James live with Harry's lesbian sister and her partner, while Harry becomes the favorite of a brokenhearted writer and successfully courts a gold-hearted female sex worker who never turns away street urchins asking for food or money. Harry's pursuits come to a head when he finds out one day that his mother, stabbed by his father when she tried to escape his clutches with Harry, survived the attack.

3—*Twilight Dancers*

Additional Language: Kapampangan
Year of Release: 2006
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Center Stage Productions
Cast: Tyron Perez, Cherry Pie Picache, Allen Dizon, Lauren Novero, Ana Capri, William Martinez, Arnel Ignacio, Joel Lamangan, Jerry Lopez Sineneng, Glaiza de Castro, JE Sison, IC Mendoza, Terence Baylon, Kris Martinez, Chester Nolledo, Dennis Recto, Dino Dizon, Marvin Bautista, Harold Montano, Christian Navesis, Johnron Tañada, Topher Castro, Randy Macapagal, Jack Gabaisen, Tyrone Trias, Kryven Lacson, Perry Escaño, Miggs Espina, Paolo Laroza, Nor Domingo, Marc Ubalde, Keith Cabañe, Armando A. Reyes, Jess Evardone, Robert Correa, Jon Romano, Lotlot Bustamante, Verene Mariano, Vernice Guenivir V. Mariano, Boy Pilapil, J.P. Beltran, Billy Balbastro, Frederick Peralta, Ricky Miranda, James Cooper, Ryan Forbes, Ian Reyes, Bruce San Juan

Rescued by Alfred from an abusive family, Dwight joins his friend to work as an erotic dancer. Since his wife disapproves of his profession, Dwight becomes instead a ballroom-dance instructor, despite the smaller income. Madam Loca, who's fond of rentboys, takes a liking to Dwight and hires him to entertain the murderous and decadent town mayor. Dwight tells his sponsor that he's saving up to be able to work overseas, so she conscripts him for a well-paying special assignment, which Alfred asks to join for extra income.

After *Macho Dancer* (1988) became Lino Brocka's most profitable overseas release, it became possible for his confrere Mel Chionglo, conscripting one of the film's scriptwriters, to propose another project along the same lines. The still-successful release of *Sibak* led to two other films also dealing with the lives of working-class male erotic dancers. The first essential point about these entries, despite some of their titles' attempts to resemble *MD*, is that they were sequels neither to Brocka's films nor to one another (Ricky Lee, *Messenger*, February 22, 2025), thus lending credence to Joel Lamangan's claim that his *Anak ng Macho Dancer* (*Son of Macho Dancer*, 2021) was the first actual sequel to the Brocka film. But a rewatch of the three Chionglo titles in succession also makes another point evident: the trilogy as a whole surpasses the Brocka film—admittedly not a tall order, considering how Brocka himself was still a few projects away from dispensing with conscienticizing foreign viewers, toward recapturing the local mass audience with a light-handed skills display, the likes of which have never been replicated. Nevertheless, the Chionglo films also perform the careful mission of reworking (a different creature from remaking) *MD*, more or less following its chronological presentation: *Sibak* introduces the social milieu where erotic dancers attempt to redefine family and friendship on workable terms, *Burlesk King* focuses on the personal circumstances of the typical worker's extensive sojourn, and *Twilight Dancers* inspects the sexual and political exploitation conducted by the very officials tasked with overseeing the welfare of the dispossessed. Where *MD* was hesitant in suspending its judgment of the seamier elements of the underworld, the trilogy embraces the entire gamut of so-called perverse sexualities and prohibitions, the better to cast in relief the instances when these options are exercised at the expense of Others. The universe they reveal is peopled by characters who're loud, theatrical, violent, inclined to camp and drama, with genuinely affecting backstories even when they function as villains, an acquiantanceship worth making when one is in need of intensive rehumanizing.

Lauriana

Year of Release: 2013
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Based on a story by Ricardo Jimenez
Producers: Film Development Council of the Philippines & BG Productions International
Cast: Bengs Garcia, Allen Dizon, Victor Basa, Adrian Cabido, JC Parker, Rich Asuncion, Anna Luna, Chanel Latorre, Angeli Bayani, Robert Correa, Marc Solis, Rico Barrera, May-i Fabros, Lili Montelibano, Jash Vilajim, Raffy Atar, Keyster Gatailan, Jill Palencia, Aries Lapus, Alberto Mateo, Vince Celis, Enrique Siqua, Allan Rhey Noble, Val Filomeno, Rupert John Lirio, Mac Mac, Mammeth Cabido, Ace Castro, Aljon Lozada

In the mid-1950s, a Philippine Constabulary unit led by Samuel Corazon sets up camp in a small barrio in Quezon Province. When not engaged in skirmishes with Communist rebels, the soldiers hang out at the *baylehan* or open-air nightspot, where they pay for taxi dancers to partner with. One of the latter, Lauriana, takes a shine to Samuel, who reciprocates her attraction. Carding, an orphan kid whose adoptive aunt has her hands full as a single mom with two biological kids of her own, grows close to the cohabitants, who treat him as their offspring. Carding realizes that Samuel loses his temper when he gets drunk and beats up Lauriana, although he regrets his cruelty and nurses her when his sobriety returns, confessing to Carding that he loves Lauriana more than his own wife. Although she came from further south and aimed to move northward to Manila after saving up enough money, Lauriana explains to Carding that Samuel witnessed his mother's unfaithfulness toward his father, for which his father killed himself. But when Samuel has to leave for a spell and uses his healthcare skills to ensure that Lauriana will be unable to stray, Carding realizes that Samuel's obsession is depraved and potentially murderous. The pity he feels for Lauriana never leaves him and affects his romantic relationships as a college student in Manila, grappling with the oppression of the fascist dictatorship and devoting his free time hunting down Samuel, who has apparently vanished.

Lauriana was the one instance that Mel Chionglo attempted period material as director, inasmuch as its flashforward is also rooted in the past. His design triumph should not be surprising to anyone, considering that the weaknesses of his previous period attempts as production designer (Ishmael Bernal's long-lost *Walang Katapusang Tag-araw* or *Endless Summer*, 1977; and Eddie Romero's *Aguila*, 1980) were budgetary in nature and had nothing to do with his always-admirable expertise. Less well-known, except to a few confidants, is his fondness for disruptive time frames within identifiably classical material: *Lauriana* moves from its post-World War II (or peak Cold War) setting to glimpse the childhood of Samuel, Carding's surrogate father, then leaps forward to Carding's own young adulthood during the Marcos Sr. dictatorship, without clarifying what exactly happened to the title character. The three generations of men with their own troubled interactions—Samuel and his father, then Carding and Samuel, ending with Carding attempting, sometimes unsuccessfully, to care for everyone around him except himself—present the traumatizing effects of what we have come to call toxic masculinities. Lauriana embodies the figure of the initially hopeful and well-intentioned citizen made to bear, unfairly at every turn, the cost of such unresolved conflicts. Samuel blames her for commodifying her body, as if women in early modernity had more acceptable means of earning a living, while Carding criticizes her decision to be complicit in her oppression, as if empathy should be considered an error in everyday conduct. The warning that *Lauriana* sounds out is unmistakable: we may have overcome the most malignant manifestation of masculinism in ridding ourselves of fascist dictatorship, but the memory of its predominance abides and constantly threatens to stage a return.

Iadya Mo Kami

English Title: *Deliver Us*
Additional Language: Ilocano
Year of Release: 2016
Director: Mel Chionglo
Screenwriter: Ricardo Lee
Producer: BG Productions International

Cast: Allen Dizon, Eddie Garcia, Aiko Melendez, Ricky Davao, Diana Zubiri, Rolando Inocencio, Allan Paule, Ana Feleo, Elora Españo, Tabs Sumulong, Carlo Juan, Brian Arda, Leo Sarmiento, Jess Evardone, James Pascual, James Alanis, Mark Nino Brinsuwela, Minerva Torrejos, Bongjon Jose

> Father Greg, a young priest, is transferred by his order to a far-flung diocese, where he learns that the small town is dominated by Julian, an overbearing landlord. He carefully navigates his way around the place, especially since Carla, with whom he had a child out of wedlock, followed him to work out their relationship. The womanizing Julian, whose tolerant wife also takes a shine to the priest, discovers Father Greg's secret and discusses the situation with him over drinks. When Julian is discovered murdered afterward, Father Greg's life takes a spin that he barely manages to handle.

Mel Chionglo's entire career proved most productive in his collaborations with Ricky Lee, yet his last film remains an enigmatic entry, since neither talent had exhibited any leaning toward the spiritual. Yet with *Iadya Mo Kami*, they managed to advance the strongest religious text in Philippine cinema, ironically by focusing on a cleric teetering on the precipice of moral collapse, more concerned about the human cost of his actuations than about his standing in heaven. Chionglo pulls off this feat by infusing the film with a strong undercurrent of melancholy, allowing the ravishing beauty of the mountain setting to do the necessary work of seducing the audience. Topnotch performances abound, with special attention to Allen Dizon's quietly authoritative delivery and Aiko Melendez's fire-and-ice reading of an unpredictable yet fearsomely secure political wife.

ROMY SUZARA

(2 films: 1981–2013)

Pepeng Shotgun

English Translation: *Shotgun Pepe*
Year of Release: 1981
Director: Romy Suzara [as Romy V. Suzara]
Screenwriter: Edgardo M. Reyes
From a story by Jojo Lapus
Producer: Sining Silangan
Cast: Rudy Fernandez, George Estregan, Tetchie Agbayani, Bob Soler, Tony Carreon, Dick Israel, Ruben Rustia, Mark Gil, Joey Padilla, Baby Delgado, Romeo Rivera, Baldo Marro, Bomber Moran, Lucita Soriano, Nello Nayo, Cesar Esguerra, Larry Silva, Ernie Forte, Turko Cervantes, Yolanda Luna, Buddy Salvador, Pons de Guzman, Bobby Oreo, Jay Grama, Franco Rivero, Bobby Clinton, Pat Salvador, SOS Daredevils

> For years, the Sablantes and the Medranos have bitterly feuded with each other. Their conflict worsens after Pepe Medrano accidentally kills Rex, a scion of the Sablantes. When Rex's brother Manolo is elected as mayor through the use of dirty tricks, he orders for the murder of Pepe's father. Driven by vengeance, both families refuse to rest until their blood feud has been settled.

Action, the most successful genre during the martial-law period, left only a few entries worth reconsidering, but this one remains exemplary for the subtlety of its critique of tyranny and its dignified sympathy for the persecuted. During the present, when even Hollywood films turn to computer-generated imagery effects as a matter of course, one could continue to marvel at a whole set of now-eroded skills in gunfight effects and martial-arts performances, all deployed with a grace and timing—and the occasional dash of humor—which today's post-production houses could draw years of lessons from. *Pepeng Shotgun* also represents the peak confluence of several otherwise always-competent practitioners, from its production company to its director, writer, and lead performer, but the entire enterprise is literally held together by its always-impressive editor, the late Ike Jarlego Jr. During a year when critics were divided between two arthouse samples and wondered what either seemed to have missed, the modest charms and unpretentious skills display of *PS* has endured more satisfyingly because it had the answer: a connection with its audience.

Tinik

English Translation: *Thorn*
Year of Release: 2013
Director: Romy Suzara [as Romy V. Suzara]
Screenwriter: Raymond Diamzon
"Based on a story by Romy V. Suzara & Jose Carreon, and screenplay by Emmanuel H. Borlaza" [per closing credits]
Producers: Red Sun Production & Film Development Council of the Philippines

Cast: Ricardo Cepeda, Lemuel Pelayo, Alexis Navarro, Bembol Roco, Lance Raymundo, Angeli Bayani, Menggie Cobarrubias, Le Chazz, Afi Africa, Antonette Garcia, Terence Baylon, Francis Rex, Jeremy Ian, Ahwel Paz, Cholo Teja, Rrnelle Delgado, Esrom Ferrero, Ma. Lourdes I. Grulla, Arman Vargas Saquido, Ruby Flores, Khen F. Aldovino, Ace Castro, Anna Mayer Piton, Clarenz Dann Toovey A. Dacumos, Ma. Danzhiela Teeney A. Dacumos, Leidee Ramos, Anthony Alfonso, Roberto Balicas, Roger Velilla, Rene Maglinte, Victor Taniegra, Gelmore Hydia, Esrom Ferrer, Jasper Santos, Bryan Geollegue, Aldren Sorima, Raymond Diamzon

> After Mike's partner is killed in trying to protect him from a homophobic attack, he vows to focus on his fashion-design activities. While jogging with friends, he notices Danny, a young man coaching some basketball players. Mike takes charge of sponsoring the neighborhood game of Danny's team, which results in Danny's estranged father reconciling with his son. Although acknowledging Danny's heterosexual preference, he hires the young man as his live-in driver and finances his return to school. He also coaches his star model, Alexis, even while being aware that she lives with an elderly sugar daddy. Although Danny initiates sex with Mike, he finds himself drawn to Alexis and explains to Mike that he aspires toward a conventional family with kids. When Alexis's benefactor leaves for a foreign trip, Mike tips off another of her admirers so he could pay her a visit. The admirer's visit results in violent complications that wind up involving Danny.

One might have to approach *Tinik* with the standard caution reserved for queer texts made by straight folk, although the time may yet arrive when the equivalent license granted feminist discourse—that nonwomen can participate and even excel in it—might not be long in coming, if Philippine (and global) culture continues being fortunate. What will of course remain mostly inaccessible will be the depiction of the internal dynamics at play in nonnormative desire, which is why the outstanding samples of queer films by straight men (e.g. Paul Verhoeven's *The Fourth Man*, 1983, or Ōshima Nagisa's *Taboo*, 1999) don't even try, and instead use the opportunity of utilizing so-called perverse sexuality as a means of shedding light on Otherness. The equivalent local sample would be *Celso Ad. Castillo's Totoy Boogie* (1980, the full title actually incorporating the filmmaker's name), although the box-office disappointment of that entry, followed by underachievements by genre filmmakers, trained critical attention on "authentic" queer films by queer directors; one must also stress that this observation applies to gay-male films, rather than lesbian-themed works, made by straight-male Filipinos, since women and gay-male directors generally have a better run in tackling concerns over genders and sexualities. *Tinik* for its part does not aspire to metonymic commentary and confines itself to the expected humanist pleas for tolerance and understanding. But Romy Suzara was completing a decades-long career as a commercially successful practitioner, and applies his considerable accumulation of skills, plus empathy for the queer personalities who populate movie circles, in devising an impassioned and class-conscious drama centered on a successful fashion designer and the earnest and still-maturing out-of-school youth he falls for. He already knew from familiarity with *noir* material not to rely on virtue signaling and provides both lover and object with problematic decisions, with the poignancy of their final image of togetherness representing an ironic though well-earned triumph all its own.

PEQUE GALLAGA

(4 films: 1982–2005)

Oro, Plata, Mata

English Title: *Gold, Silver, Death*
Additional Languages: Hiligaynon, Spanish, Japanese
Year of Release: 1982
Director: Peque Gallaga
Screenwriter: Jose Javier Reyes
From stories by Peque Gallaga, Mario Taguiwalo, Conchita Castillo
Producer: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines
Cast: Cherie Gil, Sandy Andolong, Liza Lorena, Fides Cuyugan-Asensio, Manny Ojeda, Maya Valdes, Lorli Villanueva, Joel Torre, Ronnie Lazaro, Abbo de la Cruz, Mely Mallari, Mary Walter, Agustin Gatia, Arbie Antonio, Kuh Ledesma, Gigi Dueñas, Dwight Gaston, Jimmy Fabregas, Mona Lisa, Manny Castañeda, Ben Morro, Benny Warden

> To evade the arrival of Japanese forces fighting in World War II, the Ojedas and the Lorenzos—two wealthy clans based in Negros—leave the city and head to a provincial mansion. As the war rages on, the families then flee to a nearby forest where they try to maintain their affluent lifestyle. But even as they hide from the war, it does not take long before they experience its nightmarish effects.

Peque Gallaga had been taken to task by mostly academe-based politically concerned commentators for his bravura evocation of the plight of the sugar gentry during World War II. This would be the equivalent of the controversy that befell a 1958 novel by Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo* (*The Leopard*)—a fate that was the opposite of Luchino Visconti's 1963 film adaptation: the polarized politics of the time proved resistant to accommodating a narrative that focused on the elite, no matter how critical the perspective was. Based on the fireside tales recounted by Gallaga's elders, *Oro, Plata, Mata* depicts the disruption of a landowning clan's rural idyll brought about by the incursion of marauding Japanese soldiers, with the mortal conflict actually stemming from the uprising of the family's exploited workers. Lost in this recollection of theme and controversy is the movie's singular cineastic triumph: a sensuous and orgiastic fusion of period detail, natural wonder, and grand human folly—with masterly cinematographic handling by Rody Lacap—that had never been witnessed before or since in anybody else's debut project. About three decades later, Gallaga and his co-director Lore Reyes would revisit the *OPM* locale with the movie's lead actress, Cherie Gil, and yield the wise and charming *Sonata* (2013), quite literally an "art film" in the best sense of the word.

Virgin Forest

Additional Languages: Kapampangan, Ibanag, Chinese, Spanish, Portuguese
Year of Release: 1985
Director: Peque Gallaga
Screenwriter: Uro Q. dela Cruz
From a story by T.E. Pagaspas
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Sarsi Emmanuelle, Miguel Rodriguez, Abel Jurado, Arbie Antonio, Jed Arboleda, Bruce Fanger, Bob Zwanziger, Ama Quiambao, Peque Gallaga, Turko, Crispin Medina, Leo Martinez, Ray Ventura, Pepito Bosch, Cris Daluz, E.A. Rocha, Rolando Tinio, Roy Lachica

> It is 1901 and as the Philippines's Spanish colonizers fall, American forces begin to take over. In a remote town, three young people—Chayong, a Chinese businessman's kept woman; Alfonsito, an *insular* (native-born Spaniard); and Alipio, a lowly fisherman—are taken prisoner by Filipino mercenaries conspiring with two American officers who plan to capture President Emilio Aguinaldo. The three manage to escape but they soon realize that their differences make them vulnerable to enemies from all sides.

The backlash against Peque Gallaga for the unexpected success of *Oro, Plata, Mata* (*Gold, Silver, Death*, 1982) started with the far more ambitious *Virgin Forest*, which holds the distinction of showcasing arguably the best work of the peerless cinematographer Conrado Baltazar. The film lent itself to controversial responses in its deliberately ambivalent approach to Philippine historical events leading up to the capture of Emilio Aguinaldo (himself a problematic figure) by US colonizing forces, assisted by allegedly mercenary natives. The developments are observed by a trio of outcasts—a mestizo, a fisherman, and a runaway sex slave, who insists on her womanly prerogatives in the face of constant bickering between the two males, each of whom claims her for himself. The trio's interactions blatantly convey the allegory where the then-emergent nation struggles to reconcile native and foreign forces. The resultant threesome is novel and titillating enough to overpower the real-life incidents. But the years since the movie's release, with several disappointing attempts at determining the value of Aguinaldo's contribution, have proved that *Virgin Forest*'s history-from-below perspective has been the only workable approach so far.[42]

[42] Lore Reyes, who subsequently became Peque Gallaga's co-director after the latter recovered from a major health problem, was production manager on several Gallaga films including this one. He provided clarification on several false claims by various internet-era authorities, of which mention must be made of two egregious ones: first, the declaration, supposedly issued by Gallaga himself, that he was present during the shooting in 1982 of the climactic scene of Ishmael Bernal's *Himala*—a physical impossibility to which I can also attest, inasmuch as I was then-employed at the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, since the ECP had scheduled the production of Gallaga's and Bernal's films to run concurrently so they could be released around the same time; second, that the dialogue of *Virgin Forest* contained, after Kapampangan, a high percentage of Ilokano. Familiar with the language, Reyes (who provided the list of languages in the film) said that not a single word could be heard except for the ones that the language shared with Kapampangan.

Scorpio Nights

Additional Language: Hiligaynon
Year of Release: 1985
Director: Peque Gallaga
Screenwriter: Uro Q. dela Cruz
From a story by T.E. Pagaspas & Rommel Bernardino
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Orestes Ojeda, Daniel Fernando, Anna Marie Gutierrez, Eugene Enriquez, Amanda Amores, Mike Austria, Pen Medina, Uro Q. dela Cruz, Lore Reyes, Apol Salonga, Caloy Balasbas, Carlito Abrasia, Jed Arboleda, Dwight Gaston, Erin John Martir, Angelo Castro Jr., Arbie Antonio, Chuck Ontal, Rommel Bernardino, Madeleine Gallaga, Peque Gallaga, George Estregan

> Danny, a student boarder left in the city during summer break, becomes infatuated with the wife of a security guard who lives right below the room he is renting. When the guard returns and has sex with his still-asleep missus, Danny uses a hole on the floor to take a peek. One evening, he pretends to be the guard and succeeds in bedding the wife, who realizes someone else had touched her when her husband later gets with her. She then surprises Danny the next time he gets into her bed, and they are soon thrust into an illicit affair whose passion keeps escalating, oblivious to the dangers that lie ahead.

Controversy continued to hound Peque Gallaga since his distinctive debut, *Oro, Plata, Mata* (*Gold, Silver, Death*, 1982); this time it proceeded from the implicit support he supposedly lent the Marcos dictatorship by providing the regime with "decadent" entertainment in the form of this specific sex film for the government's censorship-exempt venue. The historical paradox of course is that in all genuinely fascist systems, it is the government, not the opposition, that denounces decadence. Since *Scorpio Nights* actually critiques the socio-economic deprivation that results in the depravity it depicts, its very existence winds up belying its critics' moralistic impulse. One might wish for a more subversive handling directed at the heart of religious righteousness, which after all is the premise that unifies the movie's objectors, whatever their political position. However, that approach would have aligned the movie with comedy-inflected Western pornographic-film tradition, and might have caused the product to be dismissed entirely out of hand. *SN* instead opted to break new ground in its own way, wherein an erotic text intended for mainstream release contained a combined meat-and-money shot toward the film's close.[43] Evidence of the high regard for the movie among cineastes can be seen in

[43] In preparing an obituary for Peque Gallaga, I inquired about an incident, sensational during the time, where he denounced a number of specific cultural and academic personalities during the *Scorpio Nights* premiere at the Manila Film Center. The outburst, as it turned out, resulted from an attempt by an MFC official to cut out scenes from the film despite the fact that the venue was censorship-exempt. The encounter between director and official, who was also a film critic and professor, resulted in a violent scuffle and possibly accounted for the downgrading of the film by evaluation bodies, including the then-only film critics circle. See "My Peque Gallaga Interview" in *Amauteurish* (May 9, 2020), amauteurish.com/2020/05/09/my-peque-gallaga-interview/.

how its spin-offs have been handled: *Scorpio Nights 2* (1999) was directed by Erik Matti and *Scorpio Nights 3* (2022, more a reboot than a sequel) by Lawrence Fajardo, Gallaga's fellow Bacolodians and former mentees who each have their own canonical entries in this listing; between either, a sex-and-politics vehicle, titled *Sseommeotaim* (*Summertime*, 2001), was made by Korean filmmaker Park Jae-ho as a tribute to *SN*.

Pinoy/Blonde

Year of Release: 2005
Director: Peque Gallaga
Screenwriters: Peque Gallaga & Lore Reyes
Producer: Unitel Pictures
Cast: Jeffrey Quizon, Boy 2 Quizon, Iza Calzado, Jaime Fabregas, Ricky Davao, Eddie Garcia, Manny Castañeda, Noel Trinidad, Michael de Mesa, Cherry Pie Picache, Gina Alajar, Ryan Eigenmann, Gabby Eigenmann, Ian Veneracion, Richard Gutierrez, Joel Torre, Richard Gomez, Tessie Tomas, Gardo Versoza, Wilma Doesnt, Ara Mina, Sherilyn Reyes, Tirso Cruz III, Peque Gallaga, Gigette Reyes, Aljon Jimenez, Bobby Andrews, Chubi del Rosario, Symon Soler, Jay Herrera, Roxlee, Manilyn Reynes, Dolly Sinay Monares, Cherie Gil, Ara Mina, Nadine Wischer, Liza Lorena, Giselle G. Töngi, Mark Gil, Tonton Gutierrez, Boots Anson-Roa, Vandolph, Gina Alajar, Rita Avila, Tony Gapo Marbella, Boy Salvador, Andre Jalandoni, Nicolette Bell, Ron Capindig, Krisma Maclang, Lawrence Fajardo, Wanggo Gallaga

> Andrew and Conrad are film-obsessed friends who keep quoting lines from their favorite films and debate the merits of the Philippines's two major auteurs. Andrew, who dyed his hair blond, upholds Lino Brocka's social conscience, while Conrad prefers Ishmael Bernal's analytical detachment. Conrad finds out that his gangsterish Uncle Tong was injured in an accident and pays him a visit. Tong instructs him to go to Hotel Maricopa with a package, get whatever they'll hand him, and take it to a video shop. Andrew insists on accompanying him, but what they find is an abandoned drug lair. They hide when they hear men's voices and soon realize a shootout is taking place. After everyone leaves, they find a bag and take it—only to hide again when some of the thugs return. They find themselves in a room where dead bodies are dumped, but when Conrad sneaks out to look for help, he's caught by the villains, who delay executing him because an antidrug politician is staging a moralist rally just outside the hotel. One of the younger gangsters enters the room they hid in, discovers Andrew, and engages in a conversation on filmmaking.

Peque Gallaga apparently made *Pinoy/Blonde* as a lark, an indulgence he was entitled to—and demonstrated he was cooler than any of the millennial directors, most of whom were young enough to be his grandkids. The even better news is that many of his cast members were either actual performers or their children from the same period, all of them attuned to the mix of suspense, comedy, and the subtle social commentary lurking in the material: although the long-running debate between the main characters ultimately upholds the primacy of Lino Brocka, the

In American pornographic-film practice, meat and money shots are considered genre-defining elements—at least until the emergence of "couples" or made-for-women material. The meat shot is one where male, female, or intersex genitalia can be visibly discerned, preferably in copulation. The money shot is taken when the male ejaculates, meant as documentary proof of the performer's real-life engagement in the sex act. Those inclined to look further into these ideas are now fortunate to have a large number of scholarly titles; an excellent introductory reading would be Linda Williams's *Hard Core: Power, Pleasure, and the "Frenzy of the Visible,"* University of California Press, 1989.

satirical edge makes unmistakable Gallaga's affection for Ishmael Bernal. The generational gap between Gallaga and contemporary film appreciators (who were, truth be told, generally gunning for Brocka's international stature) definitely accounts for their cold reception to *P/B*, exacerbated by Gallaga's refusal to sweet-talk his own critical contemporaries. But his fondness for young talent shines through nevertheless, both in his casting virtually a small town's worth of actors and in featuring several audiovisual excerpts made by up-and-comers. The narrative takes inspiration from the once-edgy stoner-buddy comedies initiated as early as the 1970s by Cheech & Chong, with cinema replacing the highs induced by marijuana. And if the friends look like they could be brothers, that's because they are (in fact, another sibling, Vandolph, is also featured in a bit role); the larger significance is Gallaga's acknowledgment of their late father Dolphy, whom he once codirected (with Lore Reyes) in the affable fantasy epic *Once Upon a Time* (1987), and who remains the country's only star-level actor-producer who still has to be acknowledged with a National Artist recognition. *P/B* thus endures not just as a pleasant diversion from the greatest film stylist the country had ever produced, but also as his incalculable reminder to never overlook the legacy of the rest of the medium's practitioners.

PEQUE GALLAGA & LORE REYES

(3 films: 1988–2013)

1—*Tiyanak*

English Translation: *Demon Foundling*
Year of Release: 1988
Directors: Peque Gallaga & Lore Reyes [as Lorenzo A. Reyes]
Screenwriters: Peque Gallaga, Don Escudero, Lore Reyes
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Janice de Belen, Lotlot de Leon, Ramon Christopher, Mary Walter, Chuckie Dreyfus, Carmina Villaroel, Rudolph Yaptinchay, Smokey Manaloto, Zorayda Sanchez, Bella Flores, Suzanne Gonzales, Betty Mae Piccio

> Christy, together with her boyfriend Jojo, visits her sister Julie who has become hysterical after suffering three miscarriages. One night, Christy finds a baby in an abandoned home. An excited Julie immediately adopts the child despite objections from her family. Little does she know that whenever it gets dark, the infant she has taken in is not as innocent as it appears to her.

2—*Aswang*

English Translation: *Viscera-Sucking Shape-Shifter*
Year of Release: 1992
Directors: Peque Gallaga & Lore Reyes
Screenwriters: Pen Medina & Jerry Lopez Sineneng
From a story by Peque Gallaga, Don Escudero, Lore Reyes
Producers: Regal Films & Good Harvest
Cast: Alma Moreno, Manilyn Reynes, Aiza Seguerra, Berting Labra, Janice de Belen, Joey Marquez, Aljon Jimenez, Leo Martinez, Dick Israel, John Estrada, Pen Medina, Rey Solo, Eva Ramos, Orestes Ojeda, Gigette Reyes, Romy Romulo, Lilia Cuntapay, Edison Ang, Mar Mojica, Rudy Castillo, Totoy Magno, Jun Basilio

> In the rural town of Talisay, a series of nocturnal attacks terrorizes the townspeople, the latest victim being the randy husband of a pregnant woman, seduced by a beauty who transforms after luring him. When a home in Manila is gang-invaded and the residents killed for the owner's store of wealth, the daughter and her nanny are taken by the famiy driver to his hometown, which happens to be Talisay. The family's security guard is identified in media reports as the gang's tipster, so he suggests that they search for the survivors in the driver's rural neighborhood. The place's *aswang*, who's also an outsider residing in a hut as an old woman, picks out as much as she can of the newcomers as well as the town residents.

Audiences were lured in by Regal Films' ridiculously catchy tagline "Oh my god, *ang anak ni Janice* [the spawn of Janice]"—a canny erasure of the distinction between character and performer. The presentation they experienced similarly toyed with the easily blurred boundaries between the film world and real life: Who wouldn't pick up any infant foundling? Who wouldn't take offense at malevolent insinuations about one's own baby? And who wouldn't be terrorized by a flesh-hungry monster snacking on moviegoers, even as one watches the onscreen bloodbath as an actual moviegoer? Beyond this affirmation of spectatorial pleasure, *Tiyanak* purveyed a then-

ahead-of-its-time call to ecological responsibility and, via a few subtle stabs at gender exclusion, devised a plot where all the protagonists—from imp to adoptive mother to vanquishing grandmother, plus shaman-chorus—were women. In terms of generic strategy, the movie chose to lean on comedy although it was founded on melodrama. This hybrid of otherwise distinct commercial categories upholds a principle that typifies some of the best—and most of the worst—commercial outings in cinema; called genre pastiche, the approach relies on a process of accretion in which several styles, mostly associated with successful pop-culture products, are brought together in an eclectic manner. This mode of practice exposes the filmmaker's orientation, and all too often we see texts where political material is handled seriously while producer-imposed requirements are given slapdash treatment. Fortunately, Peque Gallaga and Lore Reyes are true-blue movie buffs, always willing to meet new genre challenges, and making sure to devote as much screen time as possible to audience engagement; not surprisingly, horror filmmaking became their preferred area of specialization. A few years after *Tiyanak*, they reprised the eponymously titled episode in the second (of a still-continuing) *Shake, Rattle & Roll* omnibus series. The fuller version suffers from the expected narrative longueurs as well as the necessary demonizing of Others, but the interests in this instance are once more reflexive: Metro Manila tabloids were rife with stories of drug-fueled home-invasion massacres and *manananggal* sightings in slum areas, building up to the first presidential election after the dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. the same month that the film was released. *Aswang* turned on these historical resonances (hearkening back to the possibly hyperbolic claims of Edward Lansdale[44]), hitched to the otherworldly, borderline-abject beauty of a still youthful-looking Alma Moreno.

Sonata

Additional Languages: Hiligaynon, French, Italian, Czech
Year of Release: 2013
Directors: Peque Gallaga & Lore Reyes
Screenwriter: Wanggo Gallaga
Producers: Film Development Council of the Philippines, Central Digital Lab, Wildsound Studios
Cast: Cherie Gil, Richard Gomez, Chino Jalandoni, Joshua Pineda, Chart Motus, Madie Gallaga, Dante Amaguin, Angel Lobaton, Tanya Lopez, Edouard Garcia, John Gilbert Arceo, Ricky Gallaga, Andrei Jalandoni, Manny Montelibano, Jack Triño, Louie Dormido, Milton Dionzon, Guillermo Gaston, Rudy Reveche, Pamela Henares-Jaladoni, Teresa Estrada, Jonathan Lorenzo Lindaya, Johnrick Ylosorio, Josh Motus, Raingo del Prado, Bull Dilag, Ricky Davao (voice)

[44] Edward Lansdale, a psy-war operative for the Central Intelligence Agency, alleged in his book *In the Midst of Wars: An American's Mission to Southeast Asia* (Fordham University Press, 1972) that he undermined people's support for Communist Huk rebels by kidnapping recruits and sympathizers and hanging them from trees after draining their blood; the natives supposedly concluded that any *aswang* would be on the prowl for antigovernment insurgents and avoided providing assistance thereafter. In *Aswang*, the monstrous creature takes on some properties of the *manananggal* by feeding on a fetus while still in its mother's womb, but also exhibits werecreatural properties in stalking and attacking people of either gender and is ultimately destroyed, vampire-style, by sunlight.

When her voice fails her, Regina Cadena retires to her hometown in Bacolod in order to avoid the celebrity limelight. She explains to people who inquire about her condition that the operations performed on her throat only worsened her vocal condition and that she may never be able to sing professionally again. Her contemporary Cora, who'd been assisting the Cadena family since her younger years, goes to the Cadena residence to help Regina restore order to her affairs, since the diva became debilitated by alcohol; she brings her son Jonjon in order to keep him away from her estranged husband. Jonjon makes the acquaintance of Ping, an older kid who's the son of a tenant family. With Ping's help, Jonjon takes an interest in the exotic world that Regina came from, brings her treats when he notices she likes them, and fixes the mementoes she wanted to discard. Amused by the kids' attention, Regina explains opera and, in effect, her life, to them, renames them after famous characters, and eventually makes plans to stage for them an aria from Antonin Dvořák's lyric opera *Rusalka* (1901).

Sonata was a passion project of Cherie Gil, who passed away about a decade after its release. Its narrative resembled and, in a sense, reversed, the global trajectory of her experience, when she left a fairly successful career as a character actor in the late 1980s to be a housewife to Israeli violinist Rony Rogoff; her return two decades later coincided with the coming-of-age of digital-format independent film production, endowing her with several opportunities to flaunt her striking middle-age grandeur and upgraded performative ability. As seemingly further preparation for *Sonata*, she performed the role of the elderly, vocally busted Maria Callas in two English-language runs of Terrence McNally's *Master Class* (1995). The film takes place in the idyllic manor in the midsection of Peque Gallaga's full-length solo debut feature *Oro, Plata, Mata* (*Gold, Silver, Death*, 1982), where Gil played the lead character's rebellious girlfriend who elopes with a gang of bandits. The connection is accentuated with Gil being the first major character to appear as well as the one who delivers the final topical statement, after having ironically gone off the deep end. The contrast with *Sonata* is more than just budgetary, with *OPM* being set in two additional locales; where the house is meant to be a refuge for the landed gentry, away from the violence of war (which nevertheless insistently approaches) and the savagery of the wilderness, both induced by the characters' excessive privilege, in *Sonata* it functions as a ghostly, conflicted presence, bestowing Regina with the healing she seeks—but only her and no one else. The two tykes whom her character elects to facilitate her re-entry into the society she abandoned in the distant past, provide her with fulfillment and heartbreak with admirable aplomb, with the rest of the cast following suit. But the movie remained hers to claim, and she makes sure that no frame she appears in is wasted, with whatever vanity we might suspect on her part totally earned by the magnanimity she displayed.

MARYO J. DE LOS REYES

(7 films: 1982–2003)

Schoolgirls

Year of Release: 1982
Director: Maryo J. de los Reyes
Screenwriter: Jake Tordesillas
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Snooky Serna, Dina Bonnevie, Maricel Soriano, Edu Manzano, Joel Alano, Edgar Mande, Mitch Valdes, Anita Linda, Louella, Benggot Pe Benito, Melvi Pacubas, Mary Walter, Balot, Matimtiman Cruz, Alma Lerma, Domingo Landicho, Estrella Antonio, Manny Castañeda, Rina Peredo, Willie Natividad, Donna Sanchez, Sandy Andolong, Ricky Davao, Soxy Topacio, Eric Borbon, Ed Villapol, Tessie Tomas, Lito Pimentel

> Three teenage girls contend with the various challenges and constraints of college life while parrying the insults of mean girls. Margot insists on her prerogative to play the field even after a squarish young professor takes an interest in her. Sora decides to drop an abusive boyfriend when an apparently well-fixed folk singer pursues her. Matthew is frustrated in courting Margot so he confides in tomboyish Ella, who thinks no guy will notice her because of her homely appearance. Tet, their former teacher, acts as their life coach but also has difficulty in maintaining a partner because of her high standards.

Unexpectedly banned by the militarized censors board when it was submitted for approval in late 1981, *Schoolgirls* may be seen as a victim of circumstances beyond its control. Regal Films was still in the government's crosshairs after the brouhaha over Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night*'s disallowment from participating in the Berlin International Film Festival led to bad press overseas for the regime. The "dry run" for the Manila International Film Festival was raising expectations for a liberal spell (meaning, among other things, no censorship), so the country's right-wing agents desperately needed one last show of force on the cultural front. The fact that the film turned out to be a slightly risqué though essentially wholesome romp, more of a sequel to Joey Gosiengfiao's *Underage* (1980) than *Underage Too* (1991, also directed by Maryo J. de los Reyes), may have led to the all-around dismissal of the presentation, aside from the obvious conclusion that the female Regal Babies had a longer-running marketability potential than their male counterparts. Yet *Schoolgirls* has endured better than it had any right to. De los Reyes's immersion in the teen wing of progressive Philippine theater, complemented by his application of film techniques in his university teaching, enabled him to unfurl a complex, class-crossed, women-positive, and gender-evolved narrative with a rowdy bunch of quirky characters and a contagious and inexhaustible sense of joie de vivre.

Diosa

English Translation: *Goddess*
Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 1982
Director: Maryo J. de los Reyes
Screenwriters: Soxy Topacio, Khryss Adalia, Jake Tordesillas
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Lorna Tolentino, Lloyd Samartino, Alfie Anido, Tita Munoz, Jenny Ramirez, J. Antonio Carreon, Ed Villapol, Venchito Galvez, Francisco Cruz, Willie Natividad, Donna Sanchez, Alberto Villaruz, Raoul Casado

> During the colonial occupation, a Spanish soldier encounters a bejeweled *diwata* or nature spirit. After they make out, he steals her ornaments. In the present time, Don Jaime, tycoon-owner of Alegre Amalgamated, writes a note and keeps it in a box before killing himself. He cedes the business to his elder son Jun and a 30-hectare rural property to the younger Teddy. Jun begins a casual affair with Katrina, whom he picks up in a disco, and calls off his impending marriage. Meanwhile Teddy, while on research in his hometown for his thesis in anthropology, pursues the origin of a legend in the aptly named Barrio Alitaptap, where a forest king supposedly slapped his promiscuous daughter and her scattered gemstones turned into fireflies.

Of all his attempts at paying tribute to classical-era film trends, *Diosa* is Maryo J.'s only effort to reconnect with period fantasy, though still rooted in the present and using the past only as background material. It's necessarily a mixed bag, but contains evidence of Regal Films matriarch "Mother" Lily Monteverde's all-out support, considering her even more nostalgic affinity for old (though still not entirely then-lost) cinema. But what made the film too easy to dismiss when it came out renders it indispensable to the present, when its major creatives have passed away. Although we can be grateful that Gregorio Fernandez's *Prinsipe Teñoso* (1954) has been preserved, nothing else of its kind remains. And now that our scholars and audiences might finally be capable of welcoming queer-camp appreciation, *Diosa* will be ready for its closeup. A forest fairy unapologetic about soliciting carnal pleasure from unsuspecting mortals who're sometimes too eager to claim everything she possesses, capable of wreaking epochal havoc when men overstep their privilege? Plus she's able to formulate a critique of colonization and spare anyone able to comprehend and placate her rage. Her predominance has been long overdue.

Bagets

English Translation: *Pubescent Kids*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Maryo J. de los Reyes
Screenwriter: Jake Tordesillas
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: William Martinez, J.C. Bonnin, Herbert Bautista, Raymond Lauchengco, Aga Muhlach, Eula Valdez, Jobelle Salvador, Chanda Romero, Yayo Aguila, Baby Delgado

Arnel is burdened by his family's wishes for him. Tonton has been a high school repeater for the past four years. Adie falls in love with his neighbor even if she is married. And while Toffee is neglected by his actress mother, Gilbert deals with a philandering father. As these five friends finish their last year in high school, they undergo a fun-filled but ultimately meaningful journey toward adulthood.

Youthfulness has held an overwhelming universal fascination in the photographic arts, supposedly because we see our reflections fixed in the artwork at a moment that is always past, even as we continue to approach mortality. In fact the formula that fueled the *Bagets* juggernaut had already been in place as early as the 1960s, with Sampaguita Pictures effectively commodifying it by casting the Stars '66 group members in so-called smorgasbord projects. Ishmael Bernal initially demonstrated how to devise narratives that successfully maintain multiple-character lines of action and resist depicting singular heroes (or dual heroes and anti-heroes) for Seven Stars' Siyete Belyas and Regal Films' Regal Babies casts. After a few film exercises of his own, Maryo J. de los Reyes was primed to handle Viva Films' so-called Bagets batch: his first film, *High School Circa '65* (1979), signalled his willingness to deploy a large circle of characters, while his disco series with Nora Aunor (five films starting with *Annie Batungbakal* in 1979) developed his mastery in handling feel-good musicals. The plot of *Bagets* does not resolve into anything out of the ordinary, but the celebratory mood—drawn from an appealing mélange of pastel designs, New-Wave music, MTV-style montage, gay lingo, and freshly scrubbed second-generation film personalities—provided a much-needed momentary diversion from the then-gathering anti-dictatorship storm, and still proves irresistible today.[45]

Kaya Kong Abutin ang Langit

English Translation: *I Can Reach Heaven*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Maryo J. de Los Reyes
Screenwriter: Jake Tordesillas
Producer: VH Films

[45] Terminological notes in order of mention: **A.** Siyete Belyas literally means "Seven Beauties," although *belyas* in Tagalog is also a euphemism for sex workers. The compound term *belyas-artes* is literally "fine arts" (from the Spanish), but with the alternative meaning of *belyas*, it could also denote "indecent or vulgar conduct." **B.** The other four Nora Aunor disco films are: *Bongga Ka 'Day* (*You're Fab, Sis*, 1980), *Totoo Ba ang Tsismis?* (*Is the Rumor True?*), *Ibalik ang Swerti* (*Restore the Luck*), and *Rock and Roll* (all 1981). Subsequent non-disco-themed Maryo J. films with Nora Aunor were *Minsan, May Isang Ina* (*Once There Was a Mother*, 1983), the "Querubin: Maria Leonora Theresa" episode of *Mga Kwento ni Lola Basyang* ("Cherubim" in *The Tales of Grandma Basyang*, 1985), *I Love You Mama, I Love You Papa* (1986), and *Naglalayag* (*Silent Passage*, 2004). **C.** The director had possibly the highest hip quotient among local filmmakers during his heyday, as evident even in the string of wordplay that *bagets* begets: originally a diminutive of *bagito* or fresh teen, its configuration was deconstructed in order to generate several variations. Hence from an amalgamation of *bago* (new) and *gets* (to pick up or acquire), period slang proffered *nagets* (already obtained), *pagets* (deluded about one's attractiveness), *lagets* (constantly available, with *lagi* contracted for the first syllable), and *forgets* (no longer desirable); the same year in fact yielded *Erpat Kong Forgets* (*My No-Longer Desirable Father*, dir. J. Erastheo Navoa), which featured the most popular of the *Bagets* actors.

Cast: Maricel Soriano, Gina Alajar, Charito Solis, Liza Lorena, Ronaldo Valdez, Jaime Fabregas, Michael de Mesa, William Martinez, Arlene Muhlach, Francis Martinez

> Having grown up poor, Clarissa ardently desires to live in luxury after being exposed to the lavish lifestyle of her godmother, Monina Gardamonte. The girl's ambitions eventually consume her after Therese, Monina's daughter, dies. Clarissa manipulates Monina to adopt her so that she can be the new heiress of the Gardamonte fortune. Driven by greed and eager to turn her back on her past, a heartless Clarissa will stop at nothing to reach her goals.

The downtrodden woman who finds her own inner strength and discovers the pleasures of excesses archetypically reserved for men sets herself up for the worst kind of tragic comeuppance. The appeal of melodrama is in providing ordinary mortals like us, the movie attendees, with a handle on the process, able to identify with the misbehaving heroine without having to suffer her inevitably unhappy ending. The hard-knock personal background of former child star Maricel Soriano provided some intertextual credibility in her rags-to-riches-to-dust role here (and no spoilers actually: the movie begins with the end). Along the way the captive viewer will be treated to the spectacle of a nice young girl turned into an awful older-than-her-years woman, desperately rejecting her past and mouthing lines that mingled with the more serious slogans against a dictatorship already in decline: "*Ayoko ng masikip! Ayoko ng walang tubig! Ayoko ng mabaho! Ayoko ng walang pagkain! Ayoko ng putik!* (I hate cramped spaces! I hate running out of water! I hate smelly places! I hate going hungry! I hate filth!)." Maryo J. de los Reyes had an unusually productive year in 1984, with an often-overlooked title also worth tracking down, *Anak ni Waray vs. Anak ni Biday*, produced as a tribute to the First Golden Age studios of LVN and Sampaguita, and channeling the spirit of musical-comedy expert Manuel Conde; it features the lead stars in *Kaya Kong Abutin ang Langit* (plus movie queens Nida Blanca and Gloria Romero as the title characters) in fine mettle.

Anak ni Waray vs. Anak ni Biday

English Translation: *Southern Lady's Daughter vs. Northern Lady's Daughter*
Additional Languages: Ilocano & Waray
Year of Release: 1984 / Color with B&W
Director: Maryo J. de los Reyes
Screenwriter: Jake Tordesillas
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Nida Blanca, Gloria Romero, Snooky Serna, Maricel Soriano, Nestor de Villa, Luis Gonzales, Gabby Concepcion, William Martinez, Chichay, Bella Flores, Zeny Zabala, Rez Cortez, Louella, Debraliz, Opalyn Forster, Donna Sanchez, German Moreno, Ike Lozada, Lillian Laing, Dencio Padilla, Balot, Flora Gasser

> In the 1950s, two couples—Biday and Eli, and Idang and Narcing—are declared co-winners in a dance contest. Biday, an Ilocana, and Idang, a Waray, marry their respective partners and become next-door neighbors in a middle-class subdivision. Both couples have daughters (Susie and Amy respectively) who are courted by Eddie and Joey, while Eli and Narcing fool around with Carol and Patricia, two rich widows. Bella and Zeny, the widows' daughters, have set their sights on Eddie and Joey, so it's up to the married mothers and their daughters to win back their men.

Anak ni Waray vs. Anak ni Biday opens with a dedication to the founders of LVN and Sampaguita, the two most popular studios of the First Golden Age of Philippine cinema (roughly coinciding with the 1950s). LVN could boast of having the most gifted local auteur of comedies and musicals in the person of Manuel Conde (as well as the period's master of melodrama in Gregorio Fernandez), but Sampaguita was the country's counterpart of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Studios, which claimed to have "more stars than there are in heaven." *AnW v AnB* may be seen as nothing more than a compendium of standard musical and comic (and occasionally fantastic) elements associated with its sources of inspiration, executed in top-flight cineliterate fashion: nostalgic appreciators could have a field day identifying the procession of references evoked in the characters' names, not to mention having the elderly but still-sprightly couples, along with the *femmes fatales*, portrayed by actual stars of the time. The fathers could only initially afford to ride a tricycle to work, then upgrade to a *calesa* (horse-drawn carriage) to rush their parturient wives to hospital, thus signaling the filmmaker's intent to provide a critique of gentrification; but then the horse proceeds to comment on the action and secures another throwback to old-time cinema (by way of *komiks* material). Already known for his handling of multiply performed scenes right from the start of his filmmaking career, Maryo J. de los Reyes piles on additional skills accumulated from his disco series (mostly starring Nora Aunor), orchestrates frenetic quarrels and chases, and stages arch exchanges undergirded by familial warmth amid comic confusion. *AnW v AnB* never steps beyond the gay old time it celebrates, but it also remains true to its belief that our now-rare old films were indeed worthy of the adulation that their audiences lavished on them.

Dinampot Ka Lang sa Putik

English Translation: *You Were Merely Scooped Up from the Mud*
Year of Release: 1991
Director: Maryo J. de los Reyes
Screenwriter: Jose Javier Reyes & Jake Tordesillas
From a story by Jose Javier Reyes
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Maricel Soriano, Christopher de Leon, Charo Santos-Concio, Monsour del Rosario, Maritoni Fernandez, Luis Gonzales, Sylvia Sanchez, Orestes Ojeda, Ronnie Henares, Bennette Ignacio, Gloria Romero, Eddie Arenas, Dexter Doria, Malou de Guzman, Glenda Garcia, Angela Figueras, Oliver Osorio, Eric Francisco, Naty Mallares, Nonoy Gates, Alfonso Garcera, Dennis Baltazar, Aries Bautista, James Cooper, Petit Calupitan, Joey Hipolito, Gina Leviste, Lollie Mara, Renato del Prado, Frederick Peralta, Cloyd Robinson, Eva Ramos, Lucy Quinto, Bella Flores, Jordan Castillo, Tita de Villa, Dinky Doo Jr., Arlene Tolibas, Melanie Tiangco, Tony Angeles, Dido de la Paz, Albert Gonzales, Jimmy Long

> Ambet agrees to participate in a warehouse burglary so he can help alleviate the financial straits that his family's confronting. When he gets arrested, his wife Malou leaves with their son for Manila to seek better financial opportunities. Her supportive neighbors invite her to work as a nightclub dancer, but at a stag party, Edmond notices her discomfort and extends some support toward her. His girlfriend and sister call attention to Malou's class difference but Edmond insists that he can help her overcome her social limitations, until she points out that many of their conflicts are irreconcilable.

Regal Films had always had a long-running streak of nostalgia for Philippine film trends of an earlier era, a tendency that intensified after the fall of the Marcos Sr. regime led to an alarming decline in film attendance. Instead of taking into account these industrial and generational dynamics, critics of that time reverted to their usual lamentation of the absence of aestheticized and politicized material. *Dinampot Ka Lang sa Putik* may be regarded as one of the more brazen attempts, with its earnest and straightforward treatment of a class-conciliatory narrative, Cinderella without the wonder-tale elements. This, however, is where ignorance of its talents' maturity fails the serious observer: with over a decade in intensive film practice and even longer in theater work, Maryo J. de los Reyes was more than ready to accept the challenge without reverting to the usual satirical or ironic fallback. Complemented by actors who'd been essaying these roles long enough to deliver them with nary a false note, the result is recognizably superior maize—possibly not recommendable for regular consumption, but perfect for any occasion when only the best kind of corn will do: gorgeous, savory, unexpectedly nutritious to boot.

Magnifico

Year of Release: 2003
Director: Maryo J. de los Reyes
Screenwriter: Michiko Yamamoto
Producer: Violett Films Production
Cast: Lorna Tolentino, Albert Martinez, Jiro Manio, Isabella de Leon, Mark Gil, Celia Rodriguez, Gloria Romero, Tonton Gutierrez, Amy Austria, Cherry Pie Picache, Danilo Barrios, Susan Africa

> Despite coming from a poor family plagued by many misfortunes, youngster Magnifico wants to build a nice coffin for his grandmother. He also goes to great lengths to take his little sister, who has cerebral palsy, to a local carnival. As he gets different people to help him, Magnifico reciprocates their kindness in a way that gradually changes his community.

Philippine celluloid production bowed out in grand style with the release of two epic productions, by filmmakers who even have similar-sounding names. In contrast with Mario O'Hara's *Babae sa Breakwater* (2003), *Magnifico* proffers a linear tale focused on domestic issues, its central character a young innocent whose acts of kindness transform his family and community. A number of observers marveled at how a male-centered narrative could still pack an old-school wallop this late in history, but the reasons are all on open display, so to speak: compassion even for the most deeply flawed characters, wonderful performances revolving around the precocious Jiro Manio in the title role, and relaxed, hand-on-heart storytelling expertise. Maryo J. de los Reyes keeps his narrative engine ambling along, occasionally pausing for us to savor its sharply observed character sketches, until a sudden plunge takes everyone to a place of no return. The analogy with developments in film technology is undeniable, but to wish for a different ending would be to deny the inevitable, and *Magnifico* shows us how grace and humor can make the journey worth the while.

GIL PORTES

(3 films: 1983–1984)

Gabi Kung Sumikat ang Araw

English Title: *Sun Rises at Night*
Year of Release: 1983
Director: Gil Portes [as Gil M. Portes]
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
From a story idea by Manny Pichel
Producers: Four N Films & Gold Lion Productions
Cast: Gina Alajar, Charito Solis, Sandy Andolong, Kristine Garcia, Edgar Mande, Juan Rodrigo, Bebong Osorio, Willy Cruz, Glenda Tuazon, William Martinez

> A nightclub singer, Rosita is used to entertaining male customers and occasionally sleeping with them for the money. After a while, she falls in love with Danny, but winds up quarreling with him. Lota, Danny's ex, searches for him to be able to reconcile with him. Via a detective, she finds out that he died after his last date with Rosita. The detective also warns Rommel, who's apparently falling for Rosita's charms, that a number of other people have been found dead after associating with her.

More typical of Gil Portes's output, *Gabi Kung Sumikat ang Araw* furnishes strong material with less-than-satisfactory execution. Enough integrity remains to reveal certain concerns of the period, specifically the late martial-law era of the elder Ferdinand Marcos, when pent-up dissatisfaction with the regime's mismanagement and corruption was just about to be detonated by the assassination of returning oppositionist Benigno S. Aquino Jr. The mid-plot revelation of a community of nighttime normies who transform into old people during the day could readily be read as an allegory for Communist-rebel outsiders, amplified by their wariness about being discovered. Yet the contemporary decline in rebel militancy enables the film to command an even stronger signification—as a metaphor for outlaw sexualities. The climactic onslaught of geriatric folk evokes parallels with the Spanish horror classic *Island of the Damned* (dir. Narciso Ibáñez Serrador, 1976), where the seemingly harmless children are replaced by initially benign elders. The situation in *GKSA* is arguably more distressing, since people who age are presumed to have acquired wisdom and enough apathy to let go of survival issues.

'Merika

English Translation: *America*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Gil Portes [as Gil M. Portes]
Screenwriters: Clodualdo del Mundo Jr. & Gil Quito
Producer: Adrian Films
Cast: Nora Aunor, Bembol Roco, Marilyn Concepcion, Cesar Aliparo, Boogie Abaya, Chiquit Reyes, Marshall Factora, Brenda Duque

For five years, Mila has been living well in New Jersey as a hospital nurse and a nursing-home aide. However, she is beset with loneliness and constantly questions whether or not she should stay in America. It is when she falls in love with fellow Filipino immigrant Mon that she truly sees the situation she is in and finds the answers she has long sought out.

The Nora Aunor persona embodied the working-class Filipina, tracking the latter's transition from local domestic to foreign care professional. *'Merika* would necessarily exhibit alienation and weariness, since these are essential components of the overseas worker's experience. The film sports a rarely encountered reality effect, drawn from filmmaker Gil Portes's training in official (and therefore "objective") documentary practice. Local film observers would be hard-put to find a movie whose production elements are so subtle and unobtrusive, perfectly matched as usual by Aunor's delivery. Toward the end of the narrative, a series of editorial interventions points up the fictional nature of the material by interweaving simultaneous scenes from disparate locales. At this point, and by this means, the text's reality-based presentation transforms into a call to empathy and attention.

Bukas ... May Pangarap

English Translation: *Tomorrow ... There's a Dream*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Gil Portes [as Gil M. Portes]
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Tri Films
Cast: Gina Alajar, Tommy Abuel, Ruben Rustia, Michael Baluyot, Richard Baluyot, Joy Glorioso, Lucy Quintos, Bebong Osorio, Dante Balois, Daniel Martin, Eric Lava, Tony Pascua, Beda Orquejo, Thea Cleofe, Chito Vicente, Evelyn Vargas, Josie Galvez, Mel Ladongga, Lucy Baldorado, Bes Flores, Sammy Morales

When her husband Udong becomes a contract worker in Saudi Arabia, Mering adopts an optimistic disposition despite the hardship of rural poverty. After a month without hearing from him, she tries to allay her fears for the sake of their two young sons. When he returns with nothing, victimized by his recruiter and imprisoned as an illegal alien in the country he had pinned his hopes on, she has to figure out ways to pay their creditors and survive from one day to the next, since Udong is obsessed with avenging himself on the recruiter. Nothing that the couple can do is able to stave off hunger, the contempt of unsympathetic neighbors, and the negligence of an unresponsive government system, compounded with their growing disaffection for each other.

One way of accounting for the critical negligence suffered by *Bukas ... May Pangarap* is that it functioned too effectively as a cautionary protest film, the same way that early social-realist texts presented difficulties suffered then by our impoverished compatriots that have since been redressed, or that war films delineated conditions that no longer exist. An even more insidious factor may have been at work as well: Gil Portes did not belong to the front- or even second-rank of elite practitioners favored by local tastemongers, so he apparently could not be capable of accomplishing two vital samples in a row, no matter that they happened to cover the same topic of overseas work. *'Merika*, the film with a triumphant narrative, has been the one that shows up in extensive canon listings, although *BMP* can similarly boast of a storytelling triumph of its own. As an entry in the country's yearend film festival, it has even proved to endure better than the films that out-earned and out-awarded it. As in the case of Nora Aunor in *'Merika*, Portes hands to Tommy Abuel what has been far and away his defining performance; but it is Gina Alajar's also-overlooked turn as the conflicted housewife, stressed beyond humanly endurable limits, that remains frighteningly and recognizably real.

EMMANUEL H. BORLAZA

(3 films: 1984–1987)

1—*Bukas Luluhod ang mga Tala*

English Translation: *Tomorrow the Stars Will Fall to Their Knees*
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Emmanuel H. Borlaza
Screenwriters: Jose N. Carreon & Orlando Nadres
From a story by Nerissa Cabral serialized in *Pilipino Komiks*
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Sharon Cuneta, Eddie Rodriguez, Gina Pareño, Pilar Pilapil, Tommy Abuel, Rey "PJ" Abellana, Raymond Lauchengco, Lani Mercado, Eula Valdes, Janet Elisa Giron, Romeo Rivera, Mary Walter, Eddie Arenas, Vangie Labalan, Manny Castañeda, Allan Bautista, Timothy Diwa, Mark Cruz, Luis Benedicto, Charlon Davao, Jennifer Sevilla, Heidi Gloria Santos, Cris Daluz, Nelia Rondina, George Estregan

> Because the baby she conceived was illegitimate, Rebecca's mother had to give birth on the street, denied a ride to the hospital by her father Roman Estrella and his legal wife. Her mother's husband accepts her as his own daughter, but she and her brother have to endure the maltreatment of her half-sisters and their mother, who live in luxury across the street from their shanty. When her stepfather pleads for assistance for an emergency and her cruel stepmother unleashes her guard dog, which fatally attacks him, Rebecca swears to devote her life to bringing down her biological father and his family. She stops studying to work on her career as a singing sensation, but her younger brother is driven violently mad and imprisoned after her half-sister pretends to befriend him in school then mocks him in her home. Rebecca learns that the Estrellas' businesses are failing and arranges with her lawyer to secretly purchase their residence, just as her other half-sister also goes to pieces when the man she intends to win falls hard for Rebecca.

2—*Bituing Walang Ningning*

English Translation: *Star without a Sparkle*
Year of Release: 1985
Director: Emmanuel H. Borlaza
Screenwriter: Orlando Nadres
From a story by Nerissa Cabral serialized in *Pilipino Komiks*
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Sharon Cuneta, Christopher de Leon, Cherie Gil, Jay Ilagan, Tommy Abuel, Joel Torre, Chanda Romero, Lorli Villanueva, Vicky Suba, Lito Pastrana, Timothy Diwa, Eric Borlaza, Alvin Torres, Ronald Catahan, Gemmalyn Lingad, Rose de Guzman, Jenny Corpuz, Augusto Victa, Leila Lopez, Tony Martinez, Robert Miclat, Eddie de Leon

> Dorina Pineda is so obsessed with famous singer Lavinia Arguelles that she spends her spare time and money to attend her live appearances, and sneaks out extra garlands of *sampaguita* (jasmine) from the handicraft shop where she works, to offer them to her idol. She also sings at casual or small-time venues, in order to better emulate Lavinia, who pretends to appreciate Dorina's fanaticism despite finding her repulsive because of her poverty. When Lavinia, in a fit of pique, refuses to fulfill her commitment to a producer's programs, Dorina volunteers to take her place, and Lavinia's ex-boyfriend is pleasantly surprised by Dorina's talent and drawn to her kindness. All of which increases Lavinia's ire toward her still-worshipful follower.

Bukas Luluhod ang mga Tala is primarily remembered as the film that unexpectedly clobbered Mike de Leon's *Sister Stella L.* (1984) at the box-office, in spite of the antidictatorship movement's full-blast status. It has been read in retrospect as the film that embodied Sharon Cuneta's "Noranian turn" (as expressed in the title of an article by Bliss Cua Lim), in which she succeeded in sustaining her box-office supremacy by adopting the rags-to-riches narratives associated with Nora Aunor, further highlighted by the fact that *SSL* starred Aunor's long-term rival Vilma Santos. A more frankly commercialist undertaking than its successor *Bituing Walang Ningning*, *BLT* demands a higher level of tolerance for an overeagerness to appeal to an infantilized conception of the movie audience. Then again, this also accounts for its more effective denouemont, since its unfettering from "proper" storytelling values provided it with leeway to harness more passionate (though predictable) situations. *BWN*, the next year's Cuneta juggernaut installment, served to to underlay the essential "Dulsita" argument forwarded by Jerrick Josue David.[46] Its and its predecessor's historical circumstances provide a useful context: Emmanuel H. Borlaza developed his audience-friendly approaches during the wholesome teen-idol musicals meant to provide a moral counterweight to the soft-core *bomba* films of the late 1960s and early '70s; he also (more than once) assisted in the revival of Cebuano-language cinema by introducing smart reworkings of commercial genres. Viva Films, for its part, intended to foster conservative values in film material and production during the Marcos era, with Sharon Cuneta as its signature performer. This assumption served to challenge Filipino filmmakers, who were by then already used to devising ways to bypass or subvert the many restrictions that government authorities imposed on the country's most popular mass medium. Not surprisingly, several Viva productions have proved worthier of long-term appreciation than observers initially thought. As the last of a series of Hollywood-style movie queens to stake her claim on pop-culture history, Cuneta took note of the lessons of her predecessors (hence her "Noranian" turn) and has been shaping her life according to her perception of what history expects from her: feminist responsibility then, democratic politics today, always with a well-known affection for her followers. Not only is she the only movie queen whose fan vehicle (where she ironically plays a starstruck devotee) deserves to be honored, even before she upgraded to mature roles; she has also persisted in finding her way, high-profile as ever, even with the rambunctiously vexatious arrival of new media and new politics in the new millennium. Among the many other pleasures that *BWN* bestows are its evergreen title song and the line uttered by exasperated but self-amused drama queens since then: "You're nothing but a second-rate, trying-hard copycat," preferably with a glass of well-aimed cold water in hand.

[46] These two Sharon Cuneta studies may be considered the exemplification, and one hopes the resumption, of Philippine star studies after scholarly literature on Nora Aunor, notwithstanding institutionally commissioned pieces on foreign-celebrated auteurs and a dubiously motivated anthology on a performer who wished to be counted the equal of Aunor and Cuneta. Their publication history is as follows: Bliss Cua Lim, "Sharon's Noranian Turn: Stardom, Embodiment, and Language in Philippine Cinema," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture*, vol. 31, no. 3, Fall 2009, pp. 315–358; and Jerrick Jose David, "Dulsita, ang Kabuuan ng Kontradiksyon ng Imahen ni Sharon Cuneta sa Pelikulang Pilipino (Dulsita, the Total Contradiction of Sharon Cuneta's Image in Philippine Films)," *Kritika Kultura*, vol. 25, August 2015, pp. 314–343, doi:10.13185/1656-152x.1655.

Stolen Moments

Year of Release: 1987
Director: Emmanuel H. Borlaza [as Maning Borlaza]
Screenwriter: Jose Javier Reyes
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Alma Moreno, Rio Locsin, Rey "PJ" Abellana, Chanda Romero, Miguel Rodriguez, Perla Bautista, Roy Alvarez, Gigi de la Riva, Deborah Sun, Robert Arevalo, Nikki Martel, Barbara Perez, Romeo Enriquez, Lucita Soriano, Alfred Baretto, Vic Ramos, Ferdie Fernando, Naty Mallares, Geena Zablan, Vangie Labalan

> Marietta endures the scolding of her stepmother, whom she resents because her foreign-based father sends some money for her upkeep to her. Fredo, her neighbor in the slum community, continues to court her although she, like many other girls, has eyes for the handsome and well-built Alex. In the company where the latter is employed, Carol, the owner's daughter, insists on assigning Alex (whom she initially calls by his family name, Bernabe) to drive her to various occasions, to the point of eventually asking him to accompany her to social functions. They quarrel because Alex feels left out, but when he goes home drunk, Marietta attends to him and they wind up sleeping together. Finally Carol admits her attraction to Alex and he agrees to marry her even though her parents disapprove of him, while Marietta, hoping that Alex might be able to fall for her, in turn finds herself rejected by him. She then accedes to Fredo's request that they tie the knot, and invests in the same furniture-export business that Carol founded, expressing her disappointment in Alex's class-intimidated reluctance to help run their enterprise. Fredo and Alex meet accidentally and arrange a dinner event for their partners, where Marietta inquires into Carol's business secrets. Carol realizes one day that Marietta has poached her investment contacts and asks Alex to talk with her—an opportunity that Marietta exploits to extend their earlier one-night stand into a full-blown extramarital fling.

Middle-class chroniclers among popular narrative artists get an unfair shake from critics, who tend to drastically conclude that they're performing as apologists for the bourgeoisie. Ironically a new type of influential commentators emerged during the millennium, who unconsciously extended this argument by insisting on high-art values, with an even more pathetic circle of influential academe-based critics accepting this criterion so long as the products they honored depicted poverty-stricken subjects. Emmanuel H. Borlaza's extensive career, covering commercial productions in a number of capitals, is one example of how such ridiculous requisites could have pernicious consequences: none of his Cebuano-language films have been preserved despite their strong repute. *Stolen Moments* demonstrates how such long-trained expertise could be misrecognized. The class conciliation that it builds toward is founded on business competition, which is forthwith dismissed as soon as one side has won, and transforms instead into a competition where the hunkier of the two male leads is the prize. The two class-divided women who drive the narrative are provided with epiphanies drawn from a realization of the cost of their aspirations: Carol, the heiress who turns her back on family wealth, discovers that working for the man of her dreams wears her out and drives him to the arms of her competitor Marietta, whose slum background in turn enables her to fight dirty when necessary—until her moral conscience makes her realize that the world where she insinuated herself will actually keep rewarding her depravity as long as she maintains a veneer of respectability. The unexpected resolution, where two strong

conflicting women negotiate a workable arrangement between them, is salutary not just because of the reverse gender exclusion that it promotes, but also because a long period of military dictatorship was just dismantled by a female challenger. Carol's acceptance of Marietta's apology for "borrowing" her hubby,[47] although seemingly a violation of the progressive proscription on class conciliation, actually signifies the ex-heiress's initiation into the messy but pleasurably queer ethos of working-class pragmatisms.

[47] The field of feminist studies was just catching up at this point, with scholars pointing out how equivalent Western film plots (notably Susan Seidelman's *Desperately Seeking Susan*, 1985) appropriated the practice of homosociality articulated by queer-theory pioneer Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (in her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* from Columbia University Press, also 1985), wherein straight male friends temper the terror of the prospect of the intimacy of same-sex desire between them by displacing it onto women—i.e., using their female partners as objects of exchange instead of offering their own bodies to their friends.

TATA ESTEBAN

(1 film: 1984)

Alapaap

English Title: *Clouds*
Additional Language: Ilocano
Year of Release: 1984
Director: Tata Esteban
Screenwriter: Rei Nicandro
From a story by Tata Esteban
Producers: Aces Films International, Oro Vista Motion Pictures, Rare Breed Ltd.
Cast: William Martinez, Mark Gil, Michael de Mesa, Tanya Gomez, Isadora, Eva Rose Palma, Ed Villapol, Rosemarie Gil, Liza Lorena, Jabbar, Jose Cortez, Benny Resurreccion, Jerry O'Hara, Rez Cortez

> After a present-day death certificate is filled out, we inexplicably flash forward to September 28, 1986, when Jake links up with the brothers Dave and Donald, to ask their help in completing a film that he needs to submit as his thesis project in an American university. The two suggest taking a trip to Baguio (bringing their girlfriends along), where they can search for material and possibly even shoot some footage there. After they persuade a reluctant old man to allow them to stay at his guesthouse, increasingly strange events begin to happen. When the brothers show Jake the shot they secretly filmed of him making out with a native lass outdoors, and realize that he had no one with him, they have no choice but to conclude that an otherworldly force is bent on messing up with their lives.

Anyone who can explain why 1984 was the most artistically productive year in Philippine film history might also have to account for why the critics of that time took it for granted. The yearend Metro Manila Film Festival, as an example, was so spoiled for great choices, that it could afford to toss a few token awards to an exceptionally creative debut film and forget about it for good. Directed by the fairly obscure actor Steve Paolo (who was also producer and production designer) using his actual name, *Alapaap* took the ECP's name literally, ensured audience patronage by banking on sex scenes and the upper-body female nudity then-exempted by censorship for depictions of indigenous practice, and scored largely on the basis of its skillful appropriation of *giallo*-horror principles. Its spectacle of unsurprisingly above-average performances aided significantly in overriding a few instances of anachronisms and illogical developments—with also a then-unremarked exceptional casting of the Eigenmann brothers (Michael de Mesa and Mark Gil) as well as topflight delivery by Tanya Gomez. As in countless other Philippine horror samples, the City of Pines embodies the collision between modernity and ancestral culture, but in harsher terms than usual. The ending is meant to provide some respite from the conflict, but the film is clever enough to take as much as it gives.

Gayuma: Sana'y Mahalin Mo Rin Ako

Alternate Title: *Gayuma*
English Translation: *Charm: I Hope You'll Love Me Too*
Year of Release: 1995
Director: Tata Esteban
Screenwriter: Rei Nicandro
Producer: Falcon Films
Cast: Amanda Page, Julio Diaz, Maritoni Fernandez, Jay Manalo, Danny Ramos, Shirley Palma, Marissa Delgado, Lucita Soriano, Shola Luna, Connie Chua, Dennis Adobas, Archi Adamos, Boy Alano, Tata Esteban, Turko Cervantes, Gino Ilustre, Angel Baldomar, Allan Quimbo, Julian Alvaro, Bigtime Castillo, Bay Cristobal, Boy Davao, Ray Davao, Gel Dungca, Ihman Esturco, Al Eugenio, Bong Ferrer, Gil Gaganti, Saldy Golo, Berting Lago, Mariz Mauricio, Sonny Navarro, Tony Navarro, Nilo Odiaman, Doming Olivar, Tess Orias, Rudy Pontigon, Daisy Reyes, Cloyd Robinson, Dagul Salazar, Noel Sandoval, Edgar Santiago, Ina Suarez, Francisco Uno, Junior Uno

> Lynn Blackwell, a half-American Pinay in Subic, longs to meet with the father who abandoned her. She professes affection for her boyfriend Dondon but leaves for Manila to meet an American pen pal who promised to take her with him to the US, but the guy leaves because of some rowdy men. When Lynn arrives, they spike her drink and kidnap her to rape and then abandon her. Meanwhile the slum-dwelling Lydia, who lives with the good-for-nothing gambler Rubing, finds frustration after the herbalists she consults are unable to cure her infertility. She encounters the dazed and confused Lynn on a jeepney ride and takes her home to care for her. Just as King, the neighborhood toughie, has taken an interest in Lydia, Rubing finds Lynn attractive enough to use her wish to migrate to the US to hoodwink her.

Two reflexive turns mark *Gayuma: Sana'y Mahalin Mo Rin Ako* and remind us of Tata Esteban's intensive film immersion, apparent since his first film, *Alapaap* (*Clouds*, 1984). One is at the beginning, when the scriptwriter directly addresses the camera to explain that despite the forthcoming presentation's sensational content, it's actually based on true stories. The second arrives when we think that the misfortune that's about to befall Lynn, the naïve provincial, might be carried out by King, the same slum bully professing an interest in his neighbor Lydia; as it turns out, King's an extra who plays hostage in a movie scene where he's dismissed after his service is no longer needed, and Lydia eventually handles him in more or less the same way. Christian morality still overpowers *Gayuma*'s narrative framework, but then one doesn't have to be reduced to the Manichaean treatment that typifies such an approach: the parable of Dives and Lazarus, for example, allows for multiple, even contradictory, readings, and we find in the two primary characters not just a gender switch but also a constant uncertainty about who between them suffers in nobility and who gets punished for her privilege. Undeniably, as befits a feminist narrative, a transference from the more familially oriented Lydia to the perplexed and traumatized Lynn takes place, but then how did Lydia manage to handle her abusive and deceitful husband? This is where *Gayuma* plugs into an entire generational pop-culture trend: all the best straight-male directors, from working in genres that probably wore them out from decades of insistent masculinism,

turned pro-women and queer-friendly during this period. Lydia's BFF was her unapologetically out trans neighbor, who teaches her to be more critical of the bull dispensed by both her hubby and the herbalists who claim to have the means of jump-starting her motherhood aspiration, with her "adoption" of Lynn compounding her husband's betrayal. Esteban's fascination with the tricks his characters play on one another and, consequently, on the audience, arguably peaks with *Gayuma*—helped in no small measure by its cinematographic properties. Sergio Lobo had been disparaged for neglecting his duties with Ishmael Bernal's major multicharacter entries, but returns with a vengeance and sets down evidence of a prowess that could never be equalled by anyone, except perhaps by the late Conrado Baltazar. Overdue for rediscovery and deserving of accolades that went to far less deserving entries during its time.

CHITO S. ROÑO

(10 films: 1984–2018)

1—*Private Show*

Year of Release: 1984
Director: Chito S. Roño (as Sixto Kayko)
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Clock Work Films International
Cast: Jaclyn Jose, Gino Antonio, Leopoldo Salcedo, Lucita Soriano, Yvonne, Aurora Boulevard, Vicky Varga, Johnny Vicar, Bella Flores, Ella Luansing, Angie Ferro

> Myrna is a young but worldly-wise lass who shows up at Ador's live-sex den to apply as a performer. She falls in love with Jimmy, her regular partner. However, her drug habit and his kidney problems strain their relationship. After breaking up with him, he decides to return to his hometown. She grows increasingly dependent on drugs and becomes indifferent to the worsening decadence in her environment and the degradations being done to her.

2—*Curacha: Ang Babaeng Walang Pahinga*

English Title: *Curacha: A Woman Without Rest*
Year of Release: 1998
Director: Chito S. Roño
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Rosanna Roces, Jaclyn Jose, Ara Mina, Ruby Moreno, Lucita Soriano, Maureen Mauricio, Mike Magat, Dick Israel, Tito Arevalo, Lito Legaspi, Richard Bonnin, Roy Alvarez, Tony Mabesa, Alex Cortez, Tom Olivar

> Curacha, a friend of Myrna's and a live-sex performer herself, witnesses an apparition of the Virgin Mary while praying in church: the lady walks down the altar toward her, slaps her, and she awakens to the announcement of another ongoing coup d'état. Since security forces blockaded the street where she exited, she has to find her way out, only to discover that the rest of the city has also lost its bearing.

Live-sex performers function as an index of the country's destitution, restoring pornographic spectacle to its voyeuristic theatrical origin. The act of capturing their lives in film raises a paradox—*How can a society with a media industry still need live-sex performances*?—that, depending on how well the question is answered, can lead to several possible conclusions. In the instance of the martial-law era's *Private Show* and the post-martial law period's *Curacha*, the viewer is provided with a chronicle of the country's continuing descent into an abyss of social and moral depravity, notwithstanding an undeniable step-up in the affluence of the elite. A perceptible maturation is also suggested by the casting of the best "bold" performers of their respective periods—the heartbreakingly waifish Jaclyn Jose of the 1980s and the boundlessly voluptuous Rosanna Roces of the '90s. Both play characters who lose all claims to dignity yet refuse to surrender to unmitigated debauchery by foregrounding the fierce and unyielding combination of talent, warmth, humor, and sensual presence that mark the Filipina as the world has come to know her.

1—*Itanong Mo sa Buwan*

English Translation: *Go Ask the Moon*
English Title: *Moon Child*
Additional Language: Chabacano de Cavite
Year of Release: 1988
Directors: Chito S. Roño
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producer: Double M Films
Cast: Mark Gil, Anjo Yllana, Jaclyn Jose, Anita Linda, Tita Muñoz, Susan Africa, Mia Gutierrez, Lucita Soriano, Fernando Morato, Cris Vertido, Resty Vergara, Gamaliel Viray, Alan Glinoga, Jing Jing Manaloto, Aljon Jimenez, Jojo Reyes, Bodjie Pascua, Archi Adamos, PETA Kalinangan Ensemble

> In the course of a botched bank robbery, a teller, Josie, is taken hostage by Angel, when his partner is killed. He takes her to the isolated rural home of Juana, an elderly lady. After Josie is rescued and Angel is seriously wounded, her husband, Sammy, has difficulty coming to terms with her version of events, especially since his mother is intent on maligning the woman he married. Conflicting statements made by Juana as well as the hospitalized Angel cast further doubt not just on Josie's narrative but on her character as well.

2—*La Vida Rosa*

English Ttite: *The Life of Rosa*
Additional Language: Chabacano de Cavite
Year of Release: 2001
Directors: Chito S. Roño
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Rosanna Roces, Diether Ocampo, Liza Lorena, Jiro Manio, Angel Aquino, Pen Medina, Jhong Hilario, Nonie Buencamino, Vic Diaz, Albert Martinez, Aurora Yumul, Olga Natividad, Katrina Nazario, Ihman Esturco, Rey Behar, Angie Ferro, Dodie Acuña, Joe Gruta, Cris Vertido, Krystle Zamora, Jackie Castillejos, Cris Michelena, Irma Adlawan, Tom Olivar, Connie Chua, Aurora Uding

> After swiping a car from a mark charmed by Rosa, Dado decides he wants to transform the vehicle into a taxicab. Their decision incenses Tiyong, their gangleader, who sets in motion a series of events that leads to Dado whacking him. Lupo, Tiyong's right-hand person, accepts the assassination since it allows him to take over the criminal organization. Rosa and Dado, however, dream of their own racket, one that will allow them to resettle Rosa's son and blind mother and enable them to live in peace abroad.

Recognizing when a team effort provides productive dividends over time, Chito S. Roño reattempted the same approach that had worked for him with the twin triumphs of *Private Show* and *Curacha*: get a gifted scenarist to write material for the most talented sex symbol of the era. The formula didn't pan out the same way it did for Ricky Lee's scripts, since *La Vida Rosa* falters in comparison with *Itanong Mo sa Buwan*, despite an undeniable upgrade in Roño's directorial skills. Then again, *IMsB* surpasses most unruly-woman films anywhere, its novel structure and use of flashback enabling the narrative to raise issues not just about the reality of events but also the insidious effects of media celebrity, decades before the internet made this debilitating

property of modern existence commonplace. For most of its running time until its main character capitulates to the dictates of her partner's personal interests, *LVR* similarly relishes its opportunity to function as an objective correlative of its lead performer's remarkable autobiography.

Bakit Kay Tagal ng Sandali?

English Translation: *Why Does a Moment Take So Long?*
English Title: *A Moment Too Long*
Year of Release: 1990
Director: Chito S. Roño
Screenwriter: Orlando Nadres
With additional dialogue by Emmanuel H. Borlaza
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Dina Bonnevie, Julio Diaz, Eddie Garcia, Janice de Belen, Charito Solis, AiAi delas Alas, Eva Ramos, Vangie Labalan, Elsa de Venecia, Gamy Viray, Koko Trinidad, Pocholo Montes, Jess Ramos

> In his bid to get rich, Ted convinces his girlfriend Niña to marry his ailing and widowed boss, Edmundo. Ted believes that once Edmundo dies, his wealth will be inherited by Niña, which she can then share with her lover. But when Ted's plan fails, he marries his boss's daughter after she takes over Edmundo's company. Soon, Ted and Niña realize how their ambitions extract a price they may each be unprepared to pay.

By its capacity for depicting the plight of women under a patriarchal system, melodrama has always had the potential to cross over into horror, and nowhere in Philippine cinema has that potential been realized than in the constant discharge of blood, sweat, and copious tears manifested in this film. Along the way a curious development takes place: the characters seem to have been aware that the country's masculinist authoritarian experiment had recently failed, so the women wind up wresting control of the narrative, and wage war, and negotiate peace, with one another. For their part, the ultimately excluded males display some strength, and never of a constructive nature, only when they're older—which means that eventually, they die off. The director's benign bemusement with this lurid and giddy state of affairs provides the darkly comic distance that turns the presentation into a display of what literary and cultural critics call the carnivalesque (from Soviet-era scholar Mikhail Bakhtin's marvelous dissertation), a seriocomic mode that enables its authors to combine contradictory effects such as tears, fears, and pained laughter.

Alyas Stella Magtanggol

English Translation: *Alias Stella Magtanggol*
Alternate Title: *Stella Magtanggol*
Additional Language: Japanese
Year of Release: 1992
Director: Chito S. Roño
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee

Producer: Seiko Films
Cast: Rita Avila, Romnick Sarmenta, Maritoni Fernandez, Gardo Verzosa, Lito Legaspi, Sylvia Sanchez, Vanessa Escaño, Allan Paule, Karen Timbol, Alicia Alonzo, Tony Mabesa, Ray Ventura, Lolie Mara, Dexter Doria, Shirley Tesoro, Evelyn Vargas, Edmund Cupcupin, Turko Cervantes, Dante Javier, Lora Luna

> Adopted by a devout rural couple after she was abandoned by her birth mother, Stella grows up alienated from the values of her small town. In high school, the only friendship she maintains is with Wendy, who never runs out of pocket money but has to endure the sadistic treatment of the mayor. Frustrated by the sexual abstinence of her wholesome boyfriend, Stella turns to the family driver for stud service. The latter's wife stabs him out of jealousy and he falls off a rooftop, where he and Stella were trysting, exposing their affair to the rest of the townspeople. After her father suffers a fatal heart attack because of her scandal, her mother banishes her from home. She adopts her mother's family name, Magtanggol, and lives with Wendy, but they have to flee after the mayor's heavy-handedness traumatizes her friend, nearly killing her. Both women wind up in Manila's red-light district, where Stella finds gainful employment as a nightclub singer while manipulating the blandishments of a rich suitor and fooling around with a younger lover. Her strokes of good fortune, however, are compromised by her discovery that her boyfriend turns out to have a violently jealous streak.

A rare instance in Philippine cinema where an unruly-woman tale resolves in the main character's favor without subjecting her to death, disability, or religious conversion, *Alyas Stella Magtanggol* even more surprisingly claims to have been based on a real-life story. The narrative facilitates this arrangement by devising a parallel scenario where Stella's BFF is the character who pays the price of faithfully observing patriarchal and familial demands, thus making understandable Stella's insistence on personal independence and readiness to rebel when her autonomy is challenged. A number of other ethical dictates are upended as well, starting with the configuration of homespun rusticity as an ideal to be upheld over productive female labor, even if the only available option happens to be sex work. The expected dangers of underworld involvement make their appearance even with a supposedly benign and cowardly potentate, but the film also provides a reversal in the historically specific disaster caused by the pyroclastic mudflows of Mount Pinatubo's 1991 eruption: the now-abandoned structures half-buried in lahar, made to represent their former occupants' defeated aspirations, serve as useful hiding places for people on the run in *ASM*. When the surviving characters find themselves in the same territory during the film's climax, we find ourselves grasping for hope among the ruins, as they do as well.

Bata Bata Paano Ka Ginawa?

English Translation: *Little Child, How Were You Created?*
English Title: *Lea's Story*
Year of Release: 1998
Director: Chito S. Roño
Screenwriter: Lualhati Bautista
Based on her 1988 novel
Producer: Star Cinema Productions
Cast: Vilma Santos, Carlo Aquino, Serena Dalrymple, Albert Martinez, Ariel Rivera, Raymond Bagatsing, Cherry Pie Picache, Angel Aquino, Rosemarie Gil, Dexter Doria, Cita Astals, Andrea del Rosario, Lucy Quinto, Menggie Cobarrubias

> For years, Lea has juggled both social work and single motherhood, for the sake of her children Ojie and Maya. But things get complicated when Raffy, Ojie's father, returns with plans to bring along his son when he migrates to the US

with his new wife. Worse, Maya's father Ding often lashes out to mask his shortcomings as Lea's live-in partner. As tensions rise, Lea learns what surviving in a patriarchal system really entails.

All the usual reservations about middle-class feminism get tempered by a necessary qualification when situated in a Third-World context. Lea, the central character of *Bata Bata Paano Ka Ginawa?*, is sufficiently gender-enlightened to know that she cannot expect any treatment equal to the men she opts to live with and live like. Hence in contrast with them, she winds up having to juggle egotistic partners, nosy neighbors, judgmental colleagues (in an educational institution, at that), and freaked-out offspring, all the while scrambling to earn just enough to maintain her independence. An overlay of irony stems from the fact that the film's setting, like the source novel's, was more or less after a people's movement succeeded in ousting a fascist dictatorship, though not the oligarchic, clerical, and foreign-imperialist dominions that gave rise to it. After a few decades playing catch-up with Nora Aunor despite prematurely matching her in terms of local recognition, Vilma Santos manages to come into her own like never before or since. In *BBPKG* she dexterously calibrates her trademark mix of charm, vulnerability, calculation, stubbornness, and restrained lust and rage into an unambiguously intoxicating cocktail, reminiscent of Aunor at her best. As a consequence, the movie's thematic complexities and more-bitter-than-sweet conclusions can be gulped down without much resentment.

Caregiver

Year of Release: 2008
Directors: Chito S. Roño
Screenwriter: Chris Martinez
Based on a story by Jewel C. Castro, Chris Martinez, Chito S. Roño
Producers: ABS-CBN Film Productions & Star Cinema
Cast: Sharon Cuneta, John Estrada, Rica Peralejo, John Manalo, Makisig Morales, Jhong Hilario, Mickey Ferriols, Lotlot de Leon, Saul Reichlin, Matthew Rutherford, Claire Jeater, Marita Zobel, Anita Linda, Monique Wilson, Ima Castro, Boots Anson-Roa, Dexter Doria, Neil Ryan Sese, Gary Granada

Sarah Gonzales has to bid farewell to her colleagues, students, and family members when her husband, Teddy, asks her to join him abroad. She will be giving up a bright career as an English teacher to work as a caregiver, in exchange for far better pay. In London, she worries about Teddy's profligacy and discovers he has not yet been certified as a nurse. In the meanwhile, a grumpy elderly patient, Mr. Morgan, finds in Sarah's charm and honesty the kind of attention that his family failed to provide him with.

Released during the period when local critics considered mainstream releases unworthy of their attention, *Caregiver* stands as proof that blind willingness to mimic Western-sourced aesthetic evaluation standards leads down nonsensical and sometimes harmful pathways. Otherwise, the type of attention lavished on artsy "politicized" exercises that regular audiences would resolutely ignore could have been directed toward a standard-issue product that could finally serve as a useful starter text in comprehending the multilevelled complexities of the country's labor-export policy. The narrative befittingly focuses on a young mother's travails (apropos of the statistical reality of Overseas Filipino Worker demographics comprising mostly women), from giving up her expertise in a psychically fulfilling local career in exchange for better-paying menial work abroad, ensuring that the

family members who'll be left behind will continue functioning in her absence, and contending with the several domestic and professional challenges that beset migrants Othered by their race, class, and gender. Sharon Cuneta embodied the character at a perfect juncture in her career trajectory as a mature performer capable of acknowledging all manner of predicaments, complemented by perfectly cast players including foreign actors. The film portrays its OFW characters' triumph in bittersweet terms—a final observational truth that ultimately reflects on a system of governance that cares less for its citizens' capacity to thrive within their country's borders, among their own people, than for their placement in a global slave economy so as not to stanch the flow of remittances.

Boy Golden: Shoot to Kill

Year of Release: 2013
Directors: Chito S. Roño
Screenwriters: Cathy Camarillo & Guelan Varela-Luarca
From a story by Cathy Camarillo & Jorge Estregan
Producer: Scenema Concept International
Cast: Jorge Estregan, KC Concepcion, Joem Bascon, Isko Salvador, Renato Morado, John Lapus, Matthew Barrios, Tonton Gutierrez, John Estrada, Eddie Garcia, Gloria Sevilla, Baron Geisler, Leo Martinez, Roi Vinzon, Dick Israel, Mon Confiado, Gerard Acao, Jhong Hilario, Mike Lloren, Randy dela Cruz, Juan Miguel Urquico, Deborah Sun, Stephanie Sulit, Camille Ybanez, Julijo Pisk, Roel Catalan, Don Umali, Lui Manansala, Prapimporn Kanjunda, Simon Ibarra, Joanna Lou Abrera, Buboy Villar, James Flatt, Robin Tapeno, Zyrus Imperial, Reggie dela Cruz

> When notorious Bahala Na Gang member Arturo Porcuna, more popularly known as Boy Golden, is released from prison in the early 1960s, he vows to resume his life of crime in order to hunt down Tony Razon, who was responsible for the rape and murder of Boy's sister Baby. He seeks support from lowlifes from both sides of the law, so long as they're willing to help him out. Along the way he makes the acquaintance of Marlady, who's also seeking revenge on Razon and teams up with him for that purpose. They also encounter a couple of elderly gangsters who turn out to be lovers, who help them in their quest while demonstrating the kind of messy, bloody, but blissed-out future that awaits them.

Odd by any measure, *Boy Golden: Shoot to Kill* appears to have set out to violate every expectation associated with its typology. Its realist material is executed in flagrant artifice, its tragic narrative unfolding in darkly comic episodes, its star turns overrun by campy costumes and delivery. One might speculate that this was director Chito S. Roño's way of discouraging comparisons with Danny L. Zialcita's now-lost masterwork *Hindi sa Iyo ang Mundo, Baby Porcuna* (*The World Isn't Yours, Baby Porcuna*, 1978), made at the height of the director's neorealist phase; interestingly, Zialcita also moved on to more audience-friendly campy treatments, although *BGSK* would be closer to the excesses of the now-defunct Sine Pilipino production cabal comprising Ishmael Bernal, Elwood Perez, and Joey Gosiengfiao. The film's achievements are so distinctive that viewers may wind up wondering if Boy Golden was a murderous historical figure (he was) or if Marla actually existed and became his lover (she did). This is because what *BGSK* does is the opposite of what period material actualizes: instead of transporting us to the life and times of these personalities, as Zialcita's *Baby Porcuna* managed to do, Roño's film takes that entire milieu and visualizes it in an eternal present. The process raises questions of integrity, credibility, and acumen, but the fact that it will imprint itself on anyone who yields to its many-pleasured audacities should be answer enough for now.

Signal Rock

Additional Languages: German & Waray
Year of Release: 2018
Director: Chito Roño
Screenwriter: Rody Vera
Producers: Available Light Productions & Regal Films
Cast: Christian Bables, Daria Ramirez, Nanding Josef, Mon Confiado, Elora Españo, Keanna Reeves, Francis Magundayao, Archie Adamos, Sue Prado, Jomari Umpa, Ces Quesada, Kokoy de Santos, Mara Lopez, Ruby Ruiz, Dido de la Paz, Judy Ann Santos (voice)

> Intoy serves as go-between of his Finland-based sister Vicky (whom he contacts via the stable reception provided by the Magasang Rock Formation, colloquially called signal rock) and his family. He also helps out various townsfolk in his capacity as jack of all trades, proud member of his community, and occasional delinquent indulged by everyone, including the police chief. When he falls in love with Rachel, however, he realizes that like his sister and the other young women of the town, she might eventually leave him to work elsewhere and marry a rich foreigner for convenience. At this point, his sister informs him that she might lose custody of her daughter to her abusive ex-boyfriend unless Intoy helps her prove that she has the means to support the child. Intoy realizes he has no choice except to call on people to return the favors he had extended them.

Intended as the middle installment in a trilogy on Biri Island in Samar province, *Signal Rock* distinguishes itself from its predecessor, *Badil* (*Dynamite Fishing*, 2013), by being less overtly political yet more impactful via its more extensively developed thematic discourse. Once more, the narrative is focalized via the crisis situations confronted by a young man, who this time needs to solicit the support of his tight-knit community in order to prevent his sister, a migrant wife, from being deported through the machinations of the abusive foreigner that she married. Intoy, the central character, realizes that the same forces that swept up his sister and his best friend's girlfriend will soon deprive him of his own shot at small-town happiness, and that all he could do is ensure that the women who left maintain enough stature and equanimity so that their role as their respective families' providers does not get compromised. Yet *SR* works out a persuasive critique of the Philippines's continuing reliance on labor export, by counterposing the benefits (and excesses) of globalization with the manifold pleasures and satisfactions of homespun values and practices. The strategy may seem conventional, but the film turns out to be anything but. The emphasis on male characters, for example, proceeds from the outflow of women from the town into the world of effective overseas slave labor; the remaining citizens' insistence on indulging in tradition locks them in a cycle of perpetual reliance on foreign-currency remittances; the perjurious claim that the entire town conspires in making is intended to save one of their own, but it also suggests where the tendency of elected officials to engage in plundering the national treasury comes from. *SR* is a throwback as well as a tribute to the achievement of the artists of the Marcos dictatorship, who were able to package essential and painful analyses of then-existing conditions in seemingly fun-filled, devil-may-care celebrations of the quotidian. Above all, as much as it casts a distrustful eye on the system that afflicts the most helpless among us, it also invites us to share in extolling the life force and survival instinct of these same people. It would not be such a stretch to realize that the movie embodies not just Filipino characters (literally), but the Filipino spirit itself.

ELWOOD PEREZ

(4 films: 1985–2013)

Silip

English Translation: *Peek*
English Title: *Daughters of Eve*
Year of Release: 1985
Director: Elwood Perez
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Viking Films International
Cast: Maria Isabel Lopez, Sarsi Emmanuelle, Mark Joseph, Myra Manibog, Pia Zabale, Daren Craig Johnson, Michael Angelo, Arwin Rogelio, Gloria Andrade, Cherriebee Santos

> In a remote village, Tonya teaches catechism to the local children while trying to repress the lust she still feels for Simon, her former suitor. Tensions rise when Tonya's childhood friend Selda returns to the village after years of living in the city. Selda's sexual emancipation challenges Tonya's pious facade and soon, their clashing beliefs lead to dire consequences for themselves and the people around them.

Even in terms of its best intentions, Ferdinand Marcos's martial-law dictatorship inadvertently managed to subvert itself. *Silip*, admired by the "wrong" crowd, might ultimately serve as the means by which this principle could be demonstrated. It was set in the same locale, written by the same scenarist, and screened at the same venue as the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines's most celebrated work, Ishmael Bernal's *Himala* (1982). Yet *Silip* re-envisions its unacknowledged predecessor's female bonding, between the miracle worker and her brothel-operating best friend, as a quest for sexual awakening and fulfillment, and pursues this earthy project to its nihilistic extreme. The ambition itself is quite jaw-dropping, considering the reputations that the artists and the support institution had staked on the project. Not surprisingly, the Church-supported February 1986 people-power uprising ensured that the movie would never be able to contribute to mainstream cultural discourse. As a result, *Silip* has remained associated with the type of disreputable films that could be shown only at censorship-exempt theaters during the Marcos period and at far more dubious venues afterward. Incredible as it may sound, this may be the closest Philippine cinema has ever come to the smutty sublimity of queer poet, philosopher, and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, several of whose spiritually inflected film discourses were also infused with pornographic imagery and denounced by moralists accordingly.

Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit

English Translation: *Count the Stars in Heaven*
Year of Release: 1989
Director: Elwood Perez
Screenwriters: Jake Cocadiz & Jigz Recto

Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Nora Aunor, Tirso Cruz III, Gloria Romero, Perla Bautista, Miguel Rodriguez, Ana Margarita Gonzales, Vangie Labalan, Mario Escudero, Flora Gasser, Beverly Salviejo, Rolando Tinio, Ella Luansing, Deborah Sun, Tess Dumpit

> Peasant girl Magnolia has always loved her cruel landowner's son, Anselmo. But their relationship turns sour as Magnolia, through hard work, becomes rich, and the indolence of Anselmo's family causes them to lose their wealth. When Magnolia gets pregnant after a drunken tryst with Anselmo, she keeps this a secret from him. Years later, a romance between her daughter and Anselmo's son forces her to deal with the resentment she has been harboring.

In an ideal world this film would be held up as Philippine cinema's most successful sample of progressive genre transformation, a concept derived from the ground-breaking *Cahiers du Cinéma* editorial "Cinema/Ideology/Criticism," written in 1969 by Jean-Louis Comolli and Jean Narboni. The essay argued, among other points, that certain films, especially commercial projects, may be saddled with conventional material; yet filmmakers (such as Alfred Hitchcock) with sufficient mastery in the medium can utilize style as a means of providing critical commentary on content. Regal Films, with Elwood Perez as director, revived the wildly successful but then-already long-dormant Guy-and-Pip love team via the production company's previous installments, *Till We Meet Again* and *I Can't Stop Loving You* (both 1985). Perez continued to tinker with the components—usually involving class conflicts—to come up with increasingly ambitious diversions. With *Bilangin ang Bituin sa Langit*, he went whole-hog with an epic melodrama with period elements and fan-pleasing contrivances, including having Nora Aunor voice a mestiza singer and getting the central couple to play parents as well as their own children. No other local performer could pull off a role that required over-the-top dramatization and playful self-awareness in the same instance, and Aunor had by then attained a performing peak that seemed destined to run for as long as she could stay alive.

Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.

English Title: *The Real Life of Pacita M.*
Year of Release: 1991
Director: Elwood Perez
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: MRN Film International
Cast: Nora Aunor, Armida Siguion-Reyna, Lotlot de Leon, Juan Rodrigo, Subas Herrero, Marissa Delgado, Dexter Doria, Marilyn Villamayor, Eddie Infante, Alma Moreno, John Rendez

> Pacita is a sassy nightclub singer by night, famed for her bawdy songs and repartee. But by day, she is a loving single parent to her only child, Grace, who is about to leave for Australia after bagging a college scholarship. When a shooting accident leaves Grace in a coma, Pacita's resolve as a mother will be tested as she faces a slew of problems, not the least of which is her meddlesome and judgmental mother-in-law.

When Nora Aunor undertook the role of an unruly, obsessive nightclub performer, she had just decided to shelve her own auteur production, *Greatest Performance* (1989), on which she had completed principal photography as performer, writer, and director. *Ang Totoong Buhay ni Pacita M.* resonates with her understanding of the creative process as well as the insights she had

accumulated from decades in the profession. Also by then making an impressive crossover to the legitimate stage via a couple of strenuous productions mounted by the Philippine Educational Theater Association, she apparently decided to amplify her execution of the title character in *Pacita M.*, and only wound up proving that even when it comes to histrionic overkill, no one could do it as well. The movie advances an enlightened pro-euthanasic argument, which serves the purpose of providing a useful message for those who prefer to find any.

Otso

English Translation: *Eight*
Year of Release: 2013 / B&W with Color
Director: Elwood Perez
Screenwriters: Vince Tañada & Elwood Perez
Producers: Film Development Council of the Philippines & Earth Moving Pictures
Cast: Vince Tañada, Monique Azerreda, Gabby Bautista, Anita Linda, Jun Urbano, Vangie Labalan, Mark Joseph Garde, Jordan Ladra, Adelle Ibarrientos, Cris Lim, Cindy Liper, Andrew Leavold

> Lex returns from Los Angeles to Manila to work on a script for an indie film. After moving to a unit in a run-down condominium, he meets his neighbors—including the sultry Sabina and her aunt, actress Anita Linda, who owns the condo—and they inspire him as he writes. But during a birthday party for Anita, Lex realizes that his observations about what goes on around him are not what they seem.

Philippine cinema has never been known for late-career swings. In contrast with what John Grierson once said of Josef von Sternberg, "When a director dies, he becomes a photographer," Filipino directors tend to turn into religious moralizers, if not proselytizers. This probably explains why the bewildering left-field turn of a box-office *enfant terrible* into a full-blown exponent of semi-autobiographical explorations has left mainstream film critics—i.e., the ones organized into award-giving bodies—out in the dark, pun incidental. Elwood Perez had brought on board enough of his audience-oriented skills to ensure that *Otso* could still work on the level of visual pleasure. The spectacle however of an always-too-successful blockbuster director returning from retirement and not just challenging established taste-mongers, but also overturning their list of favored indie-digital practitioners, must have stung those who preferred to conduct their business with self-certain constancy. The key to the film's unique and unexpected triumph is scriptwriter and lead performer Vince Tañada, liberated for the moment from his history-based stage material. With *Otso*, he committed to the fever-dream collaboration with the fervor of someone who has been given an opportunity to make history, rather than interpreting it, for a change. Perez intended *Otso*, which was about a scriptwriter's travails, to be the first installment of a personal trilogy drawn from his professional experiences: it was followed by *Esoterika: Maynila* (*Esoterica: Manila*, 2014), also with Tañada in a prominent role, about a *komiks* illustrator; and by the still-to-be-completed and provisionally titled *#Mnemonics (Vaya con Dios)* (meaning *God Be with You*), his tribute to 1960s movie queen Amalia Fuentes, with whom he made some of his early films.

TIKOY AGUILUZ

(3 films: 1985–2000)

Boatman

Year of Release: 1985
Director: Tikoy Aguiluz
Screenwriters: Alfred Yuson & Raffy Guerrero
From a story by Tikoy Aguiluz, with additional dialogue by Jose F. Lacaba
Producer: AMA Communications
Cast: Ronnie Lazaro, Sarsi Emmanuelle, Suzanne Love, Josephine Manuel, Jonas Sebastian, Eddie Arenas, Bella Flores, Mario Escudero, Alfredo Navarro Salanga, Susan Africa, Dennis Marasigan, Cloyd Robinson, Ding Navasero

> Felipe leaves his job as a boatman ferrying tourists to and from Laguna's Pagsanjan Falls to try his luck in Manila. He ends up as a live-sex performer and falls in love with his partner Gigi. He also starts a relationship with Emily, an American woman who hires him as her boytoy. As city life consumes him, Felipe realizes that there is a price he must pay for his carnal exploits.

At the height of the people-power movement, critics of the Marcoses were eager to charge the regime with immorality, and the revitalization of the sex-film genre was meant to stand as proof. Admittedly the libertarian atmosphere of the time was cynically intended to demonstrate to foreign observers that film artists enjoyed crucial amounts of freedom and institutional support. Despite this unstable situation, the local industry did manage to yield a number of noteworthy outputs. *Boatman,* with its disturbing, fevered fusion of high-art aesthetics and underworld debauchery, counts as one of them. The talents behind the film overlapped with those involved in anti-dictatorship projects, so the spectacle of a commercially successful sex-obsessed product criticizing the same socio-political system that gave rise to it can now be better appreciated and evaluated in retrospect.

Segurista

English Translations: *Perfectionist*; *Dead Sure*
English Title: *The Insurance Agent*
Year of Release: 1996
Director: Tikoy Aguiluz
Screenwriters: Jose F. Lacaba & Amado Lacuesta
From a story by Tikoy Aguiluz, Jose F. Lacaba, Amado Lacuesta
Producer: Neo Films
Cast: Michelle Aldana, Gary Estrada, Ruby Moreno, Albert Martinez, Julio Diaz, Pen Medina, Eddie Rodriguez, Liza Lorena, Suzette Ranillo, Teresa Loyzaga, Anthony Castelo, Roy Rodrigo, Manjo del Mundo, Celsar Bendigo, Evelyn Vargas, Melisse Santiago, Vangie Labalan, Pocholo Montes, Edgar Santiago, Mon Fernandez, Allan Garcia, Elan Villafuerte, Philip Lazaro, Ace Espinosa, Taka Musara, Maritess Fuentes, Tess Dumpit

To support her family devastated by the inundation of lahar from Mount Pinatubo, Karen hits upon the novel idea of selling insurance to the clients she encounters as a guest relations officer (the Philippine euphemism for bar hostess), through which she attains a level of success that makes her the highest earner in her batch of insurance agents. Her husband and daughter in Pampanga remain unaware of her less-than-savory strategy, and she knows enough about her patrons, from the example of her constantly lovelorn roommate Ruby, to keep professional distance from them even while allowing them access to her body. A number of clients, however, are attracted to her unattainability: one of them courts Ruby to get close to her while another decides to break up with his family despite her protestation. An even more dangerous obsessive, one that she fails to account for, is the person who conceals his desire for her.

Segurista is a film very much worth watching, for the most part. It starts out as a soft-core sex comedy, exceptional in the face of the usual tragic-moralistic depictions of carnal transgressions in Philippine cinema. It then takes a step forward without abandoning its observational wryness, into a laudable and women-sympathetic colloquy on social mores and inadequate disaster response, as well as on contrasts and parallels among various professions. Along the way it boasts of accomplished technique and performances, although it underutilizes the exceptional Ruby Moreno (who had made her own star turn in a 1993 Japanese masterwork, Sai Yôichi's *All Under the Moon*). Its only serious misstep is when it opts for a (mercifully shortish) resolution that demonizes the lowest-ranking worker in its narrative universe—the usual exclusion of the lumpen proletariat from progressive concerns that orthodox leftists unfortunately still consider acceptable, and that has marred too many otherwise noteworthy works in the country.

Biyaheng Langit

English Translation: *Trip to Heaven*
English Ttitle: *Paradise Express*
Year of Release: 2000
Director: Tikoy Aguiluz
Screenwriters: Ianco dela Cruz & Rey Ventura
From a story by Tikoy Aguiluz & Mirana Medina-Bhunjun
Producers: GMA Films & Viva Films
Cast: Joyce Jimenez, Mark Anthony Fernandez, Susan Africa, Christian Alvear, Kent Ambos, John Arcilla, Jack Barri, Nida Blanca, Menggie Cobarrubias, Cholo Escaño, Bong Gutierrez, Jeanette Joaquin, Vangie Labalan, Rj Leyran, Bert Martinez, Ali Navarro, Robert Oliviero, Bembol Roco, Boy Roque, Shermaine Santiago, Bert Martinez

Bea, a Filipino-American visiting the Philippines without her parents, finds herself drawn to the world of gambling where her grandmother amuses herself as a senior citizen. She winds up losing the money she was hoping to save so she could live independently, and finds herself buried deeper in debt when an amount she borrows from her best friend also gets squandered on a bad bet. She hooks up with Danny, an orphaned enforcer who collects debts for Bossing, a gambling lord. Still hoping to recover, both of them splurge on funds that belong to Bossing. But their losses force them to hide out in Danny's slum residence and work out ways to appease Bossing, who has taken an interest in Bea. Their confrontation with Bossing results in bloodshed, so Danny flees out of town with Bea to ask help from a semi-retired ganglord who also has a score to settle with Bossing.

Biyaheng Langit is atypically straightforward for a Tikoy Aguiluz film. That reflects as much on the anxieties that beset local practitioners ever since critical awareness and global validation became ideals to be cherished and pursued. It also indicates how consistently productive filmmakers can occasionally find coasting irresistible, with enough collegial support from local genre specialists to assure them that getting by has its own rewards. Pinoy action films during the late 20th century were at peak productivity, so enough personnel and actors could be conscripted to execute an undertaking with just the right amount of thrills and (courtesy of Aguiluz's earlier specialization) ribaldry. Folks may be inclined to point out Mark Anthony Fernandez's relation to his aunt Merle, who pioneered in *bomba* films, plus his father Rudy, a top action star. But the link goes farther and deeper: not only was his grandfather Gregorio an overlooked First Golden Age director, he was also a remarkable performer, although unfortunately only his supporting performances in his own films remain, and MAF proves himself fully worthy of the association. Beyond these admittedly incidental felicities (marred by the harrowing killing of Nida Blanca under resemblant circumstances), the film probes into the phenomenon of underworld-organized gambling—a concern that was already showing signs of infesting the higher seats of government by this time, and that would continue causing official vexations through subsequent administrations.

WILLIAM PASCUAL

(1 film: 1986)

Takaw Tukso

English Translation: *Constant Craving*
Additional Language: Chabacano de Cavite
Year of Release: 1986
Director: William Pascual
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producer: Ultravision Films
Cast: Gino Antonio, Julio Diaz, Jaclyn Jose, Anna Marie Gutierrez, Anita Linda, Lucita Soriano, Eva Darren, Tony Rubio

> A solid friendship exists among Nestor, his fiancée Debbie, his cousin Boy, and Debbie's friend Letty. But it gets shattered when a distraught Debbie elopes with Boy after she gets into a fight with her mother. The two get married but settle in the car-repair shop where Nestor lives and works. Tensions rise even further when true-hearted Letty weds Nestor and they live right beside Debbie and Boy.

Tragedy has conveniently become the coin of the realm of the senses, mainly because the medieval tendencies of Philippine Catholicism prefer that people who indulge in sexual pleasure must be made to pay—extravagantly, if possible—for their perceived transgression(s). The creative forces behind this project managed a way out of the predictability of this narrative approach by returning to the basics. It does this by grounding the material in the originative spirit of neorealism, as embodied in the frank sensuality of Luchino Visconte's *Ossessione* (*Obsession*, 1943), a then-daring adaptation of James M. Cain's occasionally banned crime novel *The Postman Always Rings Twice* (1934). With an observational expertise that would be the envy of veteran ethnographic filmmakers, *Takaw Tukso* (like *Ossessione*) envisions economically impoverished characters involved in dangerous games of seduction and clandestine assignations. Passion ultimately gets the better of their professional and friendly relations, and a comeuppance elevates the drama to the level of some of the most innovative strains in classical Greek theater.

ABBO Q. DELA CRUZ

(1 film: 1987)

Hubad na Pangarap

English Translation: *Naked Ambition*
Year of Release: 1987
Director: Abbo Q. dela Cruz
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producer: Golden Pearl Production
Cast: Michael de Mesa, Julio Diaz, Anna Marie Gutierrez, Lola, Vangie Labalan, Archi Adamos, Dante Castro, Chris Daluz, Tony Angeles, Tony Martinez, Stella Strada II, Jesse dela Paz, Lina Anota, Dick Morados

> Miguel arrives at his rural rest house with several of his swinger friends, including a good-time girl with whom he hooks up. When his volatile girlfriend Cindy arrives, she throws a fit and drives all the visitors away, allowing Miguel to appease her by making out with her. All by themselves, they turn their attention to the place's caretakers, Nelia and Ador, a poor but attractive couple engaged to each other. Miguel and Ador are childhood chums, but Miguel's interest in Nelia starts to strain their friendship. Cindy's exploitative regard toward Ador meanwhile leads to a bloody resolution in which the police are forced to intervene.

Abbo Q. dela Cruz's debut film, *Misteryo sa Tuwa* (*Joyful Mystery*, 1984), was a film maudit that will always be worth at least one viewing, but that will probably be defensible as strictly a late-era Cold War masterpiece—patriarchal, myopic, and desperate. It was so overblown that it came close to shutting down the film production division of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, which nevertheless came up with one last debut piece, Pio de Castro III's *Soltero* (*Bachelor*, 1984), a film that replicated its shortcomings, albeit on a decidedly more intimate scale. Dela Cruz had better timing with his sophomore project, written by one of the winners of the next batch's scriptwriting contest (which were never produced because of the preceding year's follies). The *Misteryo sa Tuwa* connection provides the first step in comprehending the offbeat properties of *Hubad na Pangarap*: its misanthropy is unmistakeable, but this time more carefully skewed against its privileged characters, so that its ineluctable misogyny is favorably contrasted with its masculine characters' meanness or feeble-mindedness. The libertarian spell occasioned by ECP-screened entries also fostered the busting of the final Catholic taboo against displaying the male form, so *HnP* enables a more-than-game Julio Diaz to cocktease not just his onscreen female master but an unsuspecting general audience as well. More productively, the film can be regarded as the middle entry in a trilogy scripted by Armando Lao, bookended by William Pascual's *Takaw Tukso* (*Constant Craving*, 1986) and Chito S. Roño's *Itanong Mo sa Buwan* (*Moon Child*, 1987), depicting increasing narrative complexity where working-class masculinities are confronted with and confounded by the well-laid schemes of the *femme fatale*.

EDDIE GARCIA

(1 film: 1987)

Saan Nagtatago ang Pag-ibig?

English Translation: *Where Is Love Hiding?*
Year of Release: 1987
Director: Eddie Garcia
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Adapted from the *komiks* by Gilda Olvidado
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Vilma Santos, Tonton Gutierrez, Ricky Davao, Gloria Romero, Alicia Alonzo, Cherie Gil, Alicia Vergel, Eddie Arenas, Perla Bautista, Joonee Gamboa, Suzanne Gonzales, Vicky Suba

> When Rick unexpectedly gets his girlfriend Estella pregnant, he fears that his rich grandmother will refuse to give him a large inheritance out of disappointment. To prevent that, he convinces Estella to marry his mentally handicapped half-brother, Val. She reluctantly obliges and eventually lives with Rick's family. But complications arise when she starts to develop feelings for Val.

Eddie Garcia's directorial strength lay in glossy handling of complicated narratives, making him an ideal match for Viva melodramas. He also none too soon moved away from conservative male-centered material toward feminist subject matter. And with this Vilma Santos-starrer, he attained a peak of sorts with the help of an unusually inspired *komiks* adaptation and an equally inspired ensemble delivery. Known mainly for the line "*Lagi na lang si Val, ang walang-malay na si Val*" (Always blaming Val, the innocent Val)," the film might be wrongly regarded as trafficking in sympathy for the mentally disabled. In fact it unexpectedly reverses the disadvantaged son's marginal situation and makes us comprehend how he could win the loyalty and affection of his pretend-wife, but the terms by which *Saan Nagtatago ang Pag-ibig?* turns out to be the closest to a feminist film that Garcia has made rely on a careful balancing act that begins with the exclusion of male players from the central conflict. Patriarchal power is invested in a fearsome granny, while her daughters (one of whom is Val's mother) cower in her presence and her grandsons are either incapacitated or spoiled beyond redemption. Once the men and phallic matriarch are eased out, Garcia gets to stage his money shot: a farewell scene by an alliance of women that derives its power from as much the foregoing emotional buildup as from the cultural connotations of women in black ritualistically bonding together. *SNaP* sustains the impressive tradition of *komiks* material providing some of the best stories in Pinas cinema—and some of the worst too, but what literary source is exempt from that weakness? The long-overdue reckoning of the most successful mass-patronized literary genre in local culture continues to await its moment.

ARTEMIO MARQUEZ

(2 films: 1987–1988)

The Untold Story of Melanie Marquez

Year of Release: 1987
Director: Artemio Marquez
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
From a story by Melanie Marquez
Producer: Miracle Boy Films International
Cast: Melanie Marquez, Caridad Sanchez, Tony Santos Sr., Rosemarie Gil, Totoy Marquez, Rene Salud, Maya dela Cuesta, Renee Salud, Lawrence Pineda, Romy Diaz, Tony Bernal, Karla Kalua, Desiree Verdadero, Sonny Pinga, Odette Khan, Virginia Angeles, Ma. Cecilia Magmayo, Julie Ann Cortez, Daryl Tupaz, Mark "John" Marquez, Cherry Ong, Rodolfo Manlangit, Ricardo de los Remedios, Ma. Luisa Laurel MacCutcheon

> While enduring persecution at a young age from her wealthier and fairer classmates, Melanie helps out her mother by working as a domestic helper at a bordello, where the women admire her height and beauty. Exasperated by her mother's rage over their economic difficulties, she seeks assistance from her estranged father Artemio, who has attained some success as a movie director in faraway Manila. Artemio's mistress resents the appearance of her partner's legitimate child and banishes Melanie from their home and office. She tells her mother about the other woman badmouthing them, upon which the mother confronts the mistress. Melanie decides to train on her own as a model, and attracts the attention of fashion designer Renee Salud, who grooms her for local and eventually global beauty contests. Melanie fulfills her dream of winning the Miss International crown, but she also realizes that heartaches will remain an essential part of her life, regardless of whatever station she attains.

No better proof of how well the Philippine film industry used to thrive lies in such a sample as this. Artemio Marquez was virtually an ancient relic by this time, having lived and worked through two Golden Ages of productivity, his primary distinction lying in how his production house made a breakout star out of Nora Aunor via a series of musical quickies. When his daughter Melanie became the second globally renowned figure that he was associated with, his film-mogul acuity kicked in and, doubtlessly inspired by Aunor's transformation into the country's major performer, impelled him to create the kind of personal project that only an openly eccentric yet highly professional showbiz longtimer could pull off. Melanie Marquez, who was also just as invested in the undertaking, affirms her seriousness by allowing herself to be slapped multiple times, sometimes in slow motion, by every major character who happens along.[48] Despite *The*

[48] The other Artemio Marquez stamp would be a breakdown scene where the (usually female) character would hysterically sweep away all the contents atop a table. In Melanie Marquez's next project with her father, the Regal Films production *Nasaan Ka Inay?* (*Where Are You, Mother?*, 1988), she apologizes to the partner of a sister she had wronged by literally wallowing in and gobbling down mud—the closest we have ever gotten to subconsciously approximating Divine in John Waters's *Pink Flamingos* (1972), although Melanie might have to be grateful that apparently neither she nor her father witnessed what Divine actually scarfed down. A detailed recollection-cum-appreciation of this moment (in Filipino) was provided by Jerrick Josue David in his *Linyang Pinoy, Hugot Pinoy* feature on *Facebook*. For Susan Sontag's "Notes on 'Camp'" book source, see her anthology *Against Interpretation*, Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, 1966.

Untold Story of Melanie Marquez's otherwise dismissible premise and handling, the film presents a useful record of Melanie's catwalk prowess. Even more significantly, it prevails as a rare contemporary incarnation of authentic camp, according to the paradigm stipulated by Susan Sontag in her 1964 article: inadvertent in affect, premised on artifice, funny despite its serious intent, open to multiple readings by insiders, utterly embraceable given the proper perspective and preparation, with Melanie's undeniably androgynous appeal overlooking the proceedings.

Sa Puso Ko Hahalik ang Mundo

English Translation: *The World Will Kiss My Heart*
Year of Release: 1988
Director & Screenwriter: Artemio Marquez
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Snooky Serna, Gabby Concepcion, Pops Fernandez, Martin Nievera, Lotlot de Leon, Ramon Christopher, Caridad Sanchez, Daria Ramirez, Rez Cortez, Tita Muñoz, Subas Herrero, Lucita Soriano, Ester Chavez, Mario Escudero, Charlon Davao, Judy Anne Santos, Jane Zaleta, Ryan Fortich, Luis Benedicto, Egay Gonzalez, Jay Cuyuca, Nemits Rivero, Ceso Yusi, Brigham Manalastas, Ernesto delos Reyes, Ric Mercado, Chito Ilagan, Butch Miraflor, Mark Lopez, Mercie de Vera, Marlene Vegasca

> Growing up in rural poverty, Aurora and Amalia have to cope with the sudden death of their mother by agreeing to having their sister Claudia adopted by a wealthy couple, who rename the child Betty and bring her with them to the US. When they grow up, only Aurora remembers the separation; she permits her boyfriend Benjie to seek his fortune in Manila but fails to hear from him after a while. This is because the owner of the nightclub where he works, a wealthy widow, entraps him so she can possess him as her new hubby. Short of cash for continuing her studies in the city, Amalia decides to find work as well. Albert is smitten by her and gets her hired at the same workplace where Benjie landed, since the owner (now Benjie's wife) happens to be his elder sister. Betty visits the Philippines with her husband Renato, a struggling musician, so they can stage a concert where Betty will be singing Renato's compositions. Aurora, who's searching for Benjie, is distracted while walking and gets hit by Renato's car. The guilt-ridden Renato takes his victim to his home so she can recover and gives her a job as domestic helper, but Betty resents her presence and keeps quarreling with her husband and still-unrecognized sister.

The triumph of *The Untold Story of Melanie Marquez* signaled that Artemio Marquez still had some squall in his sails at an age when most people would be enjoying their retirement. Regal Films' Lily Monteverde, an even more voracious talent-hunter than he'd ever been, contracted him and made sure to corner all the crowd-pleasing material that his impressively extended film practice enabled him to churn out. For better or worse, Marquez embodied the quintessence of the Pinoy filmmaker-as-journeyperson. The lore that he'd managed to store up, however, held him in good stead, and could best be sampled in his first project for Regal. *Sa Puso Ko Hahalik ang Mundo* had none of the personal signature (such as it is) that he'd endowed in his daughter's luridly luminous biofilm, and it bore the stamp of "Mother" Lily's insistence on casting young real-life celebrity couplings that generated audience titillation all their own. But it also had all the hallmarks of his most financially successful period as owner of Tower Productions, where the types of aspirants that the First Golden Age studios resisted

for not being Euro-pretty enough were launched so stratospherically that the more old-school movie stars could only survive by retreating into hard-core sex-film projects. Nearly all of those teen-idol and *bomba* films are lamentably lost, but in *SPKHM* we can still see how Temyong Marquez's wholesome-youngster formulas could weave their spell on enthralled movie fans: fateful coincidences, dramatic outbursts, pregnant secrets, a yearning for connection—so drenched in openly manipulative music-infused schmaltz that the final-act benevolent intervention of an affluent matron can be welcomed only in so far as it could help draw the proceedings to a close.

PEPE MARCOS

(1 film: 1988)

Tubusin Mo ng Dugo

English Translation: *Redeem with Blood*
Alternate Title: *Tubusin Mo ng Dugo ... A Crime Story*
Year of Release: 1988
Director: Pepe Marcos
Screenwriter: Jose N. Carreon
Producer: Bonanza Films
Cast: Rudy Fernandez, Marianne de la Riva, Debbie Miller, Princess Punzalan, Johnny Delgado, Eddie Garcia, Perla Bautista, Rez Cortez, Roy Alvarez, Ernie Forte, Zandro Zamora, Romy Diaz, Val Iglesias, Abbo dela Cruz, Ruben Rustia, Renato Robles, Conrad Poe, Estrella Kuenzler, Rene Hawkins, Usman Hassim, Renato del Prado, Bella Flores, Felix E. Dalay, Bert Vivar, Joey Padilla, Big Boy Gomez, Rommel Valdez, Naty Santiago, Luis Benedicto, Cheryl Garcia, Manny Doria, Emily Tuazon, Robert Miller, Jimmy Reyes, Bebeng Amora, Bert Vivar, Ernie David

> Fresh out of prison, Carding participates in the small-time neighborhood rackets to which his upbringing accustomed him, with the help of his lesbian pal Bing Bong. He courts Elena but her father disapproves of her favoring a common hoodlum, while he also hooks up with Sally, a bargirl, whenever he's in desperate need of quick cash. His mother asks her old friend Captain Torres to watch over him, but during another stint in jail, he's able to escape when an inmate, Gordon, is freed by his homies. Counted as the newest member of the gang, Carding finds himself working on big-time heists but gets into scrapes with his mates because of their ironhearted code of conduct, necessitated by the crisis situations that they confront during their money-making activities.

Rudy Fernandez had at least one other celebrated bad-boy role, in Edgardo Vinarao's *Diskarte* (*Strategy*, 2002), which aspired for ill-advised redemption by detouring midway into religious-revivalist folderol. *Tubusin Mo ng Dugo* was a far more impressive endeavor, nearly derailed at two junctures by the character's tendency to force himself on women who resist his advances, even if they implicitly yield afterward. Such pigheadedness, aggravated by the hero's otherwise charming insouciance, would be part of a cultural tradition that was already newly primitive during the time it was presented. The measure of *TMD*'s achievement may be collocated in the analog era, before computer graphics became available as a matter of course. From this strictly technical perspective, nothing else during its time came close; even the deplorable negligence it suffered due to inadequate recognition mechanisms barely impinges on its skills display, inasmuch as it proceeds from a satirical approach rarely attempted in the genre. It also immensely benefits from the successful realization of an ambitious thematic scheme, wherein the psychological stress that inheres in outlaw activities not only grows with the organization but also turns inward, resulting in (occasionally well-founded) paranoia over one's allies and in terrifying internecine conflict. In certain respects, *TMD* turns out to be as much of its era as, say, Lino Brocka's *Maynila* (1975), and likewise deserves its own share of appreciation amid acknowledgment of its unfortunate shortcomings, if a decent print can still be salvaged anywhere.

NORA AUNOR

(1 film: 1989)

Greatest Performance [unfinished]

Year of Intended Release: 1989
Director & Screenwriter: Nora Aunor [as Guy]
Producer: NCV Films
Cast: Nora Aunor, Tirso Cruz III; Julio Diaz; Kristoffer Ian de Leon; Fe de los Reyes; Rez Cortez; Lara Melissa de Leon, Jet Montelibano, Butch Elizalde, German Moreno, Michael de Mesa, Tony Carreon, Miguel Tanciangco, Bella Flores, Nonoy Zuñiga, Bobby Taylo

> Laura's body is carried out of an auditorium where a young unnamed fan wanders backstage to dwell on his memory of her. Laura's life unfolds as her success as a singer enables a lifestyle of debauchery, which people in her social orbit exploit. She lives with Cholo, a violence-prone musician who turns to drugs out of frustration from his lack of success in managing her career. Her propensity to get stoned by herself results in a traumatic incident where a gang of men invite her to their table and drug her in order to gang-rape her; she attempts to gun them down afterward but gives up and intensifies her addictive behavior. After her attempt to stage a concert at a small-time fashion venue results in her band members brawling with unruly audience members, she pleads with an amorous producer. But when the latter attempts to sexually assault her, Cholo shows up and shoots him dead. After Cholo lands in jail and a sheriff confiscates her band's musical instruments because of their inability to cover their bank loan, she binges out on liquor and drugs, with Briccio picking her up and taking her to a rehab clinic. Briccio convinces her to stage an anniversary concert as her way of announcing her intention to turn over a new leaf, but Cholo escapes from jail and hooks up with her, inciting Briccio's psychotic condition.

Possibly the most irregular entry in this entire canon listing, *Greatest Performance* underwent the exceptional journey of embodying Nora Aunor's ultimate auteurist aspiration: she was producer, director, writer, lead actor, and singer. Exasperated by the creative pressures weighing on the project, she encountered rejection from the Metro Manila Film Festival, which had always been receptive to her proposals in the past and even after this case. Having already spent around ₱3 million (over ₱21 million in current value), she decided to scrap the entire undertaking—easier to accomplish then because of the celluloid nature of the footage. Film critic-archivist Jojo Devera, one of her confidants, managed to secure a low-end video transfer, which she also wished to destroy when she learned of its existence. With her demise in March 2025, the film may now be counted as public-domain material, with the implicit acknowledgment that Aunor did not wish for its persistence.[49] As it is, the transferred

[49] For a special issue of *Kritika Kultura* devoted to Philippine film stardom, for which I was preparing an article on Nora Aunor, I learned about the existence of Jojo Devera's video copy of *Greatest Performance* and asked permission from Aunor, via Ricky Lee, so I could conduct a close reading of the material, with the assurance that the resultant study would be strictly academic—a request that was granted; the *KK* article is titled "Firmament Occupation: The Philippine Star System" and appeared in vol. 25 (August 2015), pp. 248–284, doi:10.13185/1656-152x1653. A few years later, Devera organized an informal group comprising critics and tech experts to request, via video conferencing, that she allow the completion of the film, even without her participation. Here she drew the line and made it clear that as far as she was concerned, she was over the project and that she did not wish any further work to be done on it. With Aunor's death in March 2025, Devera has been overseeing possibilities for readying *GP* for public consumption.

copy still requires sound effects, some dubbing and trimming, editorial transitions, and closing credits (a clear signal not just of its provisional nature but also of Aunor's well-known timidity is her director-writer credit, which uses her nickname "Guy," as well as her producer's credit designated with only her initials). Nevertheless it tracks a *Todesroman* (a coming-of-death story, as opposed to the coming-of-age *Bildungsroman*) in a performing artist's life, using a fictionalization of experiences that she acknowledged as part of her personal history in a series of interviews that she granted upon her return in 2011 from her extended US sabbatical. In fact her store of first-person narratives was capable of yielding even more controversial material, but the undeniable intertext for which *GP* could serve as corrective was an earlier MMFF project that purported to depict the life of a successful singer, but which proceeded from the preposterously hoary, not to mention sexist, perspective that a female pop-culture figure's success is less worthy than the life of a male doctoral candidate. *GP* does not reject the moralistic premise, a decision that potentially weakens its ideological position, but it does show an insider's intimate familiarity with the extremes and dangers that a dissipated star's life could sink to, and configures the men in the central character's life as destructive forces. Moreover, it furnishes the singular element that Aunor insisted on acknowledging, all the way to the end of her existence: the support of her fans. In *GP* only one admirer (played by her biological child) interacts with the singer's life, but the fan's loyalty, helplessness, and insistence on being present during her career peaks speaks volumes about the high regard Aunor placed on her followers. *GP* might yet reemerge as a closer-to-finalized sample, especially with forthcoming developments in artifical-intelligence solutions, but even in its present damaged condition, its embodiment of the Noranian predicament will prove rewarding to any appreciator of Philippine film stardom. Almost needless to add, astute directorial judgments are literally evident in her setups and cutting points, with even the most minor performers carefully coached for the roles they assume. The dialogues are borderline-démodé, but then nearly her entire performance is either reactive or silent—an acknowledgment of the strength that her directors admired: hard to believe, considering Aunor's formidable track record, but the film's "greatest performance" title is fully earned, even in terms of the final number she sings. If the MMFF authorities had any inkling of the historical document that they so casually dismissed, they would have realized that all the later accolades they granted Aunor could never compensate for the near-loss suffered by *GP*.

AUGUSTO SALVADOR

(2 films: 1990–1993)

Ikasa Mo ... Ipuputok Ko

English Translation: *Cock [the Revolver] ... I'll Fire It*
Year of Release: 1990
Director: Augusto Salvador
Screenwriters: Rene Villanueva & Humilde "Meek" Roxas
From a story by D.G. Salonga & Hermoso D. Pacho, serialized in *Pogi Komiks*
Producers: Urban Films & OctoArts Films
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Eddie Garcia, Michael de Mesa, Maila Gumila, Sheila Ysrael, Dencio Padilla, Perla Bautista, Robert Talabis, Atong Redillas, Ricky Rivero, Bon Vibar, Dindo Arroyo, Romeo Rivera, Maylene Gonzales, Rommel Valdez, Eddie Arenas, Ernie Zarate, Johnny Vicar, Rene Hawkins, Ernie David, Usman Hassim, Robert Miller, Joey Padilla, Big Boy Gomez, Ding Salvador, Vic Belaro, Polly Cadsawan, Ernie Forte, Rey Solo, Eddie Tuazon, Belo Borja, Danny Labra, Danny Riel, Vic Belaro, Teddy Magera, Ernie David, Jimmy Reyes, Nemie Gutierrez, Joe Baltazar, Rey Tumenes, Bernard Atienza, Baldo Marro's Boys

> Guiller Sta. Romana makes sure to live an upright existence as a police officer, in honor of his father who died in the line of fire. His younger partner, Boboy Sanchez, just welcomed a newborn son and consequently feels some anxiety about making ends meet, considering the low salary that police personnel draw. Guiller makes sure to maintain civil relations with his father's associates, since he suspects one of them betrayed his father to the gangsters who killed him. Ledesma, a crime lord annoyed by Guiller's insistent inspection of the goods he wants to transport, asks Liezel, his trusted gun moll, to persuade Guiller to allow him one profitable shipment in exchange for big money. Liezel only succeeds in convincing Boboy, who then two-times the operation, leading Ledesma to order his men to hunt down and kill the two men's families. They succeed in abducting Guiller, who has no idea what Boboy has done, maul him severely, and leave him for dead.

The commercial dominance of action films in Philippine cinema became the reason for the negligent treatment that Philippine cultural experts accorded it; only one other genre, the hard-core sex film, managed to surpass it during the period of transition from dictatorship to elite democracy—and not surprisingly, samples of the latter suffered even more abusive treatment, with the Philippine cardinal dictating censorship policy and censors chiefs gloating over their practice of burning celluloid strips, if not entire films, that they judged to be offensive and for which they, rather than the producers or creatives, should be criminally liable. A more insidious form of maltreatment lay in the gatekeepers of cultural prestige, who focused selective attention on action entries when these could be read as criticizing the social policies of the martial-law government, but trained their recognition efforts on poverty-themed art films once liberal democracy had replaced the Marcos Sr. authoritarian era. As a typical illustration of separate trends tending to reinforce one another, two pulp-derived titles featuring heroes who lose their sense of sight came out in the same year: *Ikasa Mo ... Ipuputok Ko* from *komiks* material, and Francis Posadas's *Kasalanan ang Buhayin Ka* (*It's a Sin to Let You Live*) from a regional radio serial, both now in degraded condition. *IMIK* is closer to a standard action-film presentation, in that it features law-enforcement lead characters who find themselves up against lawless social superiors. The *komiks* source enables it to explore areas and situations precluded in the previous teamup of

the director and actor, *Joe Pring: Homicide, Manila Police* (1989), because of the latter's biographical boundaries. The secondary importance given women characters is curbed toward the end, when the hero's blindness necessitates his wife and mistress to team up and help in targeting his enemies. Even more markedly, *IMIK* makes use of high-caliber performers regardless of which side of the law they happen to play. Augusto Salvador's extensive background as film editor helps explain the clarity and precision of his always-essential takes, with the occasionally literally explosive violence marking the film as the type our best genre specialists could execute while enabling the dramatic issues to build up in corresponding fashion, both coming to a head in a manner that commemorates technical expertise alongside histrionic skills.

Masahol Pa sa Hayop

English Translation: *Worse than an Animal*
Additional Language: Ilocano
Year of Release: 1993
Director: Augusto Salvador
Screenwriter: Humilde "Meek" Roxas
Producer: Four N Films
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Jun Aristorenas, Efren Reyes Jr., Jessica Rodriguez, Atoy Co, Willie Revillame, Jessie Delgado, Philip Gamboa, Dencio Padilla, Conrad Poe, Ruel Vernal, King Gutierrez, Agot Isidro, Bob Soler, Benedict Aquino, Terence Baylon, Noel Nuqui, Bernard Fabiosa, Mike Magat, Johnny Vicar, Ernie Forte, Ernie Zarate, Turko Cervantes, Lito Castillo, Polly Cadsawan, Vic Belaro, Allan Garcia, Leon Cuevo, Robert Perez, Roger Moring, Eddie Mañalac, Jerome Advincula, Teddy Magera, Allan Reyes, Leo Adalem, Nanding Fernandez, Bebeng Amora, Nestor Balla, Lee Andres, Gamaliel Viray, Tony Tacorda, Tony Angeles, Edmund Cupcupin, Sabrina M., Jimmy Santos, Augusto Victa

> After neutralizing a rogue rebel group motivated by profit and spite, Capt. Tomas Padilla is ordered by Brig. Gen. Montalban to save a provincial governor from men who allegedly took him hostage. As it turns out, Montalban was out to avenge the death of his son, who was illegally transporting contraband and defied the governor's order to give up. Since Montalban marked Padilla and his team as expendable, they fight back and take refuge in an Aeta community, whom they free from marauding soldiers. Padilla realizes that Montalban gained an advantage by abducting his wife and son, and asks assistance from the tribespeople who'd promised to help him.

Masahol Pa sa Hayop is a peculiar creature, although its lineage can be tracked to the trend in local action films that heroicized military personnel after the successful participation of the Armed Forces of the Philippines in the antidictatorship uprising of February 1986. Unlike the initial batch, however, *MPsH* does not rely on the narrative of a well-known official; nor does it partake of the self-conscious seriousness of these presentations. Those with time to spare might be able to find previous collaborations between the similarly surnamed (though apparently unrelated) director and actor—a dozen titles, though nearly thrice that if we include Augusto Salvador's credits as film editor. *MPsH* is preceded by a few attempts that toy with a liberal slant, with an outright left-sympathetic treatment in *Lucio Margallo* (1992), the pair's previous collaboration. The current work positions itself relatively safely within a critique of abusive higher-ups and makes adequate use of a device once better deployed in a Lito Lapid film, Celso Ad. Castillo's now-lost *Pedro Tunasan* (1983), where the hero finds refuge as well as assistance from the same indigenous group.

The conventional though still-laudable anticorruption line is enhanced (or compromised, depending on one's preference) by the stunts and fireworks enabled by a moderately budgeted outing, although those who might want to take a harsher view will be able to temper their response by considering how *MPsH* ties in with a trend in global cinema, of similarly highly commercial outings that exemplify a measure of social consciousness or even sometimes outright socialist ideologizing. Several action figures, starting with Jun Aristorenas, are fortunate to have some of their best performances on record here; but the jewel in the movie's crown is the figure of Phillip Salvador, thriving in genre projects after the death of his mentor Lino Brocka, gifting late celluloid-era pictures with the most highly skilled action-star performances on our side of the planet. He may have aged less gracefully than he should have since then, but with so few blessings in the mode of practice that he opted for, we can still marvel at how far he was able to take the brand of responsible film imaging that he became known for.

CARLOS SIGUION-REYNA

(4 films: 1991–1998)

1—*Hihintayin Kita sa Langit*

English Title: *I Will Wait for You in Heaven*
Year of Release: 1991
Director: Carlos Siguion-Reyna
Screenwriter: Racquel Villavicencio
Adapted from the William Wyler film *Wuthering Heights* (1939)
Producer: Reyna Films
Cast: Richard Gomez, Dawn Zulueta, Jackie Lou Blanco, Michael de Mesa, Eric Quizon, Vangie Labalan, Jose Mari Avellana, Guila Alvarez, Gio Alvarez, Jomari Yllana, Judy Cobar, Jeffrey Coronel, Ramir Arce Romero, May Gorospe, Lynn Cruz, Sonny Viana, Ricky Yu, Alfon Miranda

> While growing up, Carmina and her adopted brother Gabriel develop feelings for each other, much to the disapproval of her real sibling Milo. When their father dies, Milo relegates Gabriel to the status of family servant. Despite her commitment to her true love, Carmina is forced to marry the wealthy Alan as Gabriel seeks his fortune elsewhere. Years later, Gabriel has become rich himself and vows to get back at those who made him suffer.

2—*Ikaw Pa Lang ang Minahal*

English Translation: *You're the Only One I've Loved*
English Title: *Only You*
Year of Release: 1992
Director: Carlos Siguion-Reyna
Screenwriter: Racquel Villavicencio
Adapted from the William Wyler film *The Heiress* (1949)
Producer: Reyna Films
Cast: Maricel Soriano, Richard Gomez, Eddie Gutierrez, Charito Solis, Armida Siguion-Reyna, Dawn Zulueta, Guila Alvarez, Reyelmin Eduardo, Adrianne Escudero, Richard Reynoso, Ramir Arce Romero, Robert Natividad, Susan Medina, Ramon Reyes, Reddie Boy Escudero, Jean Garcia, Zeny Constantino, Nestor Cortez, Eufemia Azuelo, Edwin Briones, Joel Carreanga, Rosalie Escudero, Millie Escudero, Mela Quisumbing Escudero, Teddy Umali, Johnny Garutaro, Joey Morales, Joseph Tociero

> As sole heir to a vast fortune, naïve Adela has all the money she needs. However, all she longs for is the love of her father Maximo, who in turn disdains her, blaming her for her mother's postpartum death. When a stranger named David courts her, she is quickly smitten. Though Maximo warns her that her suitor is only after her wealth, she elopes with David. Soon, she realizes that this act of rebellion will teach her the harsh realities of life and love.

The presence of "the foreign" has tended to raise contentious exchanges about what exactly constitutes Filipinoness. The success of these two adaptations of Classical Hollywood movies, themselves adapted from 19th-century English-language novels (Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights* and Henry James's *Washington Square*), might confirm nationalist author Renato Constantino's assertion, in *Synthetic Culture and Development* (1985), that Philippine cinema was merely "reflective" of the West. On the other hand, one may respond by pointing out that because

of its universality, film is arguably the least Filipino mass medium, and therefore the valorizing of originality would be a futile pursuit. Moreover, there have been other avid non-Western moviegoers aside from Filipinos. For now, we may regard the success of these twin attempts as evidence of a cosmopolitan strain in our mass audience—a quality that enables them to find nostalgia in rural-set narratives, identify with protagonists of either gender who leave defeated yet return triumphant, and take pleasure in complex narratives, grand production values, and operatic gestures. In such a globalized mode of practice as ours, adaptations of non-indigenous material will be unavoidable; hence we can certainly do worse than have models, with *Hihintayin Kita sa Langit* and *Ikaw Pa Lang ang Minahal* as our long-standing state-of-the-craft, that may serve as challenges for future filmmakers to emulate, resist, or outdo.

Ang Lalake sa Buhay ni Selya

English Title: *The Man in Selya's Life*
Year of Release: 1997
Director: Carlos Siguion-Reyna
Screenwriter: Bibeth Orteza
Producer: Reyna Films
Cast: Rosanna Roces, Ricky Davao, Gardo Versoza, Alan Paule, Eva Darren, Crispin Pineda, Gigi Locsin, Cednic Millado, Macky Villalon, John Nielsen Apilado, Virgie Lopez, Manny Mendoza, Loraine Torrado, Cyrill Torrado, Kristofer Curameng, Sunny Castillo, Richard Melu, Dennis Selis, Marilyn Mortiz, Joseph Buncalan, Joey Luna, Irene Medez, Alex Orlanda, Peregrino Tadem, Vicky Pagaron, Jerome Gampani, John Elizar Pascua, Resty Isabel Valido, Joseph Olfindo, Jun Leyva, Ernesto Lavariño, Nestor de la Peña, Lina Trinidad, Anita Edu

> Bobby, Selya's virile but promiscuous boyfriend, disappears from her life when she tells him that she's pregnant with his child. The desperate public-school teacher travels to his hometown to look for him but is informed by Piling, his landlady, that he just left and she has no idea where he went. Ramon, the owner of the boardinghouse and a principal at the local high school, is also undergoing a difficult breakup with his married lover. Aware of the rumors that Ramon's gay relationship has caused in the conservative community, Piling devises a scheme where Selya can rent a room and teach at Ramon's school. She also brings the two together, lying to Ramon that she informed Selya of his preference. A visit from Ramon's ex causes discord in the newlywed's life together, but this is minor compared to the sudden reappearance of Bobby.

If we count Rufa Mae Quinto as a comedy specialist, then Rosanna Roces was the country's last sex-film star. Following the trajectory that all her predecessors aspired to achieve, she agreed to appear in distinctly serious projects, starting with two outings in the same year at Reyna Films. One of these, *Ligaya ang Itawag Mo sa Akin* (*They Call Me Joy*), met with acclaim and a slew of recognitions, despite the fact that the entry was too early-wave feminist to be considered useful for gender analysis, much less activism; even right-wing moralists would find its positions on sex work acceptable—so no wonder the elderly critics group embraced it. Downgraded in comparison was her other project, *Ang Lalake sa Buhay ni Selya* (*The Man in Selya's Life*), which may have been misperceived as belonging on the same order as the other film, as well as a corrective to her bawdy and witty public persona. Such an oversight burdened *ALBS* with baggage it never intended to bear. The key is in looking over the (married) director-writer partnership's initial

collaboration, *Misis Mo, Misis Ko* (*Your Wife, My Wife*, 1988), as well as an earlier script by the same writer, Lino Brocka's *Palipat-lipat, Papalit-Palit* (*Changing, Exchanging*, 1982): not only is *ALBS* queer in sensibility, as the earlier two were, it is also essentially a comedy of manners despite its occasional stroll into melodramatic territory. Roces holds her own in light-handed ensemble work, actually a more difficult performing challenge than tragic drama, while the theater-trained Ricky Davao (recently deceased) elucidates a delicate balance of desire, frustration, and hope, often in impressively modulated combinations. One of our best-achieved queer texts, sneaking and persisting under the radar, just as it should.

Tatlo ... Magkasalo

English Translation: *Three ... Sharing*
English Title: *Three*
Year of Release: 1998
Director: Carlos Siguion-Reyna
Screenwriter: Bibeth Orteza
Based on a story by Jun Lana
Producer: Reyna Films
Cast: Ara Mina, Tonton Gutierrez, Rita Avila, Gina Alajar, Sharmaine Suarez, Eva Darren, Roy Rodrigo, Philip Lazaro, Mailes Kanapi, Kaye Congmon, Lorraine Fernandez, Reggie Gonzales, Sam Intano, Audrey Ignacio, Joel Olivera

> Elsie and Tito, a newly married couple, find their union destabilized by Tito's fiery temper and continuing attraction to his mistress, Susan. Alice, who had a discreet affair with Elsie before the latter got married, resumes their acquaintance—to the consternation of Barok, an out lesbian who pines after Alice. Elsie finds Alice hard to turn away, not only because of Tito's abusive behavior but also because she finds out that her ex-lover has a terminal illness. Tito's discovery of the women's conflicted relationship induces a shift in his regard for his wife, as well as a fascination in and growing respect for the love that women are capable of providing each other.

The imaging of lesbian desire in Philippine cinema has encountered the same difficulties that beset queer folk in conservative cultures everywhere. Since women are recipients of the male gaze, their bodies are allowed to be objectified, but love or sometimes even physical intimacy between them may be permitted only up to the point where male characters have to exercise their prerogative of owning their female partners. Lesbians in Philippine cinema have been more fortunate than their counterparts in other non-Western film cultures, with some depictions departing from the usual tragic or murderous or forcibly heterosexualized ("correctively raped," to use the right-wing oxymoron) types of characters. The fountainhead of modern queer imaging in local films would be Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980), where the butch lesbian figure is nevertheless punished by the narrative for her drug-peddling activities. Mel Chionglo's *Isabel Aquino: I Want to Live* (1990) may perhaps be the closest to a politically correct adaptation of a real-life narrative, while Sigrid Andrea Bernardo's *Ang Huling Cha-Cha ni Anita* (*Anita's Last Cha-Cha*, 2013) is an exemplary and charming coming-out tale. Between these two samples, *Tatlo ... Magkasalo* (1998) proves how difficult the journey has been. Its central female characters comprise a married woman conflicted by her bisexuality, a dying lesbian unable and unwilling to let go of her now-unavailable former partner, and an openly man-hating butch woman attached to both

once-and-future lovers and creating difficult triangulated relations. Yet the narrative finds a way to reconcile all these impossible desires, ironically by allowing the straight male to realize, via a process of enlightenment, that his sexual exclusion matters less than the privilege he has of observing how women capable of same-sex love work out their differences among themselves. This makes understandable how *Tatlo* initially generated disapproving responses among PC observers as well as critics who tend to reject genre products. More recent observers have been attuned to its upholding of queer values, along with a cautiously realistic handling of class differences, where women without men have to constantly endure borderline-poverty conditions: the movie's social contribution consists in asserting that the realization of radically novel familial relations, no matter how short-lived, is worth the cost of suffering the rejection of patriarchal systems.

TOTO NATIVIDAD

(6 films: 1992–2017)

Totoy Guwapo: Alyas Kanto Boy

English Translation: *Totoy Handsome: Alias Crossroad Kid*
Year of Release: 1992
Director: Toto Natividad
Screenwriters: Humilde "Meek" Roxas & Jhun Tolentino
From a story by Carmelita del Mundo
Producer: Moviestars Production
Cast: Ace Vergel, Bembol Roco, Efren Reyes Jr., Johnny Delgado, Aurora Sevilla, Sheila Ysrael, Willie Revillame, Rez Cortez, Max Alvarado, Roldan Aquino, Ruel Vernal, Renato del Prado, Zandro Zamora, Daria Ramirez, Tom Olivar, Atong Redillas, Sunshine Dizon, Gladys Reyes, Jimmy Reyes, Ernie David, Rene Hawkins, Nonoy de Guzman, Turko Cervantes, Bebeng Amora, Telly Babasa, Freddie Ondra, Gody Pacrem, Rey Flores, Harris Mantezo, Mike Vergel Jerome Advincula, August Pascual, Ben Dugan, Tom Alvarez, Dardo de Oro, Art Veloso, Arman Escartin, Thunder Stuntmen, Super Allasan Stuntmen, Ben Dugan Stuntmen

> Because his mother resents having to raise him and opted to move away with her lover instead, Totoy winds up a street urchin working as a beggar, along with other kids, for Dolpo. When the latter beats up one kid who kept part of her earnings to buy a doll, Totoy stabs Dolpo and flees with his friends. They grow up as street criminals engaged in protection racketeering. More powerful rivals target Totoy's interests and he lands in jail when his most trusted lieutenant, Morris, sells him out to Roldan's gang. He manages to escape but Roldan's men, along with Morris, know that Totoy's vulnerability lies in the woman he loves and wishes to protect.

The son of First Golden Age action stars, Ace Vergel started as a child actor and reemerged as mature performer with skills and charisma intact. He managed to grace a few prestige projects—including Lamberto V. Avellana's last film *Waywaya* (1982), an adaptation of a story by F. Sionil Jose, and Mel Chionglo's *Bomba Arienda* (1985), a biography of the fiery pre-martial law radio commentator—but his legacy remained in the action genre. What distinguishes his so-called "bad boy" persona in acclaimed works like Carlo J. Caparas's *Pieta* (1983) and Willy Milan's *Anak ng Cabron* (*Son of a Scoundrel*, 1988) is how he brings overwhelming grief to his mother and, by extension, his wife. *Totoy Guwapo* proceeds from an awareness of the inevitability of his Oedipal predicament, but reverses the situation in order to observe a more realistic process, where the parent passes on her dysfunction to her child. This enables the text to minimize recriminatory exchanges between the main character and his family, but *TGAKB* benefits from more than just narrative amelioration. From his very first project, *Durugin ng Bala si Peter Torres* (*Rain Bullets on Peter Torres*, 1990), director Toto Natividad exhibited a willingness to attempt what other local action directors were too reluctant or self-repressed to portray. His daredevilry, coupled with a prolific streak, served to temper Vergel's flair for rage and intensity by focusing on physical exploits rather than verbal outpouring, although director and star unfortunately burned bright too quickly and left too soon. *TGAKB* happens to be in apparently worse condition than most of Natividad's video transfers, so the challenge to uncover a serviceable copy also abides.

Amang Capulong: Anak ng Tondo, Part II

English Translation of Subordinate Title: *Son of Tondo*
Year of Release: 1992
Director: Toto Natividad
Screenwriter: Jun Lawas
Producer: Four-N Films
Cast: Monsour del Rosario, Rina Reyes, Tirso Cruz III, Johnny Delgado, Perla Bautista, Ruel Vernal, Tobby Alejar, Kevin Delgado, Lucita Soriano, Jose Romulo, Rez Cortez, Roldan Aquino, Renato del Prado, Edwin Reyes, Nilo Nuqui, Sharmaine Arnaiz, Mario Escudero, Rudy Fernandez, Jimmy Reyes, Dannie Riel, Ernie David, Ushman Hassim, Jess Santos, Joe Lapid, Delfin Dante, Al Mangga, Al Cunanan, Cristian Banzil, Ace Baylon, Ben Dugan, Chique Sibal, Rudy Castillo, James Gaters, Lito Mina, Bebot Davao, Ding Alvaro, Ed Madriaga, Thunder Stuntmen, Brother Stuntmen, Shadow Stuntmen, Commando Stuntmen, DM Boys Stuntmen

> Amang Capulong and Gorio tease their friend Tony, who's about to complete his police training and might henceforth find himself on the other side of his chums' crime-adjacent lifestyles. Amang's mother, who's constantly berated by the village drunk Gabriela for eloping with the man she was about to marry, argues that they should tough it out as born-and-bred Tondo natives. When Tirona, a commercial developer, eyes the Sunog Apog district that he bought from the government and warns the slum residents that they should move out, they organize an initially successful legal resistance. Tirona, however, mobilizes criminal elements to stigmatize the residents. Amang's father, who sees an opportunity to cut into their earnings, is consequently gunned down by the police, while Amang's attempt to extract revenge lands him in jail.

Inflict as many markers of quickiness as you can on a contemporary posting of a premillennial release—open-access, apparent sequel of an ignored original, even more insistently ignored money-making genre by an extremely prolific no-name filmmaker, minimally competent lead performers: not only does *Amang Capulong: Anak ng Tondo, Part II* surpass all of these in announcing the arrival of the country's final celluloid master, it also bids to stand alone as first in a string of Toto Natividad tours de force and begs favorable comparison with the final output of Fernando Poe Jr. The expected violence-inflected opener, for instance, takes place in an open-air social-dance occasion that rural and working-class urban youths consider one of the highlights of their prework existence. Near the close of FPJ's *Eseng ng Tondo* (*Eseng of Tondo*, codir. Augusto Salvador, 1997), his character casually mingles with the trans women who organize and dominate the Tondo events, but in Natividad's staging, the male leads boogie down with their T-girl partners, with everyone flashing broad smiles. Such a queer turn at the narrative's kickoff (recognizable to any Tondo habitué) betokens the unpredictability that would attend the plot twists, coupled with the film's radical critique beyond malevolent capitalist expansion. When the standard argument against relocation is voiced by the slatternly alcoholic lady whom even the community keeps distance from, then we're assured that the artists in charge will keep everyone's best interests in mind, regardless of social standing. The film acknowledges its own place in Philippine genre traditions by sneaking in a cameo by the star of the original *Anak ng Tondo* (dir. Tito Sanchez, 1985), but also thereby relieves its appreciators of having to sit through a less-than-striking entry for completism's sake. It also maintains Natividad's auteurist concern for improvised technologies of violence, not just in prison settings but also in arson attacks. The least that *Amang Capulong* can hope for is belated recognition, along with the existing output of its much-neglected director.

Ka Hector

English Translation: *Comrade Hector*
Alternate Title: *Leopoldo Mabilangan*
Year of Release: 1994 / Color with B&W
Director: Toto Natividad
Screenwriter: Humilde "Meek" Roxas
From a story by Teresa Mabilangan & Humilde "Meek" Roxas
Producers: Seiko Films & RS Productions
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Dina Bonnevie, Gardo Versoza, Ricky Davao, Willie Revillame, Efren Reyes Jr., Edwin Reyes, Renato del Prado, Glenda Garcia, Perla Bautista, Pocholo Montes, Roldan Aquino, Rene Hawkins, Jobelle Salvador, Jose de Venecia, Marcial Punzalan Jr., Atong Redillas, Jessie Delgado, Ray Ventura, Romnick Sarmenta, Don Umali, Eric Franciso, Archi Adamos, Rusty Santos, Bernard Fabiosa, Mike Magat, Romy Asuncion, Joey Padilla, Polly Cadsawan, Tony Tacorda, Lucy Quinto, RJ Salvador, Erickson Lorenzo, Vic Varrion, Erick Torrente, Ernie Forte, Ding Salvador, Henry Criste, Aris Cuevas, Rey Abad, Bebeng Amora, Albert Garcia, Andy Lara, Dick Rodriguez, Romy Aquino, Joonee Gamboa, Don Pepot

> As a New People's Army partisan, Leopoldo Mabilangan adopts the nom de guerre Ka Hector as a tribute to a selfless and people-oriented townmate whose acquaintance he made as a young man. He makes sure to observe the army's rules on courtship as well as in dealing with civilians and captured enemy soldiers, and in the process he wins the heart of Teresa, a.k.a. Ka Hasmin. During an encounter, he discovers that Col. Jess Faraon was the socially responsive childhood friend he knew until they had to go their separate ways. When the NPA begins conducting interrogations and punishments to weed out government infiltrators, some of Ka Hector's followers fall under suspicion and get killed. When the presidency of former army chief Fidel Ramos undertakes an amnesty program for antigovernment rebels, some reform-oriented government officials attempt to convince Ka Hector that their aspirations don't have to clash and that he might be more effective running an aboveground cooperative program. Other comrades determined to stay on worry that his example might result in more NPA members leaving the armed movement.

Overlooked and underseen since its release, *Ka Hector* wastes no time in staking the immediately obvious claim—that among the filmic heroicizing of antigovernment rebels produced in the wake of the February 1986 people-power uprising, this leads the entire pack, worthy of comparison to the best of Celso Ad. Castillo's inspired depictions of an earlier generation of progressive personalities. It achieves this remarkable latter-day feat by a combination of astute narratological and cinematic decisions. The recollection provided by Teresa Mabilangan, Ka Hector's widow, avoids the excessive romanticizing of the subject's biographical trajectory, allowing instead his perilous idealism to demonstrate how anyone who risks attempting innovations in militaristic projects rarely survives to tell the tale.[50] It draws parallels between the military's right-wing coup

[50] A social-network search constantly pointed me in the direction of a few acquaintances I had made. Teresa Mabilangan turns out to be related to actor-producer Krisma Maclang Fajardo, wife of director Lawrence Fajardo. Krisma's grandfather was the familial contact who convinced his cousin, Leopoldo Mabilangan, who was head of the Banahaw [formerly Melito Glor] Command of the New People's Army, to surface in civil society (*Messenger* exchange with Lawrence Fajardo, May 26, 2025). The Amnesty International annual report claimed that Mabilingan's execution in April 1994 was attributed to "heinous crimes" ("AI Report 1995—Philippines," *RefWorld: Global Law & Policy Database*, issued January 1, 1995). On the other hand, a contradictory report on the deaths of former cadres alleged that the killing of Mabilangan was meant to implement a Maoist tactic of sacrificing a lower official as a warning to a leader's enemies; if this were true, then it meant that Mabilangan himself had not committed any serious act that would incite any grievance in the party leadership, aside from resigning from his underground commitment to

attempts as well as the rebel army's anti-infiltration campaign, thus making heartbreakingly comprehensible Ka Hector's acceptance that he would be setting himself up to be targeted by either side of the conflict. Apparently well-aware of where the earlier rebel bios faltered, Toto Natividad took a turn avoided by the earlier films, openly treating the story of *KH* as the war movie that it actually should be, with the horrors of combat finally presented alongside the tragedy of losing comrades and the inadvisability of indulging the luxury of mourning. One would be invited to speculate that this was the direction Lino Brocka himself was heading into, if he had been able to survive into the future where the historical developments in *KH* took place. The comparison is uncannily apt, since the same lead actors of *Orapronobis* headline the film, with Phillip Salvador embodying proof that, except for Nora Aunor, no one else can match the training that Brocka provides, even with the mentor himself long-gone. Ultimate proof of the film's masterly stature is in its close approximation of Conrado Baltazar's visual expertise as well as in its incorporation of real-life news footage: the inserts serve the expected purpose of providing historical context at crucial moments in Ka Hector's generational epic, but their deployment toward the end of the movie comes close to sealing shut the gap between fiction and fact.

Wangbu

English Translation: *Lunatic*
Year of Release: 1998
Director: Toto Natividad
Screenwriters: Henry Nadong & Toto Natividad
Producers: Neo Films & Viva Films
Cast: Jay Manalo, Amanda Page, Dindi Gallardo, Julio Diaz, Joonee Gamboa, Roy Alvarez, Brando Legaspi, Kjell Villamarin, Mike Castillo, Tony Martin, Lauro Delgado Jr., Eric Jimenez, Rando Almanzor, Gerry Roman, Mar Sacdalan, Jun Arenas, Edward Belaro, Cris Maruso, Boy Acosta, Boy Roque, Alex Cunanan, Rudy Vicdel, Robert Miller, Louie Baylon, Jaime Cuales, Boy Gomez, Nosan Stuntmen

> Feeling his way in an urban slum milieu, rural migrant Dodong is too hot-tempered to get along with his neighbors. When he catches his son trying out an illicitly procured stimulant, he beats up the pusher but catches the attention of Lt. Rapacio, the latter's police protector. His father and his wife plead with him to return to their hometown but he points out that no future awaits him there. His father walks out as he gets arrested and tortured in jail while Rapacio and his minions invade his home and murder his wife and child. Crazed with rage and eventually called "*wangbu*" (a verlanization of *buwang* or lunatic), he attempts to purchase firearms from a small-time gunrunner and is sheltered by Janette, a golden-hearted nightclub worker.

Toto Natividad may have started late (in the same decade that *Wangbu* was made), but he had an extensive internship as editor in his action-film specialization, performing the same function in the current work. Comprising the most successful movie genre during the late 20th century, action films had the capacity of accommodating social discourse by virtue of their depiction of class conflict; they also tended to take masculinist privilege for granted, justifying the typical

take advantage of an amnesty proclamation (see "After [Romulo] Kintanar, the Killings Continue: The Post-1992 [Communist Party of the Philippines] Assassination Policy in the Philippines," *Libcom.org*, March 1, 2020).

heroic central figure's climactic rampage by enabling their villainous characters to abuse the hero's loved ones, the more extreme the better for a final-act bloodbath. *Wangbu* abides by this requisite but provides a replacement semi-familial unit for the hero via a stouthearted sex worker and her colleagues, who connive in performing as hostages for a seriocomic escape sequence, as well as an atypical development featuring father-and-son conciliation. Natividad also reprises an improvised-weapon strategy that he first used in an Ace Vergel-starrer, and it still packs a punch (worst of all for the unfortunate victim). One of the last predigital action entries, *Wangbu* exemplifies Natividad's generic expertise, melding the rewarding old-school strategy of choreographing crowd participation with the millennium-era vogue of cutting according to the rhythm of chopper-rap music. The dissipation of its original audience core need not foreclose the revival of the action genre in Pinas cinema, but the study of its past masters will be the first crucial step toward this goal.

Notoryus

English Title: *Notorious*
Year of Release: 1998
Director: Toto Natividad
Screenwriter: Willy Laconsay
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Victor Neri, Rachel Alejandro, John Regala, Gardo Versoza, Kier Legaspi, Brando Legaspi, Johnny Vicar, Aya Medel, Jorge Estregan, Jeffrey Tam, Boy Alano, Roldan Aquino, Cris Vertido, Susan Africa, John Erickson Policarpio, Gerald Ejercito, Tony Bagyo, Rando Almanzor, Lauro Delgado Jr.

> Toryo Liwanag's a recidivist who winds up serving his longest sentence after killing a police officer. Liway Sanchez, a psychology major, requests an interview for her thesis, but he mocks her academic interest. When he ascertains Liway's concern for convicts like him, Tonyo hangs out with her and eventually develops a relationship with her. They take care of a street kid who ran away from home because of his violently abusive father. Unfortunately Toryo has to contend with abusive cops in his neighborhood, with whom a gangster, Brother Johnny, colludes using the guise of a preacher. Toryo's aware of Bro. Johnny's psychosis, wherein he'll execute anyone who crosses him then ask forgiveness from heaven. When these forces succeed in landing Toryo in stir once more, he realizes he'll have to live by his wits if he wants to reunite with his family of choice.

Like every other young male star of his generation, Victor Neri attempted supporting roles in action films, until he was able to hit his stride in Toto Natividad projects, before using the period of expected diminishing returns to complete his studies and essay one impressive age-appropriate role in Keith Deligero's *A Short History of a Few Bad Things* (2018). One later collab with the *Notoryus* director-writer team, *Ex-Con* (2000), will satisfy those who want more of what they watched, although the expansion of coverage to include Triad activities might bring up questions of racial difference alongside the exclusion of the more typically unorganized criminal players from overseas. *Notoryus* itself coud have easily dispensed with an extended tranquil midsection by depicting its main character's inner turmoil despite the domestic contentment fate finally (though temporarily) granted him. Even if it stretches your credulity to believe that a penal-hardened delinquent can believe in the benevolence of a social researcher and the suffering-

sensitized dignity of a young survivor of parental abuse, Natividad plants without warning a murderous evangelist whose satirical spikiness makes it impossible to turn away, with a propensity for preaching that turns apocalyptic when Natividad rhythmically edits a gunfight to his bombastic cadences. *Notoryus* also demonstrates Natividad's newfound specialty in maximizing the use of tight spaces, with prison sequences that function as indispensable set-piece lessons in framing, as well as in foregrounding the heretofore unexplored homoeroticism of hand-to-hand combat. Movie-making genre magic like we've never seen before in these parts, and sadly might never see again.

1—*Double Barrel (Sige! Iputok Mo.)*

English Translation of Subordinate Title: *Go Ahead! Fire Your Weapon.*
Year of Release: 2017
Director: Toto Natividad [as Toto Natividad Jr.]
Screenwriter: Willy Laconsay
From a story by Toto Natividad & Willy Laconsay
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: AJ Muhlach, Phoebe Walker, Jeric Raval, Ali Khatibi, Oliver Aquino, Carlo Lazerna, Ronald Moreno, Dindo Arroyo, Mon Confiado, Richard Manabat, Leon Miguel, Joseph Ison, Giovanni Baldisseri, Jon Romano, Lubel Fernandez, Silay Tan, Vincent Rosales, Angel Ortiz, Anna Bianca Naraga, Rob Sy

> Jeff tries to flee from a police roundup of suspected users in their slum building but gets cornered. Since the war on drugs by then-President Rodrigo R. Duterte provided financial incentives for police who kill drug suspects, his wife Martha makes the rounds of city jails to make sure he's alive. Her brother Pancho has no idea where Jeff was brought and advises Martha to refrain from angering the cops. Inspector Bagani, partly out of pity for Martha, conscripts Jeff by asking him to identify and then kill his supplier. Jeff explains to Martha that he's now on the "moral" side of the war, but one of his targets proves to be too well-protected to kill off. Bagani threatens to get rid of Jeff if he refuses to follow through, but Martha intervenes and offers to do the killing herself.

2—*Riding in Tandem*

Year of Release: 2017
Director: Toto Natividad
Screenwriter: Jerry Gracio
From a story by Toto Natividad & Jerry Gracio
Producer: Cinebro
Cast: Jason Abalos, Khalil Ramos, Joem Bascon, Nina Dolino, Mara Lopez, Victor Neri, Ronnie Quizon, Sue Prado, Dido de la Paz, Alvin Lorenz Anson, Kiko Matos, Althea Vega, Bani Baldisseri, Richard Manabat, Rommel Luna, Carlos Sia Jr., Vincent Bondoc, Mark Justine Aguillon, Lina Rowy, Silay Tan, Joseph Ison, Evangeline Torcino, Jojo Gallego, Gary Perez, Jaime Cuales, Evelyn Santos, Jason dela Cruz, Janna Espino, Cindy Espiritu, Eunice Feyven O. Timado, J.C. Gamba

> Miguel is a former police officer who becomes a tandem-riding paid assassin after being fired from his job. One of his assignments, however, leads to a police chase where his partner gets killed and he lands in jail. Jonard meanwhile depends on the support of his devoted sister, who gets killed on the order of the official against whom she filed a harassment complaint. His attempt to avenge her lands him in the same cell where Miguel is incarcerated. Both are

fortunate in having partners who remain loyal to them, but a prison guard takes an interest in Miguel's wife. When Jonard is able to thwart an attempt on Miguel's life by some of their cell roommates, the latter expresses his gratitude by offering Jonard some assistance if he asks for it. Jonard rejects Miguel's offer, but he's forced to reconsider after his wife suffers a medical emergency that requires a payment he can't afford.

Toto Natividad's remarkable track record extended to the point right before the war on drugs ended and the global pandemic, which did him in, began. His output was just as confrontational as a few other independently produced features and documentaries were during this period, but then all his work, like Lino Brocka's, was primarily intended for commercial release—though unlike Brocka, he did not have the option to first screen them overseas to acquire any acclaim that could protect them from pushback. Curiously, the government of then-President Rodrigo R. Duterte appeared to take the cue from the first Ferdinand Marcos presidency and generally exempted cinema from his media crackdowns. What could have proved to be a hindrance for Natividad if he attempted to resume a postpandemic career was a deluge of negative commentary; this would have been expected from supporters of the still-popular PRRD, but the more deplorable responses came from certain indie enthusiasts (including organized critics), who were confident yet inept enough to essentialize mainstream film practice as a social evil. His last two completed film projects would be the envy of filmmakers capable of disabusing themselves of the art's-sake nonsense then in vogue. Both *Double Barrel* and *Riding in Tandem* contain no evidence whatsoever of a filmmaker at rest or in decline—in fact they outperform most action films by younger hands, with the director's CGI enhancements strictly serving the purposes of action-sequence storytelling. The first gets weighed down by the melodramatics of its central couple, but more than compensates with its unexpected depiction of not just a riding-in-tandem het pair, but also a true-believing police officer, even more sinister *because* of his uncritical sincerity, for whom the pecuniary rewards handed out by the administration can be treated as perks he could deploy for ongoing operations. *RiT* has more fully developed material, although its palpable excitability accounts for a few stretches where the film threatens to overpower its well-honed narrative, and Natividad's usual stabs at humor and visceral violence will be sorely missed by auteurist appreciators. Nevertheless the film's culmination will reward anyone willing to endure a few bumps along the way. Like *DB*, it hearkens back to a decade-plus-old Natividad release, *Ka Hector*, in its treatment of rampant lawlessness in Duterte's unconscionably bloody drug war. The setting itself provides an inexorable logic where working-class and criminal characters find common cause in the only option to earn a decent living made available to them by their social betters. The fraternal love-hate relationship that results in their alliance advances an insight rarely conveyed in progressive-minded texts, that proletarian resistance can only be strengthened with the support of the left's wrongly derided lumpen element.

J. ERASTHEO NAVOA

(1 film: 1992)

Totoy Buang: Mad Killer ng Maynila

English Translation of Primary Title: *Totoy the Lunatic*
Year of Release: 1992
Director: J. Erastheo Navoa
Screenwriter: Humilde "Meek" Roxas
Producer: OctoArts Films
Cast: John Regala, Mark Gil, Aurora Sevilla, Rina Reyes, Francis Magalona, Bob Soler, Sharmaine Arnaiz, Kevin Delgado, Zandro Zamora, Daria Ramirez, Howard Zaleta, Lollie Mara, Romy Diaz, Danny Labra, Nonong de Andres, Johnny Vicar, Josie Tagle, Cathy Sablan, Lorena Mendez

> The son of a police officer, Totoy sees his father respected by the community but experiences abusive treatment, also extended to his mother when she tries to intervene for his sake. His mother decides to flee with him but the father's able to stop Totoy from joining her. Now completely at his father's mercy, Totoy endures not just physical battering but also sexual assault. His psychological equilibrium suffers permanent damage even though his body ultimately heals: he slays his father and somehow manages to get away with the crime, leading a life of apparent working-class normality—until he encounters other instances of excessive cruelty, even when committed against other people. He becomes a person of interest when several murder victims are straitjacketed in the same way his father used to torture him.

Totoy Buang: Mad Killer ng Maynila will probably be one of the most extreme samples of genre films in the Philippines. You can set out to catalogue its shortcomings and your checklist will be full, even in terms of the selling point it became known for: the presence of lead actor John Regala, who by this time had lost whatever physical sightliness he started out with. The genre's populist predisposition, however, helps tide it over several near-disasters, including a then-standard flirtation with religious revivalism. The main character is also furnished with complex female characters (his survivalist mother, a privileged girlfriend, and a gangland insider) as well as with an upright police officer, the kind of person his father never was, who shares Totoy's outrage when he learns about a white-slavery racket that preys on homeless children. These plot elements ensure that Regala's uniquely inspired anarchic delivery remains rooted in a working-class perspective marginal enough to occasionally make anyone sufficiently sympathetic with his circumstances wonder whether he might be the sane one after all. Actors understandably regard the performance of madness as an opportunity to showboat their store of skills and technique; Regala apparently drew from the reality he was intimately familiar with, which tragically overcame him in the end.

JUNN P. CABREIRA

(1 film: 1993)

Beloy Montemayor Jr.: Tirador ng Cebu

English Translation of Subordinate Title: *Hitman of Cebu*
Year of Release: 1993
Director: Junn P. Cabreira
Screenwriters: Chito B. Tapawan & Junn P. Cabreira
From research conducted by Chito B. Tapawan & Junn P. Cabreira
Producer: OctoArts Films
Cast: Jeric Raval, Patrick dela Rosa, Monica Herrera, Janet Arnaiz, Tirso Cruz III, Charito Solis, Vic Vargas, Nikka Abaya, Edgar Mande, Roldan Aquino, Benedict Aquino, Pocholo Montes, Dexter Doria, Howard Zaleta, Lindsay Custodio, Jean Zaleta, Ernie Reyes, Liza Garcia, Robert Miller, Tony Bagyo, Bomber Moran, Ronnel Victor, Vic Belaro, Jim Rosales, Eddie Tuazon, Jing Castaneda, Rene Pascual, Pol Tantay, Telly Babasa, Romy Blanco, Danny Labra, Miko Manzon, Edward Salvador, Harris Mantezo, Johnny Ramirez, Julito Nunez, Emil Estrada, Bella Flores

> Beloy, Roy for short, started his life of crime at 16, his best friend Andy always standing by him and his mother constantly admonishing him to avoid trouble. Toughies seek him out, however, to find whether he can fight as well as his late father. After getting roughed up, he embarks on a workout routine and succeeds in overcoming the guys who bully him, but he winds up in prison as a result. After further scoring against jailhouse thugs, he contrives an escape plan by cross-dressing and asking his girlfriend to help; the latter's family refuses to accept a hooligan in their circle, so she elopes with Roy and travels with him and Andy to Manila. Lt. Delgado, a crooked police officer, recruits Roy and Andy for his kidnapping-for-ransom racket. When they realize that Delgado plans to kill off his latest victim once he gets the ransom money, they free her and incur Delgado's ire.

A sure indicator of a genre's supremacy is when a number of stars can flourish in secondary capacity—headliners of low-budget quickie projects, rather than of the rarer prestige productions. As the French *nouvelle vague* critics were careful to impart, more innovations could be found in this mode of practice, with the artists' freedom from producers' impositions providing opportunities for fortuitous approaches meant to compensate for industrial limitations. As one of the more successful second-string personages during the heyday of Pinoy *aksyon*, Jeric Raval unsurprisingly commanded his own share of avid fandom, commemorated in Keith Deligero's *Iskalawags* (2013), a semi-autobiographical account of growing up in a rural milieu in the Visayas, where Raval himself makes a reflexive appearance as an embodiment of Manila-based stardom. *Beloy Montemayor Jr.* might serve as satisfactory representation of Raval's dapper yet congenial projection, with a former softcore star, Patrick dela Rosa, serving as comic sidekick. The material, like Raval's persona, dwells on certain characters and settings only long enough to draw useful impressions from them, then finds any available excuse to quickly move on. In this way, *BMJ* is able to cover far more personalities and locations than the typical action outing, and manages to overlay loose ends and unanswered questions (not to mention budgetary restrictions) via the frenzy of its core characters' concerns and movements. Director Junn P. Cabreira immersed in a variety of genre specializations, all of them with the same cost-effective orientation, so *BMJ* can be regarded as a culmination of his accumulation of skills in purveying fast-paced and well-modulated amusements for anyone willing to surrender to genre enchantments.

EDGARDO VINARAO

(1 film: 1993)

Tatak ng Kriminal

English Translation: *Mark of the Criminal*
Year of Release: 1993
Director: Edgardo Vinarao [as Edgardo "Boy" Vinarao]
Screenwriter: Amado Lacuesta
Based on Pablo S. Gomez's same-titled komiks material
Producer: FLT Films International
Cast: Eddie Garcia, Tetchie Agbayani, Johnny Delgado, Jean Saburit, Beth Tamayo, Berting Labra, Fred Moro, Manjo del Mundo, Romy Romulo, Edwin Reyes, Vangie Lablan, Rey Solo, Nonoy de Guzman, Eddie Tuazon, Herminio "Butch" Bautista, Ester Chavez, Jose "Kaka" Balagtas, Ding Concepcion, Tony Tacorda, Boy Sta. Maria, Bebeng Amora, Joe Baltazar, Eddie Samonte, Ben Rivera, Ben Malit, Buddy Salvador, Cesar Villanueva, Johnny Ramirez, Danny Labra, Boy Alano, Tom Calunsod, Freddie Roberto, Jimmy Flores, Robert Roncales, Rudy Vicdel, Tony Concepcion, Mario Cruz, Julito Nunez, Michael Manzano, Jun Tañajura, Rene Tanajura, Allan Ancieto, Ariel Henson, Ramon Fernandez, Marie Barbacui, Panchito

> After his release from prison, Gojo confronts his mortal enemy Bito to ask if he might be aware of the whereabouts of his daughter Jessica, who'd be a teenager by this time. Bito's henchpeople throw him out; afterward, a police officer expels him for vagrancy while he sleeps on a bench at night in the people's park. He finally wanders into a taxi station, where the drivers befriend him and vow to help him find Jessica. As it turns out, Bito housed Gojo's wife Laura, after Gojo killed Bito's brother; Bito beats up Laura everyday and takes an unhealthy interest in Jessica. After casing Bito's house, Gojo is surprised when Laura emerges and boards his taxi. Laura confesses her regret in shacking up with Bito and tells him she entrusts Jessica to the care of a pragmatic but sympathetic dance instructor.

Close to the same year that Eddie Garcia broke out as renowned action star when his *Andres Manambit: Angkan ng Matatapang* (*Clan of the Brave*, dir. Ike Jarlego Jr., 1992) won major prizes at the Metro Manila Film Festival, he featured in a smaller-budgeted but fairly competently made action-spiced family melodrama, where he plays a taxi driver during a period when people in that profession were regularly victimized, sometimes murdered, by holdup individuals or groups, although more prominently publicized were the passengers similarly victimized by gangs using taxis as their snare. The fact that Garcia was already elderly by then—in fact, he would die from an on-set accident while literally performing a millennium-era action role—would befit the postmortem commemoration of his late-era specialization, when he lent his name to the law meant to safeguard the welfare of participants in film and TV productions. *Tatak ng Kriminal* though points to a less-observed problem in Garcia's generational principles. One could never really automatically fault performers who accede and attempt to excel in roles for which they get hired by producers of all types; but Garcia's parallel career as director began with Cold War secret-agent films as well as a defense for the convicted rapist of Annabelle Huggins (*Ang Manananggol* or *The Advocate*, 1963), culminating in the 1960s with the reelection biopic of Ferdinand Marcos Sr. (*Pinagbuklod ng Langit* or *Bound by Heaven*, 1969), before resuming late into the Second Golden Age with left-leaning women-

positive material for the major stars of the period, although conflicting at one point with the activist directors guild. His final film performance was in an overt critique of the fascist dictatorship, Benedict Mique's *ML* (2018), but one would be hard-put to find a Garcia action-star role remotely similar to what he essayed in *TnK*. We can argue that his Andres Manambit character, a righteous police officer, set a trend that was difficult for him to buck. Nevertheless he landed the *TnK* assignment and invested it with the pathos and humor that won him a following among action aficionados, with the character's underclass identification helping to temper the smugness of his smart-alecky persona. The cab driver's long-sought reunion with his unsuspecting though endangered daughter, escorted by the golden-hearted feminist madame who protects her (another of the narrative's casual virtues), occasions a wordless set piece worthy of any of the age's experts, and affirms Garcia's mastery of film performance despite the technocratic approach he tended to prefer.

JOSE JAVIER REYES

(3 films: 1993–2003)

May Minamahal

English Title: *Loving Someone*
Year of Release: 1993
Director & Screenwriter: Jose Javier Reyes
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Aga Muhlach, Aiko Melendez, Boots Anson-Roa, Ronaldo Valdez, Claudine Barretto, Agot Isidro, Nikka Valencia, Aljon Jimenez, John Estrada, Bimbo Bautista, Liza Lorena, Marita Zobel, Ramil Rodriguez, Ogie Diaz, Gina Leviste, Ernie Zarate, Lulu Arietta, Fina Peralejo, Lailani Navarro, Patrick Riego de Dios, Melvin Viceral, Paolo Zobel, Ed Poon, Malou Crisologo, Terry Baylosis, George Lim, Angie Roy, Ed Murillo, Alma Lerma, Isko Moreno, Ma. Lourdes Araneta, Myla de Jesus, Michelle Suzarra, Rex Agoncillo, Patricia Ann Roque, Marisol Garcia, Ma. Elena Diño, John Villar, Chanda Espiritu, Fe Cabrera, Nelia Lapena, Anna S. Anastacio

> Carlitos is starting out at an advertising agency, but one day his father suddenly dies of a heart attack. Since he's the only son, his mother informs him that he's now in charge of the family, including his three sisters. His mother discovers that her late husband had not been forward about the state of their finances, so that Carlos and his elder sister will have to work to support the studies of their siblings. His mother decides to sell a tract of land his father had been paying for, while Carlos finds a buyer for the family van, arranging to share the use of their remaining car with his mother and sisters. While having lunch with his office mates at the company canteen, he meets Monica, who's a working student. He finds her fascinating because of her lack of social pretension, and finds out she belongs to an all-male working-class family, with a father and brothers who're fond of sports and flourish in a rough neighborhood. His mother, sisters, and family friends are all appalled by Monica's lack of sophistication while Monica's pressured by her father and brothers to make sure that Carlos toughens up. Their differences lead to serious conflicts in their relationship.

May Minamahal was appreciated on its release as the film that initiated the then-arriving dominance of romantic comedies by having characters who spoke "colloquial, almost street-smart language" (Jerrick Josue David, "The Last Two Decades of Philippine Cinema," *Jeksterville*, July 5, 2010, posted online). One would have expected that the proliferation of romcom entries made by some of the country's best practitioners would have left such a sample biting the dust, but *MM* finds ways of remaining vital, even with its weaknesses displayed in starker relief than before. Its primary values are anchored on sharp performances and well-observed, documentary-adjacent scene constructions. Of greater consequence is the fond attention it lavishes on less-privileged personalities, a presence that would be reduced to domestic help or villainy for most of the first decade of the genre's ascendancy. But then the film strives for a conciliation of the two families' class positions, which is the point where a slippage occurs: the irony of having the lead male living among his mother and sisters, and the lead female with her father and brothers, further faces the danger of the argument being reduced to strictly gender-conflict terms. That is, the working-class family is mostly masculine while the bourgeois folk are mostly feminine, and since when have the two sides failed to find common ground in the normal scheme of things? There is of course satisfaction in the spectacle of men surrendering to female dictates, but Jose Javier Reyes is sharp enough to maintain ambivalence. The men, who after all are visited by their prospective in-laws in their own residence and neighborhood, can't help but turn rowdy even at

their best-behaved, and we have a glimpse of the mother forcing herself to smile. At this point it becomes obvious, for those concerned with local film tradition, that *MM* is extending a link with the long-ended Second Golden Age, as well as pointing to a future of a genre that has the capacity of fulfilling its audience's demands for meaning and pleasure.

Minsan May Isang Puso

English Title: *Once There Was a Heart*
Year of Release: 2001
Director & Screenwriter: Jose Javier Reyes
Producers: Regal Entertainment & Available Light
Cast: Ricky Davao, Jaclyn Jose, Carlo Aquino, Ana Capri, Simon Ibarra, Lui Manansala, Dekster Santos, Jiego Malvar, Dimples Romana, Marlito Ambrocio, Luz Imperial, Hope Matriano, Jaro Conde, Randolf Reyes, Val Trono, Gilleth Sandico, Nino Ignacio, Julie de Leon, Jeffrey Santos, Grace Villablanca, Tessie Villaram, Archie Cayetano, Adeth Alviar, Portia Bullecer, WRC Talents, Maru Talents Studio, Jequipros Talent Center

> Simon runs a small bakery with two assistants, from which the working-class families of a neighborhood buy their breakfast buns (called *pan de sal*). One of these families is Emily's, whose comatose husband has to be cared for by Boyet, her younger child, so that his elder sister can complete her studies and eventually help him return to school. Simon also maintains an exclusive arrangement with Melba, a sex professional, since he lost his family in an accident when the car he drove crashed and killed them. Simon catches one of his assistants pilfering the bakery till and dismisses her; when Boyet sees the "Help Wanted" sign, he applies for the job and endures Simon's mean-spirited treatment in order to help his mother. Emily could not prevent her daughter from seeking comfort in her premarital relationship but winds up banishing her when she gets pregnant. As head of their respective households, Emily's and Simon's insistence on righteousness and independence get confronted by the realities of economic subsistence and their need for human connection.

The neorealist impulse was definitely old-hat, way over half a century old by the time the millennium rolled around. Yet effective local samples were hard to come by, partly because celluloid films were difficult to maintain and also because the adoption of the Hollywood practice of reserving social-realist products for awards competitions often resulted in works that did not address mass viewers as well as they impressed prestige gatekeepers. Jose Javier Reyes's declaration that he concocted *Minsan May Isang Puso* as his tribute to Lino Brocka, who beat his own path to creating crowd-pleasing social dramas even at the cost of critical revulsion, helps explain how this particular sample has managed to endure since its release. The characters in the narrative attempt to attain fairly ordinary ambitions, but financial realities keep proscribing the limits within which they must function. Yet to their surprise, as well as ours, it is their exploration of these constraints that enables them to break out selectively, with sufficient consideration for others who might be affected by their decisions. The film benefits greatly from topnotch delivery by all members in the cast and reminds us never to take for granted performers who accept difficult and unglamorous roles for the sheer purpose of fulfilling their potential: no one could have seen that Jaclyn Jose and Ricky Davao would be leaving too early, but that only makes of *MMIP* an outing that deserves to be cherished beyond its already laudable terms.

Kung Ako Na Lang Sana

English Translation: *If It Had Only Been Me*
English Title: *Without You Through the Years*
Year of Release: 2003
Director & Screenwriter: Jose Javier Reyes
Based on the concept by Mary Rose Colindres, Emmanuel Dela Cruz, Theodore Boborol, Dennis Teodosio, Guia Gonzales, Tammy Bejerano
Producer: Star Cinema Productions
Cast: Sharon Cuneta, Aga Muhlach, Christine Bersola, Mickey Ferriols, Dominic Ochoa, Jennifer Sevilla, Shintaro Valdez, Patrick Guzman, Gabe Mercado, Reggie Curley, Chat Silayan-Bailon, Butz Aquino, Banaue Miclat, Raul Montesa, Lollie Mara, Bing Davao, Gilleth Sandico, Carme Sanchez, Olivialyn Richard, Enid Reyes, Mico Aytona, Adrian Albert, Pauleen Luna, Pia Wurtzbach, Oliver Aquino, Aaron Concepcion, Mike George, Jojit Lorenzo, Shiela Valderrama, Sandra Rebancos, Monalisa Bernardo, Tanya del Rosario, Zharrine Carbonel, Angelica Ferrer, Ricky Baizas, Artemio Abad, Albert Guinto, Tazi Arish, Edgar Sandalo, Chiqui del Carmen, Jeffrey Relopez

> Emmy has been so preoccupied with providing for her family as well as her more needful acquaintances that she never found time for romance. When Vince, a friend from college, is disowned by his successful father because of his irresponsibility, he turns to Emmy, yet continues to falter. But only he, among Emmy's friends, treats her as an equal, rather than his superior. When each of them arrives at the point where their relationships force them to confront their maturity, they begin to joke about winding up with each other.

Occasionally a genre piece fulfills its functions so well that it works despite its conventions and predictability. Any serious film observer would be able to anticipate that *Kung Ako Na Lang Sana* will be uncovering its lead characters' compatibility with each other and bring them to a point where their differences, not just with each other but also with their family and friends, will be resolved in a climactic reunion party. Yet the film works, mainly because it never takes these elements for granted. It provides careful motivations and character consistency even in the smallest roles, and makes its few coincidences dramatically plausible. Central to its success is the fact that Sharon Cuneta and Aga Muhlach had been careful in cultivating their wholesome and responsible personas, and had both reached a performance peak when they worked together, generating sparks that neither of them was able to realize with any previous screen partner. The ease with which they essay complicated roles—apparently drawn in part from their real-life conditions—would make the most jaded romcom viewer root for them to remain together, if only for the satisfaction of watching them trade a whole lot more lines and gestures with each other.

ALAN CHUI CHUNG-SAN & YUEN BUN

(1 film: 1995)

Mabangis na Lungsod

English Translation: *Ferocious City*
Alternate Titles: *No hoi wai lung*; *Tough Beauty and the Sloppy Slop*
Additional Language: Mandarin
Year of Release: 1995
Directors: Alan Chui Chung-San & Yuen Bun [with action direction by Alan Chui Chung-San & Lee Chi-Kit]
Screenwriter: Fok King-yiu
Producers: Libran Films, Libran Motion Pictures, New Treasurer Films Co.
Cast: Yuen Biao, Cynthia Khan, Monsour del Rosario, Lee Waise, Billy Chow, Yuen Wah, Alan Chui Chung-San, Jerry Bailey, Wai Lam, Peter Chan, Wai Shum, Tam Suk-mui, Wong Ngok-wah, Lam Ngok-wah, Alex Man, Lily Leung

> [***Note: characters' names apparently vary depending on language version***.] Major Sandos and his partner bust a transaction about to be consummated by some drug dealers in a double-deck bus and later arrest the wife of drug dealer Hwa Quo, who in turn arranges the killing of Sandos's partner during his mother's birthday celebration. Meanwhile in Hong Kong, police officer Yiang discovers that Hwa Quo's operation makes use of counterfeit bills for their overseas drug transactions. She is assigned to befriend Hwa Quo's wife in jail in Manila, with another operative, Li Chin Tang, masquerading as her husband. The pair succeed in freeing the wife and befriending Hwa Quo, who's impressed by their fighting skills and assigns increasingly sensitive missions, culminating with the killing of Sandos. Their cover's almost blown when Li mourns his best friend's demise, but Hwa Quo's higher-up wishes to make their acquaintance. Just when Hwa Quo's suspicions endanger them, Sandos turns up and informs them that he deliberately set up his mock execution in order to end Hwa Quo's pursuit.

Mabangis na Lungsod may be regarded as one of the realizations of the inter-Asian exchanges that Pinas initiated when it was still a fairly influential American client state. A list of blunders and misjudgments will make itself available for anyone who wishes to insist on perfect representation, but then one should also be obliged to point out any compensatory achievements when these become evident. The *MnL* project was completed during the buildup toward the handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China in 1997, when HK cinema was nearing the end of several decades of productivity; for this reason, the film was considered the equivalent of a B-movie, a ripoff of a franchise sequel, deficient in star power and stunts and explosives. Moreover, the necessarily cartoonish approach to plot and character results in a host of sexist and lesbophobic devices that, coupled with the HK industry's valorization of police work, create products whose primary value lies almost exclusively in their provision of visual and kinetic pleasure. But the Pinas locale also yields a few critical touches: police and government officials readily collaborate with foreign elements when they're capable of financial enticement, and the opening hostage situation involving a public bus, where the use of firepower only resulted in multiple tragedies, should have

served as a warning to local officials when a similar crisis emerged in real life in 2010.[51] Viewed several decades later, the relatively modest dimensions of *MnL* remain superior to the run of most local action films, where its creatives' aesthetic discipline furnishes split-second edits that serve as conduits for fluid delineations, tongue always firmly lodged in cheek. One could reasonably speculate how action aficionado Toto Natividad, the country's last best celluloid-era filmmaker, could have taken notes in order to further upgrade his skills set.

[51] In 2025, a Malaysian Cantonese-language film, *823 Hostage Crisis*, took as its subject the disastrously handled incident. Its director was Leung Hung-Wah, who was also an actor who went by the name Tony Leung, although he was neither of the better-known TLs—i.e., Leung Chiu-wai (a.k.a. "Little Tony") or Leung Ka-fai ("Big Tony"). I am grateful to film critic and scholar Amir Muhammad for providing this update.

FRANCIS POSADAS

(2 films: 1997–1999)

Amanos: Patas ang Laban

English Translation: *Balanced: The Fight Is Fair*
Year of Release: 1997
Director: Francis Posadas [as Francis "Jun" Posadas]
Screenwriters: Henry Nadong, Francis Posadas, Sonny Saret Abelardo
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Jestoni Alarcon, Victor Neri, Regine Tolentino, Sherilyn Reyes, Robert Arevalo, Mark Gil, Subas Herrero, Bayani Agbayani, Marita Zobel, Patrick dela Rosa, Edgar Mande, Maureen Mauricio, Joanne Salazar, Vic Belaro, Faustino Ferrer, Mar Sacdalan, Noel Sandoval, Alwyn Uytingco, Steven Alonso, Victor Alberto, Mel Kimura, Joseph Olfindo, Gay Ace Domingo, Ronnie Corpuz, Jesse Bangot, CJ Tolentino, Gerry Gersabal, Ben Romano, Girlie Alcantara, Vic Santos, Susan Corpuz, Fortunato Martin

> Celso Aragon's overseas-placement firm has been so corrupt that two individuals, unknown to each other up to this point, case his office and attempt to exact the revenge they planned. Lando, who introduces himself, tries to collect the money his family lost when they mortgaged their house and failed to see him work abroad. A still-unidentified Bobby shows up presently, toting a firearm, and demands that his girlfriend, sent to and now missing in Japan, be returned by the firm. He kidnaps Aragon's daughter to defend himself from armed bodyguards, but in the ensuing melee, Lando manages to steal a briefcase full of money before fleeing with Bobby and Angela. After he is identified in news reports, Lando finds himself rejected by his family and secretly stashes the briefcase in his younger brother's clothes bin. Ambassador Villaverde, who maintains a reputation as champion of overseas contract workers, informs Aragon that a blue-covered notebook containing the contact information of all their illegal-recruitment connivers was hidden in the briefcase Lando stole. Villaverde appears on media to appeal to the two fugitives but secretly instructs his henchmen to kill off the criminals as well as their hostage once the incriminating document has been recovered.

A genuinely left-field delight that makes genre patronage worth the trouble (inclusive of an acquaintanceship with exceptional left-field specialist Epoy Deyto), *Amanos: Patas ang Laban* commences by unravelling its moderately convoluted premise, then goes whole-hog in piling on as many twists and revelations as it can prop up while maintaining, as befits its title, a balance among suspense, comedy, and melodrama. What it gradually reveals, however, is key to its effectiveness as a mass-audience product: the social horror visited on our most vulnerable citizens by grand-scale political corruption. Francis Posadas may be an old hand in commercial production, even developing a parallel specialization in skin flicks, but sustained a personal survival strategy by insistently jettisoning old-school "significance"—perhaps wisely realizing that the subjects his films tackle carry their own weight to begin with. *APaL* affirms his wisdom of leaning into genre tropes and strategies as a way of enhancing, rather than evading, social commentary. The heartbroken-because-principled mother, the conflicted but eventually won-over rich girl, the clownish reporter who knowingly regards truth-telling as the best kind of opportunity for media visibility, the prestige performers cast as heavies—these and more feed into a feel-good fantasy of proletarian virtue winning over bourgeois evil, a rare occasion for our beleaguered mass audience to draw a package of rewards, if only in fiction, promised them by popular culture.

'Di Puwedeng Hindi Puwede!

English Translation: *It's Impossible Not To!*
Year of Release: 1999
Director: Francis Posadas [as Francis "Jun" Posadas]
Screenwriters: Ricky Lee & Mel Mendoza-del Rosario
From a story by Ricky Lee & Enrico C. Santos
Producers: FLT Films International & Star Cinema
Cast: Robin Padilla, Vina Morales, Bayani Agbayani, Dante Rivero, Bembol Roco, Kier Legaspi, Ramil Rodriguez, Daisy Reyes, Roy Rodrigo, Mark Vernal, Tom Olivar, July Hidalgo, June Hidalgo, Clayton Olalia, Tony Tacorda, Bobby Henson, Boy Gomez

> Carding avoids the petty criminality from which he used to earn a living, by running his own ridesharing service. Upon bringing a customer to a bank, however, a robbery in progress spills out where the hoodlums have taken a pretty female hostage. Carding's chivalry gets the better of him and his fighting skills save the day. He visits the orphanage where he grew up to renew his commitment to give back what he can. Unknown to him, the hostage, Kristine, was in cahoots with the robbers, motivated by a desire to get back at her father, who makes a killing by running a counterfeit operation. Impressed by Carding's skills, she conscripts him to join her co-conspirators, which leads to some tension since their leader also fancies Kristine for himself. Her father also answers to Mendez, a big-time underworld figure who runs a few other rackets, the worst of which is a child-trafficking ring.

Like Fernando Poe Jr. only in a more extreme manner, boyish-looking Robin Padilla made a strong first impression with the movie-going public by presenting an entire gamut of tics and intense, constipated-sounding line readings—qualities that enabled him to combine action with comedy, and that also possibly exposed how dated FPJ's own mannerisms were. But while the elderly icon was serious enough about subsequently ridding or self-satirizing as much of his histrionic baggage as he could get away with, Padilla persisted in playing out in real life his "bad boy" persona and, after a spell in jail where he submitted to Islamic conversion, hitched his star to Rodrigo D. Duterte's similarly initially successful presidential stint, even after RDD's right-wing policies proved tragically disastrous because of his and his lieutenants' mishandling of a police force seriously corrupted by decades of recompensatory negligence. Not that FPJ's political fortunes were any better: his failed presidential run, owing to alleged manipulation of the tabulation of votes, was regarded as the cause of the coronary thrombosis that ended his life. Padilla sought critical validation in a few "indie" film projects, but his defining work remained in the action comedies that he completed during his peak as a box-office attraction. *'Di Puwedeng Hindi Puwede!* benefits from a more careful structuring of plot elements than the usual slapdash material he could always coast on because of the profitability of his skills set. He was paired with supporting performers who also assisted in relieving him of sustaining his usual delivery, which was admittedly starting to wear thin by this time from overexposure: a comic actor, Bayani Agbayani, and Padilla's then-paramour Vina Morales to provide romantic interest, with a bit of gender confusion between BFF and GF that only Padilla could pull off. The shortfall in Padilla's professional trajectory relied on how he, and several lesser talents, thought that his next career stage lay in elective office, as if exemplary entertainment were a lesser form of public service. The loss is as much his as it is Philippine cinema's.

JOEY DEL ROSARIO

(1 film: 1998)

Kahit Pader Gigibain Ko

English Translation: *I Will Even Tear Down Walls*
Year of Release: 1998
Director: Joey del Rosario
Screenwriters: Humilde "Meek" Roxas & Joey del Rosario
Producers: RS Productions & Regal Films
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Rosanna Roces, Elizabeth Oropesa, Eddie Gutierrez, Richard Bonnin, Dindo Arroyo, Alona Amor, Bob Soler, Susan Galang, Gamaliel Viray, Ernie Zarate, Eric Francisco, Mon Confiado, Denver Razon, Jetro Castro, Ric Arellano, Bernard Fabiosa, Cris Daluz, Joey Sarmiento, Jec Chaves, Rona Rivera

> Former sex worker Sandy Galang dresses in a habit and makes a killing begging for alms with real nuns. Members of a rebel group attempt to kidnap her but she is rescued by Captain Roman and his team. Sandy confesses that she is on the run from Senator Madrigal, whom she witnessed and recorded murdering a cabinet secretary. Roman brings Sandy to his superior to narrate her story, but Madrigal's henchmen are able to track them down wherever they go. Roman contacts Senator de Joya, an opponent of Madrigal, to get more reliable assistance.

Joey del Rosario cut his teeth on Fernando Poe Jr.'s series of blockbusters in the 1980s, while Phillip Salvador started a bit earlier with the film and theater projects of Lino Brocka, but persisted in the action genre after his mentor's death. The final element in the mix was Philippine cinema's so-far last sex star, Rosanna Roces, an atavistic beauty justifiably famed for her startling candor and raunchy humor. *Kahit Pader Gigibain Ko* hangs its narrative premise on her unique precocity, complemented by her real-life backstory of professional sex work. After an opening flashback following a suspense detour halfheartedly ascribed to political rebels, the narrative settles into its standard series of silly chases and increasingly impressive shootouts, punctuated by its characters' articulations of their plans and motives, plus the requisite makeout scene between the two leads. The resolution, whereby national-scale electoral politics is cleansed by its own principled players, would be problematic in any serious context, but *KPGK* laces (or may we say poisons) its proceedings with the same camp-sensationalist treatment, leaving the one definite conclusion we can make: that the undertaking was essentially a tribute to and update of the romantic comedies that solidified the respective star statures of FPJ and Susan Roces, bequeathing a confection that can be occasionally snacked on through the then-forthcoming millennium.

JEFFREY JETURIAN

(6 films: 1999–2006)

Pila-Balde

English Translation: *Queue of Pails*
English Title: *Fetch a Pail of Water*
Year of Release: 1999
Director: Jeffrey Jeturian
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producer: Good Harvest Productions
Cast: Ana Capri, Marcus Madrigal, Harold Pineda, Allen Dizon, Estrella Kuenzler, Becky Misa, Jess Evardone, Engelbert de Ramos, Darylynn Dajao, Amaya Meynard, Rina Rosal, Lawrence Roxas, Cris Corpuz, Edwin Amado, Rosemarie Cane, Erica Masinam

> Gina lives in the slums with her laundrywoman grandmother Cion and her younger siblings, Boyet and Maria. In hopes of a better life, Gina rejects Nonoy—a fellow slum dweller who truly loves her—in favor of Jimboy, the playboy son of one of Cion's better-off patrons, Mrs. Alano. Jimboy gets Gina pregnant, but problems arise when Mrs. Alano forbids her son from consorting with the slum folk.

The folly of declaring Golden Ages is exposed by works of this type, one that draws from the strengths of two opposed masters—Lino Brocka's proletarian sympathies and Ishmael Bernal's sardonic irreverence—and outdoes either option by combining both qualities. Produced after the end of the so-called Second Golden Age (roughly mid-1970s to the end of the Marcos era in 1986), the film can best be read as an update of the First Golden Age's *Malvarosa* (1958, dir. Gregorio Fernandez), this time deploying the carnal allure of the sex-comedy to explore the complexities and paradoxes of class and gender politics. When exploitation threatens to become the norm even among the movie's heroic proletariat, the narrative pulls them back from the abyss and provides them with a well-earned shot at redemption, a rare instance of an upbeat closure perfectly complementing a hard-core realist text.

Tuhog

English Translation: *Skewered*; *Long Take* (film production parlance)
English Title: *Larger than Life*
Year of Release: 2001
Director: Jeffrey Jeturian
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producers: Available Light Productions & Regal Films
Cast: Ina Raymundo, Klaudia Koronel, Jaclyn Jose, Irma Adlawan, Dante Rivero, Nante Montreal, Raymond Nieva, Eric Parilla, Crispin Pineda, Frank Rivera, Desi Rivera, Celeste Lumasac, Albert Zialcita, Jessette Prospero, Russell Zamora, Rhett Romero, Menggie Cobarrubias

Perla endures her father's attempts at incestuous rape. But when he takes an interest in his granddaughter Floring (Perla's daughter by a lover who had abandoned her), Perla's moral outrage leads to her killing her own father. An enterprising director and scriptwriter interview mother and daughter in order to make an exploitation movie titled *Hayok sa Laman* (*Lust for Flesh*), where a mother, Violeta, melodramatically seeks to protect her concupiscent daughter, Hasmin, from the depraved attentions of her father even while the girl makes out at every opportunity with her boyfriend Adan. Perla and Floring attend a screening with their friends and neighbors, and are appalled by how their narrative is trivilialized and sensationalized onscreen.

The last scriptwriting contest of the Experimental Cinema of the Philippines declared two co-equal winners, but the agency shut down before it could find producers willing to finance the projects. One of the winners, Armando Lao, managed to make a name for himself as an outstanding practitioner. His ECP-winning entry, *Pinilakan* (*Silvered* or *Silvery*), was updated and released during the period of unrest building up to the massive demonstrations attempting to (unsuccessfully) reinstall deposed President Joseph Estrada. One may be tempted to draw a parallel between the people-power events aimed at "correcting" the anomaly of having unpopular and dysfunctional Chief Executives—Ferdinand Marcos in 1986's original EDSA uprising, Estrada in 2001's EDSA II—and the parodic and cynical replication of people power subsequently labeled EDSA III. Viewed from a historical distance, *Tuhog* demonstrates an ability to interrogate the machinations of urban, capitalist, male gaze-dominated cinema and its disregard for the interests of its polar opposites—the rural, agricultural, feminized world of the Third-World subject. It refuses the moral streamlining that renders the typical reflexive treatment sanctimonious and predictable, and makes understandable how media exploitation manages to thrive even while it cannibalizes the misery and suffering of its sources of material. The contrasts between the cinematic polish of the film-within-a-film and the documentary plainness of the real-life narrative, as well as the generic performances of the "fictional" characters, all come to a head when the two stories' violent resolutions lead to distressing excesses, with the *Hayok sa Laman* film-within-a-film characters provided with a pornographic equivalent of their real-life counterparts' domestic happy ending. In this manner, *Tuhog* implicates not so much its exploitative (fictional and real-life) filmmakers as its (fictional and real-life) audience: who can resist the titillation in the three-dimensional characters' situation, and the carnal attractions of their onscreen representations?

1—*Bridal Shower*

Year of Release: 2004
Director: Jeffrey Jeturian
Screenwriter: Chris Martinez
From a story by Chris Martinez, with script supervision by Armando Lao
Producer: Seiko Films
Cast: Dina Bonnevie, Cherry Pie Picache, Francine Prieto, Christian Vazquez, Douglas Robinson, JR Valentin, Alfred Vargas, Pinky Marquez, Rodel Velayo, Gina Pareño, Boots Anson Roa, Lester Llansang, Angel Jacob, Gerald Lauron, Jacob Dionisio, Christine Carlos, Flora Gasser, Yvette Marie Tagura, Pocholo Montes, Irma Adlawan, Bon Vibar, Grace Patricia Francisco, Basil Bolinao, Cynthia San Juan, Roher Tierra

Tates, Sonia, and Katie all work as fairly successful advertising executives under the benign supervision of Emily. It is their love lives, however, that prove problematic and potentially upsetting for their friendship. Mickey, an underachiever, is dismayed every time he bumps into one of Tates's casual flings, although he relies on her contacts so he can annul his marriage to be able to wed her. Sonia enjoys having sex with the poor but passionate Bryan, but when she discovers she's pregnant, she decides to settle with the wealthy but boring Juancho, despite being unsure which boy toy is the child's father, just so she can fulfill her trophy-wife aspiration. From their superior vantage point, the two friends cast aspersions on overweight Katie's choice of Joebert, a male stripper whom she tries to guide toward a more socially acceptable profession.

2—*Minsan Pa*

English Title: *One Moment More*
Additional Languages: Cebuano, Japanese, Korean
Year of Release: 2004
Director: Jeffrey Jeturian
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producer: MLR Films
Cast: Jomari Yllana, Ara Mina, Christian Vasquez, Tirso Cruz III, Rio Locsin, Dimples Romana, Criselda Volks, R.U. Miranda, Malu Barry, Dulce, Anna Fegi, Jonathan Badon, Marru Hadraki, R.R. Jacob, Natasha Denser, Ramon Villanueva, Sari Santillan, Nico Antonio, Jennifer Donaire, Kristopher Relucio, Ben Estur Jr., Gigette Reyes, Donnah Alcantarah, Ed Murillo, Dot Ramos-Gancayco, Kate Pamela Natividad, Igi Boy Flores, Adan Bolivar, Jacqueline Etulle, Roger Rayala, Teresa Tunay, Fonz, Kristopher Grundstrome

Since his father abandoned their family, Jerry has had to play the role of sole breadwinner for his mother, brother, and sister. He earns a living as a tour guide for Japanese men who travel to Cebu for the sights as well as the women. When the influx of foreign tourists declines as a result of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, he agrees to accommodate local tourists and falls for Luna, a well-off adopted Manileña who's engaged to her companion Alex. Jerry's pride makes him resist his father's attempts to reconcile with them; he punishes his younger brother as well when he catches him gambling in a casino. When Luna drops her camera into the sea, Jerry sees an opportunity to win her affection away from Alex.

The teamup of Jeffrey Jeturian with script specialist Armando Lao is comparable to the Second Golden Age's collaborations between their mentors Marilou Diaz-Abaya and Ricky Lee, with Jeturian taking an extensive break from film directing and Lao dying prematurely (both fates of which tragically befell Diaz-Abaya). In a millennial year whose exceptionality has never been adequately appreciated, much less explicated, they came up with a pair of works that seemed generically and structurally opposed, set in the country's contending capital cities. Yet the ready-made response to those willing to find fault with either release is surprisingly simple: watch both in succession and see how one ingeniously complements the other. *Bridal Shower*'s seemingly frivolous pursuits collapse (normally a disparagement) onto one character's plot concerns and ends with an ambivalently conclusive coupling, in contrast with the other characters' resolutions. *Minsan Pa* meanwhile extends the dilemma of the dispossessed male in *BS*: it would be commonplace in the country to find young working-class hunks who decide to return to their rural roots in order to have a better shot at success. Their objectification by higher-stationed admirers persists nevertheless, whether they like it or not, so they live essentially feminized lives, assured of patriarchal privilege but with their notion of ideal happiness permanently suspended by their social limitations. After traversing the central character's journey marked by the

melancholia of mature acceptance, what awaits the expectant viewer is a quality unique in the works of both director and writer—a happy ending, as smartly disposed and emotionally well-earned as it would be possible for fully attuned affiliates to concoct.

Kubrador

English Title: *The Bet Collector*
Year of Release: 2006
Director: Jeffrey Jeturian
Screenwriter: Ralston Jover
Producer: MLR Films
Cast: Gina Pareño, Fons Deza, Nanding Josef, Soliman Cruz, Joe Gruta, Domingo Landicho, Neil Ryan Sese, Johnny Manahan, Miguel Castro, Nico Antonio, Jess Evardone

> Despite her old age, Amy's persuasiveness and her special way of recalling numbers boost her work as a bet collector for *jueteng*, an illegal game popular in her slum neighborhood. As she goes about her duties, she evades the cops, sits in for her boss at a rigged gambling draw, and even performs some good deeds for her community. All this leads Amy to a fateful encounter after a visit to her son's grave on All Saints' Day.

The early post-celluloid production that set hard-to-match standards in directorial style, with real-time storytelling, fluid long takes, and powerhouse performances demonstrating how the strengths of digital filmmaking, granting the participation of genuine talent, could be enhanced. The filmmakers allude to the limits of the medium by introducing a metaphysical element—the mother's dead son, a reminder of dreams that will never come true—yet we only realize in retrospect how such a device, devoid of its usual tearjerker function, served to prepare us for the mother's own near-death encounter. On Gina Pareño's ravaged-yet-hopeful features, a rare mergence of life lessons and masterly performance, we find an epitomization of the hope and despair that the narrow, suspicious, and normativized slum spaces seek to conceal from outsiders.

Ekstra

English Title: *The Bit Player*
Year of Release: 2013
Director: Jeffrey Jeturian
Screenwriters: Zig Madamba Dulay, Antoinette Jadaone, Jeffrey Jeturian
Producers: Cinemalaya Foundation & Quantum Films
Cast: Vilma Santos, Cherry Pie Picache, Richard Yap, Ruby Ruiz, Nenita Deonoso, Karen Leslie Dematera, Boobsie, Christopher Ad. Castillo, Raymund Ocampo, Abi Niesta, Zyrus Imperial, Ronaline Ronn Enriquez, Tart Carlos, Antonette Garcia, Erlinda Villalobos, Raymond Rinoza, Hazel Faith dela Cruz, Rex Lantano, Martha Comia, Jake Seneres, Ricky Pascua, Zachary Ezekiel Diaz, Angelica Luis, Mhel Seduco, Michael Bayot, Fatima Centena, Almira Alcid, Cris Garrido, Norberto Portales, Marlon Rivera, Sunshine Teodoro, Vincent de Jesus, Louie Kim Sedukis, Miguel Cruz, Bobby Contiga, Piolo Pascual, Marian Rivera, Cherie Gil, Nico Antonio, Orlando Marcos, Vida Masakayan, Marx Topacio, Afi Africa, Toni Lopengco, Eula Valdez, Rosejean Sevilla, Salvador Zapanta, Glen Elizalde

> Even after becoming an unwed mother, Loida refuses to give up her pursuit of bit parts in movies, banking on the awareness that she has more talent than most of her work colleagues. Josie, their coordinator, herds them to out-of-town locales in order to work on a stressful and prolonged TV drama. The bit players maintain the camaraderie necessary for the mutual support they need at work, but Josie also awaits any opportunity for a break so she can raise the tuition money that her daughter tells her is already due.

Calibrating one's expectation in approaching *Ekstra* will be the key to uncovering its reflexive charm and cultural circumspection. Vilma Santos had attained the underappreciated ability to maintain a personable presence in her films without upstaging any of her coplayers, in contrast with her rival Nora Aunor's auteuristic skill in perceiving and seizing a work's central mechanism in order to override it for the purpose of enhancing, if not bettering, the final product. Jeffrey Jeturian had over a decade's worth of working through this type of material and demonstrates in *Ekstra* a delicacy that manages to salvage what could have easily been a devastating, melodramatic resolution. In-joke references to Aunor's expertise, as well as spot-on parodies of TV-drama conventions, serve to enhance the affecting and all-knowing humiliation that Santos allows her character to endure. Fans of either or both stars—that is, of Philippine cinema in its contemporary entirety—need not hesitate: *Ekstra* will be more than enough to hold us over until its filmmaker manages to return to creative activity once more.

IKE JARLEGO JR.

(1 film: 1999)

Tigasin

English Translation: *Masculine*
Year of Release: 1999
Director: Ike Jarlego Jr.
Screenwriter: Mel Mendoza-del Rosario
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Eddie Garcia, Victor Neri, Alma Concepcion, Alvin Anson, Peque Gallaga, Lito Legaspi, Manjo del Mundo, Rez Cortez, Jean Saburit, Amy Perez, Roldan Aquino, Archi Adamos, Gino Paul Guzman, Augusto Victa, Dexter Doria, Ester Chavez, Ogie Diaz, Idda Yaneza, Gandong Cervantes, Robert Talby, Ed Aquino, Archie Ventosa, Nikka Ruiz, Janet Diaz, Gloria Garcia, Joseph dela Paz, Janice Manuba, Eric Jimenez, Kevin Cabaluna, Dianne Sandico, Apolinario Reyes, Jenny de Guzman, Danny Celis, Reggie Sison, Tom Olivar, Polly Cadsawan, Ding Mendoza, Banjo Romero, Diego Salvador, Joe Jardi, Kim Laurel, Joe Lpid, Nemie Samson, Alberto Wahing, Freddie Elasigue, Jay Bermundo, Nonoy de Guzman, Jake Madrigal, Mon Confiado

> Greg Marcial looks forward to a well-earned leave of absence after busting a crime ring, but his superior requests one last mission from him. Several elderly men have been suffering cardiac arrest while engaging in sexual intercourse, but in order to conduct an investigation, Marcial has to pick out a new partner for field work as intelligence officer. Police trainers discourage him from selecting Ramon Ignacio, whom they find insufferably arrogant; Marcial though appreciates his sharpshooting skills and straight talk, and Ignacio proves crackerjack enough in helping him track the victims' cause of death to a locally manufactured synthetic version of Viagra. They arrest promo salesladies who push the product along with skin cream, and subdue resistant van operators. But as they celebrate their mission accomplished, their superior arrives to inform them that more deaths have occurred. They ascertain that the victims pick up their escorts at a riverside restaurant that specializes in aphrodisiac preparations, run by a high-living proprietress named Jessica, who endangers their operation when Ignacio finds himself falling for her.

Ike Jarlego Jr. might have had a short directorial career, but he'd actually grown up in the film business. Since his father Enrique was the preferred editor of First Golden Age master Gregorio Fernandez, he literally first showed up as a child actor before following his father's footsteps and proving himself worthy of the family profession. Ironically, his early filmmaking attempts—specifically *Andres Manambit: Angkan ng Matatapang* (*Clan of the Brave*, 1992) and *Nena* (1995)—were greeted with acclaim that they had difficulty sustaining.[52] His decades-long stint as editor though provided him with a healthier orientation than formal film training would have inculcated. *Tigasin* would be proof of value in any commercial

[52] I had been a founding member of Kritika, the organization that selected *Andres Manambit*, which also won top prize at the yearend Metro Manila Film Festival. *Nena* later won the Young Critics Circle's best-film award—though I was also a founding member of the group, I'd already started US graduate studies by then. I am grateful to police officer Juan Miguel B. Manansala, SMS Operator at the District Tactical Operation Center, for clarifying some dynamics in Philippine National Police operations.

filmmaker's oeuvre, if not for the unfairly high expectations that industry observers imposed on Jarlego. He had enough good sense to infer that Eddie Garcia's late-career focus on action material could benefit from the actor's sex-comedy chops (a colloquial translation of the title would be "priapic," which needs no further elaboration), and relies on newcomers to deliver crucial support; Victor Neri supplies the right measure of interactive chemistry, although the rarity of successful May–December buddy-cop films even in overseas cinema proves how distinctive the achievement is. Alert to the homoerotic implications, Jarlego stages a love-motel investigative foray where the partners masquerade as a queer couple, with Garcia reviving his tacky-queen persona, still scandalously effective after all this time.

JON RED

(2 films: 1999–2013)

1—*Still Lives*

Year of Release: 1999
Director & Screenwriter: Jon Red
Producers: Pelipula Productions & Blue Cord
Cast: Joel Torre, Nonie Buencamino, Ray Ventura, Ynez Veneracion, Alan Paule, Caridad Sanchez, Archi Adamos, Soliman Cruz, Mel Martinez, Raymond Keannu, Mon Confiado, Richard Quan, Nathan Forrest, Randy Punsal, Benjie Felipe, Leon Miguel, Jun Ureta, Ian Victoriano, Raul Morit, Michael Angelo Dagñalan, Ruben Lee, Bombi Plata, Roberto Pangan, Larry Manda, Bong Rosario, Jason Red, Michael Red

> Badong, a neighborhood drug dealer, seeks to maintain his dominance via the standard carrot-and-stick approach. He exudes friendly warmth toward his most productive earners, but metes lethal punishment when his clients displease him. He warns Enteng, his clean-cut personal assistant, that he cannot bow out of the business mainly because of the trouble caused by Paul, his thieving friend. An associate, Nardo, wishes to propose a money-making scheme although he also owes Badong for past unpaid transactions. Badong proceeds confidently, having paid off influential officials, but fails to contend with the reality that government authority never really operates as a monolithic entity.

2—*Ang Pirata*

English Translation: *The Pirate*
Year of Release: 2013
Director & Screenwriter: Jon Red
Producer: Pelipula Productions
Cast: Shamaine Buencamino, Mon Confiado, Ketchup Eusebio, Ronnie Lazaro, Bembol Roco, Stephanie Tablizo, Adrienne Vergara, Raul Morit, Hector Macaso, Steph Tablizo, Adrienne Vergara, Diling Castro, EJ Salcedo, Larry Manda, Ogi Sugatan, Danny Red, Jon Red

> Gerry and his henchperson Bert are hired by a certain colonel to clandestinely capture and, if necessary, eliminate local pushers of drug and media products. Bert grew up in rural poverty and swore to rise in the ranks, although his older sister Marinette, despite eventually marrying Gerry, ridicules him for succeeding in violent extralegal activities. Two schoolgirls in the vicinity of their safehouse develop a sapphic relationship, but when one of them breaks up, her ex acts out her heartbreak by selling pirated DVDs, thus setting herself up as an easy target for the operatives. Although not the first abducted victim to resist, she puts up a valiant struggle.

Acknowledged as the work that initiated the independent-digital trend in the Philippines, *Still Lives* has managed to live up to its promise, despite a narrative resolution whose twist may have seemed too clever by half. Its longer-lasting feat is enabled by strategies that several generations of successors tended to take for granted from the get-go, thus resulting in more failures than necessary: an intimate familiarity with the culture that it engages with, and a commitment by its creative forces to serve the best interests of said social context, including a willingness to suspend judgment in order to more accurately depict its most difficult-to-access aspects. The facts that digital technology itself still had to evolve more fully and that

the team could have benefited from a budget several times larger than what the presentation languished on: these become moot points when set against the onslaught of an inspired cast and offbeat elements introduced ostensibly to prop up a controlling gimmick, but ultimately implemented in order to augment the film's entertainment value. Red himself provided his own demonstration in a series of releases, with *Ang Pirata* resembling *SL* the most closely in terms of its (mostly) confined setting and thuggish social environment. His command of contrasting stylistic elegance, unexpectedly dark humor, and startlingly ferocious violence remained intact, with an advancement in extracting peak performances, notably in the hard-bitten yet heartrending delivery of Mon Confiado. The narrative premise in *AP* might appear even more implausible than *SL*'s,[53] but in only a few years the fascist presidency of Rodrigo Duterte would commence, with extrajudicial executions openly sanctioned by a chief executive now justifiably incarcerated for the traumatizing abnormality he induced in the country's historical consciousness.

[53] The filmmaker mentioned the lead actors' costuming in *Ang Pirata* as his "spoof/homage to 1960s action cinema," where local secret agents in spy films were dressed like their Western counterparts despite the tropical weather, as a means of affirming their social hypocrisy (*Messenger* reply, April 19, 2026). Regarding the campaign against so-called pirated DVDs: the historically specific activity was instigated by Jack Valenti, a frequent official guest of Imelda Marcos during her husband's military dictatorship. Pirated videos were forcibly interlinked with US Congress trade penalties and even falsely claimed as responsible for funding Islamic terrorist activities. See Joel David, "Videodisc Piracy as an Instance of Resistance" in *International Journal of Diaspora & Cultural Criticism*, vol. 11, no. 1, January 2021, pp. 98–137, doi:10.15519/dcc.2021.01.11.1.98.

OLIVIA M. LAMASAN

(2 films: 2000–2004)

Minsan, Minahal Kita

English Translation: *Once, I Loved You*
Year of Release: 2000
Director: Olivia M. Lamasan
Screenwriters: Ricky Lee & Olivia M. Lamasan
Producer: Star Cinema Productions
Cast: Sharon Cuneta, Richard Gomez, Edu Manzano, Angel Aquino, Carmina Villaroel, Ciara Sotto, Rosemarie Gil, Sandra Gomez, Marvin Agustin, Kristine Hermosa, Bonggoy Manahan, Ama Quiambao, Andrea del Rosario, Gabe Mercado, Patty Wilson

> Diane and Albert are stuck in loveless marriages but after an initial meeting, their paths keep crossing. They fall in love and proceed with a discreet romance. When their affair is discovered, Albert begs Diane to elope with him to the US. Diane is persuaded because her husband, Louie, tends to be physically abusive. But when Albert's wife Jackie asks for another chance, Diane and Albert's plans are left in uncertainty.

The team and studio behind *Madrasta* (*Stepmother*, 1996), Sharon Cuneta's breakout as serious actress, devised an even more challenging role for her, this time as the other woman, and were matched with a superior performance, and film, that got taken for granted—possibly in response to a perceived overrating of the earlier project. Cuneta, as well as her director Olivia A. Lamasan, deserve to be remembered more for this type of melodrama entry, one that implicitly critiques her earlier teen-star roles by presenting her as an emotionally and physically battered woman, forced to resort to subterfuge for the sake of love. In *Minsan, Minahal Kita*, grown-up issues are handled with just the right attention to thematic development and fan-pleasing devices, not to mention an uncompromising stance toward women's prerogatives in terms of their bodies, desires, and preferences.

Milan

Additional Language: Italian
Year of Release: 2004
Director: Olivia M. Lamasan
Screenwriters: Moira Lang & Olivia M. Lamasan
From a story by Moira Lang
Producers: ABS-CBN Film Productions & Star Cinema
Cast: Piolo Pascual, Claudine Barretto, Iza Calzado, Ward Luarca, Irma Adlawan, Ilonah Jean, Ryan Eigenmann, Pia Moran, Lotlot de Leon, Cecil Paz, At Maculangan, Lollie Mara, Richard Arellano, Maritess Joaquin, Cathy Garcia-Sampana, Nuel C. Naval, Elvis Vargas, Chona Zaballa, Melogin Evangelista, Matteo Luca, Ernie Cortez, Esting Cortez, Jay Rivera, Longo Francisco, Cristina Cortez, Cesare Cortez, Rochelle Tolentino, Ricardo Lorenzi, Jennifer Arcena, Yulan Tejada, Michael Garland

Wondering why his wife Mary Grace hasn't been responding to his letters for a long time, Lino decides to leave his job as a factory supervisor and look for her in Milan, Italy. In order to do so, he has to join a group of Filipinos who illegally cross the Swiss border under cover of night. Upon arriving in Milan, he asks Filipino-looking residents if they can remember Mary Grace from a photograph, but no one recognizes her. Jenny, a Filipina who passes herself off as Italian, takes pity on his plight and provides him with bedspace in the apartment she arranged to share with several other migrants, as well as some of the part-time work that she has no difficulty in sourcing, while asking her contacts about the possible whereabouts of Mary Grace. When Lino falls for Jenny's intelligence and strength of character, she suddenly receives a lead on where Mary Grace might be located.

Of the several OFW-themed romcoms that Star Cinema produced, *Milan* distinguishes itself as the most accomplished and heartfelt. The subject of overseas migrant work is by definition nearly inexhaustible, but the budget and resources that the material requires have proved to be obstacles that only the most successful film producer of the millennium can confront, and even then with a full list of commercial compromises. *Milan* comes close to losing its footing after its midportion, when the central pair begin their preordained process of courtship, coupling, frustration, and reconciliation. The film traverses these treacherous requisites by falling back on the strengths of the traditions it draws from: one is the pre-Code phase of Classical Hollywood, where social and legal violations are acknowledged but treated with nonchalance; the other is the documentalist potential of social realism, realized in the film via on-cam interviews with compatriots who're apparently living out in real life the specifics of the plot. With such fail-safe measures, the film could actually dispense with cinematic values—but *Milan* nevertheless provides a tactile, emo-laden captivation of the forlorn enchantments of a long-advanced system running just to stay in place, with performers skilled in their designated tasks and a then-youthful Claudine Barretto uncovering a useful range of performative abilities as she goes along.

JOYCE BERNAL

(4 films: 2000–2009)

Tunay na Tunay: Gets Mo? Gets Ko!

English Translation: *So True: Got It? I Got It!*
Year of Release: 2000
Director: Joyce Bernal [as Bb. Joyce Bernal]
Screenwriters: Dindo Perez & Mari Mariano
From a story by Dindo Perez & concept by Debbie Cimafranca
Producers: Star Cinema & RCP Productions
Cast: Robin Padilla, Jolina Magdangal, Vic Diaz, Efren Reyes Jr., Roldan Aquino, Dindo Arroyo, Bearwin Meily, JR Herrera, Via Veloso, Dang Cruz, George Lim, Gamaliel Viray, Cris Vertido, Levi Ignacio, Polly Cadsawan, Mark Mendez, Angel Ayson, Jean Co, Sheerlyn Co, Wilen Navarro, William Romero, Josie Tagle, Marilyn Naval, Ramon Fernandez, Manolito Ampon, B.J. Nakamoto, Peter Lim, Steve de Leon, Jun Hidalgo, Wally Villanueva, Boy Roque, Jack Montalban, Gil Carino, Reynaldo Castro, Melvin Galang, Boy Gomez, Gads Aranel, Alex Cunanan, Alberto Laderas, Jun Arenas, Boyet Ferro, Moroski Padilla, July Hidalgo, Rey Cercena, Banjo Romero, Long Mejia, Leychard Sicangco, Dick Sangkad, Mario Castillo, Khader Alhamsi

> Nick Abeleda is an undercover police officer who keeps having to change his identity, including his name, for every assignment or emergency that he has to handle. While being chased by the gangsters who discovered his police status, he attempts to hide in the narrow and congested streets of Manila Chinatown. To be sheltered by a small restaurant that he runs into, he claims to be in search of a job and gets assigned to cook. Fortunately his cooking skills are adequate, but the charming but incompetent waitress, who introduces herself as Tin Tin, doesn't want him minding her business. Tasked by his supervisor to infiltrate the syndicate of Mr. Wong, a master criminal operating as a legitimate Chinese businessman, Nick is requested by the man he's shadowing to search for his missing daughter so he can marry her off to the son of a business associate. It doesn't take long for him to figure out that Tin Tin's actually Mei Ling, Mr. Wong's daughter.

Hong Kong cinema may be the immediate reference point in *Tunay na Tunay: Gets Mo? Gets Ko!* Although wire fu, a fight scene where the players defy gravity by being suspended on invisible wires, makes only a singular and modest appearance, the sense of mayhem premised on the interaction of multiple characters abides, and the expedient comic-book plotting serves to outline seemingly impossible narrative challenges that leave the lead characters with nothing else to fall back on except charm and daring. Fortunately Jolina Magdangal and Robin Padilla were intrepid presences for their time, since their respective star status as romcom princess and action prince did not observe conventional expectations of whatever constituted personalities of their stature. Director Joyce Bernal also demonstrates the flexibility and adaptability of the enthusiastic and creative nonspecialist, capable of welcoming a challenge mainly because she's unaware of how taxing it could get and how easily the typical expert could falter. If one had to formulate a complaint, that would be regarding the material's wasted potential for advanced Orientalist discourse; but then, even Hong Kong cinema rarely attained insightfulness in this area, and if we're to be honest with ourselves, most everyone who's drawn to it doesn't really hope for life-changing revelations, if life-altering fun can serve as compensation.

1—*Booba*

Year of Release: 2001
Director: Joyce Bernal [as Binibining Joyce Bernal]
Screenwriter: Mel Mendoza-del Rosario
From a story by Joyce Bernal & Mel Mendoza-del Rosario
Producers: Viva Films & RS Productions
Cast: Rufa Mae Quinto, Gary Estrada, AiAi delas Alas, Gina Pareño, Roldan Aquino, Archie Ventosa, Denver Razon, Ava Avila, Rico Miguel, Rad Dominguez, Polly Casawan, Felindo Obach, Rudy Meyer, Josie Galvez, George Lim, Angie Reyes, Peter Lim

> Booba is resented by her homely and quarrelsome twin sister Gretchen, for being her diametrical opposite: a sweet, pretty, popular, and shapely airhead. Lola Belle, their grandmother, keeps attempting to mollify Gretchen, but the latter gets fed up and leaves their rural shack for the city. Lola Belle dies not long after, but before doing so, she tells Booba to look for Gretchen and assures her that she will always be by her side. Booba then ventures alone in Manila, trying to earn a living while occasionally spotting her sister, who keeps evading her in a huff while engaging in a range of criminal activities as a mob boss. Her attractiveness draws the attention of the wrong kind of men, although fortunately Lola Belle's spirit shows up to warn her of trouble. While doing her job as a nightclub dancer, her workplace is raided by the vice squad, whose kindly police leader takes pity on Booba and does what he can to assist her.

2—*Masikip sa Dibdib: The Boobita Rose Story*

Alternate Title: *Masikip sa Dibdib: Ang Tunay na Buhay ni Boobita Rose*
English Translation: *Tight in the Chest: The Boobita Rose Story*
English Translation of Alternate Title: *Tight in the Chest: The Actual Life of Boobita Rose*
Year of Release: 2004
Director: Joyce Bernal [as Binibining Joyce Bernal]
Screenwriter: Mel Mendoza-del Rosario
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Rufa Mae Quinto, Antonio Aquitania, Gina Pareño, John Lapus, Sunshine Dizon, Phytos Ramirez, Tita Swarding, Rudy Hatfield, Raquel Pareño, Kier Legaspi, Bernard Bonnin, Charlie Davao, Chinggoy Alonzo, Raquel Monteza, Ralion Alonzo, Earl Ignacio, Lui Manansala

> As a young child, Boobita is driven out of home with her mother and siblings after her father takes in a mistress and passes on his out-of-wedlock daughter to them. The now grown-up Boobita has to earn a living in order to maintain her homebound mother, womanizing brother, and rebellious stepsister who, like their grandfather, has become an alcoholic. Although determined to find success by snagging a well-off eligible bachelor, Boobita's lack of education proves to be a liability. The series of misfortunes that she encounters occasionally induces her to burst into song.

Two releases featuring Rufa Mae Quinto in the persona that made her a star trade on the bawdy drollery of a well-endowed woman too vacuous to realize her hotness. Sex-focused comediennes are a rarity in Philippine cinema, although in consonance with Marilyn Monroe's irrefragable demonstration, sly intelligence distinguishes the best aspirants from all other pretenders. The establishing text, *Booba*, uses a name derived from the Spanish word for dimwit (further extended in English slang to mean "breast"), with the political incorrectness setting the terms for director Joyce Bernal's irreverent approach to humor and

willingness to play with genre. Though unrelated to each other, both films foreground this condition in their casting of Gina Pareño, the only full-figured comic star from any First Golden Age studio, described as a "sex-starved *lola* (granny)" in *Booba*'s jokey opening credits. As inevitable with the cultural specificities of humor, *Booba* finds its parodic intentions occasionally dulled by overfamiliarity, with only its talents' sense of conviction lifting the project through these rough spots. Quinto, however, never betrays any cognizance of superiority to her material—always a welcome perk in comic performance. The rewards of such inconspicuous discipline carried through in her next Bernal project, *Super-B* (2002), but it was in the one after where director and actor were able to scale heights that only Mike de Leon (replicating his home studio's lost Manuel Conde masterpieces) was able to pull off beforehand. Included by *Asian Movie Pulse* contributor Epoy Deyto in "10 Gritty Asian Films That Defined a Generation's Struggle," *Masakit sa Dibdib* performs the difficult stunt of delineating a tearjerker narrative while maintaining a straight face, figuratively as well as literally, within the pop equivalent of Viennese operetta. The fact that Quinto manages to convey the naïveté essential for her character to be swiped by the casual cruelty of her social betters as well as by the sudden eruption of musical numbers (restoring the "melos" in melodrama—make sure to source the full version rather than the producer's severely truncated remastering) provides a clue into how our compatriots managed to survive wars, dictatorships, and overseas traumas. Among several minor touches, for example, the film wittily commemorates the early-millennium Pinoy-slang reinscription of "nosebleed" to indicate the use of difficult words or expressions in English. The film as a whole might also imply another long wait before the next knockabout bombshell comes along, but that would be all up to how fast Pinas pop culture can respond to the challenge.

Kimmy Dora: Kambal sa Kiyeme

English Translation of Subordinate Title: *Twins in Silliness*
Year of Release: 2009
Director: Joyce Bernal [as Binibining Joyce Bernal]
Screenwriter: Chris Martinez
Producers: Spring Films & MJM Productions
Cast: Eugene Domingo, Dingdong Dantes, Zanjoe Marudo, Ariel Ureta, Miriam Quiambao, Baron Geisler, Gabby Eigenmann, Archie Alemania, Zeppi Borromeo, Leo Rialp, Phillip Nolasco, Tyrone Rabago, Christian Bautista, Marvin Agustin, Mark Bautista, Paolo Ballesteros, Jinggoy Estrada, Vhong Navarro, Rufa Mae Quinto, Erik Santos, Aiza Seguerra, Regine Velasquez

> Smart yet moody Kimmy and sweet but airheaded Dora are identical twins who always seem to be at odds with each other. Both are also heirs to the Go Dong Hae business empire. A misunderstanding leads Kimmy's lawyer Harry to hatch a plan to eliminate Dora. But when the plan hits a major obstacle, each of the sisters faces a slew of problems that can endanger their business and their family.

The doppelgänger situation has been the stuff of fantasy and horror, and occasionally of metaphysically minded authors and auteurs. Film enables what theater has difficulty pulling off, but *Kimmy Dora: Kambal sa Kiyeme* banks on the performance-driven fireworks of Eugene Domingo, replicating theater veteran Roderick Paulate's twin accomplishments[54] and enhancing it with a pared-down version of the class conflicts portrayed in Jim Abrahams's *Big Business* (1988). Despite these references, as well as the irrelevance of the Korean references (developed in the sequel and prequel that followed in 2012 and 2013 respectively), *KDKK* retains the progressive orientation that made its predecessors worthy of double takes, and literalizes Christian Metz's appreciation of mirror construction, where film enables its audience to witness a hall-of-mirrors effect of the medium portraying and commenting on itself. At one point, when Domingo is challenged to depict evil-sister Dora mimicking the angelic Kimmy in order to mislead their overindulgent father, the multiple bravura impersonations that Domingo performs provoke a rare instance of laughter in local comedy that is presented as slapstick but is premised on conceptual sophistication. Director Joyce Bernal provides the humanist and romantic resolutions that characterize the earlier texts, yet insists on the primacy of feminist independence and cathartic humor, hand in hand (in hand) with Domingo's game sensibility.

[54] The films invariably exploit Roderick Paulate's "Rhoda" or flaming-queen persona by contrasting him with a straight-acting twin. These include *Ako si Kiko, Ako si Kikay* (*I Am Kiko, I am Kikay*) and *Kumander Gringa* (*Commander Gringa*), both directed by Mike Relon Makiling and released in 1987, with the first proceeding from a sci-fi premise where each of the brothers drinks a potion, transforming into a princess and a prince charming but unaware of each other's existence. *Kumander Gringa*, as well as Maryo J. de los Reyes's *Bala at Lipistik* (*Bullet and Lipstick*, 1994), turns on the more realistic *Kimmy Dora* formula of twins with differing orientations and placed in life-threatening situations—the Philippine rebel insurgency in the former and gangland conflict in the latter—where the interloping femme brother has to mimic his butch counterpart in order to survive. An attempt to update the formula, possibly intended for Vice Ganda, the contemporary counterpart of Paulate, was Wenn Deramas's *Bromance: My Brother's Romance* (2013), where the professionally successful gay brother suffers a concussion and lapses into a coma, and his homophobic ne'er-do-well sibling (both played by Zanjoe Marudo) has to enact a queer charade while exploiting his gay bro's closeness to the woman he desires.

MIIKE TAKASHI

(1 film: 2000)

The Guys from Paradise

Additional Language: Japanese
Year of Release: 2000
Director: Miike Takashi
Screenwriters: Izō Hashimoto & Itaru Era
From the novel *Tengoku Kara Kita Otoko-tachi* by Hayashi Yōji
Producers: Asahi National Broadcasting Co., Excellent Film, Hammers
Cast: Kikkawa Kōji, Yamazaki Tsutomu, Endō Kenichi, Okina Kaei, Muzahashi Kenji, Kanayama Kazuhiko, Ōtsuka Nene, Oikawa Mai, Monsour del Rosario, Kitami Toshiyuki, Oikawa Mitsuhiro, Sako Hideo, Takenaka Naoto, Pocholo Montes, King Gutierrez, Jess Lapid, Kaye Tuano, Joey Galvez, Levy Ignacio, Oikawa Mai, Kanayama Kazuhiko, Kitami Toshiyuki, Rene Hawkins, Vic Felipe, Lindsay Kennedy, Efren Reyes Jr., Boy Roque, Rey Bejar, Alex Cunanan, Jun Dauz, Alex Braquit, Cris Daluz, Aileen Joy, Sonny Cabalda, Leo Valdez, Philip Supnet, Noe Endaya, Shaina Miguel, Jazi Cruz, Jane Perez, Abby Moscaidon, Bobit Dominguez, Sammy Bernabe, Miyamoto Seiya, Shojima Takeshi, Sako Hideo

> Hayasake Kohei, a salaryman of Sanyu Trading, is caught with a kilogram's worth of heroin and incarcerated in Manila City Jail, where he gets to know a small group of Japanese prisoners. Yoshida, who says he fled Japan after killing some gangsters, hires Kohei to represent him in business transactions, which they accomplish by bribing the guards so they can get around outside. Kohei absconds with Yoshida's money but when he gets to his hotel, his wife's no longer in his room. Yoshida finds him and warns him not to trick him again. Kohei realizes his wife and his lawyer are cheating on him so he dismisses them both. He then decides to use the money he left with a Filipino chef who runs a Japanese restaurant, but when the chef discovers what the package contains, he flees with it. Sakamoto, a pedophile inmate, drugs Kohei and attempts to sell him to organ harvesters but Yoshida saves him. When a prison riot erupts with the Noypi inmates ganging up on the Japanese, a Philippine prisoner whom Yoshida cheated helps them escape. While driving away, they see a child crying over her injured mother; they take her to her village, where Sakamoto uses his medical knowledge to treat her.

Casual film observers might be delighted to find out that one of Japan's major film talents elected to adopt the only novel written by one of his compatriots, which happened to be Pinas-set, and devoted his considerable influence to make it happen. Hard-core followers of Miike Takashi, however, might be in for a disappointment, if they hadn't heard about *The Guys from Paradise* yet (an unlikely possibility). It has none—actually a few, which might as well be counted as nothing—of the incessant, viscerally horrific, sometimes outright cartoonish violence that made his fan favorites so slavishly venerated: *Audition* and *Dead or Alive* (both 1999) and *Visitor Q* and *Ichi the Killer* (both 2001), to name just a few. The primary distinction that *TGfP* shares with the general run of Miike films is the role that irony plays in the narrative; in fact, irony in the film takes precedence over violence, so much so that when violence finally makes its appearance, it still operates on the principle of reversal. These irruptions initially cause perplexity, particularly with Kohei, the lead character, who winds up regarding them as lessons he has to learn in order to survive. The first definitive sign that developments will refuse to follow normal logic is when Kohei witnesses a prison riot: the sounds are recognizable from any other city-jail film, but the participants all seem to be enjoying themselves, delighting in what is after all a departure from

the monotony of regimented existence—just as, on a later occasion, a thunderstorm makes everyone rejoice in the rare opportunity to have a clean shower. Yoshida, the gang leader, makes fun of the trans woman whom he regards as maid and mistress, but mourns for the only time in the film when she dies trying to save him. Sakamoto, who was arrested for child rape, cures the mother of a girl who calls for help, and selflessly uses his indispensable medical expertise on her townmates. At the point of no return, when the Japanese prisoners are menacingly surrounded by the rest of the inmates, Brando, the singular Filipino prisoner with an axe to grind against Yoshida, saves them in the surest way possible, by scattering money that the other prisoners hasten to collect. The final narrative irony might be impossible to accept, even if the film already dropped broad hints from the very beginning that Miike would be subsuming his cinematic skills to the source novel's properties. But a historical parallel, also involving another Japanese novelist, might be instructive: Suehiro Tetchō was befriended by Jose Rizál while the two were traveling by ship to Europe in 1888, and subsequently published *Nanyo no Daiharan* (*Severe Disturbance in the South Seas*, Sumyodo, 1891), in which a Rizál-like figure rebels against Spanish occupation in Pinas and is assisted in his aspiration by the Emperor of Japan.[55] Strange though wondrously interventionist, these artists from a northern archipelago; further studies ought to proceed forthwith.

[55] An early source for information on the interaction between the two authors would be Josefa Saniel's "Jose Rizál and Suehiro Tetchō: Filipino and Japanese Political Novelists," *Asian Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1964, pp. 353–371. Renewed contemporary interest in these two derived from Benedict Anderson's final volume *Under Three Flags: Anarchism and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*, Verso Books, 2006 (later republished as *The Age of Globalization: Anarchists and the Anti-Colonial Imagination*), where he referred to Caroline S. Hau and Shiraishi Takashi's research, subsequently published as "Daydreaming about Rizal and Tetchō: On Asianism as Network and Fantasy," *Philippine Studies*, vol. 57, no. 3, 2009, pp. 329–388, doi:10.13185/2244-1638.1684. I am grateful to Professor Epoy Deyto for providing me with access to *The Guys from Paradise*, and to Professor Michiyo Yoneno-Reyes for information, unavailable at English-language internet sources, on novelist Hayashi Yōji, whom I initially mistook for Hayashi Jyouji.

YAM LARANAS

(2 films: 2001–2020)

1—*Radyo*

English Title: *Radio*
Year of Release: 2001
Director: Yam Laranas
Screenwriters: Yam Laranas & Jon Red
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Rufa Mae Quinto, Jeffrey Quizon, R.J. Leyran, Louie Medel, Tado, Bojo Molina, Katya Santos, Goms Burza, Lucy Quinto, Michelle Mercado, Raul Dillo, Shermaine Santiago, Mardi Gozum, Ronnie Lazaro, Mike Lloren, Soliman Cruz, Jon Red, Randy Punsal, Raul Morit, Ardenia Albarida, Noel Sandoval, Nido de Jesus, Mac Alejandre, Renato del Prado

> Mila conducts a popular radio talk program every morning with her co-anchor George. Several listeners phone in to share their dreams and problems. Among them is Ruben, a sales promoter in the hallway of a congested shopping mall, where no one pays him any attention and Myla, a saleslady whom he longs for, mocks him for his lowly position. After he requests Mila to play a song for Myla, whom he calls his girlfriend, she scolds him; when he calls up Mila to narrate what happened, she and George treat him dismissively. He relives the childhood trauma of his mother's cruel treatment, murders and rapes and dismembers Myla, then calls up the DJ to drop hints about what he did. His killing spree just started, however, and as detectives take an interest in his identity, his begins obsessing over Mila.

2—*Sigaw*

English Title: *The Echo*
Year of Release: 2004
Director: Yam Laranas
Screenwriters: Roy Iglesias & Yam Laranas
Producers: Megavision Films, Regal Entertainment, GMA Films
Cast: Jomari Yllana, Richard Gutierrez, Iza Calzado, Angel Locsin, James Blanco, Ella Guevara, Lui Manansala, Tessie Villarama, Pocholo Montes, Ronnie Lazaro, Geric Albero

> Marvin finally was able to rent his own apartment, where his girlfriend occasionally drops by to visit. He has difficulty sleeping though because he keeps hearing loud noises from the occupants of another room, where a hotheaded police officer shouts at and beats up his wife and their young daughter. One night, the wife knocks on Marvin's door to ask him to look after her daughter while she tries to calm down her husband, who'll be arriving soon. Marvin hesitates to get involved but he takes pity on the girl. He tells his GF that he's starting to see bloody apparitions of the mother and daughter and she confesses that she has started experiencing the same thing. During a particularly scary encounter, the couple decide to leave the apartment and watch a feel-good movie, but the visions find a way to haunt them there as well.

The predicament in approaching whiz-kid product is that the practitioner may be so gifted that younger appreciators as well as foreign observers (who amount to the same thing, when one thinks about it) might wind up fostering the same cycle of formalist appreciation that entraps Western artists in a rut from which they can only escape by rejecting the system wholesale and

starting over in another area or activity, if they have the resources for renewal. The evidence played out early enough, when the start of the current millennium encouraged Philippine film critics to name the next Golden-Age harbingers, as if such an era can be heroically determined by any number of individuals. Yam Laranas would be a perfectly archetypal sample, with a pair of films that stirred excitement among responders despite the presence of elements that would have given pause to any past Pinas expert. The delightful and heart-pounding *Radyo*, for example, proceeds from a traumatization brought about by a Hitchcockian phallic mother, minus Sir Alfred's usual winky perspective; even more seriously, the film's entire social world takes a stance against the now-grownup victim, who responds with mountingly perverse cruelty. The later *Sigaw* is a more sober affair, although at the expense of its women characters turning passive instead of reprising the bullying or taunting that they did in *Radyo*, and with (once more) the progressive-sanctioned demonization of its distinctly working-class player for being an armed representative of "the system." With these caveats in mind, one can nevertheless still immerse in impressively conceived settings where Laranas gives himself free rein to disrupt audience expectations and even introduce reflexive moments that comment on the material without enforcing a separation from the onscreen events. In *Radyo,* the female host spins a hit record made by the actress who plays the character, with her sidekick interjecting a salacious pun; in *Sigaw*, the lead couple take refuge in a film screening but find even that space haunted. These moments of grace actually induce an unexpected retrospective dimension, allowing discerning audiences to add insight to their pleasure.[56]

1—*Abomination*

Year of Release: 2018
Director: Yam Laranas
Screenwriters: Paolo Vacirca & Oscar Fogelström
From a story by Yam Laranas & Gin de Mesa
Producers: Unitel Productions, Underground Logic, Hit Productions
Cast: Tippy dos Santos, Maritoni Fernandez, Justine Peña, Paul Holmes, Lukas Enrique, Lexi Fernandez, Lexi Schulze, David Bianco, Leigh Halliwell, Emma Brennan, Kuya Manzano, Spyke Perez, Janelle Olafson, Pinky Amador, Ramon Perez, Andy Kun, Robert Zialcita, James Svendsen, Merhzad Tamadon Khan, Henry Lo, Sam Turner, Dada Hassan, Aaron Hewson, Raul Venigas, Ibu Benedict, Remus Hususan, Anne Feo, John Moseley, Alexandra Santos, Viviana Flores, Manuel Velasco, Eddie Ngo, Mahle

[56] Patrick D. Flores's commentary on the reflexive element in *Sigaw* articulates this point in full: "That the cinema is revisited creates another dimension within the scenario, as it finally implicates the institution of spectatorship as party to the conspiracy of representation, of making a particular language of the real utterable at the expense of its impossibility (not yet possible), which as we learn here can never be abandoned" ("The Restive Condition," *Young Critics Circle Film Desk*, June 2, 2008, posted online). The *Radyo* DJ character, on her part, announces that she'll be playing a hit song by Rufa Mae Quinto titled "Ikikiss Kita" or "I'll Kiss You," with her co-anchor adding "sabay hug," meaning "with a hug." The actual Quinto song is "Kiss Kita Sabay Hug" (Nonoy Tan & Ed Calumpang, 2002) which, when articulated fast enough to elide the aspirate, sounds like "I'll kiss your testicle." The reflexive play proceeds apace when the character sings along to the record and their voices sound exactly alike.

Rachel is found lying in the middle of an empty road, unconscious. When she awakens, she asks the doctor to call her mother but the latter refuses to speak to her. A senior doctor informs her that the person she claims to be died a few months earlier so the police are fetching her for questioning. She escapes and attempts to contact her family, then her best friend. She remembers how her mother, as a single parent, had difficulty handling her: when she didn't take meds to control her mood swings, she would beat up her classmates for imagined slights and her mother had to force her to apologize. One night, she attends a small party thrown by Dan, who's aware of Rachel's unstable condition and knows how to take advantage of it.

2—*Nightshift*

Year of Release: 2020
Director & Screenwriter: Yam Laranas
Producers: Viva Films, Aliud Entertainment, ImaginePerSecond
Cast: Yam Concepcion, Michael de Mesa, Mercedes Cabral, Jeffrey Quizon, Soliman Cruz, Ruby Ruiz, Mayen Estanero, Roman Perez Jr., Irma Adlawan, Caleb Santos, Joel Garcia, Karenina Romualdez, Brian Bamunuachchi, Jonjon Maceda, Maryanne Climaco, Lita Loresco, Sigrid Polon, Christian Villete, Rafael Atun, Jessa Mae Gajo, Shaider Vargas, Mico Akashi Dagaas, Antonio Adlawan, Mary Ann Tan, Liberty Galvez, Red Musni, Edith Monsanto, Gerard Gevera, Jessica Nunez, Brenda Porcadilla, Sofia Nicole Mabalay, Isabel Tepase, Regina Miano, Jackylyn Miano, Prince John Dale Pampanga, Coleen Que, Laline Yulo, Ariel Guevarra, Albert Logacho, Allan June Pampanga, Cherry Favors, Jam Sehani, Richard Macorol

Jessie Pardo reports for her first day of duty as night-time morgue assistant to Doctor Alex. The sight of various dead bodies unsettles her, particularly in their expulsion of gases and cadaveric spasms. Fortunately Doc Alex is patient, considerate, and avuncular, even encouraging her to take breaks, which she refuses. A strong typhoon causes occasional electrical brownouts, worsening Jessie's jumpiness. Two morgue assistants try to humor her but after she catches them stealing from the corpses, she sets some professional distance with them. A mother pleads to be let in so she could see the body of her daughter, but the only outsiders allowed after hours are police investigators. When her replacement fails to arrive because of the storm, Doc Alex volunteers to keep her company; he suffers a heart attack, however, and has to be rushed to hospital, thus leaving Jessie alone in the company of the unalive.

The unusual yet unobserved progression in Yam Laranas's filmmaking career was his consistency in working within genre material, despite the fact that even his younger colleagues were collecting trophies from overseas festivals and local critics' competitions. In so doing, he quietly managed to accumulate a filmography that demonstrated attempts at reworking genre tropes, mostly with qualified success, as these things expectedly turn out. His later projects exhibit a willingness to accept ambitious challenges in some cases, as well as expertise comparable to global practitioners when he opts to flex his abilities. *Abomination* is an example of the former type of effort, a work that purports to be set in a fictional North American city named Monte Maria but (save for apparent establishing outoor shots) was produced entirely in the Philippines; in addition, it bounces around (occasionally with superimposed announcements) its lead character's developmental stages, corresponding with her unstable psychological condition. Both these attempts work with such a high degree of credibility that when the mystery's solution unfolds, it turns out to be far more artificial

than the film's naturalistic accomplishment, much like an M. Night Shyamalan viewing experience feels after everyone and her aunt are already familiar with how the riddles in *The Sixth Sense* (1999) are going to be answered. The key will be a matter of taking *Abomination*'s final sequences as part of the earlier time-fragmented journey and regarding these with as much skepticism as the rest of the plot, then look forward to the next Laranas entry. *Nightshift*, for its part, will be more standard-issue—which means its sources of pleasure will be in the way Laranas extracts time-worn values such as the buildup of dread alongside well-executed jump scares, the direction of actors (notably an atypically avuncular Michael de Mesa, whose unexpected benevolence is positively uncanny), and a final-act narrative explication that doesn't overstay its welcome. More and better work will be in store from this talent, and we can only hope it won't take too long in coming.

JOEL LAMANGAN

(3 films: 2001–2013)

Hubog

English Translation: *Shape*
English Title: *Wretched Lives*
Year of Release: 2001
Director: Joel Lamangan [as Joel C. Lamangan]
Screenwriter: Roy Iglesias
Producer: Good Harvest Productions
Cast: Assunta de Rossi, Alessandra de Rossi, Wendell Ramos, Jay Manalo, Romel Villamor, Jackie Castillejos, Mel Kimura, Jim Pebanco, Tony Mabesa, Malou Crisologo, Mario Magallona, Joanne Quintas, Ryan Eigenmann, Joseph Ison, Alvin J. Bernales, Yo Ocampo, Dante Javier, Edward Belaro, Jing Alvarado, Felindo Obach, Manolo Barrientos, Banaue Miclat, Bobby Benitez, Macky Aquino, Gigette Reyes, Mary Rose Paz, Karen Ann Diaz, Ruth Diaz, Joy Chong, Angelica Ferrer, Lucy Navarette, Aimee Tengco, Bernah Bernardo, Dennis Obispo, Ronald Eusebio, Edwin dela Torre, Bon Vibar, Girlie Alcantara

> Vanessa, a casual worker, strives to provide for her intellectually disabled younger sister Nikka in order to stave off social workers bent on taking her, following the death of their mother. Vanessa's boyfriend Oliver offers little support given his work as both cabbie and petty criminal. Eventually, Vanessa leaves him for Uno, a bodyguard who seems more capable of providing for her and Nikka. As discontent among slum dwellers intensifies with the 1998 ouster of President Joseph Estrada, a breakdown in peace and order extends to the personal relationships among Vanessa, the men in her lives, and the community she lives in.

Shorn of its cynical intentions and reduced to its generic elements, "poverty porn" need not bear the derogation that has made it an easy satirical target among contemporary observers and filmmakers. *Hubog* is a case in point: early commentators may have been put off by its political allegories—specifically referencing the EDSA III rallies that sought to restore deposed President Joseph Estrada—as well as its literal approach to the "porn" aspect. Way over a decade since its release, however, it has shed off its aura of eager exploitation, retained its confidence in engaging in social discourse, and daringly foretold a right-wing pro-fascist drift, along with an extensive reliance on social-networking, among the dispossessed—a then-contained vision that became a reality during the 2016 presidential election and its aftermath. The movie cleverly modifies the standard inscription of "nation" on women's bodies by splitting the usual singular representative into two: a mature contract worker who makes herself sexually available as a matter of survival, and her mentally challenged and therefore readily abused younger sister. No happy resolution awaits such a situation, especially when the only choice they can make among male prospects is whoever can be the least evil. Nevertheless the film attains a note of poignant triumph, as the sisters prove not just their devotion to each other but also their willingness to struggle valiantly in a society that can only hold forth the bleakest outcome for its least-privileged members.

Walang Kawala

English Title: *No Way Out*
Year of Release: 2008

Director: Joel Lamangan [as Joel C. Lamangan]
Screenwriter: Eric Ramos
From a story by Jose Lamangan, Manny Valera, Eric Ramos
Producer: DMV Entertainment
Cast: Polo Ravales, Joseph Bitangcol, Emilio Garcia, Jean Garcia, Paolo Rivero, Althea Vega, Marco Morales, Ermie Concepcion, Mike Magat, Jon Romano, Anthony Taylor, Alchris Galura, Wilson Go, Aaron Domingo, Beth Rivera, Mellow Johnson, Evelyn Tagalog, Danilo Regala, Lea Regala, Ida Pumarejos, Sue Prado, Ace Castro, Arron Cadawas, Aldrich Darren, Renz Cruz, Miguel Morales, John Lalu, Miggy Valdez, Vicvic Villavicencio, Noel "Chino" Sarenas, Joel Giray, Vic Romano, Tony Tambobong, Noel Elmido, Vic Gabion, Romy Salvador, Ernie Andrade, Macmac Jingo, Joel Luciano, Richard Mijares, Caroline Mirrales, Anna Liza Pallen, Vanessa Sambo, Belle Zarate

> Everyone in Cynthia's fishing village is surprised when she suddenly returns from the Middle East. She tells her husband Joaquin that she wanted to spring a surprise, and that she wants to bear their eldest child before she returns to overseas work. Joaquin gets increasingly worn out because he has to suspend his intimacy with Waldo, the troubled orphan whom he helped complete high-school studies, but with whom he fell in love. Fired by jealousy, Waldo's unstable condition returns and he leaves for Manila. Joaquin confesses to Cynthia about his new preference and she makes a scene as he deserts her to search for Waldo. He's able to track the latter to his last known residence and workplace, a gaybar. When he finds out that Rufo Bansuelo, a married police officer who likes young men, offered Waldo a place to stay, he hangs out at the places where Waldo worked and quickly draws Rufo's attention. Rufo takes him to his home, where Joaquin discovers that he physically abuses his wife and that Waldo is nowhere to be found; Rufo rapes him and keeps him locked in a room.

Walang Kawala can be regarded as one of the culminations of Joel Lamangan's interest in the plight of sex workers, inasmuch as he and Lino Brocka were once associated with the Philippine Educational Theater Association, and he played a gaybar madam in Brocka's *Macho Dancer* (1988). Preceded by Mel Chionglo's informal trilogy on male erotic dancers—*Sibak: Midnight Dancers* (1994), *Burlesk King* (1999), and *Twilight Dancers* (2006)—*WK* distinguishes itself by being a closer reworking of Brocka's biggest global hit, minus the several digressions intended to elevate the earlier work's political and postcolonial significance but that also resulted in an unwieldy overblown text. One unfortunate result in both cases, carefully negotiated in the Chionglo trilogy, is the marginal and occasionally villainous handling of women roles. But the pathos of working-class men unable to react responsibly to the call of same-sex desire is rounded out admirably, with high-powered readings by a trio of actors fully committed to their roles: the temperamental youth unable to avail of therapeutic treatment and therefore constantly endangered by his own volatility; the earnest newcomer to homodesire who realizes that prostitution will be the only means of urban survival available to someone in his station; the striver who finds a respectable profession but winds up lashing out at the wife that his image requires him to maintain, and whose only means of upgrading his income is by engaging in exploitation. The tinderbox situation is compounded by the intensity of each character's passion, and one might even be relieved that the narrative resolves tragically but not for everyone. The real victim is the vanquishment of a love doomed only because of its nature, prevented from performing productively for subjects who happen to belong to the class of citizens counted as socially unacceptable.

Burgos

Year of Release: 2013
Director: Joel Lamangan
Screenwriter: Ricky Lee
Producer: Heaven's Best Entertainment
Cast: Lorna Tolentino, Tirso Cruz III, Rocco Nacino, Allen Dizon, Ina Feleo, Dimples Romana, Bangs Garcia, Kerbie Zamora, Barbara Miguel, Jim Pebanco, Tony Mabesa, Gilleth Sandico, Raquel Villavicencio, Madeleine Nicolas, Anna Luna, Menggie Cobarrubias, Lollie Mara, Joe Gruta, Arlyn de la Cruz, Dorothy Gilmore, Ruby Ruiz, Jess Evardone, Brian Arda

> Edita Burgos persists in tracking down the whereabouts of her missing son Jonas. The farmer's collective he was working for claims that the military abducted him for his alleged subversive activities. Widowed when her husband Joe died of a stroke in 2003, Edita warned Jonas about associating with people considered outlaws by the military; when he responded that she and his father similarly undertook a dangerous form of activism by pioneering in what became known as the "mosquito press" by the fascist Marcos administration, she had no choice but to reluctantly allow him to continue with his commitment to radical change. The other members of her family as well as an organization of *desaparecido* seekers assist her in her quest, although the Carmelite order, which she joined as a lay nun, expresses misgivings about her increasingly high-profile image as well as her seeming refusal to forgive the people who might have disappeared her son.

Part of Joel Lamangan's announced legacy project of documenting the human-rights record of the martial-law regime of the first Ferdinand Marcos (1972–1986), including its aftereffects in the turbulent post-dictatorship era, *Burgos* also stands out as a departure from his tendency to incorporate sermonizing in his narrative resolutions. Possibly necessitated by budgetary restrictions, the approach is well-complimented by his maturation as film director, benefiting from striking use of closeups, fluid editing, and sharp coaching of performers. The film presents an open-ended delineation of Edita Burgos's still-ongoing search for her son Jonas, with Lorna Tolentino embodying what must be the most credible figuration of a formally consecrated individual increasingly conflicted by an activist commitment she thought she could already leave behind. Proceeding *in medias res*, *Burgos* necessarily relies on flashbacks in order to explicate Edita's frustration with a democratized system to which she and her late husband had devoted their most productive years, only to revert to a covert fascism that cut down one of her own, in case she wanted to still harbor any delusions about it. Her strategy of drawing strength from her past builds up to a quietly devastating finale, with Lamangan demonstrating a subtlety and sophistication that betokens a newfound reliance on the capacities of the medium he'd been working in for the past several decades already.

LAV DIAZ

(3 films: 2002–2013)

Hesus, Rebolusyunaryo

Alternate Title: *Hesus, Rebolusyonaryo*
English Translation: *Hesus, the Revolutionary*
English Title: *Jesus the Revolutionary*
Year of Release: 2002
Director & Screenwriter: Lav Diaz
Producer: Regal Films
Cast: Mark Anthony Fernandez, Donita Rose, Joel Lamangan, Ronnie Lazaro, Pinky Amador, Ricardo Cepeda, Bart Guingona, Richard Joson, Orestes Ojeda, Marianne de la Riva, Lawrence Espinosa, Arvin "Tado" Jimenez, Dido de la Paz

> It is the year 2011 and a military junta has taken over the Philippines. Underground resistance forces are present but paranoia has infested their ranks. Caught in the middle is freedom fighter Hesus, a rebel from within the ranks. But as he advocates his ideologies, the words of his mysterious superior Miguel and those of manipulative junta member Colonel Simon make him question what he should really fight for.

The so-far last regular-length film made by long-form master Lav Diaz is an overlooked achievement, in the sense that it remains the best science-fiction (in the qualified futuristic sense) local movie. Another distinction—an up-front skills display—was fortunately only temporarily abandoned by Diaz, who appears, with 2013's *Norte, Hangganan ng Kasaysayan*, to have reconciled recently with the commercial preferences of Filipino spectators. Set almost a decade in a future (2011) that again fortunately never came to pass, the movie envisions a junta-led dictatorship of such vicious efficiency that only the best-trained military officers can be capable of providing revolutionary resistance.[57] The notion that Philippine society as we know it can turn dystopic even before it has reached a decent level of developmental comfort raises a few questions, such as "*What are we fighting over then*?" and "*What happened to our strong women*?" *Hesus, Rebolusyunaryo* operates as a cautionary text that raises the question of whether any form of dictatorship by Armed Forces reformists can be better than the one that the country experienced under Ferdinand E. Marcos, and does not hesitate to give out one resounding answer: "Never."

[57] A provocative reading was ventured via confidential message by RCO (who requested anonymity), an independent researcher from the Department of European Languages at the University of the Philippines's College of Arts and Letters. Drawing from the context of the film's year of production, he stated that its period setting and use of military stragglers may have been a way of allegorizing the then-ongoing internal conflicts among various factions in the Communist Party of the Philippines and their armed operators, specifically the Alex Boncayao Brigade; see Alecks P. Pabico's "Reaffirmist–Rejectionist Schism: The Great Left Divide" in *i: The Investigative Reporting Magazine*, vol. 5, no. 2, April–June 1999. Circumstantial corroboration may be found in the critical remarks Lav Diaz expressed regarding in his review of a 1988 film, Cesar S.B. Abella's *Patrolman*, whose lead character is targeted for assassination by the ABB despite his having been an upright citizen; see Diaz's "Propaganda ng Pulis (Police Propaganda)," *Manila Standard* (January 4, 1989), p. 15.

Florentina Hubaldo, CTE

Year of Release: 2012 / B&W
Director & Screenwriter: Lav Diaz
Producer: Sine Olivia
Cast: Hazel Orencio, Kristine Kintana, Noel Sto. Domingo, Willy Fernandez, Joel Ferrer, Dante Perez, Brigido Tapales, Ana Arrienda, Cesar Arrienda, Martina and Julia, Edelyn Nava, Erica Nava, Jeffrey Sigua, Christopher Tapales

> Florentina Hubaldo keeps running away from her home in a rural town in Southern Luzon, but her father always manages to track her down and punish her while exploiting her for his drinking and gambling expenses. One of the effects of his severe physical abuse is chronic traumatic encephalopathy or CTE, a condition where she suffers from migraine and other signs of brain trauma; for example, she keeps repeating a short spiel she had prepared about herself but has difficulty completing it. Her grandfather is concerned about her plight but is too old and weak to help. In a parallel narrative, a group of friends search for some treasure supposedly buried in one of the friends' yard. The friend who owns the place takes care of a sickly girl whom he calls his daughter, whose health keeps worsening. These two stories eventually intertwine in an unexpected manner.

Waves of admiration greeted Lav Diaz's venture into a self-styled version of long-form filmmaking—called "slow cinema" by most observers, a term that Diaz abhors. His first attempt, *Batang West Side* (*West Side Kid*, a.k.a. *West Side Avenue*, 2001), broke the four-hour maximum running time for commercial releases. His next long-form entry, *Ebolusyon ng Isang Pamilyang Pilipino* (*Evolution of a Filipino Family*, 2004), ran for about double *BWS*'s five-hour length, at 9 to nearly 11 hours, depending on which version is being screened. *EIPP* bore the qualities that would mark the rest of Diaz's long-form films: done in digital video, utilizing black-and-white cinematography, filled with long takes and long shots, completed with a small crew whose members would double as the movie's actors, with material drawn from harrowing historical memory. To further challenge audience expectations, he announced a trilogy of unrelated entries based on the theme of trauma, comprising the nine-hour *Kagadaganan sa Banwaan ning mga Engkanto* (*Death in the Land of Encantos*, 2007) and the 7.5-hour *Melancholia* (2008); *Florentina Hubaldo, CTE* is the trilogy's last entry, and the shortest at six hours. It stands out from Diaz's other early work in that it was the first and, until recently, the only one to focus on a woman. The title character's suffering is so distressful and heartrending that only a mean-spirited viewer would attempt to look away and ponder the movie's allegorical issues. Unlike its long-form predecessors, it also foregrounds the tranquil beauty of the countryside, with the majestic (though occasionally deadly) presence of the Bicol region's Mayon Volcano overlooking the proceedings. The movie's stately and formal perfection provides the anchor by which Florentina's experience becomes bearable enough to witness; in fact, it is the mercifully few moments when she cannot be seen, when only her cries can be heard, that the movie comes closest to visceral horror. Diaz's storytelling strength is in his handling of time and duration, and *FHCTE* provides further evidence in its interweaving of seemingly distinct strands that, by the movie's sad-yet-hopeful close, fully reward the patient viewer.

Norte, Hangganan ng Kasaysayan

English Title: *Norte, The End of History*
Year of Release: 2013
Director: Lav Diaz
Screenwriters: Rody Vera & Lav Diaz
Producer: Wacky O Productions
Cast: Sid Lucero, Archie Alemania, Angeli Bayani, Hazel Orencio, Mae Paner, Soliman Cruz, Angelina Kanapi, Ian Lomongo, Kristian Chua, Noel Sto. Domingo, Perry Dizon, Moira, Sheenly Gener

> Fabian is a smart albeit radically oriented student who puts off finishing his last year in law school, while Joaquin is a simple man who struggles to provide for his family amid various financial setbacks. Their lives intersect when one of them commits a crime but it's the other who gets arrested for it. The varying degrees of punishment they endure lead to a path of either moral degeneration or personal enlightenment.

The movie that strains at the four-hour mark replicates what Eddie Romero's *Aguila* (1980) managed to prove in an earlier film generation: that the Filipino spectator is capable of attending extra-lengthy presentations, given the proper motivations—major stars then, widespread acclaim this time. The fact that *Norte, Hangganan ng Kasaysayan*, more than any previous three-hour-plus local commercial release, delivers on its promise has certainly helped its case and, more important, its often-reviled audience's. Its success in indigenizing Russian source materials, notably Fyodor Dostoevsky's 19th-century novel *Crime and Punishment*, may be ultimately impossible to resolve. Nevertheless Lav Diaz ensures that we won't be deprived of the cinematic equivalents of literary wonderment, generously providing ravishing scenery, arresting performances, and twists of fate that swerve, often without warning, from the ethical to the corrupt, the sublime to the horrific, the quotidian to the phenomenal.

RORY B. QUINTOS

(1 film: 2002)

Kailangan Kita

English Translation: *I Need You*
Additional Language: Bicolano
Year of Release: 2002
Director: Rory B. Quintos
Screenwriters: Shaira Mella Salvador & Moira Lang
From a story by Shaira Mella Salvador, Moira Lang, Emmanuel Dela Cruz
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Aga Muhlach, Claudine Barretto, Johnny Delgado, Liza Lorena, Jericho Rosales, Dante Rivero, Cholo Escaño, Nicole Judalena, Igi Boy Flores, Cris Villanueva, Rissa Mananquil, Gerald Madrid, Ces Quesada, Madeleine Nicolas, Jon Achaval, Fonz Deza, Farrah Florer, Jessette Prospero, Albert Zialcita, Randy Gamier, Idda Yaneza, Edgardo Pascua, Cyrus Balinguit, Rocky Martinez, Morten Bremelhoej, Florante Tagulo, Carl Rosales, Anthony Ranguani, Lowell Conales, Rheylord Camacho

> Carl Diesta, a successful chef in the US, goes to his bride-to-be Giselle Duran's Bicol hometown to help prepare for their forthcoming wedding. Giselle however keeps finding reasons to delay her arrival while Carl observes that her sister Lena shares his passion for food and extends a hand to insurgent fighters, despite the objection of Carl and her family. Carl realizes that Lena had to break up with the man she loved after he joined the rebel army. She convinces him to relish spicy preparations in coconut milk, a specialty of Bicol cuisine which he initially resisted. As Carl starts doubting whether marrying Giselle was a wise decision, Lena tells him that she knows the town's best cook of *laing* (taro leaves cooked in coconut milk) and takes him to the old man's hut. Carl realizes that the cook was someone he knew in the past, before he moved abroad.

The reality of Filipinos returning from overseas sojourns has always been a source of vital narratives on national identity and global engagement, ever since the native *ilustrados* of the nineteenth century brought over the Enlightenment ideals that Spanish colonizers strove to keep at bay from the native population. The Philippines's long-enduring labor-export policy has made the influx of returnees, whether staying temporarily or for good, a permanent certainty in the country's national imaginary. The reality has become so commonplace that Star Cinema, which once had to depict a Philippine character in a foreign setting in Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *May Nagmamahal sa Iyo* (*Madonna and Child*, 1996) to affirm her status as an Overseas Filipino Worker returnee, could now endow a character with enough foreign-voyage markers and occasional long-distance phone calls to establish the authenticity of said character's alienation from local cultural phenomena. *Kailangan Kita* coasts along satisfactorily enough on its lead male character's classically inflected dilemma—the way that, say, Newland Archer realizes that Countess Ellen Olenska incites his nostalgic imagination more than his betrothed does in *The Age of Innocence* (1920 novel by Edith Wharton, 1993 film by Martin Scorsese). But the net it casts is woven from sturdier fabric than the usual flimsy premises of popular romances. The incursion of an insurgent movement, whose origin can

be tracked to the country's anticolonial revolutionaries, is only the first of a series of direct challenges to the central family's conflictive existence. Other prognosticators of even more inescapable social shifts show up, sometimes without warning, necessitating in one instance a generational conciliation that could devastate unprepared viewers. The representation of nation is expertly divided between a rational, First World-residing male, and a subservient, neglected, but constantly appraising daughter; *KK* decisively triumphs in its casting of Claudine Barretto in peak form, as a woman resigned to her own fate who yet realizes self-fulfillment in clandestine relationships that she maintains with as much discretion as she can get away with.

WENN V. DERAMAS

(2 films: 2003–2012)

Ang Tanging Ina

English Title: *My Only Mother*
Year of Release: 2003
Director: Wenn V. Deramas
Screenwriters: Mel Mendoza-del Rosario & Keiko Aquino
From a story by Mel Mendoza-del Rosario & Freddie M. Garcia
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Aiai delas Alas, Connie Chua, Eugene Domingo, Edu Manzano, Tonton Gutierrez, Andoy Ranay, Alan Chanliongco, Jestoni Alarcon, Carlo Aquino, Nikki Valdez, Heart Evangelista, Marvin Agustin, Serena Dalrymple, Shaina Magdayao, Alwyn Uytingco, Jiro Manio, Marc Acueza, Yuki Kadooka, Jojit Lorenzo, Rommel Rellora, Anthony Griar, Nestor Balla, Angelica Panganiban, Dianne Tejada, Michelle Ayalde, Nikki Laurel, Liberty Lometillo, John Pratts, Jestoni Alarcon, Dennis Padilla, Edu Manzano, Tonton Gutierrez

> Ina Montecillo falls into a pattern of discovering a handsome hunk eager to marry her, then suddenly losing said hunk in an accident and discovering her next marriageable prospect just when she lays her previous hubby to rest. After three husbands and a dozen kids, she decides to live as a single parent, to spare any future men whatever jinx she may be cursed with. Her BFF Rowena helps her in applying to any available job, but her burgeoning brood, the oldest members of whom are already of school age, demands her attention as well because of their growing-up pains.

One of a number of millennial-era victims of the punishing workload of TV-dominated film work, Wenn V. Deramas suffered further from the film-as-art ideology propagated by academe-based critic-instructors and mindlessly mouthed by practitioners—all of whom should have known better. *Ang Tanging Ina*'s revenge on this state of affairs actually sealed its fate as a permanently downgraded entry: not only was it produced by the most successful film studio since the end of the Second Golden Age, it was also the most profitable Filipino film project up to its time. It generated a number of sequels (although, strictly speaking, Deramas made only two that proceeded from *ATI*'s narrative premise); more significantly, and just as casually neglected, was the impressive development of his expertise in comedy, along with several of the talents in *ATI*. At the time of his demise, over a decade later, he seemed poised to rival Manuel Conde and Maryo J. de los Reyes, guaranteeing (if his and our luck hadn't run out) one master for each of our Golden Ages plus himself as the millennium's current one. He remained prolific, to his tragic detriment, with *ATI* standing as proof of his then-nascent comedic gift: an ability to deliver complex expositions, an incomparable sense of timing, a fearlessness in extending setups and payoffs, and a sharp attunement to the quotidian concerns of the audience. Underlying the expected generic compromises and containment, *ATI* nevertheless maintains a drag-queer edginess in upholding a funny-looking elderly lady as the flamboyant master of a multifariously strenuous situation.

Moron 5 and the Crying Lady

Year of Release: 2012
Director: Wenn V. Deramas
Screenwriters: Mel Mendoza-del Rosario & Wenn V. Deramas
Producers: Viva Films & MVP Pictures
Cast: Luis Manzano, Billy Crawford, Marvin Agustin, DJ Durano, Martin Escudero, John Lapus, Andrew Wolfe, German Moreno, Jon Santos, Roden Araneta, Dennis Padilla, Roldan Aquino, Deborah Sun, Arlene Muhlach, Joy Viado, Mark Felix, Marco Brillo, Carlos Dala, Kevin Kier Remo, Martin Venegas, Kule Ang, Eagle Riggs, Tess Antonio, Dang Cruz, Christopher Roxas, Carlos Agassi, Eri Neeman, Hideaki Torio, Phobie, Ya Chang, Renee Hampshire, Flora Gasser, Nikki Gil, Reynand Luarez, Jennylyn Mercado, JC Parker, Ricky Rivero

> As elementary-school classmates, Beckie harbored a crush on Albert, but his tight-knit group, comprising Isaac, Aristotle, Mozart, and Mike, kept mocking and bullying him. The five remain such nitwits that they become the oldest high-school students at St. Andrew Academy. When they see an ad looking for performers, they apply but get instructed to wear G-strings for an audience of gays and women. They flee from having to service the customers but wander into the church wedding of a Japanese bridegroom and his Pinay fiancée. Mozart remembers a Japanese word from his street-smart parents and they keep repeating it, which happens to mean "queer." Upon hearing it, the bridegroom realizes that his wife-to-be, Beckie, was born male and dies from a heart attack. From that point onward, Beckie vows revenge against the five friends and uses her wealth to devise various ways of framing them so they could get arrested and thrown in jail.

What appears to be a formulaic setup with the usual plethora of jokes, witticisms, and absurdities packaged within a crime-doesn't-pay framework and exacerbated with a valorization of infantile behavior, prevails despite its baggage because of its creatives' and ensemble's accumulation of comedic skills, complemented by an embrace of political incorrectness and careful tweaks of potentially awkward portions. The most rewarding reformulation is in the casting of the central collection of gagsters: the logical expectation would be to hire young pre-breakout talents, the way that past group films managed to minimize salary budgets while maximizing the actors' collective appeal. What *Moron 5 and the Crying Lady* did instead was to counterintuitively corral the precise opposite—post-famous actors, replete with performative skills as well as personal histories already familiar to observers—a strategy that was surefire in the past, but only in the case of sexually mature actresses and far older actors. Their melding of interactive exchanges and delight in one another's presences succeeds so well that the presentation of differences among them could be treated as incidental necessities. The accrual of their early-millennium personas also makes them queer-friendly enough so that the title character's Crying (trans) Lady can confidently indulge her brand of postqueer meanness, confounding the scaredy-cat persona of real-life Aquino assassination witness Rebecca Quijano, with the extra treat of other skilled performers cross-dressing into some of the supporting and cameo roles. We don't need to launch into another diatribe right now against critical high-mindedness that wasted the opportunity to honor one more contribution of a directorial talent who would be departing not soon after: the closing credits, worth some spare attention for summarizing the Moron 5 actors' real-life careers, also shows the Crying Lady bantering with (the impersonator of) a political figure who'd be making her own triumphant comeback not long afterward, a symbolic consequence of our failing to heed one of the warnings casually sounded in pop culture.

MARK MEILY

(1 film: 2003)

Crying Ladies

Year of Release: 2003
Director & Screenwriter: Mark Meily
Producer: Unitel Pictures
Cast: Sharon Cuneta, Hilda Koronel, Angel Aquino, Eric Quizon, Ricky Davao, Julio Pacheco, Shamaine Buencamino, Sherry Lara, Gilleth Sandico, Joan Bitagcol, Johnny Delgado, Edgar Mortiz, Raymond Bagatsing, Bella Flores, Lou Veloso, Jemalene Estrada, Randolf Stamatelaky, Winnie Cordero, Bearwin Meily, Ronaldo Bertubin, Andoy Ranay, Ermie Concepcion, Ruby Ruiz, Melvin Lee, Jojit Lorenzo, Jorg Schifferer, Ike Veneracion, Dante Nora, Mae Paner, Mark Meily

> Fresh out of the women's correctional where she was imprisoned for financial fraud, Stella Mate [*ma*-teh] attempts to find a stable source of income, but only foreign-recruitment agencies offer anything sufficiently feasible for her. Her separated husband informs her that he and his new wife plan to move to Mindanao and bring her child with them, since her jail record makes her an unfit parent. Through the small Chinatown workshop where she works part-time, she's able to wangle a short-term designation as a funeral mourner for a traditional Chinese family, who believe that the presence of weeping guests will facilitate the journey to heaven of the dead person's soul. Since she has to be part of a trio, Stella recruits two of her friends: Rhoda, a former movie extra insisting on being recognized for the bit roles she played when she was younger; and Choleng, a charity worker torn with guilt for conducting an affair with a married man. When they arrive at the funeral parlor, Stella realizes that the man in the coffin was the same person she had swindled and whose police complaint led to her stint in prison.

One of the crucial departures between Sharon Cuneta's observance of the trajectory of Philippine superstar Nora Aunor was in her late turn to independent projects—but at nearly the point when she semi-retired from showbiz work. *Crying Ladies*, in fact, still bears some resemblance to the mainstream projects that Aunor would have worked on during her Second Golden Age heyday. Its primary point of departure is in its endeavor to accommodate racialized Asian Others in Philippine society, with an attempt to equalize relations by making the Chinese and Indian characters entrepreneurial entities who exercise benign influence over the lead character. The Chinese side gets a better airing because the family involved has a more intensive interaction with the title-character team, although the patriarch has died by the time the plot begins. The entire presentation does not really advance beyond depicting the pathos of the working-class woman who finds it near-impossible to rise above her station—one of the tiresome legacies of social realism compounded by the ideological impositions of Western standards of acceptability for films originating in postcolonial sources. It would be possible to argue that Cuneta had already done characters like Stella in the rags-to-riches projects that ushered the second (Noranian) phase of her career ... but *CL* reveals an authority and authenticity missing from those works, and announces still another phase, more fully Noranian this time, that she was ill-advised to abandon.

KHAVN

(5 films: 2005–2017)

1—*Ang Pamilyang Kumakain ng Lupa*

English Title: *The Family That Eats Soil*
Year of Release: 2005 / Color with Sepia
Director & Screenwriter: Khavn
Video Documentary: Eric Jose Pancho
Animation: Ulysses Veloso & Jan Sarmiento
Producers: Filmless Films, Be Movies Productions, Hubert Bals Fund
Cast: Carlo Catap, Hamid Eton, Elizabeth Marin, Gil Mendoza, Hazel Magno, Edward Vitto, Gigi Duque, Christian Guzman, Jocelyn Sibayan, Khavn, Flortecante Dayao, Ariel Mamburan, Jaymar Valenciano, Cris Villanueva, Kristine Kintana, Maricel Gajasan, Israel "Oblax" Balignasay, Adonis de la Cruz, Tasyo Caubalejo, Eric Jose Pancho, Joy Domingo, Vincent "Enteng" Viray, Pedro San Goku, Elmo Redrico, Marc Mendoza, Roy Mark "Omar" Gerez, Marlon dela Cruz, Merv Espina, Erenesto Garcia, Jessie L. Liwanag, Mario R. Monte, Salvador C. Ticman Jr., Norman Wilwayco, Narding de la Cruz, Kelly de la Cruz, Eva Bagao, Jansen Bagao

> A family, comprising father, mother, brother, sister, and baby, converge at the dining table to partake of their meals, with their dead grandfather at the head. In the course of a whole day's consumption, the various members also attend to their other concerns. The father poisons babies in a hospital, the brother tortures Chinese-Filipino entrepreneurs, the daughter gives vent to her lustful imagination, the baby, who objects to the serving of soil, is a bookie during cockfight sessions. Occasionally the grandfather gets up, recites poetic passages, and wanders around the city on foot, oblivious to the amusement of bystanders, while the mother, who has two doctoral degrees, is described as the family's housemaid; later she narrates a documentary on city life, lapsing into Spanish, with her speech translated into German subtitles.

2—*Ang Napakaigsing Buhay ng Alipato*

English Title: *Alipato: The Very Brief Life of an Ember*
Year of Release: 2016 / Color with B&W
Director: Khavn
Animation: Rox Lee & Khavn
Screenwriters: Khavn & Achinette Villamor
From a story by Brillante Mendoza
Producers: Kamias Overground & Rapid Eye Movies
Cast: Dido de la Paz, Khavn, Daniel Palisa, Bing Austria, Marti San Juan, Robin Palmes, Felix Opena, Danny Capawa, Champ, Rey Cardines, Wendell Mata, Marco Omana, Christian Mata, Clarence Sumalinog, King James Banaag, John Paul Langcas, Rodel Hate, Jimboy Layson, John Felix Tumarong, John Mark Ogarinola, Joanna Roselio, Angelo Brillo, Katrina Lacodini, Khavn, Ali Doron, Beth Chai, Girly Alvarez, Rina Doron, Othela, PJ Garcia, Lorein Garcia, Rosie, Wilson Quintero, Gina Balahibo, Justine Hipolito, Rolly Montivis, Maria Vasinopa, Fausta Celtino, Rosita Macabenta, Ariane Canonoy, Monaliza Layson, Perla Bichanino, Milagros Lacodini, Ivory Alajar, Caezar Acol, Kristine Kintana, Charita Castinlag, Manuel Abejano, Danny Banaag, Ferdinand Diaz, Ric Resuello, Jet Nunez, Marco Polo, Santie Navarro, Rolando Salem, Joseph Pelaez, Bartolome Nati, Danny Dominera, Brigitte Salvatore, Rey Paraon, Grace Soriano, Eliza Mendoza

> In Ulingan, a slum territory where residents scrape by through coal production, street kids form a group and call themselves D'Gang Kostka. They make spending money by robbery, even invading a grocery, engage in shootouts with police officers, and kill at will. After one of their members is rubbed out, their leader, called Bossing, decides that they should focus on only bigtime jobs. They target the Central Bank but Bossing is caught and lands in jail for close to three decades. Upon his release, his gangmates request that they divide the loot but Bossing claims that the police took it. The gang members start getting killed, starting with Porkchop, who impregnated Bossing's girlfriend Diding while he was in jail. A mentally unstable grandmother reports the events to the police, and their involvement strains relations within the community.

Ang Pamilyang Kumakain ng Lupa was barely noticed in the Philippines and would have been completely forgotten had its director not thought of commemorating its 20th anniversary with a modest rescreening. *Asian Movie Pulse* ran a reappraisal by Epoy Deyto that remarked how its digital video technology invests it with "both datedness and foresight that makes it more exciting to see today." The implication is that its original exhibition in foreign film festivals bewildered its audiences—an effect that Khavn may have aimed for. No other local filmmaker has dared to be as thematically unruly and formally audacious, with a visionary reimagining of the metropolis as "Mondomanila" (an infernal counterparting of William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County). *APKL* serves its three-square-meals structure with a helping of surrealist abjection in excessive degrees. The medium could only bear so much at this stage in its development, so at one point the screen yields to swirling abstractions; those willing to savor the experience will be rewarded with provocative insights and barbed humor, sometimes with extended payoffs: the family's meals may not look like they literally contain soil, but the final treat prepared by the mother plays on the baby's cockfight role, which is colloquially called "Kristo" because of the way that bookies extend their arms to signal the bettors. About a decade later, *Ang Napakaigsing Buhay ng Alipato* had a limited theatrical run, boosted by the triumph of *Balangiga: Howling Wilderness*. *ANBA* partakes of many of the same elements of its predecessor, with several crucial twists. Digital media had advanced to the point where it could supplant celluloid film, and Khavn attained enough rapport with local talents and skill in offbeat storytelling. Proof of this might require either attentive viewing or a second screening, since the surface details occasionally refuse to be restrained by realist principles, and the historical past remains imbricated as well: "Alipato" was the well-known alias of Luis Taruc (commemorated in Dik Trofeo's 2019 documentary *Alipato: The Ka Luis Taruc Story*), who led the Philippines's mid-century resistance to Japanese occupation as well as the postwar peasant rebellion. The film's strategic shift might be more definitely marked with its narrative ellipsis, when the young hoodlums transition into wasted grownups who welcome their leader's release from prison. At this point their decisions understandably become more deliberate and their actions more carefully planned, with the narrative becoming more naturally focalized (even when a black goat's head assumes an omniscient-observer function at one point); the movie's genre roots thereby become apparent, but rather than looking for ways to hide them or resist them, the film embraces and nurtures these elements and extends this same generosity of spirit to characters who were introduced as too callow and intractable in their early years to worry over. An impressive achievement by any standard, worth one's attention especially during moments when daring and sophistication are in short measure anywhere else.

Pusong Wazak: Isa Na Namang Kwento ng Pag-ibig sa Pagitan ng Kriminal at Puta

English Title: *Ruined Heart: Another Lovestory Between a Criminal & a Whore*
Additional Languages: German, Japanese, Spanish, French (in song lyrics)
Year of Release: 2012
Director & Screenwriter: Khavn
Producers: Kamias Road & Rapid Eye Movies
Cast: Tadanobu Asano, Nathalia Acevedo, Elena Kazan, Brenda Mage, Mico Madrid, Vim Nadera, Long, Jocas Ortiz, Mark Anthony Robrigado, Lhie Santos, Marvin Muñoz, Andre Puertollano, Khavn, Ymi Kris, Edgar Noble, Daizuki Laxa, Vincent Cando, Cristy Atienza, Christoff Ken, Allen Fuertes Lopez

> The Criminal, apparently a Japanese living in the slums of Manila, contends with the conflicts among various gangs without hesitating to resort to violence. He maintains a Lover but falls in love with a Prostitute, while a "GodFather" hovers in their presence, reciting verses. Their lives of crime, betrayal, and reprisal proceed apace as expected in the underworld, intercalated with desperately lighthearted musical celebrations, until one day the Criminal finds and follows an unusual winged figure wandering in a cemetery.

The breakout works of Khavn, periodizable at about a decade in the past, remain suspended because of a predicament peculiar to his stature as a globally recognized indie-cinema figure: he may be able to solicit funding from overseas sources, but the material he works with is so insistently and specifically culture-based that foreign evaluators, even those receptive to his output, never truly get what they're about. Hence the positive responses to *Pusong Wazak* predictably ascribe its triumph to Christopher Doyle (famed for his association with Wong Kar-Wai), with snide remarks on the order that he'd done better work in the past. The misgivings do have a foundation in *PW*'s approach to narrative storytelling, although it typifies Khavn's strategic reliance on genre elements and fierce affection for Pinoy lumpenproles; it may be more accurate to maintain that Doyle has rarely had the cinematographic opportunities that he realized in this undertaking. For a more definitive basis of comparison, one could consider *Tropical Manila*, made in 2008 by Lee Sang-woo, an associate of Kim Ki-duk: the spectacle of a Korean gangster trying to blend in a local slum raises too many verisimilitudinous issues that defeat the film even after it has fully explicated his presence. In contrast, Tadanobu Asano only needs to insinuate, via his presence, the hundred-plus features where he played variations on his character (for example in Miike Takashi's *Ichi the Killer*, 2001), then openly revel in the circumstances that even locals might find too anarchic for everyday survival; he may sport a broken arm, for example, but he uses it to paint, and later flees from gangsters while taking a video selfie with the same appendage. Nothing is too wild or strange for this assemblage of people, and their casual acceptance of copulation and bloodletting, accompanied by expertly wrought tunes that range from tacky to discordant to sublime, build up to a vision that might be seen as the fulfillment of Celso Ad. Castillo's carnivalesque fabulations but stakes its own claim on the national imaginary nevertheless.

Desaparadiso: Corrido at Buhay na Pinagdaanan nang Tatlong Principeng Magcacapatid na Anac nang Haring Fernando at nang Reina Valeriana sa Cahariang Berbania

English Title: *Desaparadiso: Corrido and the Lives Lived of the Three Prince Brothers, Children of King Fernando and Queen Valeriana of the Kingdom of Berbania*
Year of Release: 2015 / Color with B&W and Sepia
Director & Screenwriter: Khavn
Adopted from the folk tale *Ibong Adarna: Corrido at Buhay na Pinagdaanan nang Tatlong Principeng Magcacapatid na Anac nang Haring Fernando at nang Reina Valeriana sa Cahariang Berbania* and from Jose F. Lacaba's "Ang mga Nawawala (The Disappeared)" from *Sa Panahon ng Ligalig: Tula, Awit, Halaw (In a Time of Turmoil: Poems, Songs, Adaptations*, Anvil, 1991); title from a poem by Frank Cimatu; translations by Jose F. Lacaba & Dodo Dayao
Producers: Kamias Overground & Hubert Bals Fund
Cast: Dante Perez, Chris Pasturan, Raye Lucero, Ian Lomongo, Albert Valencia, Kayla Miller, Laiza Solasco, Abby Poblador, Alex Crisologo, Luis de Belen, Albert Valencia, Shun Villalobos, Wilson Quintero, Padeys Revilleza Cojano, Clarence Joy de Guzman, Renz Marie Nollase, Pinky Lamasan, Dan Palacpac

> During the era of enforced peace and order imposed by Ferdinand E. Marcos's declaration of martial law in 1972, a working-class family endures the news of the disappearance of their eldest son by conducting as much normality as they could endure. Titles tell the story, since the family members maintain absolute silence: Pedro, eldest son of Fernando and Valeriana, disappears on the date that Executive Order 1081 is announced; on the first anniversary of his disappearance, the second son, Diego, leaves home to search for his brother; two more years afterward, the youngest, Juan, does the same. Dressed as a wandering prince, Juan finds himself in an enchanted forest where he continues to seek his brothers, encountering along the way a leprous hunchback as well as his mother as Queen Adarna, who sings a string of well-known kundimans (folk-music ballads).

The authenticity of lived experience during a period of fascist rule in a culture like the Philippines's rests with a steadily depleting number of survivors. The regime's panoptic reach, for one thing, could make use of advances in surveillance technology as well the old standbys of informers and eavesdroppers. Along with the trauma of losing a loved one to a possibly indeterminate fate, the response of silence as a means of coping with heartbreak has never been depicted before or since in the few local treatments of the era, but its veracity can be affirmed in several accounts, notably the Quimpo family's *Subversive Lives: A Family Memoir of the Marcos Years* (Anvil, 2012). *Desaparadiso* operates as an ambitious intertextual attempt to interweave recent history with the Adarna Bird folktale, familiar to all schooled Filipinos, with several adjustments and reversals, then laces the narrative overreach with popular music from the intervening decades. The effect would be absurd and laughable to viewers clueless about Philippine history and structures of feeling, but proof of how well it works lies in what is far and away the most effective cinematic rendition of the well-known protest warhorse "Bayan Ko" ("My Country," Constancio de Guzmán & José Corazón de Jesús, 1929).

Balangiga: Howling Wilderness

Language: Waray
Additional Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2017
Director: Khavn
Screenwriters: Jerry Gracio, Khavn, Achinette Villamor
Producer: Kamias Overground
Cast: Justine Samson, Pio del Rio, Althea Vega, Warren Tuaño, Daniel Palisa, Jun Sabayton, Lourd de Veyra, Roxlee

> Kulas and his grandfather flee the US Army's retaliation for the Filipino revolutionaries' attack on their camp at Balangiga. They aim to go to Kulas's parents at Quinapondan, avoiding even worse conflict at Borlongan. Along the way, Kulas takes along a toddler, Bola, the only survivor of a village massacred by the Americans. Kulas takes upon himself the challenge of keeping together Bola (whom he calls his brother), his grandfather, his pet chicken, and his water buffalo Melchora, but the ravages of war insist on drawing his attention to the reality of apocalyptic suffering and death.

Khavn had been known as one of the few Filipino directors better known outside his home country. Because of the receptiveness of foreign film festivals to his output, he managed to become the country's most prolific auteur, with (as of 2018) over 50 feature films and 100 short films in less than a quarter-century, including the longest-ever Pinoy movie, the 13-hour *Simulacrum Tremendum* (2016), by his own account a "poetic documentary." In the past few years, however, his punk aesthetic's anarchic-yet-romantic anti-authoritarian thrust started exhibiting an accessibility to local mass audiences, duly noted by online commentators. *Mondomanila: Kung Paano Ko Inayos ang Buhok Ko Matapos ang Mahaba-Haba Ring Paglalakbay* (*Mondomanila, or: How I Fixed My Hair after a Rather Long Journey*) won major awards as a work-in-progress at the 2010 Cinemanila International Film Festival, just as *Balangiga: Howling Wilderness* first earned raves as a three-hour festival cut, then swept both the top prizes of the local critics and original academy award-giving bodies as a two-hour intermediate version, before finally being released as a 1.5-hour feature. Also worth watching are *Pusong Wazak: Isa Na Namang Kwento ng Pag-ibig sa Pagitan ng Kriminal at Puta* (*Ruined Heart: Another Lovestory between a Criminal and a Whore*) from 2014, and what may be the closest to an anarchist local feature, *Ang Napakaigsing Buhay ng Alipato* (*Alipato: The Very Brief Life of an Ember*) from 2016. *BHW* holds its own place in the Khavn oeuvre by providing a more accessible (though still painful and rage-filled) account of an eight-year-old's coming-of-age during the historical moment when the US openly showed its genocidal intentions toward a local population bent on resisting its colonial agenda. Ravishing landscapes strewn with human and animal remains, dreams whose surrealist content turns nightmarish, specters of the deceased who insist on mingling with the living: these announce the unexpected emergence of a fully formed and fearless artistic intelligence, ready to take his place in the crowded (though rarely intensely gifted) field of populist filmmaking.

AUREUS SOLITO

(1 film: 2005)

Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros

English Title: *The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*
Year of Release: 2005
Director: Auraeus Solito
Screenwriter: Michiko Yamamoto
Producers: Cinemalaya & UFO Pictures
Cast: Nathan Lopez, Soliman Cruz, J.R. Valentin, Neil Ryan Sese, Ping Medina, Bodjie Pascua, Elmo Redrico, Ivan Camacho, Lucito Lopez

> Twelve-year-old Maximo looks after his family of small-time crooks, including his father and two older brothers, as they live in Manila's slums. Although openly queer, he is unconditionally accepted by his straight family members. Things get complicated when the boy develops a youthful crush on a handsome policeman, who's been shadowing the activities of Maxie's household. Despite his young age, Maxie has to choose between following his heart and protecting his family.

Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros was the justly celebrated first definitive proof that a flat-out independent-digital project can aesthetically surpass mainstream-celluloid entries. Beyond that, it has several other advantages stacked in its favor. Aside from delightfully relaxed production values and luminous performances that enable the characters to linger in the mind for long stretches, the movie also celebrates Philippine queer sensibilities without falling into the usual traps of either punishing the non-normative character or over-indulging her or his erotic fantasies. Maxie may not have been possible without the pioneering efforts of a long line of comic predecessors starting with Dolphy. In contrast with them, however, his outward flightiness masks a deep and complex—and, by film's end, still-evolving—moral reconfiguration of a developing country's social challenges and responsibilities, particularly toward its most vulnerable citizens.

EMMANUEL DELA CRUZ

(1 film: 2005)

Sarong Banggi

English Title: *One Night*
Additional Language: Bikol
Year of Release: 2005
Director & Screenwriter: Emmanuel Dela Cruz
Producers: Cinemalaya Foundation, UFO Pictures, Cutting Edge Productions
Cast: Jaclyn Jose, Angelo Ilagan, Greg Rodriguez III, Alchris Galura, Miguel Iñigo Guño, Jam Rodriguez, Miguel V. Fabie III, Tanya Guerrero, Ronald Diama, Ester Reyes, Josephine M. Abelgas, Victor Cusi, Roger Macusi, Cesar P. dela Cruz, Jean dela Cruz, Mica Torre, C.J. dela Cruz, Rose Beltran, Monster Jimenez, Mario Cornejo, Josel Garlitos, Marlon Despues, Jing Villaruel, Ariel Carullo, Lorena Landicho, Lilia Villena

> On the eve of his birthday, Nyoy is brought by his friends to the vicinity of Manila's red-light district. They made an arrangement with Jaclyn so that Nyoy can have his first carnal experience. When they see her from a distance, they're realize that she's older than she claims to be so they decide to ignore her and proceed to a bar where they pick up a younger girl to pair with Nyoy. The girl however prefers a more exciting partner, so she allows herself to be picked up by another man in a convenience store. When Nyoy realizes he's been abandoned by everyone, he returns to the open-air restaurant where Jaclyn sits by herself and invites him to join her.

Essentially a two-hander once Nyoy and (the reflexively named) Jaclyn start their interaction, *Sarong Banggi* attains a rarely attempted look at awkward intimacy that evolves into a harsh, deromanticized glimpse of the inner life of a fallen woman. Key to its achievement is Jaclyn Jose's ruthless attack, allowing the once-hopeful but now regret-ridden character to take over without any hint of the performer perfecting her craft—which paradoxically makes perfection possible. By underlining some of her lines with contrapuntal action, she enables the narrative to reach places without requiring expository explanation. A plot twist that would have defeated lesser artists becomes a marvel of multistratified delivery: does she cry from disappointment, joy, horror, or self-pity? The composure that she forces herself to assume afterward similarly raises questions that she wisely avoids opting to answer. Aware of how exceptional this approach to character is in local cinema, Emmanuel Dela Cruz requires Angelo Ilagan, Jose's scene partner, to maintain sympathetic naïveté throughout, while packaging the presentation in expressionist flourishes that serve to contrast with the depths of the abyss that Jose fearlessly plunges into.

RICO MARIA ILARDE

(2 films: 2005–2007)

Sa Ilalim ng Cogon

English Title: *Beneath the Cogon*
Year of Release: 2005
Director: Rico Maria Ilarde
Screenwriters: Rico Maria Ilarde & Mammu Chua
From a story by Rico Maria Ilarde
Producers: DuduyPlus Co. & Modern Films Production
Cast: Yul Servo, Julia Clarete, Dido de la Paz, Raul Morit, Eugie Rodriguez, Ramon Bautista, At Maculangan, Rico Orbita, Hector Macaso, R.A. Rivera, Katya Guerrero, Una Ilarde, Jun Sabayton, Joel Torre, Rico Maria Ilarde, Stephanie Lim

> During a violent robbery where Pepito betrays his companion Ruel, their getaway driver Sam realizes that he'll also be rubbed out. His military training enables him to overpower Pepito and he's able to flee with the money, with Pepito's body in the trunk. Sam recalls how Pepito conscripted him in the operation during their stint in prison, with the sponsorship of crime boss Johnny-B. Realizing he'll be in trouble explaining why his companions are dead, Sam takes a turn in the road and finds an abandoned mansion, where he shacks up. He finds a beautiful maiden whom he later learns is named Katia, who leaves wrapped food in front of the house every day, with the package always gone the next day. Sam makes Katia's acquaintance and they fall for each other, but Sam also realizes that Johnny-B's manhunt is closing in on him.

After a short spell of creating horror that focused on the emergence of the monstrous, Pinas-reared and US-trained Rico Maria Ilarde (son of a famous broadcast-media personality) opted for material that centered on citizens continually victimized by the psychosocial horrors visited on them by brutes of patriarchy, with the monster making a full appearance almost as an afterthought. *Sa Ilalim ng Cogon* nearly stacks its moral dialectics in favor of wholesome innocence, but the underworld where its drama plays out does not permit such oversimplifications, so the film's main characters conduct a careful recounting of what transgressions they or their loved ones have committed and explain to each other (and to the audience) how their future actuations could help them attain a cleaner, though never a perfect, condition. Such moral clarity extends to the peripheral characters, but never in the typical self-explanatory mode that fulfills humanist principles while raising realist appreciators' eyebrows. The monster's begetter is left to subsist in the ruins of his good child's memory, but the members of the other "family," comprising a criminal operator and his henchpersons, become miniatures of complex individualities. The leader may be expectedly benevolent in his ruthlessness, but his unruliest and least predictable follower is provided with enough motivation, despite limited screen time, by starting out as the male lead's prison inmate and ending with a kicker of a closing line. One might also accuse Ilarde of idealizing these personalities, but anyone who's hung out with a wide variety of antisocial types will recognize that many of them are capable of developing political and globalist perspectives. If ever the moribund action-film genre can somehow restore itself back to dominance, *SInC* will be one of the most useful templates available.

Altar

Year of Release: 2007
Director: Rico Maria Ilarde
Screenwriters: Rico Maria Ilarde & Mammu Chua
From a story by Rico Maria Ilarde
Producers: Cinema One Originals & DuduyPlus Co.
Cast: Zanjoe Marudo, Nor Domingo, Dimples Romana, Dido de la Paz, Krista Miller, Raul Morit, Anna Marie Faybyshev, Katya Guerrero, Ranny Comia, Edd Toralba, Johnny Barnes, Mildred Formanez

> Hoping for an opportunity for construction work, Anton Marquez makes the acquaintance of Lope, but Mang Erning, the contractor, runs out of openings for them. When he recognizes Anton as his favorite boxer, however, he offers the two a live-in position repairing a rundown mansion on the outskirts of the city. It turns out that Anton foreswore the sport after his last opponent died from his blows to the head; Mang Erning warns the two that they have access to all the rooms in the house except the basement. While on an outdoor break, the two make the acquaintance of a pair of domestic help in the neighborhood, with Lope readily making out with one of them. Anton asks his designated partner, Angie, to check out on the internet the meaning of some words found on the entrance to the basement. Anton tells her that he keeps seeing a vision of a girl in white asking for his help, but when she's finally able to look up the words, she warns him that he and Lope are in danger.

As in the instance of *Sa Ilalim ng Cogon* (*Beneath the Cogon*, 2005), the second film collaboration of Rico Maria Ilarde and his producer-scriptwriter Mammu Chua set itself apart from his previous output despite his usual hybrid approach to material. *Altar* harks back to his concerns with ritualistic supernatural horror, premised on an admonition never to trespass a proscribed area. The Bluebeard reference will be recognizable to fairy-tale enthusiasts, but this time, the damsel in distress is a veteran boxer, traumatized by his own expertise in inadvertently killing a competitor. The implicit feminization of the working-class citizen, already made to line up in the hope of getting selected for paid work, and pledging to follow his employer's preferences as if he didn't have any desires of his own, is affirmed by the higher power in the basement when it punishes his high-spirited and hedonistic coworker. The narrative itself takes a few ironic turns but never grants the full triumph that Bluebeard's last wife supposedly attains in some optimistic versions of the tale. But Ilarde's constancy is just as admirable, if somewhat disconcerting to anyone raised on a diet of Philippine popular narratives: the lowly folk who populate his stories are as casually invested with wisdom as the best of them would be in real life, though the question of why this property should be so rarely realized in film-stories made for them might be worth closer inspection by students of social psychology.

SHERAD ANTHONY SANCHEZ

(2 films: 2006–2012)

Huling Balyan ng Buhi o Ang Sinalirap nga Asoy Nila

Alternate Title: *Huling Balyan ng Buhi*
English Title: *The Last Priestess of Buhi or the Woven Stories of the Other*
English Translation of Alternate Title: *Last Shaman of Life*
Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2006
Director & screenwriter: Sherad Anthony Sanchez
"Inubanan sa tabang ni (With the help of) Eilleen Meneses," per closing credits
Producers: Cinema One Originals, Salida Davao, Alchemy of Vision and Light, Loyola Film Circle, North Cotabato Provincial Government
Cast: Jelieta Mariveles-Ruca, Marilyn Roque, Jun Lizada, Manay, Ronald Arguelles, Connie Bordios, and Barangay Napalico, Arakan Valley, North Cotabato

> The *balyan* or shaman of a small rural town in Mindanao traverses her native territory as well as that of an army camp; she complains about the soldiers' presence but they regard her as an eccentric person, affirmed by her advanced age, malformed body, and bleeding hands, occasionally offering young boys a glimpse of her pussy in exchange for money. She complains about her treatment to Jun, one of the soldiers, who is infatuated with Valerie and keeps asking about her, while the rest of the men bond over so-called boodle fights or communal eating with hands, open-air basketball games, and drinking sessions where they imbibe *tubâ* or palm wine. Unknown to them, a band of rebels has set up camp just outside the town, nursing a wounded comrade, attending indoctrination lectures, and singing revolutionary anthems. Two of them quarrel by a river where a lady emerges; they don't seem to see her but their anger is appeased. One of the rebels later discharges his rifle accidentally and kills their wounded comrade; he flees the camp and returns to his residence in the town. When the *balyan* bleeds out and is in danger of dying, two of the soldiers carry her in a hammock. Their paths are about to cross that of the rebels, who're transferring camp; a kid they ask for directions runs away to warn the other side.

Huling Balyan ng Buhi was welcomed as the film that set the template for millennial-era regional cinema in the Philippines, signaling a clean break from the genre-oriented and star-driven orientation of past practitioners. Remarkably, digital production was just about to entirely supplant celluloid production in the country, with director Sherad Anthony Sanchez developing a workable system out of an annual film festival's subsidy: by locating production activity far from the capital area, he was able to devise a narrative with epic elements that would have required a beyond-average budget for a Manila celluloid project. The fact that nearly all the other independent productions boast of this potential today should not detract from the guts that *HBnB*'s emergence required, which was why most knowledgeable reviews began with a recounting of the circumstances of its origin; even Eloisa May P. Hernandez's *Digital Cinema in the Philippines, 1999–2009* (University of the Philippines Press, 2014) acknowledged *HBnB* as the originator of digital-indie practice in the country. Like several of his colleagues, Sanchez never stood idly by until the opportunity came along. Proof lay in the complex narrative and stylistic approach he lavished on the undertaking, with a humanist orientation (per his confirmation) deployed as his means of upholding the Mindanao natives caught in the figurative crossfire

between army combatants and rebel fighters. The former necessarily come across in more idealized terms, since they function openly, unafraid of displays of playfulness and bonding, with the townspeople as their audience. It is the guerrillas, however, who exhibit dramatic turns one after another, including the narrative's singular supernatural event. Sanchez's refusal to resolve the tension between the two groups enables the focus on the town's Others, specifically the *balyan* and two forest-dwelling orphans, to raise the open-ending query of what their fates might be. Not everyone will be satisfied with such a treatment, but then the parallels with Philippine history will yield the same type of frustration in the end.

Jungle Love

Additional Language: Hiligaynon
Year of Release: 2012
Director & screenwriter: Sherad Anthony Sanchez
Producers: Salida Productions, Gaps Philippines, Brass Knuckles Productions
Cast: Gloria Morales, Mae Bastes, Martin Riffer, Edgardo Amar, Aldrin Sapitan, Melbert Pangilinan, John Grino, John Paul Fernandez, Aryid Abes, Jay-Ar Abes, Janice Fernandez, Melvil Gonzales, "the people of Minalungao"

[***Note: spoilers provided***] An elderly woman attempts to seduce her brother-in-law but he refuses. She leaves, taking her infant nephew with her. She then rides a bus, where the passengers are all wearing the same pig masks. Somewhere else, an urbanized young adult male masturbates and asks Mae, his girlfriend, about getting high. She refuses his attempts to have kinky sex, saying that it's not her preference. He then encourages her to seduce their native guide, whom he describes as ugly. Anonymous naked women march in the forest, while soldiers jog on the road. Mae and her BF trek with their guide through the forest while the mother who fled with the baby walks down a creek and leaves it in a shady grove. It disappears when she returns and she panics. The soldiers' marching band plays by a convenience store but the owner tells them that without payment, they don't get freebies. The soldiers then jog backward up the road. As the exploring party lounges, Mae asks her BF for his shades while their guide looks over a map on a tablet so he can take them to a tribe. Mae mounts the guide playfully, then the latter walks on the mountainside, where anonymous men show up as part of the landscape and where the missing baby reappears. Mae and her partner make out in a hidden part of the forest. The guide goes over the map on his tablet, the last destination he traces being Balungao (in Pangasinan province). The mother who lost her baby enters a cave in the mountain. Mae wakes up and notices the guide jacking off to her. The boyfriend attempts to rape her but she leaves him. The guide then walks by some soldiers frolicking in the river. The mother awakens and sees forest spirits. Mae and her BF hump in the forest, but after they finish he's appalled as she transforms into the old woman in the beginning, and he strangles her. A young soldier bathing in the river asks Mae, in Hiligaynon language, to join him. The guide sees the old lady, who flees, then finds her on the forest floor and rifles through her bag. The woman cries but the guide brings her baby to her as men walk through the forest darkness. A DJ on an unseen radio tells his listeners not to give up. Mae passes by native women dancing as she meets the guide and seduces him. Afterward the guide goes to the edge of a cliff, shouts, undresses, and leaps off. The woman with a baby talks softly to the child under a grotesque giant tree. Forest nymphs, all half-naked women, stand around. A soldier enters a near-empty barracks and addresses Amar, who then plays an online adventure game with him. The woman with the baby runs on the side of the mountain. The woman cries and her face is frozen in black and white, while the Hiligaynon-speaking soldier continues pleading with an unseen person he calls Miss. The same soldier re-emerges on the forest floor, stark naked, and climaxes. He later enthusiastically leads the marching band. A man's voice calls out for certain people—Aldrin, Martin Gloria, Mae. The radio DJ then identifies himself as Francis Pasion and thanks donors on the air.

Possibly the only local film, though definitely not the only Filipino, to win an overseas prize for pornographic excellence, *Jungle Love* also deserves specialized recognition as the country's most successful sample of an experimental film narrative. The full storyline is provided here, but as anyone familiar with any experimental format already knows, reading will never suffice as a substitute for the viewing experience. Some creative sleuthing might also come in handy, since *JL* has become scarce since its year of release, supposedly owing to the reticence of its performers. The surprising turn that Sherad Anthony Sanchez's creative inspiration took can still be tracked from a few surreal touches in his first full-length feature, *Huling Balyan ng Buhi* (2006), through a resolutely anticommercial *Imburnal* (*Sewer*, 2008), both of which were admired by organized critics; but *JL* is sui generis and bears comparison with only a few rare samples, and is capable of standing tall even beside these. A measure of Sanchez's confidence is the several instances of jokiness in *JL*, including an insistent repetition of the same song, an adaptation of the cheesy religious pop number "God Bless You, Mama Mary Loves You" (composed by Fatima Soriano and Jerry M. Orbos, 2006), with defiantly antiwoke messaging targeting feminists, queers, the elderly, and the infirm, among several others. The same ambivalent imaging of army personnel he provided in *HBnB* is carried over, with results that can be described as more intense: a young officer ejaculates on-cam (without masturbating, strangely), then turns into the happiest baton-twirler you might be able to find anywhere. It doesn't make sense—nothing does, which is the point of the exercise; the not-making-sense also makes complete sense, and affirms Sanchez's stature, alongside a growing number of non-Manila talents, as a major Philippine film treasure.

CESAR MONTANO

(1 film: 2006)

Ligalig

English Translation: *Anxiety*
Year of Release: 2006
Director: Cesar Montano
Screenwriters: Cesar Montano & Willy Laconsay
From a story by Cesar Montano
Producer: CM Films
Cast: Cesar Montano, Sunshine Cruz, Johnny Delgado, Celia Rodriguez, John Regala, Katya Santos, Bayani Agbayani, Alvin Anson, Rommel Montano, Gwen Garci, Kalila Aguilos, Rebecca Lusterio, Manny Calayan, Jun Robles Lana, Jeri Lopez, Ashley Ott, Pia Cristobal, Christian Angelo Montano, Andrew Milallos

> A serial killer, whom we learn later is named Damian, stalks couples in motel rooms and kills them after they have sex. The police put tabs on his whereabouts and assign an officer to track and arrest him. Junior, the son of a police officer, wishes to get serious with his girlfriend Trixie, so he assents when she says he has to meet her strict mother. She takes along her friend Toti but while she sleeps in the car, Toti feels up Junior's leg as he drives. Trixie's mother disapproves of her relationship, saying she has no future with a mere driver. Meanwhile Damian has followed them to Trixie's rural hometown and makes plans to annihilate anyone he finds in Trixie's household.

The host of complaints that greeted *Ligalig*, centered on its resemblance to Alexandre Aja's *Haute tension* (*High Tension*, 2003), a sample of the New French Extremity, are redolent of the outcries that account for some of Danny L. Zialcita's career decisions. It's not the first time that a local product outdid the (admittedly inferior) foreign source from which it derived its story ideas, but the local critical short-mindedness tends to dwell on announcing the resemblance, declaring it an anomaly just for that reason, and abandoning the more difficult challenge of evaluation. Cesar Montano may have also been persistent in his pursuit of prestige and political posts, but then that should make his decision to select offbeat substance commendable, a return to his roots in detrital material, with the extensive use of then-new solid-state technology and non-linear postproduction—technical details that account for how the film manages to look and sound not so much different as updated. The final revelation, familiar to know-it-all viewers of the source film, nevertheless manages to work out within the terms of *Ligalig*, if only because of its more careful attention to causation and motivation.

BRILLANTE MENDOZA

(5 films: 2007–2016)

1—*Foster Child*

Year of Release: 2007
Director: Brillante Mendoza
Screenwriter: Ralston Jover
With script supervision by Armando Lao
Producers: Seiko Films & Center Stage Productions
Cast: Cherry Pie Picache, Kier Segundo, Eugene Domingo, Jiro Manio, Alwyn Uytingco, Dan Alvaro, Kristoffer King, Jake Macapagal, Ella Antonio, Paul Holmes, Lili Arivara, Ermie Concepcion, Jess Evardone, Ma. Ruvie Suarez, Hermes Gacutan, Aya Joy Ellett, Elize Santa Angelo, Coco Martin

> Thelma prepares to turn over John-John, whom she nurtured for three years, to his adoptive parents, an American family. Her family, including her husband and son, live on what she earns from the foster-care program, where she's acknowledged as the best participant. Bianca, the program coordinator, guides her through the turnover process, which includes a program by the working-class foster-care families and their wards. Bianca informs Thelma that John-John's mother-to-be had an injury, so they have to bring the kid to his family in a plush Makati hotel.

2—*Tirador*

English Title: *Slingshot*
Year of Release: 2007
Director: Brillante Mendoza
Screenwriter: Ralston Jover
Producers: Center Stage Productions, Rollingball Entertainment, Ignite Media
Cast: Jiro Manio, Coco Martin, Kristoffer King, Nathan Lopez, Harold Montano, Angela Ruiz, Benjie Filomeno, Enrico Villa, Aleera Montalla, Jean Andrews, Russel Laxamana, Jaclyn Jose, Julio Diaz, Simon Ibarra, Mark Dionisio, Armando A. Reyes, Rigo Ramirez, Lucky Mercado, Pusa Milanez, Ezra Munoz, Aaron Rivera, Nico Taverna, Alan Trent, Jam Milanez, Archie Dennis Duro, Jess Evardone, Arsenia Acosta, Josefina Magtagnob, Ino Amoyo, Marina Sinadjan, Majij Et, Intoy Geluca, Gemma Barrientos, Tintin, Mang Tomas, Janus Bakla, Cadiza Agarin, JP Cuaresma, Alex Arcallano, Cathy Acosta

> After a *sona* or police-conducted roundup of male residents in a slum area in Quiapo district for alleged drug trafficking, the arrested citizens are freed by a re-electionist official who extracts promises of support from each of them. They then attend to the everyday struggle for survival. Caloy has to make overdue payments on his loan for a pedicab that he drives for a living. Rex engages in appliance repair and petty thievery to maintain his drug habit. Odie watches over his drug-peddling father, while Leo and his gang extort money and valuables from strangers that they identify as prospective targets. Political and religious events provide opportunities for the characters to further victimize the public as well as one another.

Brillante Mendoza had an early start that must have been the envy of his contemporaries: local critics' prizes mirroring foreign triumphs, capped by two separate awards at the Cannes Film Festival for direction and female performance. Dissenting opinions from major sources, compounded by his ill-advised political decisions, led to a cooling down of takes toward his subsequent output. Nevertheless no one else has been as prolific, with over thirty titles since his emergence in the mid-2000s, not counting shorts, documentaries, TV series, and his production of other filmmakers' works, as well as his involvement in tech elements in his and

other people's projects. It should not surprise anyone that his early domination of local critics' awards in the same year suffers from the weaknesses one could expect in exploratory attempts—in this instance, of documentary aesthetics. Yet *Foster Child* and *Tirador* also exhibit potentials that Mendoza's later work would elaborate on and even exceed. Both partake of direct cinema approaches focused on the working class, one on a singular subject and the other comprising the delineation of a social milieu with a variety of participants. *Tirador* conveys the type of skill that Mendoza would be able to parlay into works whose discursive challenges occasionally exceed his grasp, but which always guarantee an admirable control of complex situations that spin out of the control of the characters, but never of the director's. In contrast, Cherry Pie Picache in *FC* embodies the predicaments that confront the country's female citizens after patriarchal authoritarianism took a back seat for several decades. Her attainment of a reality effect is so intact that it invites us to wrongly assume that no effort was expended in the process; yet her quiet moments in experiencing the bond of mothering with a prospective adoptee, for example, or panicking over losing the child she fostered while marveling at the enchantments of the adoptive family's prosperity, help in reminding us that such privileged moments are rarely encountered even in foreign cinemas.

Serbis

English Title: *Service*
Year of Release: 2008
Director: Brillante Mendoza [as Brillante Ma. Mendoza]
Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producers: Centerstage Productions & Swift Productions
Cast: Gina Pareño, Jaclyn Jose, Julio Diaz, Kristofer King, Dan Alvaro, Coco Martin, Mercedes Cabral, Roxanne Jordan, Dido de la Paz, Buddy Salvador Caramat, Julia Taylor, Arman Reyes, Armando Lao

> The Pinedas live in and operate a decrepit provincial movie palace that doubles as a gay cruising area. But just like the decaying building, the family members' relationships with one another gradually crumble due to problems like destitution, infidelity, adultery, incest, and unplanned pregnancies. Time can only tell if the family, just like their theater, will yield to a steadily worsening fate.

The third Filipino film to compete at the Cannes Film Festival—after Lino Brocka's *Jaguar* (1979) and *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (*My Country: Clutching a Blade*, 1985)—did not perform as well at the event as the fourth one, *Kinatay* (*Butchered*, 2009), also by Brillante Mendoza. Yet *Serbis* is distinctive even as a Mendoza film, since it foregrounds his self-referential concerns by setting the narrative in a movie theater. The memory of past glories is inscribed not just in the film palace's architecture but also in the psychology of its restive, embittered characters, constantly seeking ways to fulfill personal desires yet thwarted by laws, conventions, and culs-de-sac. The unexpected and unlikely ending terminates the narrative but raises questions, neither encouraging nor savory, but absolutely essential to understanding what could happen next to Philippine society and local cinema.

Lola

English Title: *Grandmother*
Year of Release: 2009
Director: Brillante Mendoza [as Brillante Ma. Mendoza]
Screenwriter: Linda Casimiro
Producers: Swift Productions & Center Stage Productions
Cast: Anita Linda, Rustica Carpio, Tanya Gomez, Jhong Hilario, Ketchup Eusebio, Benjie Filomeno, Bobby Jerome Go, Geraldine Villamil, Nico Nullan, Hope Matriano, Tim Yap, Earl Zanorio, Cherry Cornell, Jojit Lorenzo, Tess Antonio, Edwin Tio, Karla Pambid, Ruby Ruiz, Geraldine Tan, Enrico Villa, Ces Aldaba, Placer, Jeffrey Sison, Nolan Angeles, Cris Garrido, Elpidio Juanola, Miro Delano, Gigi Felix Velarde, Raymond Nullan, Mark Philipp Espina, Revo Dungca, Antonio de Guzman Jr., Harley Alcasid, Theresa Panlilio, Jenny Cabual

> After Lola Sepa lights a candle at the footbridge where her grandson was stabbed dead when he resisted the thief attempting to take his mobile phone, she goes to the local police station where she learns that Mateo, the grandson's killer, was already apprehended and is now incarcerated. She cannot confront him though because visitors were not welcome that day. As she leaves, Lola Puring, Mateo's grandmother, arrives to drop off some food for him. The two grandmothers learn about each other and make clear their intention: Mateo's punishment, per Lola Sepa, and his pardon and subsequent freedom, which Lola Puring determinedly pursues. Mateo's fate hangs on whether the two old ladies could arrive at an agreement about what course of action would be best to take.

The same year that Brillante Mendoza came up with *Kinatay* (*Butchered*), which controversially won for him the best director prize at Cannes Film Festival, he also released this low-key and languidly paced neorealist drama, with two elderly actors whose characters warily circle each other, finally forced to a public negotiating table because of their indigent circumstances (minus any hint of hagsploitation, if that ever needs pointing out). One earns a living by selling vegetables at an illegal open-air market where occasional police raids wipe out the day's earnings; the other lost her family's breadwinner because of a botched robbery attempt by the former's grandson. The socioeconomic dynamic in this scenario favors the former, but the latter can and does claim moral ascendancy. The rainy-season downpours provide an unobtrusive metaphorical counterpart of the wearying impact of neoliberal development on citizens unable to keep pace and forced to rely on the transactional favors of government functionaries, if not the goodwill of acquaintances who themselves are barely scraping by. Movie queen Anita Linda, playing the more impoverished grandparent, is situated in a riverside residence, where her character's attempts at soliciting donations for her grandson's funeral demonstrate her long-unchallenged stature as the country's premiere performer; Mendoza effectively rewards her with a vision of surreal beauty, via positioning her in a rarely depicted fluvial funeral procession during a brief spell of sunshine.

Ma' Rosa

Year of Release: 2016
Director: Brillante Mendoza
Screenwriter: Troy Espiritu
Producers: Centerstage Productions
Cast: Jaclyn Jose, Julio Diaz, Baron Geisler, Jomari Angeles, Neil Ryan Sese, Mercedes Cabral, Andi Eigenmann, Mark Anthony Fernandez, Felix Roco, Mon Confiado, Maria Isabel Lopez, Ruby Ruiz, John Paul Duray, Kristofer King, Timothy Castillo, Mark Dionisio, Tony Fabian, Buknoy Macabenta, Mac Mendoza, Mick Quito, Vince Rillon

> Ma' Rosa and her husband Nestor sell shabu (methamphetamine), using their family-run neighborhood variety store as front. Operatives at the local police district are able to arrest her entire family by capturing and convincing one of Ma' Rosa's regular clients to participate in a buy-and-bust operation. Taking the family to a secluded section of the district office, the police are able to bamboozle Ma' Rosa into a *palit-ulo* scheme (where she identifies her supplier so they can make a bigger killing), and demand 200,000 pesos in exchange for her and her family's release without charges. Her husband is too addicted to function effectively, so she asks her kids to help her raise the money.

On the way to winning big as Best Director at Cannes Film Festival for *Kinatay* (*Butchered*, 2009), Brillante Mendoza had to endure severe backlash from his detractors, led by the late Roger Ebert. No surprise then that his next major Cannes-winning entry, *Ma' Rosa* (which won Best Actress for Jaclyn Jose), generated a similar round of reservations, primarily centered on the poverty-porn strategy which Mendoza had used in order to garner foreign acclamation. The surprise, rather, lay in how heartfelt, vibrant, confident, and light-handed it turned out to be, as close to an exemplary poverty-porn entry as local filmmakers have been able to get, without sacrificing the requisite soul-crushing resolution. Knowingly embodying the entire national allegory in her now-motherly frame, Jose fully earns her stripes the same way Mendoza does—with frighteningly sharp instincts and a judicious combination of roughness and technical expertise. Her histrionic triumph almost overwhelms another of *MR*'s feats: a near-perfect acting ensemble, where even the smallest and/or quietest roles contribute to the larger picture with inspired-yet-disciplined performances. One would have to search in the distant past for an equivalent local sample, possibly Gregorio Fernandez's *Malvarosa* (1958), with Charito Solis at her fieriest and fiercest.

CATHY GARCIA-SAMPANA

(1 film: 2007)

One More Chance

Year of Release: 2007
Director: Cathy Garcia-Sampana [as Cathy Garcia-Molina]
Screenwriters: Vanessa R. Valdez & Carmi Raymundo
Producer: Star Cinema Productions
Cast: John Lloyd Cruz, Bea Alonzo, Derek Ramsay, Maja Salvador, Dimples Romana, James Blanco, Janus del Prado, Ahron Villena, Beatriz Saw, Nikkie Gil, Nanette Inventor, Al Tantay, Melissa Mendez, Shamaine Buencamino, Bodjie Pascua, Lauren Young

> Despite frequent spats and near-breakups, Popoy and Basha have remained a couple for five years. However, when Basha finally had enough of Popoy's domineering behavior, she ends the relationship. In time, they each find new partners. But as they try to start over, they learn that there is still something that prevents them from completely moving on from the love they once shared.

The Pinoy middle class, after enduring decimation because of the Marcos regime's failed authoritarian experiment, recently managed to re-emerge in the current globalized era of outsourced labor, foreign direct investment, and intensifying interconnectivity. Among the several attempts to observe and chronicle this crucial paradigmatic shift, *One More Chance* fares better than its contemporaries, mainly because its mainstream aspirations helped it avoid the judgmental tone that the typical independent project would have succumbed to. The tight circle of yuppified characters at its center may be oblivious to the country's—and the world's—developmental issues, but they do manage to justify their insularity by occupying themselves with a contemporary version of courtly love. As it plays out in the film, the process appears modern in so far as the couples no longer worry about premarital relations and the main female character sets the conditions of engagement, but it also retains a nobility in terms of the male lover's ardency and loyalty. Cathy Garcia-Sampana makes the most of her cast's grown-up ability to convey emotional states via subtle adjustments in expressions and ironic line readings, with John Lloyd Cruz managing to utter the cheesy-sounding passage "She loved me at my worst, you had me at my best" as if the fate of humanity depended on it.

ADOLFO ALIX JR.

(4 films: 2007–2017)

Tambolista

English Translation: *Drummer*
English Title: *Drumbeat*
Year of Release: 2007 / B&W
Director: Adolfo Alix Jr. [as Adolfo Borinaga Alix Jr.]
Screenwriter: Ave Regina S. Tayag
Producers: Cinema One Originals & Ignite Media
Cast: Jiro Manio, Coco Martin, Sid Lucero, Anita Linda, Fonz Deza, Ricky Davao, Susan Africa, Simon Ibarra, Jhersie Young, Zyra dela Cerna, Mosang

> Jason and Billy, whose parents have to stay in a hospital when their mother delivered their sister, invite their neighbor Pablo after he leaves his rental space because his landlord caught him in bed with his wife. All are short of money: Billy needs to spring for an abortion for his girlfriend, Jason wants to buy a drum set so he can play for a band, and Pablo has to find a new place to stay. The brothers get by doing favors for their neighbors while Pablo offers his body to prospective clients of either gender. When the eccentric and quarrelsome elderly lady across the street asks them to exchange smaller bills for her money, they cook up the idea of burglarizing her.

An appreciation for *Tambolista* can be enhanced by situating it in the tradition of the multicharacter youth films of the previous millennium. The male-focused entries tended then to depict the characters' hijinks, carefree and harmless; but as a millennial product, released toward the end of a still-democratic era, the film enables us to see how neoliberalism has finally caught up with the very citizens we're expected to shield from the harsh realities of modern existence. Director Adolfo Alix Jr. observed twin strategies, one old-timey and one forward-looking, to enhance his material: in shooting in black and white, he facilitates a throwback to the social-realist treatments of the First Golden Age, while in fractalizing the temporal order of events, he provides an equivalent of the social media-engendered confusion and distractedness that would increasingly afflict young people. The combination is unexpectedly yet remarkably effective, but also, in being too new-fashioned yet old-looking, accounts for how easily the film could be overlooked in comparison with his other output. *Tambolista*, rather than any number of prematurely acclaimed works, is where to start with this restless, unpredictable, admittedly uneven filmmaker.

Imoral

English Title: *Immoral*
Year of Release: 2008
Director: Adolfo Alix Jr. [as Adolfo B. Alix Jr.]
Screenwriter: Jerry Gracio
Producer: Bicycle Pictures

Cast: Katherine Luna, Paolo Paraiso, Arnold Reyes, Edgar Allan Guzman, Perla Bautista, Kristoffer King, Adriana Agcaoili, Cherrie Madrigal, Angeli Bayani, Adrian Racho, Agnes de Guzman, Rolly Palmes, Armando A. Reyes, Maxie Evangelista, Melvin Catubag, Kennyron Aroffo, Jerome Zamora, Marcie Rosario, Lisa Arnaiz, Herwey Naredo, Jojo Manalili, Johnson Orca

> Finding they cannot afford the living spaces they want to rent, Abi and Dante allow their friend Jonathan to get a residence for them. He introduces Abi as his wife and Dante as his brother-in-law to the religious landlady, when in fact Dante is the lover that he and Abi share. Jonathan pays for the rent using his income as construction foreperson while Dante barely scrapes by as a cab driver, longing for the time when he can leave for overseas work. Aside from defending their arrangement with her mother and sister, Abi makes sure that Dante doesn't lose hope from their destitution and strives to be a friend to Jonathan, whose friendship with a construction worker incites Dante's jealous rage. A sudden and unexpected windfall, however, threatens to throw their lives into disarray.

Before the internet-assisted boys' love (BL) craze disseminated throughout Southeast Asia and reached the Philippines during the lockdown period of the last global pandemic, gay cinema was a specialized trend that actually occasioned the country's first digital-format theater screenings. The films did not differ all that much from the then-forthcoming BL entries, which in turn also mirrored the same masculinist middle-class limitations of several new "queer" cinema samples from the US. *Imoral* may initially resemble the typical essentially conservative text in being low-end, domestic-focused, and anti-feminine, but it makes enough subtle adjustments to distinguish itself as one of the rare gay films with social awareness, more responsive actually to indigent conditions. It doesn't shy away from class- and gender-based discord, but it also finds ways of uncovering how less-privileged citizens attain measures of acceptance on their own terms, with the striving for basic decency always an ideal within reach, if difficult to grasp. The one character tactfully rejected by the central trio is the pushy proselytizer who owns their space—a sign that better days may yet be in the offing for the gender outlaws in our midst.

Isda

English Title: *Fable of the Fish*
Additional Language: Bikol
Year of Release: 2011
Director: Adolfo Alix Jr.
Screenwriter: Jerry Gracio
Producers: Cinemalaya Foundation & Phoenix Features
Cast: Cherry Pie Picache, Bembol Roco, Anita Linda, Rosanna Roces, Angel Aquino, Alan Paule, Evelyn Vargas, Arnold Reyes, Jess Evardone, Darlene Anderson, Pamela Juan, Angeli Bayani, Leon Miguel, Bjorn Aguilar, Kerbie Zamora

> Merlina Sagaral and her husband Miguel migrate from distant Pangasinan province. They rent space in a landfill where the residents scrounge for materials they could resell. The wives talk about how having a child enables them to keep their husbands; despite being elderly, Lina longs to bear a child when her landlady shares news of her own pregnancy. Eventually Lina shows signs of gestation and Miguel, who gets angry when his neighbors tease him about infertility, is overjoyed. Lina's birth pains occur during a typhoon, when their floor is flooded, but her baby leaps into the water and is discovered to be a fish. A TV reporter takes an interest in Lina's story and becomes her friend, but Miguel cannot accept that he fathered a non-human child and becomes an alcoholic. When the couple discover an anonymous victim of

extrajudicial killing dumped on the landfill and look for anything valuable he might have on him, they find a stash of money that enables them to upgrade their living condition.

Despite its English title, *Isda* unfolds as a straightforward realist narrative, and uses the fantastic premise of (for want of a better term) monstrous childbirth as its means of providing an intimate account of the lives of a dispossessed elderly couple. Even the fact that they could get pregnant is miraculous enough, considering the travails of migration as well as the health hazards of living amid the methane emission of the landfill. Yet the cast's proficient realization of the absurd, essentially comic situation in which their characters are lodged, promotes a mounting empathy that acquires conflictive dimensions when the central couple find their marriage foundering because of the unusual nature of their offspring. As portrayed by Cherry Pie Picache, whose rendition of benevolence is unmatched among local actors, Lina becomes the character whose devotion to her fish-child is full-fledged—making understandable how the women in her orbit share in her maternalistic concerns and even how her husband occasionally finds himself bending to her will despite his shame and resentment. The film material itself takes off from a tabloid report that turned into a short-lived urban legend, but the means by which its collection of talents reified what would have otherwise remained an incredulous account is the movie's singular hook, line, and sinker attraction.

Porno

Year of Release: 2013
Director: Adolfo Alix Jr. [as Adolfo Borinaga Alix Jr.]
Screenwriter: Ralston Jover
Producers: Cinemalaya Foundation, Phoenix Features, Deux Lux Mea Films
Cast: Adriana Gomez, Janvier Daily, Yul Servo, Rosanna Roces, Bembol Roco, Yumi, Alan Paule, Carlo Aquino, Peggy Rico Tuazon, Lucky Mercado, Bong Villanueva, Ronnel Lintag, Star Ledesma, Jeremy Ian, Nasser Lubay, TJ dela Paz, Ricky Davao, Anita Linda, Ermie Concepcion, Armando A. Reyes, Divine Tetay, Angel Aquino, Paul Holmes, John Arkin Tan, Liza Diño, Brent Michael Borro

A man and woman in a motel room enact an excessive form of sadomasochistic activity. A separate couple, Xander and Mimi, have what appears to be a less unusual encounter, with Xander servicing Mimi for money; later Digos arrives and berates Xander, who's been temporarily spirited from prison, for failing an assassination assignment. Aleks, who professionally dubs silent footage surreptitiously taken of couples in motel rooms, is teased by his female colleague and criticized by their employer for lacking in authenticity in his voice-overs; he nevertheless persists with his private webcam flirtations. Finally Alessandra (Alex for short), a star attraction in her workplace's Follies de Mwah shows, has to figure out a way to interact with the upcoming birthday celebration of her estranged son, who hasn't seen her since before her gender transition.

Although a 16mm. print of Celso Ad. Castillo's *Nympha* (1971) might still be tracked to the inconsiderate borrower who failed to return it to the government film archive, it would be safe to conclude that no sample from the first era of pornographic film production (building up to the declaration by Ferdinand Marcos Sr. of martial law in 1972) can be accessed. A few titles fortunately remain from the next period, coinciding with the struggling years of the dictatorship through the early years after the people-power revolt in 1986. *Porno* though can be classed with a

number of globally celebrated mindfucks, even if it doesn't adhere to all the definitional requirements of the genre as spelled out in Linda Williams's seminal volume *Hard Core* (1989). The multiversal chain of events invites diverse and conflictive readings—a result of deliberate asymmetrical and ambivalent plotting, per scriptwriter Ralston Jover (*Messenger*, March 9, 2025). The final episode, where the trans woman character's nickname resembles that of the preceding episode's sexually troubled young man, either can provoke a reconsideration of the film's entire narratory design, or it can incite nothing more momentous than a shrug. Both responses would be equally appropriate for a film whose concern for the complications of sex work that contemporary working-class natives confront on a daily basis necessarily has to bypass the niceties of moral and anecdotal orderliness.

Madilim ang Gabi

English Title: *Dark Is the Night*
Additional Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2017
Director & Screenwriter: Adolfo Alix Jr. [as Adolfo Borinaga Alix Jr.]
Producers: Sound Investment Equity LLC, Deux Lux Mea Films, Oro de Siete Productions, Ukon Films, Swift Distribution
Cast: Phillip Salvador, Gina Alajar, Bembol Roco, Felix Roco, Jason Abalos, Archie Alemania, Angel Aquino, Angeli Bayani, Perla Bautista, Iza Calzado, Sebastian Castro, Manuel Chua, Alssandra de Rossi, Julio Diaz, Flora Gasser, Cherie Gil, Laurice Guillen, Ben Isaac, Angelina Kanapi, Kristoffer King, Anita Linda, William Lorenzo, Sid Lucero, Zanjoe Marudo, Jess Mendoza, Mikoy Morales, Kenken Nuyad, Kenneth Ocampo, Elizabeth Oropesa, Alan Paule, Ross Pesigan, Cherry Pie Picache, Rosanna Roces, Jeremy Sabido, Arvic Tan, Erlinda Villalobos, Cris Villonco, Kirst Viray

> Sara, who functions as enforcer for Kidlat, the neighborhood drug lord, worries when the effects of the war on drugs declared by then-President Rodrigo Duterte result in the extrajudicial killing of several of her neighboring acquaintances. Her son Felix, a drug user, worries when he hears that his mother's name is on a law-enforcement kill list. With her husband Lando, she pleads with Kidlat to be relieved of her designation and requests exemption from having to pay for their last batch of sachets of shabu or methamphetamine. Kidlat imposes a final assignment, which Sara attempts to bypass, but when Felix fails to return home, she and Lando contact the police force for help.

Cinéma vérité is better known among regular audiences as the practice of developing a film fiction around events as these unfold in real life. The French New Wave auteurs who popularized it actually drew from a documentarian, Jean Rouch, who made films in Africa. Not surprisingly, our major Second Golden Age practitioners took to the approach after it proved feasible in the New American Cinema. Celluloid production, however, was both too pricey and clunky to enable seamless integration of documentary footage with staged scenes. This in no way should diminish the triumph of *Madilim ang Gabi*, although it makes understandable how critical evaluators could believe that its bona fides are inadequate in relation to its predecessors, or that better samples will presently be presented. The timeline and locales cannot be denied: the film was made as soon as President Rodrigo Duterte declared and implemented his disastrous war on drugs, with the actors roaming the slums of Manila to be able to capture the authenticity of historical realities that

appalled observers everywhere. The use of name thespians even in minor roles becomes understandable in retrospect—authorities would think twice before harassing production activities that involved prestige performers, with Gina Alajar and Phillip Salvador retreading the doomed working-class characters they played in Lino Brocka's *Bayan Ko: Kapit sa Patalim* (*My Country*, 1984) but with a more realistic twist: as in the previous year's war-on-drugs entry, Brillante Mendoza's *Ma' Rosa*, poverty implicates everyone in the state's fascistic affirmations, whether they're guilty of drug-trade involvement or not. *MaG* relies on an informed audience's recollection of scene highlights from antiauthoritarian film-texts, and may be accused of drawing in possibly more then-current issues than the narrative could sustain. But its cinéma-vérité accomplishment abides and proves that we can look forward to more laudable attempts in the foreseeable future.

JOSELITO ALTAREJOS

(3 films: 2008–2019)

Ang Lihim ni Antonio

English Title: *Antonio's Secret*
Year of Release: 2008
Director: Joselito Altarejos
Screenwriter: Lex Bonife
From a story by Lex Bonife & Joselito Altarejos
Producers: Digital Viva & BeyondtheBox
Cast: Kenjie Garcia, Jiro Manio, Nino Fernandez, Honey Grace Capili, Shamaine Buencamino, Ricky Ibe, Kurt Martinez, Jay Perillo, Ajit Hardasani, A.A. Fernandez, Aimee Fernandez, Agatha Behar, Josh Ivan Morales, Lui Manansala, Ernie Zarate, May-i Fabros, Annelle Durano, Wilfredo Quejencio, Franklin Junbic, Lex Bonife, Almhir Rahib, Marvin Reyes, Arkee Tunisia, Liza Bergencillo, Gamaica Mel Pilar, Wilma Lusanta, Mirafe dela Cruz, Dindo Flores, JM Cobarrubias, Nick Pichay, Brent Fernandez, Cel Santiago

> Antonio, 15, discusses the rudiments of budding sexuality with his contemporary Nathan and their much younger friend Mike. Living with his mother who works at the community health center, he's typically hesitant about admitting his same-sex attractions. After a bout of drinks, when Nathan spends the night in his bed, Antonio starts caressing his friend—who reciprocates his advances. Although they wind up having sex, Nathan starts avoiding him afterward. Mike asks Antonio about Nathan's distance so he's forced to confess what happened. One day, his father's parents drop off his uncle Jonbert, who plans to join Antonio's father in Dubai but has to work on his documents first. The irresponsible and sexually active Jonbert hangs out nightly with his friends, drinking and carousing, and occasionally agrees to have sex with gay men for extra cash. Jonbert finds his uncle irresistible and sees an opportunity to expand his range of experience.

Headlined by a youtful-looking lead actor who was of age when the film was produced (just in case anyone might wonder), *Ang Lihim ni Antonio* emblematizes the peak of Joselito Altarejos's explorations of queer-male erotics in the present millennium, right before social media would intensify experimentations with sexualities of all types. Even with an openness to various possibilities, negotiations with oneself and others would still always be a mightily involved and conflictive process, akin to traversing an emotional and psychological minefield. Altarejos is careful enough to withhold judgment on his male characters' actuations, so that Antonio's queer curiosity, his childhood friend's homophobia, and his uncle's machismo-induced horniness are all arrayed for those who wish to inspect each one more closely. In fact, he endows the most empathy in the plight of Antonio's mother—and for good reason beyond standard feminist commitment, considering the plot twist assigned to her. Throughout a nearly three-decade career, he has also been able to develop into a topnotch soft-core filmmaker, far and away the country's best when it comes to MSM scenes. This enables him to invest his work with a unique tension between erotic fascination and social anxiety, evocative of the cherished values of film noir even when all the other elements of noir are missing.

Unfriend

Year of Release: 2014 / Color with B&W
Director: Joselito Altarejos [as J Altarejos]
Screenwriter: Zig Madamba Dulay
Producers: Center Stage Productions & Solar Entertainment
Cast: Sandino Martin, Angelo Ilagan, Boots Anson-Roa, Shamaine Buencamino, Jay Enriquez, Maichel Fideles, Jill Singson Urdaneta, Angeli Bayani, Richard Quan, Arlene Pilapil, Philippine Drag-Ons, Lex Bonife

> On Christmas Eve, David has breakup sex with his older partner Jonathan but has difficulty letting go. He lives with his grandma Ester because his mother works overseas. The tolerant but distracted Ester asks David to observe their family rituals and bring along Jonathan but David makes excuses for his ex. On Christmas Day, David finds that Jonathan has announced his new relationship on his internet account. Despondent, David wanders the streets and enters a bar, where he leaves with a stranger with whom he has a one-night stand in an unfinished building. Since Jonathan seems intent on shutting him out, David begins indulging in self-harm activities while maintaining a semblance of normality.

Responding to an actual news report about an internet-obsessed teen shooting his same-sex ex-lover as well as himself in a shopping mall, Joselito Altarejos devised a feature that departs from the typical cautionary tale in subtle but effective aspects. The expected condemnation of constant social-media usage is avoided; everyone in the film, as in real life, shares as much of their lives as they can with the worldwide web, although the fact that several of us do so as public figures, where even strangers can partake of events in our personal affairs, may be cause for concern for those who wish to draw lessons from the film. The one point where Altarejos makes known his partiality is in his depiction of David's mounting instability. *Unfriend* makes its postqueer position clear when the tender and sentimental lovemaking between the lovers at the start becomes, in retrospect, more harmful for David's disposition than the rough and carelessly mounted anonymous sex he has with a bar stranger later on. Altarejos wisely refuses to replicate all the specifics of the real-life incident that inspired the movie (transplanting the action to a working-class milieu in Manila instead of a provincial capital), possibly from the recognition that in the age of the internet, socially impactful events tend to occur only once before they acquire the potential for parody. He carefully inscribes the visible marks of inner turmoil on the face and body of his intrepid lead actor, Sandino Martin, who upholds the indie spirit of pursuing histrionic truth regardless of how far he may have to depart from himself.

Jino to Mari

English Title: *Gino and Marie*
Alternate Title: *Death by Gokkun*
Additional Language: Japanese
Year of Release: 2019
Director: Joselito Altarejos
Screenwriters: John Paul Bedia & Joselito Altarejos
From a story by Brillante Mendoza
Producers: Solar Entertainment, Center Stage Productions, Beyond the Box

Cast: Oliver Aquino, Angela Cortez, Ruby Ruiz, Sherry Lara, Perry Escaño, Mitsuaki Morishita, Aubrhie Carpio, Sophie Warne, Maureen Mauricio, Emmanuel De la Cruz

> Unknown to each other, Gino and Marie perform casual sex work in order to support their respective families—i.e., Gino's younger sister and Marie's daughter respectively. Both are instructed by Eric, their mutual procurer, to board a bus for an out-of-town resort, where a film crew is ready to record their sex-work performance, this time (and for the first and last time) as a couple.

Jino to Mari is best viewed minus spoilers, but the sensational material makes that a nearly impossible condition. Joselito Altarejos, however, has been the country's most prominent mainstream queer pioneer, his leftist orientation evolving alongside his critiques of genders and sexualities. *JtM* finds his fervency at the fullest passionate level, questions of sociohistorical nuances be damned. We find working-class characters who enable the two frankly attractive innocents, but the narrative refuses to condemn folks who merely recognize and appreciate when others of their kind are able to fulfill what potential they've been gifted with. This sets us up for an encounter that's best left for audiences to discover, as Gino and Marie do as well. The terrible paradox at this juncture is that one may regret the turnout of events, having sympathized with the couple up to this point; but in addition, one could also be grateful for having seen, from the safe distance that film art provides, the monstrous reach of global privilege.

ELLEN ONGKEKO-MARFIL

(2 films: 2008–2016)

Boses

English Title: *Voices*
Year of Release: 2008
Director: Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil
Screenwriters: Froilan Medina & Rody Vera
Producers: Cinemalaya & Erasto Films In Cooperation With UNICEF, Casa San Miguel, Department of Social Welfare and Development, Council for the Welfare of Children Secretariat, National Commission for Culture and the Arts, & Film Development Council of the Philippines
Cast: Julian Duque, Coke Bolipata, Ricky Davao, Cherry Pie Picache, Meryll Soriano, Tala Santos, Carl John Barrameda, Mailes Kanapi, Soliman Cruz

> Seven-year-old Onyok is taken away from his abusive father by a social worker before being brought to a shelter. Unable to speak due to a damaged larynx, the boy meets Ariel, the brother of Amanda, the shelter's owner and director. As Ariel teaches Onyok how to play the violin, they (and Amanda) realize that the arts can be a means to recover from trauma—not just of the victim but of everyone else touched by his situation.

Advocacy filmmaking never acquired serious attention in the Philippine context, and for good reason: it was hijacked and exploited by the Marcoses' all-too-clever martial-law dispensation. This film restores the original ideals of the practice and demonstrates, via its intimate understanding of the dramatic potential underlying art-as-therapy methods, how effectively it could move people to strong responses, if not to action. The unmentioned assumption, however, is that the people behind the project had better be gifted with critical and self-aware skills in order to figure out what to do with the conventions of advocacy practice, which would otherwise drift toward sentimental and didactic conclusions. As proof, films produced in the wake of *Boses*'s success foundered badly despite their best intentions, while *Boses* itself managed to generate sufficient word-of-mouth and repeat viewing to become, circa the early 2010s, one of the festival circuit's most financially successful digital-indie projects.

Indigo Child

Year of Release: 2016
Director: Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil (with stage direction by José Estrella)
Screenwriter: Rody Vera
Based on his stage play
Producers: University of the Philippines Film Institute, Ladies Who Launch, Bantayog ng mga Bayani, Rey Agapay
Cast: Skyzx Labastilla, Rafael Tibayan

> Jerome, now a young man, is perplexed by the situation he finds himself in. His mother, Felisa, tends to act out her traumatic experience as an activist in the underground resistance during the martial-law dictatorship of Ferdinand E. Marcos. Because of her unstable condition, she occasionally requires medical intervention and becomes nearly impossible to communicate with. Jerome has to summon inner reserves of strength and filial devotion in order to fully comprehend the unspeakable horrors that his mother once suffered, from which she never seems able to recover.

Millennials may conceivably hesitate to consider critical presentations of the dictatorship of Ferdinand E. Marcos because of the implication that these involve returning to a past that they never experienced in the first place. (The authoritarian terms that President Rodrigo Duterte proffers appear to be more forward-looking, in contrast—which may partly explain his appeal to the otherwise apolitical younger generation, who consequently became more receptive to the Marcos scion's presidential aspiration.) Ellen Ongkeko-Marfil conducts her film and media practice with a concern for what shifts the future may bring. Her contribution to the call to warn contemporary audiences about the dangers inherent in a tyrannical system anticipated the limits that the long-running pandemic era would impose on media production and consumption: tight budget, intimate setting, interactive inserts, dialogue-driven arguments presented as an exchange between two players in the shortest acceptable playing time for a full-length feature. *Indigo Child* may sound like a throwback to the theatrical origins of early silent and sound cinema, until we take a look around at the online arrangements that have been leading to shifts in audiovisual formats, from direct address to accidental revelations in domiciliated situations: the trauma in Rody Vera's narrative, essentially a one-act two-hander, derives as much from the child's realization of the severity of the torture his mother experienced as from, as Vera once expressed it, "her constant denial [of her past experience] that eventually drives her to madness." The horror plays out not as malignant external forces (the way that typical cautionary texts on the evils of fascism tend to relate). Instead it begins with one of those seriocomic ironies that families deploy when they need to cope with existing difficulties: the son ascribes his choice of college course, electrical engineering, to his mother's continuing electroconvulsive therapy program, and proceeds from there to increasingly distressing intimate revelations, culminating with an unexpected connection with historical reality. The fact that the historical experience in question is even more horrendous is left for us to discover on our own, proof that an antifascist text does not always have to replicate the full extent of the cruelties that it references: the end credits play over actual Marcos-era protest footage then lead to the artists and producers relating the text to their personal experience before an unseen audience presumably confronting this aspect of history for the first time. It may be less effective than ensuring solid liberal education for all citizens, but Pinas cinema has long been more influential than the local system, and this is one of several instances when its impact deserves to be upheld.

FRANCIS XAVIER PASION

(1 film: 2008)

Jay

Year of Release: 2008
Director & Screenwriter: Francis Xavier Pasion
Producers: Cinemalaya, National Commission for Culture and the Arts, & Pasion Para Pelicula Productions
Cast: Baron Geisler, Coco Martin, Flor Salanga, Angelica Rivera, Rjay Payawal, JC Santos, Jericho Espiritu, Carlo Mendoza, Karla Pambid, Peewee O'Hara, Willy Cunanan, Ernie Enrique, Joven Gabuyo, Ejie Nario, Maris Dimayuga, Francis X. Pasion

> TV producer Jay Santiago goes to Pampanga to feature the family of a slain high-school teacher who shares his given name. But as he develops his story, he brazenly changes various details to heighten its overall impact, and conscripts the victim's family into his schemes. As he forms relationships with the teacher's family and former lover, he shows how far media can be capable of manipulating the truth for the sake of higher ratings.

How far has Philippine culture progressed as a proponent of queer lifestyles? One way of figuring out an answer is by observing the manner in which male homosexuality suffuses the narrative of *Jay* yet refuses to be upheld as a yardstick of social morality. One of the title characters is an apparent victim of homophobic violence, while another utilizes his namesake's tragic outcome to promote not so much his sexual preference as his media career. The manner in which the members of the victim's family take their cues from the media practitioner's exploitative conduct and yield to their own baser motives demonstrates the film's affirmation of a post-queer situation, where a villain can happen to be gay yet not be judged as flawed on the basis of his sexual preference. *Jay* demonstrates how such a level of cultural development enables a presentation that is at once reflexive—representing a vision of itself, the same way that the still-living Jay calls to mind the similarly named dead character—yet self-critical, casually intermingling comedic, dramatic, even horrific elements.

TARA ILLENBERGER

(2 films: 2008–2017)

Brutus, ang Paglalakbay

English Translation: *Brutus, the Journey*
Additional Language: Buhid
Year of Release: 2008
Director: Tara Illenberger
Screenwriters: Tara Illenberger & Arah Jell Badayos
Producers: Bonfire Productions, Cinemalaya Foundation, National Commission for Culture and the Arts
Cast: Ronnie Lazaro, Yul Servo, Rhea Medina, Timothy Castillo, Flor Salanga, Melario Nazareno, Jerey Aguilar, Irene Medina, Lagum Pasag, Yagum Maansig Solina, Aniway Solina, "Mayor" Yaum Sumbad, Mandy Sumbad, Tulay Yam-an, Ian Pagcaliwagan, Drandred Afundar, Fritz Silorio, Oyot Solina, Jimmy Rodaje, Jayvee Lachica, Raymond Abia, Charisse Pagcaliwagan, Jopeter Galicha, McDaniel Famisaran, Charles Kim Pagcaliwagan, Benjamin Jovinal, Marianne Oandasan, Roland Pagcaliwagan, Ramy Gadon, Jaimie Lazo, Christopher Arsega, Dennis Alegre, Sarah Pagcaliwagan, Randy Salibio, Ariel Molina, Arlan Lachica, Richner Solangan, Alfredo Mabalot, Leonises Feticio, Jim Augie Bergado, Japhset A. Bahian, Sonny Gado

> When her father falls ill from malaria, Payang Mansik is instructed by her mother to accompany Adag Ayan to perform *brutus*—i.e., transporting wood for illegal loggers from Manila, so she can earn enough money to buy medicine in their Oriental Mindoro town. Payang also looks forward to finding her brother, who went missing after an earlier *brutus* task, unusual for members of their Buhid tribe of indigenous Mangyan folk. After hauling the logs down a mountain, they construct a raft so they can paddle on the way to town. Although Adag warns that the current is getting stronger, Payang insists on going further, resulting in their raft crashing against some rocks. In the morning, having drifted away from their deliverables, they are picked up by an army unit led by Sgt. Sarosa, who asks them if they had seen a rebel leader named Ka Milo. Sarosa warns them that performing *brutus* is illegal, but he also tells them where they can find the logs they lost. While reassembling the raft, a stranger who introduces himself as Carlito helps them in exchange for hitching a ride.

The neorealist social-problem film, largely repressed during the increasingly prohibitive cost of film production during the late celluloid era, made a comeback via the transition to digital filmmaking. Its proportion was more abundant in Pinas than in Western cinema, largely owing to media critics and teachers romanticizing the output of artists identified with the antidictatorship movement during the martial-law period's Second Golden Age. While some of these titles garnered attention, even prizes, in global events, no one dared to voice the possibility of affirmative action at play, or even their insidious insistence that what used to be called Third World subjects should confine themselves to political miserabilism, resulting in a reactionary downgrading of the local audience that would have horrified SGA practitioners.[58] *Brutus, ang*

[58] The differences between Fredric Jameson and Aijaz Ahmad actually began with the former's discursive appreciation of a Filipino film, Kidlat Tahimik's *Mababangong Bangungot* (*Perfumed Nightmare*, 1977): in "'Art Naïf' and the Admixture of Worlds," the final chapter of *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, Indiana University Press, 1992, pp. 186–213, Jameson argued that Third-World films essentially present as political allegories, refining an argument he first articulated in "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism," *Social Text*, vol. 15, Fall 1986, pp. 65–88, doi:10.2307/466493; Ahmad, in "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory,'" *Social Text*, vol. 17, Fall 1987, pp. 3–25, doi:10.1002/9781119118589.ch6, spearheaded the response of several cultural critics, some of them understandably from Pinas, in pointing out how Jameson had to suppress "the multiplicity of significant difference among and within both the advanced capitalist

Paglalakbay demonstrates how smart filmmakers could observe these requisites and thereby win the approval of funding agencies, but also figure out ways to improve on the formula. The work's title is derived from the hardy though now-discontinued 140cc Kawasaki motorcycle used for hauling logs uphill, a term exclusive to the Buhid tribe featured in the film (per a *Messenger* response by the filmmaker); it commences like every other neorealist-inspired work, through which a line may be traced all the way to the output of the Belgian brothers Jean-Pierre and Luc Dardenne, the trend's primary contemporary exponents. Yet though *BaP* diverts through the expected worrisome and increasingly stressful developments, it insists even more stubbornly on a light-handed, even tender depiction of its dramatis personae, even the most threatening and dangerous ones. It's an unusual perspective, feminine in its most empowering sense, although those who may have traversed the many possible routes through which lifestyles caught in the crosshairs of capitalist and militaristic pressures find their own resistance in maintaining the distance and wonderment that so-called primitive cultures provide, will be able to recognize the behavioral patterns depicted in the film. Lyrical realism was supposed to be one of the traditions that neorealism meant to improve on, if not displace; *Brutus* makes us see how approaches faithful to the sensibilities of sufficiently Othered subjects can provide their own vindication in the face of more pragmatic but overused options.

High Tide

Language: Hiligaynon
Year of Release: 2017
Director & Screenwriter: Tara Illenberger [as Tara Barrera Illenberger][59]
Producers: Bonfire Productions, Dark Media Creations, Universal Harvester
Cast: Arthur Solinap, Dalin Sarmiento, Sunshine Teodoro, Forrest Kyle Buscto, Christine Mary Demaisip, Riena Christal Shin, Nathan Sotto, Onal Golez, Allen Rivera Galindo, Allain Hablo, Runshien Olivete, Mitch Fresnillo, Kyle Fermindoza, Christian Demaisip, Farida Kabayao, Dianna Baloran, Joan Paulette, Mary Libo-on, Edwin Caro-Lauran Jr., Ma. Luisa Nalupano, Elvie B. Razon-Gonzales, Emilyn Espera, Genina Toledo, Jeremy Descuatan, Wenil Bautista, Melita Penafiel, Daniella Julieta Caro, Tracy Baky, Jocelyn dela Cruz, Jennifer Tobongbanwa, EJ Mier, Stephanie Rodriguez, Joemel Banas, Harlen Grace Esmajer, Leonard Villanueva, Rafael Dionio, Genie Delareman, Jeffrey Dilag, Ignacio Dumancas, Lily Belle Palma, Ivan Kenjie Villalobos, Roshiel Fernandez, Zahara Shane Lino, Allen Rivera Galindo, Jeson Panes, Lily Belle Palma, Mark Joseph Magada, James Gulles, Josh Berso, Jeren Sola, Zedric Bacolena, Ivan Kenjie Villalobos, Rynshien Olivete, Marilou Doloritos, Jade Claire Villa, Prince Jarandilla, Leo Quiachon, Mereyel Salvacion

countries and the imperialized formations." For a tracking of the critical shortcomings that led to this state of affairs, see Joel David, "From Cloud to Resistance," *Amateurish* (August 30–September 13, 2022), uploaded in three installments starting at amauteurish.com/2022/08/30/the-problem-of-our-critical-approaches/.

[59] The landgrabbing family in the director's 2008 film *Brutus, ang Paglalakbay* is introduced as "Barrera." The filmmaker speculated that she probably associated her maternal grandfather's name with the issue of land: "Friends' and family members' names show up in my films.... My grandfather was not landed. He was a soldier in the war. But later he became a successful businessman. And people would borrow money from him, offering their small land titles. And that's how he acquired property, some of which he didn't really want" (*Messenger* reply, October 17, 2025).

Young sisters Dayday and Laila are sent to school by their fisherfolk parents despite their hand-to-mouth existence on an island in Iloilo. When disaster strikes a neighboring island, their neighbor Mercy agrees to adopt a boy, Unyok, who'd lost both his parents and barely speaks as a result of trauma. The sisters develop a bond with Unyok, with whom they scrounge for shellfish on the beach to sell directly to a restaurant, but the proprietor complains because the sizes of the mollusks they harvest are too small. When the sisters' mother is diagnosed with an ectopic pregnancy and they need to raise funds beyond their means, the three stop attending school and look for ways to help. Unyok remembers how the sea harvest where he used to live was always plentiful, so he convinces the sisters to go there during low tide and return to their island before the tide rises.

Climate change is the impassive and increasingly destructive force that confronts the most dispossessed citizens everywhere, with the Philippines already marked by meteorologists as the most vulnerable country in the world. Much like the issue of the nuclear arms race in the twentieth century, this ensures an existentialist pessimism in any discourse where the prospect might arise. Hence the expression of any form of hope, as *High Tide* endeavors to furnish, might sound like whistling in the dark. Yet the film manages to exempt its narrative's future generation from the defeatism that we know lies in store for them—ironically by focusing on its future generation. To witness them already battered by the ravages of the natural environment, when previously tried and tested measures like calendrical almanacs and miniature timepieces no longer function as they should, yet insist on persevering for the sake of their loved ones and for one another, is to imagine them carving out enough space for their fantasy to prevail, if only in fiction. This makes of *HT* that rarity among independent productions: a work rooted in solid scientific findings and closely observed ethnographic reality, that nevertheless refuses to drown in harsh and overwhelming data. It will make sense primarily for characters like the ones who populate its story, but within a framework where no winners can be guaranteed, the attempt may be seen as possibly desperate, but heroic in its desperation.

RICHARD SOMES

(2 films: 2008–2012)

Yanggaw

English Title: *Affliction*
Language: Hiligaynon
Year of Release: 2008
Director: Richard Somes [as Richard V. Somes]
Screenwriters: Richard Somes & Dwight Gaston
Producers: Cinema One Originals, Reality Entertainment, Larger Than Life, & Strawdogs Studio Production
Cast: Ronnie Lazaro, Tetchie Agbayani, Joel Torre, Aleera Montalla, Gio Respall, Monet Gaston, Keith Bryan Cabañez, Leon Gaston, Erik Matti, Lilit Reyes, Juliet Matti, James Montelibano, Dwight Gaston

> Amor returns to her family's rural home after coming down with an undiagnosable and incurable illness. Her father Junior and the rest of the family soon discover that her ailment causes her to transform into an *aswang* or flesh-eating ghoul. Initially hesitant to harm his own daughter, Junior is driven to extremes just to protect her. But his fatherly compassion threatens to tear apart not just his family but also his small village.

Otherness will probably be the always-already underlying theme of regional cinema, proceeding from the latter's linguistic and geographic distance from Manila-centered production. In depicting a poor rural family coping with a beloved member's monstrous transformation, *Yanggaw* foregrounds this Otherness, stripping away the usual artifice of indie-digital projects and working out ways, mirroring its characters' exertions, to cope with the challenge of low-budget genre production. The resultant shock lies as much in the monster's capacity to generate a parallel lethal response in her heartbroken father (exceptionally played by Ronnie Lazaro), as in our realization that the filmmakers had enough backbone and brains so that they no longer needed to resort to pricey production or visual effects in order to fashion a devastating tale of familial love beyond human understanding.

Mariposa: Sa Hawla ng Gabi

English Translation: *Butterfly: In the Cage of Night*
Year of Release: 2012
Director: Richard Somes [as Richard V. Somes]
Screenwriters: Richard Somes, Boo Dabu, Jimmy Flores
From a story by Richard Somes
Producers: Cinema One Originals & Strawdogs Studio Production
Cast: Erich Gonzales, Alfred Vargas, Mark Gil, Joel Torre, Maria Isabel Lopez, Rez Cortez, Dennis Padilla, John Lapus, Odette Khan, Vangie Labalan, Mon Confiado, Ermie Concepcion, Levi Ignacio, Alex Medina, Shielbert Manuel, Eric Perez, Jim Libiran, Adriana Gomez, Jimmy Callanga, Jake Alba, Allan Ramos, Jack Loterte, Peter Quilapio, George Constantino, Milka Bahian, Johnny Barnes, Cesar Cruz, Conrad Vargas, Vorgy Torre, Coco Torre, Christian Halili, Rayann, Jestoni Negradas, Greg de Costa, Arthur Cudia, Alex Samoranas, Gerald Torrejos, Ju San, Edielyn Hyacint, Barbara Chavez, Grace Ann Gonzales, Charloitte de Guaman, Anna Rose Mina, Yannick Gutierrez, Stefany Lim, A.C. Roperos.

In 1994, Maya's alerted by her aunt, who's unable to shoot a monitor lizard that attacked their chickens. Maya takes the gun to kill it, then skins and prepares it for a meal. Her aunt brings a telegram from Vivian, her sister Mona's friend, telling her she needs to travel to Manila immediately. Vivian brings Maya to a morgue, but when the attendant reveals Mona's body, Vivan's unable to recognize the face and rotting body. When she recognizes some of the tattoos on Mona's body, the attendant tells her that she needs to pay 40,000 pesos to retrieve the corpse or it will be donated to a university for dissection by med students. She reads a name, "Carlos," on one of the tattoos, and asks Vivian to accompany her to wherever the guy lives. Vivian says that the place is dangerous and that she cannot help out after a day. Caloy feels guilt-ridden when he discovers what happened and volunteers to take Maya to Eddie, who knows the crime lord who lent Caloy money in exchange for Vivian's services.

Mariposa: Sa Hawla ng Gabi enacts a long-overdue twist on the hoary standard of the rural innocent who's lured then consumed and expelled by the city. The first indicator of its purpose is in how the title mirrors Lino Brocka's seminal *Maynila: Sa mga Kuko ng Liwanag* (*Manila: In the Claws of Light*, 1975), but the points of departure are immediate and startling: *MSHG* focuses on a still-young lady, whose sister had strayed into the human-trafficking racket that *Maynila*'s Ligaya Paraiso endured. True to her millennium-era emergence, Maya proves to be just as truehearted a seeker as Julio Madiaga, but far better-prepared than the supposedly conflict-scarred urbanites she encounters. Admittedly, this feminist idealization only works within the generic terms dispensed in the film, but that would belie Brocka's own belated realization that the arty social-problem subjects he was encouraged to pursue also had their own baggage of rules and limitations. He'd started to reorient himself in the wilderness of the commercial genres he'd earlier abandoned, and would probably have found some satisfaction in *MSHG*'s embrace of the monstrous, which also distinguished director Richard Somes's approach in *Yanggaw* (*Affliction*, 2008). The larger, more abstract monster, which indubitably accounts for film evaluators' hesitation, is that of generic excess: when Maya, her reluctant guide, and the small-time loan shark who'd collected her then-still-living sister as payment all slug it out in a bid for dominance, the unpredictability of the violence reveals how position, gender, even age become incidental factors when the ultimate stake is survival. And the worst (which is ironic good news for genre hounds) is yet to come.

SOXY TOPACIO

(1 film: 2009)

Ded Na si Lolo

English Title: *Grandpa Is Dead*
Year of Release: 2009
Director & Screenwriter: Soxy Topacio [as Soxie Hernandez Topacio]
Producers: APT Entertainment, Directors Guild of the Philippines, Sine Direk
Cast: Roderick Paulate, Gina Alajar, Elizabeth Oropesa, Manilyn Reynes, Dick Israel, Perla Bautista, Rainier Castillo, BJ Forbes, Tony Cruz, Richard Quan, Mosang, Froilan Sales, Phil Noble, Diego Llorico, Rhen Escaño, Karylle Quijano, Dave Cervantes, Arpee Bautista, Perry Escaño, Richard Jason Paje, Rudy Meyer, Manny Castañeda, Cesar Cosme, Mike "Pekto" Nacua, John Feir, Gene Padilla, Deborah Sun, Gigette Reyes, Noel Cabangon, Jess Evardone, Nor Domingo, Edel Templonuevo

> Lolo Juanito fails to wake up one morning. After his body is returned from the morgue, his grownup children have to gather together at his house for his wake and burial. They all resent Dolores, their eldest, for being the least affectionate sibling. Mameng and Charing bring their families to help out, while estranged son Junee arrives straight from a drag program. Finally the older son, Syano, brings a stranger to the funeral and makes the others realize they never really knew their parents that well after all.

Ded Na si Lolo underwent a trajectory of being overrated, then underrated; but in the period since its release, it deserves to be regarded as a fitting tribute to the highly regarded talents of Philippine Educational Theater Association stalwart Soxy Topacio. The narrative situation indicates an intimate familiarity not just with the score of performers in theater and TV that he worked with, but also with the reality of growing up in an urban working-class milieu. The plot would have challenged most film-trained directors, with characters who keep giving vent to their anguish, with dramatic fainting as one of the family's quirks. Nosy neighbors and importunate superstitions, usually depicted as annoyances if not obstacles in local cinema, are presented with bemusement and acceptance of their inevitability. The narrative builds up to a quietly devastating final-act revelation, heartbreaking and heartwarming in equal measure, that evinces the kind of presence we lost with Topacio's sudden demise.

RAYA MARTIN

(2 films: 2009–2013)

Independencia

English Translation: *Independence*
Year of Release: 2009 / B&W
Director: Raya Martin
Screenwriters: Ramon Sarmiento & Raya Martin
Producers: Cinematografica, Arte France Cinéma, Atopic, Razor Film, Volya Films
Cast: Sid Lucero, Tetchie Agbayani, Alessandra de Rossi, Mika Aguilos, Bodjie Pascua, Lui Manansala, Richard Gonzales, Carl Lawrence Lagasca, Bong Cabrera, Lav Diaz, Arnold Reyes, Angeli Bayani, Adriana Agcaoili, Arleen Cuevas

> As American forces invade the Philippines during the late 1890s, a mother and her son settle in a jungle to hide from the ongoing chaos. One day, the son finds a wounded pregnant woman (everyone is unnamed in the story) who later becomes part of the family. Years pass but as a storm approaches and American troops wend their way through the jungle, the family's peaceful existence could soon come to an end.

The reflexive strategy, where an artwork exposes its creative processes—a novel about a novel being written, for example, or a painting of the painter finishing a painting—succeeded in film more than in any other medium, for reasons that we take for granted today: its photographic nature guarantees a "real," as opposed to abstract, experience; its use of actors provides the lure of star-worship; its commingling of all the other art forms that preceded it allows it to be indirectly self-referential in focusing on a non-filmic occupation. In this respect, the deep reflexivity that *Independencia* extends bodes well for literate film entertainment. Handling a late 19th-century fictional situation with late 19th-century cine aesthetics, Raya Martin renders the anachronism with such bravura expertise that we wind up accepting his stylistic strategy as an appropriate means of framing the narrative. In retrospect, silent-era cinema's bold artificialities also enable our better-late-than-never response to the just-as-blatantly fake anti-revolutionary propaganda films churned out by Thomas Edison et al. for the US colonial government. An additional danger, that of fantasizing that *Independencia* is actually a piece recovered from an early-film archive (which is how the movie presents itself), may be a source of pleasure that the nostalgic-nationalist viewer can be forgiven for indulging in.

How to Disappear Completely

Year of Release: 2013
Director & Screenwriter: Raya Martin
Producers: Cinematografica & Hubert Bals Fund
Cast: Shamaine Buencamino, Nonie Buencamino, Ness Roque, Ronnie Martinez, Abner Delina, Nicole Alejandro, Brent Michael Borro, Jamela Magbanlac, Vince Ivan Real, Patricia Rubiano, Francesca Venice Orense, Rainer Lumbera, Edson Jay K. Ortega, Feliciano M. Lumbera, Donabel Diokno, Mervic Jay Javier, Vener dela Cruz, Jaypee

Plaza, Mario Nipay, Dencio Gagarin, Prinz Gererd Madamba, Appie Badillo, Violy Orense, Jasmin Orense, Esther Banathlao, Pinky Baro, Violeta Lumbera, Josie Regalario, Susan Lumbera, Ma. Yssabella Nervie J.dela Cruz, Elmer Gamilla Jr.

> [***Note: spoilers provided***] A girl's voice informs a preteen boy that she wants to kill him and his family. He cries and his nose bleeds. A title reads "The islands. A year ago" and we witness a funeral procession of laughing children who drop petals on a girl's body on a sepulcher. The mother of a girl reads the Book of Genesis narrative of how the daughters of Lot conspire to sleep with their father by getting him drunk on wine. Meanwhile the girl masturbates on her bed and avoids her father seeing her through the slats on the bamboo floor. As the mother sells sausages to a haggler next day, the father places bets on a cockfight while children play outdoors but "zombie women" (according to end credits) arrive and take them away. The girl arrives home in her play clothes but changes into her school uniform right before arriving. Later the mother witnesses what appears to be her hubby's incestuous interest in their child. The mother tells her daughter the tale of how, in the seventeenth century, a tsunami hit their town and caused death and destruction with only one survivor, and old woman, who continues to haunt their plce looking for her lost daughter. Carrying a figurine of the Virgin Mary, the girl buys two bottles of gin from a convenience store, then she and her mother pray the rosary. The father next tells the story of an angel who told a king he'll have a son, who turned out to be a chicken. The parents died after raising a large brood which wound up quarreling and led to the origin of the Texas rooster breed—a story he narrates to his fighting cock. The girl plays, in costume, the gun of the American who shot a playful Philippine native and started the Philippine-American War; when a teacher looks for the children to congratulate them afterward, she discovers they're gone, abducted in a jeepney. Her parents search for her in their jeep and see her running ahead but fail to notice the old lady sitting in the back seat. Her parents are bound by ropes while the girl, brandishing a gun, marches around a burning cross, occasionally turning into the old woman, then she shoots her parents. A gang of young men desecrate the cemetery then rape and kidnap the girl's classmates, tormenting them during the ride, and threatening to toss them over a bridge their vehicle's crossing.

One will probably be unable to find a more authentic experimental-narrative film from the Philippines than Raya Martin's *How to Disappear Completely*. The question of "better" or "best" achievement will of course be impossible to determine in such a category, although the nearly unanimous oversight of recognition bodies except for the limited (and now-defunct) film festival where it first participated, is a deplorable indicator of our presumptive film evaluators' preparation in conducting out-of-the-ordinary film analysis—not that we never had any forewarning in the past. An *enfant terrible*, Martin never had sufficient support or encouragement from the elders who were then running the national university's film program and opted instead to leapfrog the system they devised and proceed directly to foreign exhibition venues. A family background in political activism and a childhood in a semi-rural environment ensure that the material at least of *HtDC* will be rooted in Martin's memories of authentic experience, with the digital medium's tendency to opt for darkening imagery evoking the constant estrangement of personal memory from the artist's grasp. The traumatic recollection of the past that commences the tale, along with the main character's parents' own remembered fantastic narratives, prove to be no match for forms of violence that the outside forces of history and uneven development imprint on the citizens. Despite its relatively short length, the film reveals its title well past the one-hour mark, possibly the longest wait for any local film, and presents its darkest events from this point onward, in the mercifully short running time that remains. But the preceding practice of juxtaposing unrelated events, characters, and time frames, ensures that *HtDC* will nevertheless maintain a fascination with what must have happened beforehand and where the film will end up afterward.

VIC ACEDILLO JR.

(1 film: 2009)

Ang Nerseri

English Title: *The Nursery*
Year of Release: 2009
Director & Screenwriter: Vic Acedillo Jr.
Producer: Cinemalaya Foundation
Cast: Jaclyn Jose, Timothy Castillo, Lance Raymundo, Alwyn Uytingco, Claudia Enriquez, Ynez Veneracion, Tony Mabesa, Chona Fernando, Babit de Luna, Eunice Lagusad, JM de Guzman, Carme Sanchez, Irene Llopis, Gigi Locsin, Chiqui del Carmen, Gigi Pirote, Imelda Valunsat, John Hernandez, Chona Fernando, Troy de Guzman, Carmelo Soberano, Anthony Corpus, Jayr Cerdenola, Loy Maga, Mark Macalintal, Arvin Trinidad, Jonathan Olano, Melqui Sedic Asuncion, Raymond Roman, Emma Galvez, Flor Salanga, Ma. Ozita "Chit" Pambid, Bernie Villapando, Janice Fuentes, Ian Paraiso

> Mai is at her wits' end as a single mother caring for several kids, all grownup except for Cocoy. Her eldest son moved out and refuses contact with the family, while another son, Jun, has just been recommitted to drug rehab. Still another son, Dean, is acting out also because of addiction, harassing his only sister, Lyn, who eventually suffers a nervous breakdown. Realizing that she'll need extra funds, Mai decides to go to Bohol to sell off some property, leaving Cocoy in charge of his siblings as well as Mai's orchid nursery. Cocoy however has also been masquerading as an outstanding student, and has to assume more than his share of responsibilities when Mai keeps extending her sojourn.

Personal projects in independent cinema are so commonplace that they have become near-synonymous with the practice. No surprise then that the material of *Ang Nerseri*—familial difficulties arising from a combination of psychological and financial problems—observes the expected pattern of these troubles resolving in increasing complications, with barely enough breathing space for the characters to recover from the suffering they have to endure. Yet the film sets itself off from like-minded works by being devoid of any form of narcissism, focused instead on a careful recounting of the emotional costs of the incidents that it narrates. What showiness it possesses lies in the technological risk-taking of using a then-newish digital single-lens reflex camera, the Canon EOS 5D Mark II, a full year before other productions (mostly in Europe) figured out its usefulness for their film projects; even in this undertaking, the fine arts-trained Vic Acedillo Jr. wound up muting his screen colors except for the cooler hues, providing an uncanny feeling of comfort and distance amid the internal turbulence swirling within and among the characters. Acedillo approached his material with hesitation and humility, ironically investing it with an approachability that it affirms via well-observed details and subtle unexpected humor.

MONTI PARUNGAO

(2 films: 2009–2011)

1—*Bayaw*

English Title: *Brothers in Law*
Year of Release: 2009
Director & Screenwriter: Monti Parungao [as Monti Puno Parungao]
From a story by Danio Caw
Producer: Climax Films
Cast: Paolo Rivero, Janvier Daily, Andrew Miguel, Kaye Alipio, Tina Agregado, Daniel Magbanua Jr., Noel Cabuhat, Cleo Muparanum, Jun Austria, Danilo Arayde Jr., Benedict Flores, Manny Pahaub, Rizaldi "Saysay" Rodriguez, Rolly Fundales, Hazel, Dhang Macapagal, Monti Parungao, Don Marion Mariring, Sany Chua, Onin Lara, Johnrex Espinosa, Alvin Agoncillo, Jeff Almazan

Danilo Vergara is taken out of his jail cell to be interviewed by a police investigator. He narrated how he had difficulty making ends meet as an entry-level police officer, forced to engage in petty corruption but finally targeted in a buy-bust operation. His brother-in-law Rhenan Jacinto is a neighborhood layabout, betting on spider combats and earning playing money by selling himself to queer onlookers. Danilo's wife gets increasingly antagonistic with her hubby and brother, since she has to act as sole earner from nightclub work. When Danilo gets fed up with her insults, the couple quarrel over his gun—which accidentally discharges and kills her. He and Rhenan flee to a distant town where they use up the money they brought to stay in a motel and snatch valuables from unsuspecting pedestrians. Eric, another sidewalk denizen, makes their acquaintance and offers the use of a small room where he squats. Whenever Danilo feels stressed and needs to find relief, he makes use of Rhenan, with Eric becoming an additional option. Eric though seeks to split the alliance between the fugitives, which Rhenan is too naïve to notice but which Danilo readily realizes.

2—*The Escort*

Year of Release: 2011
Director: Monti Parungao [as Monti Puno Parungao]
Screenwriter: Lex Bonife
From a story by Lance D. Collins
Producers: Lexuality Entertainment & Treemount Pictures
Cast: Miko Pasamonte, Danniel Derramyo, Jommel Idulan, Bryal Legaspi, Katleen Borbon, Franklin Jundak, Dennis Diwa, Lance D. Collins, Bien Rivera, Edward Sanggalang, Hart Thiel Pascual, Joseph Daoang, Alan Dimaano, Clifford Coloma, R.J. Naguit

Karlo barely earns enough to cover his rent and has to contend with prospective clients who renege on their appointments. At the bar where he makes himself available to johns on the prowl, Yuri introduces himself and confesses an attraction to him. Karlo takes him home for a night together, where Yuri also narrates how he has to live with a congenital ailment. Karlo agrees to a second meetup, a rarity for him, and has to blow off a lucrative date with an eager client. He discovers that his other sources have avoided him, pressured by the client angered by his turnaround. When Yuri also seems to have canceled him, he tries to determine his new pal's whereabouts and encounters unwelcome news.

During the decidedly transitional period, roughly the first decade of the current millennium, when video production was low-end enough to enable mall screenings without threatening celluloid releases, the resulting niche was immediately occupied by soft-core gay-male material, inasmuch as it attracted the kind of audience who could use darkened spaces as an opportunity to cruise for prospective partners. Monti Parungao was one of the names associated with the trend, although his output was less prolific than most. Typical of the spell in Pinas "queer" cinema, the releases were short and traded on romantic tales intended for distracted consumption. *Bayaw* and *The Escort* complement each other for being two-hander quest narratives premised on the aspirations of underprivileged individuals. The fugitives in *Bayaw* define their interactions as situational occurrences—i.e., they make use of available warm bodies to satisfy their carnal needs, and only arrive at a realization of an emotional attachment ironically when imprisonment stops them from fleeing further. In *TE*, an older hustler is surprised to realize how the love he dispenses is precisely what he had been depriving himself of, awakened to this reality by a younger practitioner who happens to admire him. The epiphany occurs early enough, so the story should conclude when it happens, were it not for the intrusion of complications induced by the characters' destitution. Film critic Jojo Devera points out in his review how hope and despair collide in the characters' crossroads, where they "coexist in a contemporary world of excess and absurdity normalized amidst the chaos of it all, while dismantling social boundaries" ("Everybody Hustles," *Sari-Saring Sineng Pinoy*, November 2024, posted online). Parungao's presentations deliver on the promise of significance and poignancy in a much-abused and unfairly derided subgenre.

ARMANDO LAO

(1 film: 2009)

Biyaheng Lupa

English Translation: *Overland Journey*
English Title: *Soliloquy*
Year of Release: 2009
Director & Screenwriter: Armando Lao
Producer: Quantum Films
Cast: Jaclyn Jose, Julio Diaz, Coco Martin, Angel Aquino, Eugene Domingo, Susan Africa, Shamaine Buencamino, Mercedes Cabral, Carl Guevara, Allan Paule, Andoy Ranay, Archie Adamos, Jess Evardone, Jose Almojuela, Isabella de Leon, Mely Soriano

> The stories of various people come together via their thoughts in a bus ride from Manila to Legazpi City. Anabel, a young single woman, is pregnant and, wracked by guilt, worries that she might give birth to a monster. Alex, whose ambitions have fallen apart, desperately clings to the pyramid scheme that he believes will be his key to success. A mother, Irene, regrets leaving her son so she can work abroad. Fina, a game-show contestant who finally admits to herself her dissatisfaction with her husband, crumbles at the prospect of meeting him once more. Helen, a woman conducting an extramarital affair, is anxious to maintain her secret. Her reverie is interrupted when a gossipy spinster, Lilian, boards the bus; in turn Lilian sets her eyes on Pepe, the conductor, just as a gay passenger similarly eyes Obet, a dreamy, melancholy young man who turns out to be homophobic. Even Mickey, a deaf-mute, articulates his thoughts as he leaves his foster home to visit his biological mother's grave. As more passengers hop on and off the bus, these and other stories either find, in their own ways, their own welcome (or unwelcome) resolutions.

A busload of working-class characters journey to a distant destination and see, not the scenery passing by, but their past follies, present predicaments, and uncertain futures. The movie first takes on the difficult challenge of pulling off a genuine multiple-character narrative, perhaps the most ambitious among local features, with 16—or possibly 17, counting the unseen bus driver—lead actors. It then complements this with the audacious technique of externalizing these personalities' inner lives by allowing us to literally hear their thoughts. The end of the film, coinciding with the end of their trip, demonstrates not just how rare it is to encounter a fully developed aesthetic philosophy in a first film, but also how preferable this is to the skills display that most debuting directors feel obliged to demonstrate. Perhaps more significantly, in light of Lao's extensive influence in local film-project conceptualizations, is in how *Biyaheng Lupa* departs from Lao's utilization of real-time presentations, notably in his collaborations with filmmakers who first garnered global attention via the scripts he wrote for them. Lao described *BL* as reliant on poetic time, where cosmic principles impinge on the unfolding of the narrative, as opposed to the duration-dependent real time and his earlier deployment of character-based dramatic time. Such insights on transience, destiny, and the abiding power of memory are brought to bear in the film's bravura climax, simple in conception, casual in execution, yet grand in the best possible way, where a series of rapturous textual ruptures build up to an incredible final shot that resolves the film narrative in a way that coalesces the literal with the symbolic in a manner that might still have the capacity to surprise avant-gardists wherever they may lurk.

RAY GIBRALTAR

(1 film: 2009)

Wanted: Border

Additional Language: Hiligaynon
Year of Release: 2009
Director: Ray Gibraltar [as Ray Defante Gibraltar]
Screenwriters: Ray Gibraltar & John Iremil E. Teodoro
With poetry credit for John Iremil E. Teodoro
Producer: Cinema One Originals
Cast: Rosanna Roces, Joy Louise Evidente, Kristoffer Rhys Grabato, Publio Briones III, Raffy Tejada, Edward Divinagracia, Dante Amaguin, Joan Paulette Libo-on, Edgrado Amar, Rheno Mar Soqueño, Boyet Zuluaga, Kukok Piconcillo, Nemia Guinabo, Farida Kabayao, Edgar Gayorgor, Sol Alquizar, Dennis Ascalon, Mona Pico, Pamela Falcis, Alf Alacapa, Rick Roco, The Boys, A.J. Aurelio, Faith Javellana, Edrelita Sebio, Audie Barbasa, Arnel Sumpay, Sunshine Teodoro, Peter Paul Deocos, Teatro Busilak (University of Iloilo), Western Institute of Technology, USA Little Theater

> Mama Saleng is a religious enthusiast who wants to be crucified for Holy Week as part of her devotion to "Gino-o" or Lord, a strangely attired deity that apparently only she sees. She runs a dormitory with an eatery on the ground floor that has attained local fame for its specialization in *kansi*, a sour soup traditionally made from beef shanks. Her secret is that she uses human meat, usually from boarders she slaughters when she thinks that no one will come looking for them. Her familiarity with violence arises from a childhood trauma, when she witnessed her family fatally attacked by townspeople for allegedly being *aswang* or flesh-eating monsters. Her unhinged assistant Andres volunteers to perform the killings, while her foodie neighbor Shine develops an appetite for her cooking. A video filmmaker requests permission to document her establishment while an abused young girl believes she has found refuge in Mama Saleng's place. A visitor unexpectedly drops by who reminds her of the time she fell in love with a military official whose mission was to hunt down antigovernment rebels.

A single viewing will instantly make understandable why *Wanted: Border* earned positive notices but faded as soon as the next indie cause célèbre came along. It starts with horror-film atmospherics premised on the penny-dreadful serial narratives that gave rise to a figure most famously embodied in Sweeney Todd. The violation of the taboo of cannibalism unsurprisingly recurs in times and places of desperate poverty, although never directly in terms of the consumption of human flesh but rather in the availability of animals as food—usually from piggeries adjacent to morgues, although reports of fish that may have fed on the bodies of murdered gamblers dumped in Taal Lake nearly triggered social panic in the more recent past. Yet the practice remains more intimate and regular than we like to assume, as Sigmund Freud reminded his readers of the ritual of partaking of a divine being's blood and body during Communion. *WB*, titular misspelling and all, sets itself distantly enough, by locating the narrative in rural terrain separated from the capital as much by water as by language, and by refusing to allow horror to dominate the proceedings. The strategy succeeds primarily because of the presence of Rosanna Roces as Mama Saleng, one of the rare actors who retains an earthiness no matter what register she performs in, and enables the characters who interact with her to exhibit contradictions despite the emergence of distinguishing qualities: the comic devourer, the scarily psychotic butcher, the melodramatic abuse survivor, the amoral media professional. These properties come to a head in the military officer, whose love affair with Saleng provided her with the opportunity to embark on the adventure that would define her for us. The material of *WB* may be repulsive in the telling and the recollection, but it's also capable of satisfying an appetite for the insightfully twisted, if one is fortunate enough to be seized by such a tendency.

MAE CRUZ-ALVIAR

(2 films: 2010–2014)

Babe, I Love You

Year of Release: 2010
Director: Mae Cruz-Alviar [as Mae Czarina Cruz]
Screenwriters: Mia Bacarro, Margarette Labrador Garcia, King Palisoc, Ricardo Fernando III, Generiza F. Reyes
From a story by Mia Bacarro, Margarette Labrador Garcia, King Palisoc
Producers: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Viva Films, Star Cinema
Cast: Sam Milby, Anne Curtis, Laurice Gillen, Tetchie Agbayani, Lala Sanchez, Nikki Valdez, Kitkat, Guji Lorenzana, Niña Dolino, Leo Rialp, Ricardo Cepeda, Megan Young, AJ Perez, Shamaine Buencamino, Nicole Uysiuseng, Thou Reyes, Nikki Bacolod, Angel Sy, CJ Jaravata, Roden Araneta, Cheska Ortega, Justin Gonzales, Maritess Joaquin, Jessette Prospero, Gigi Locsin, Antonio Roma, Aloysius Noroña, Marion dela Cruz, Jose Sarasola, Jaypee Aveyro, Martin Silverio, Tim Dewitt, Chris Racuber, Brian Hills, Henry Litam, Hannah Leah Pasudag, Apple Mendoza, Jane Malilin, Hannah Cimafranca, Vanessa Lozano, Jane Dadis, Michelle Dantis, Alvin Trono, Harvey Quiwa, Donabel Deinla, Ramlo John Torres, Nicolo Caronan, Phennie Poliquit, Alvin Fortunato

> Nico Borromeo, a professor of architecture, is congratulated by his mentor for being a frontrunner for vice dean. His mother, a retired academic, hasn't recovered from the memory of her husband dying sad and angered because of Nico's refusal to pursue a professional career in his younger years. When Nico attends a well-off friend's bachelor's party, he makes the acquaintance of one of the promo girls, Sasa Sanchez, who charms him with her humor and unaffected manner. When she attempts to sell him a special offer, he snubs her and walks out. As he hails a cab, some thugs attempt to hold him up just as Sasha's driving by on the way home with her friends. They tell her to intervene and she crashes her vehicle in the process but she's able to save Nico. When she asks him to cover the cost of her smashed fender, he tells her to visit him at university, where their process of mutual understanding develops. Nico's mother objects to Sasha's uncultured ways but Nico's determined to prove his stubbornness won't have destructive consequences this time around.

Don't be put off by the Air Supply power ballad, which has endured in Pinas middlebrow pop culture and whose use was apparently secured for the project. *Babe, I Love You* has the first of Anne Curtis's offbeat performances and will go a long way in explaining why her concerts have become fan favorites despite her singing skills being closer to Yoko Ono's than to any aspiring talent contestant's. Curtis's game self-awareness is infectious and always conveys a lingering impression that her gifts might lie elsewhere if they could only be discovered; but with all the fun that could be had even at her own expense, why worry about such ornery concerns? *BILY*'s one of the few romcoms that signaled a restlessness among Noypi practitioners and audiences, necessitating a fallback on one of the genre's genealogical properties during its emergence in Classical Hollywood: the class-crossed romance. Some finagling might be at work here, since Curtis belongs to that rare class of actors whose features may be pliable enough to be transformed in a wide variety of ways but who'll always retain an arresting appeal no matter what her character is made to do. *BILY* compensates by devoting its central focus to the lead male's psychosocial predicaments in order to justify the reduction of Curtis's screen time. But her reappearances have the effect of sweeping away any preceding development and restoring the concerns of the Othered character, which is after all a vital part of the genre's subversive potential.

Bride for Rent

Year of Release: 2014
Director: Mae Cruz-Alviar [as Mae Czarina Cruz]
Screenwriters: Charlene Grace Bernardo & Carmi Raymundo
Producers: ABS-CBN Film Productions & Star Cinema
Cast: Kim Chiu, Xian Lim, Empoy Marquez, Martin del Rosario, Pilita Corrales, Tirso Cruz III, Dennis Padilla, Matt Evans, Lloyd Zaragoza, Zeppi Borromeo, Eda Nolan, Gerald Pesigan, Santino Espinoza, Leo Rialp, Marlann Flores, Anita Linda, Tony Mabesa, RJ Ledesma, Jackie Aquino, Roden Araneta, Alex Castro, Artemio Abad, Bodie Cruz, Ivan Asuncion, Arlene Muhlach, Helga Krapf, Loven Canon, Patricia Prieto, Regine "Apan" T. Agra, Mark McMahon, Amelia Villaruel, Olive Isidro, Hersey Gonzales Gregorio, Edgar Allan Yu

> High-living scion Roderico "Rocco" Espiritu Jr. is anticipating prosperity when he turns 25, since he'll be able to collect from his trust fund, so he drunkenly gambles away the money allotted for a major company project. Since he's estranged from his father Roderico Sr., his grandma Lala oversees his affairs, but then she's abroad for a health procedure. On the day he expects his long-awaited windfall, his lawyer says that Lala appended a condition for the release of money: he should first prove that he's married. Since he already dismissed his long-term girlfriend and his work partners are asking him for results, he concocts a fake audition to pick a woman to pose as his wife. The aspirant who wins the role is Racquelita "Rocky" dela Cruz, breadwinner for a large family on the verge of losing the small space whose rent they've been unable to cover for half a year already. Rocky soon discovers that she can't stand Rocco's heartless and cynical treatment and confesses the deception to the recently returned Lala, whose worrying over Rocco's immaturity overrides her annoyance over the little trick that she already expected him to pull. She conscripts Rocky to participate in her own scheme to help him realize the error of his ways.

Possibly the closest to a conventional entry in this entire canon list, *Bride for Rent* nevertheless manages to execute the ordinarily objectionable class-conciliatory trick via a combination of plot reversals and clever casting choices. Allotting the narrative's decision-making processes to strong-women protagonists has been an enduring strength of Philippine cinema, ever since local history affirmed its feasibility in countering the excesses of military dictatorship nearly half a century ago. The aspect that required careful treading was in setting up the collusion between a grande dame and a hard-working slum dweller, who first meet as allies-to-be when the latter is evicted by her landlady in the pouring rain. The project certainly benefited from casting Xian Lim and Kim Chiu, love-team actors who then had minimal social baggage of their own and could commit to tragicomic role-playing without much difficulty. But the unexpected coup was in the selection of a performer whose classy-*mestiza* projection was always complemented with camp, of a sort that cut across classes, genders, and nationalities. A long list of contemporaries could certainly outperform her without much effort, but Pilita Corrales's benign and self-amused presence, anchored on several marks of Otherness starting with her halting delivery of Tagalog lines, arrives at just the point when the story required the intervention of the equivalent of a fairy godmother. All that *BfR* had to do after Corrales shows up is ensure that Chiu's working-class character never loses her moral ascendancy and avoids the usual pitfall of turning a slum resident into a princess-in-waiting. *BfR* facilitates this by configuring its male object's status as a popular media figure and endowing the woman with the immediately recognizable dignity derived from a life of hardship. Proof that genre elements can still be faithfully observed yet yield rewards that art cinema could only aspire toward at the risk of losing its own dignity.

CHRIS MARTINEZ

(1 film: 2010)

Here Comes the Bride

Additional Languages: Spanish, Hiligaynon
Year of Release: 2010
Director & Screenwriter: Chris Martinez
Producers: Star Cinema, OctoArts Films, Quantum Films
Cast: Eugene Domingo, John Lapus, Tuesday Vargas, Angelica Panganiban, Cherry Pie Picache, Tom Rodriguez, Kim Atienza, Cai Cortez, Johnny Revilla, Bart Guingona, Ricky Rivero, Ricci Chan, Neil Ryan Sese, Ayen Munji-Laurel, Madeleine Nicolas, Timothy Chan, Nico Antonio, Cecil Paz, Ernie Forte, Malou Crisologo, Tess Antonio, Raul Vasquez, Eric Espiritu, Anthony de Guzman, Peaches Beleno, Raquel Donila, Tess de Guman, Mitch Dantes, Sammer Concepcion, Kim Buranday, Kevin Zaldariaga, John Carl Daluz, Arianna Jarmel P. Panganiban, Jeio Navel Suarez, Mark Anthony Saycon, The Bien Rivera Group

> A wedding couple and the members of their party proceed to a beach resort in Rizal Province, where the ceremony will be held. People in five cars, alone or with their companions, are confronting crises of varying degrees. When they pass over Magnetic Hill, a solar eclipse takes place and their vehicles are involved in a chain collision. After the accident, a person in each of the cars notices unusual behavior, duly affecting everyone around them. A lawyer behaves like the prudish bride, eager to get to "her" wedding and worrying her best friend, the bride's mother; a gay hairdresser turns into an elderly Spanish-speaking casanova, messing up a bridesmaid's makeup but compensating by providing her with hot sex; a rustic nanny bamboozled by the family who employs her turns dominative and argues for her legal rights as well as those of others; a retired tycoon starts speaking like a naïve bumpkin and is delighted by the discovery of easy access to money; the prudish bride-to-be suddenly revels in her youth and beauty, changes into provocative clothes so she can flirt with hunks on the beach, and insists on a premarital romp with her flabbergasted fiance. The bride-in-the-lawyer's body, who's prevented from attending her own wedding, figures out that the five of them have exchanged personalities; they approach a paranormal expert, who informs them that the convergence of the accident along with the solar eclipse on Magnetic Hill might have been responsible for their alterations, but that if they have to replicate the incident in order to restore their original personalities, they will have to await the next solar eclipse two years from the present.

The high-concept comedy is such a rarity in Philippine pop culture that the qualified achievement of such an undertaking would be preferable to its total absence. *Here Comes the Bride* takes the further risk of elevating the attempt to a grand scale, premised on the entertainment skills promised by a larger-than-usual cast proceeding from various distinctive types, each one moving to personas far different from the one they started out with. All the actors have had sufficient training in the roles they embody, plus additional experience in one or more of the performing-arts venues of theater, TV, and/or film, honing their *HCtB* role-playing further through preproduction exercises. The one exception is the semi-central role of the bride: as portrayed by Angelica Panganiban, she starts out opposed to her real-life identity of a bubbly, adventurous, occasionally outrageous lass, but transitions to an even more extreme version of her public personality, thus inadvertently though momentarily upstaging the rest of the cast. The measure of the self-awareness of *HCtB*'s

creatives lies in their figuring out how the narrative's dynamic should play out. Since the setup's complication lies first in tracking the transformation of each character before they figure out the underlying cause of the phenomenon, the process of awaiting the next paranormal opportunity and setting themselves up in order to replicate the opening multivehicular pileup takes on a technical (actually technological) aura. An attempt at a last-minute mixup, with the dislodged personalities winding up in still the wrong bodies, provides the standard race-against-time suspense prior to the requisite happy ending. Its arrival signifies as much the closure of the present plotline as the opening up of a challenge to tackle more high-concept projects with equal or greater ambition, matched with all the preparatory ability our collection of talents can muster.

JOHN SAYLES

(1 film: 2010)

Amigo

English Translation: *Friend*
Additional Languages: Cantonese, Spanish
Year of Release: 2010
Director & Screenwriter: John Sayles
Based on research used in John Sayles's 2011 novel *A Moment in the Sun*; Tagalog translations by Jose F. Lacaba
Producers: Anarchist's Convention Films & Pinoy Pictures
Cast: Arthur Acuña, Irma Adlawan, John Arcilla, Merlin Bonning, Hoffman Cheng, Reymart Colestines, Ermie Concepcion, Chris Cooper, Dane DeHaan, Garret Dillahunt, Miguel Faustmann, Brian Lee Franklin, Joe Gruta, J.P. Jagunos, Ronnie Lazaro, Rio Locsin, Diana Malahay, Raul Manikan, Spanky Manikan, Pen Medina, Raul Morit, Lucas Neff, James Obenza, Jemi Paretas, James Parks, Bodjie Pascua, DJ Qualls, Lady Jane Rellita, Bembol Roco, Bill Tangradi, Stephen Monroe Taylor, Joel Torre, Ka Chun Tsoi, Yul Vazquez

> Rafael is the *cabeza* or head of the small rural town of San Isidro, while his brother joined the anticolonial revolution against Spain, which has transmuted into the Filipino–American War. American troops arrive and take over the town and instruct Rafael to continue his function while freeing the incarcerated Spanish priest, even as Rafael's adolescent son flees to join his uncle's resistance army. Rafael finds himself caught between the revolutionary leadership's instructions and the commands of the new occupation forces, who provide a carrot-and-stick strategy to win the cooperation of the townfolk. They set up telegraph wires to communicate directly with the US administration in Manila but the rebels massacre the Chinese coolies that the Americans brought over. Lt. Compton, with the priest as go-between, organizes an election to select a new leader, but the qualified voters (males at least 21 years old) write in Rafael's name; true to his promise, Compton honors their choice and even accedes to their plans for their annual town fiesta. The arrival of Col. Hardacre, who'd earlier instructed his troops to fence off the town to prevent San Isidro from providing insurrectionists with support, restores the tense relations between the natives and the US Army, as Rafael is waterboarded and forced to lead the US soldiers to the place where his brother and son might be hiding.

The resonance of the brother-vs.-brother conflict in *Amigo* is so schematic, biblical even, that it proves a relief when John Sayles opts to focus instead on the regular interactions between Rafael and the people in his community, even including the foreign invaders. *Amigo* demonstrates that authors of Western film and literature can only begin to understand their own societies' prosperity-driven triumphs by confronting their colonial records. John Sayles's political honesty and moral clarity enabled him to come up with the first US-made critical text on his country's occupation of the Philippines, and one can see the approach's usefulness in how Western film critics eagerly read contemporary American political concerns in their appreciation of the release, including a covert attempt by the official whom Rafael had won over, to subvert his own superior. There were also a lot of reservations expressed about the work compared to Sayles's earlier output, although we might be able to take the cue from the quandary that Rafael finds himself trapped in: try as he might to reconcile the demands of either side, their inherent antagonisms will result (as they did in the

plot) in either division deciding that their best interest will be realized if they get rid of him. In this respect, it would also prove productive to see how Sayles, inadvertently or otherwise, anticipated several then-forthcoming developments in Philippine politics: the population's frustration with democratic processes, the acceptance of militaristic violence against elements configured as outlaws, the vulnerability to influence-peddlers who have their own agenda to advance. The viewing experience has always been difficult for anyone, regardless of nationality, invested in the story's historical implications—which is tantamount to saying that more ambitious plans announced by other American film artists might encounter greater difficulty in reaching an audience. *Amigo* might therefore remain for some time the only overt progressive treatment by Americans of their only successful overseas colonial adventure (to our continuing long-term detriment, needless to add), and it serves as a fitting cap to its filmmaker's exemplary career.

SHERON R. DAYOC

(1 film: 2010)

Halaw

English Title: *Ways of the Sea*
Additional Languages: Cebuano, Tausug, Zamboangueño Chavacano
Year of Release: 2010
Director & Screenwriter: Sheron R. Dayoc
Producers: Cinemalaya Foundation & Los Peliculas Linterna Studio
Cast: John Arcilla, Maria Isabel Lopez, Arnalyn Ismael, Ross-Ann Dalkis, Aljimar Hajilol, Rodaine Avalie, Hadja Nursiya Darangina, Edgardo Sumicad Jr., Randy Amodia, Hadji Amman Sahi, Nasri Tawasil, Anelyn Carino, Justies Love Matchon, Reden Silven, Fharwis Amil, Joel Bustamante, Maimuna Mutos

> Hernand encounters a whole set of difficulties in organizing his latest attempt to transport Philippine natives illegally to Malaysia on a motorized outrigger boat, via the southern backdoor. Some of the young women he recruited to work as entertainers got cold feet and backed out, while Khalil, who's in charge of one of their stopovers, wants to collect on a loan he lent out earlier. Mercedes, a veteran hospitality worker, joins their group and provides assurance and confidence to some of the understandably anxious women. Their passage through the Malaysian area of responsibility is fraught with danger, with their prospective country's coast guard on the alert for their type of intrusion.

The reason why *Halaw* endures over the passage of time has to do with the several balancing acts it executes in delineating its passengers' sea trip (in contrast with the road trips of New American Cinema); since there can only be pitifully few possible conclusions at the end, none of them worth accepting, the journey becomes the whole point of the narrative. The collection of passengers is distinguished by social gaps that each one tries to overcome, as casually and painlessly as possible, though this turns out to be easy only for the most privileged among them. At the head of their group are two Manila-bred Tagalog-speaking migrants (played by the "name" members of the cast): Hernand has his hands full ensuring that everyone gets on board, while Mercedes uses wilier ways to persuade the understandably reluctant female recruits. At the other extreme is a prepubescent girl, Daying, identified by the others as a Badjao native; she may be the only character who does not speak her native tongue, since no one else would understand her—but she also literally upstages everyone by performing the celebrated *Pangalay* dance. These rounds of simple, lighthearted distractions, including exchanges of gossip, jokes, and beauty tips, will be recognizable to any native confronted by the looming prospect of overseas alienation and danger. Most of the action increasingly takes place in the dark, since the group has to travel by night through pre-electrified islands. The film provides a visual counterpart to forestall the anguish that inevitably awaits, by enabling us to occasionally glimpse natural scapes of quiet beauty, with none more ravishing than the very destination that marks their transformation from citizens to illegal entities.

REMTON SIEGA ZUASOLA

(1 film: 2010)

Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria

English Title: *Eleuteria's Dream*
Alternate Title: *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria Kirchbaum*
Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2010
Director: Remton Siega Zuasola
Screenwriters: Maria Victoria Beltran & Remton Siega Zuasola
Producers: Cinema One Originals & Panumduman Pictures
Cast: Donna Gimeno, Gregg Tecson, Lucia Juezan, Emelda Mabusay, Ara Chawdhury, Daday Melgar

> Eleuteria is a young lady who is reluctant to fly to Germany where a rich old man is waiting to claim her as his mail-order bride. However, her mother convinces her that this is the best way she can support their poor family. As she walks toward a harbor en route to the city airport, with her boyfriend pleading with her to stay, she has to choose between her family's welfare and her own happiness.

A *tour de force* made even more remarkable by the fact that the material is set on far-flung Olango Island, part of an eponymous island group in Cebu Province and famed as a bird sanctuary. The actors speak in Cebuano and the action unfolds in real time. Remton Siega Zuasola was brazen enough to appropriate, in his first feature-length release, the single-take strategy of a few (appropriately celebrated) Western models.[60] *Ang Damgo ni Eleuteria* stakes its interests in an issue as vital to the survival of the Philippine nation as it has also become the concern of citizens in more affluent economies: the uprooting of Filipino citizens, occasionally against their will, as constituent elements in the country's labor-export machinery, its only viable new-millennium industry.

[60] The single-take film can arguably be ascribed to the very first commercially successful instances of cinema, little over a hundred years ago: the Lumière brothers' so-called actualities, each comprising about a minute's worth of unedited footage. This may be one of the reasons why people familiar with film history appreciate long unbroken shots. Since commercial-gauge celluloid film could only be exposed continuously for up to ten minutes at a time, Alfred Hitchcock had to use artificial devices (usually panning or zooming into dark surfaces) to mask the cuts in *Rope* (1948). Because of the extreme difficulty of executing narrative dramas this way, as well as audiences' unfamiliarity with the technique, most single-take efforts during the pre-digital period were confined to experimental arthouse releases such as Andy Warhol's eight-hour *Empire* (1964), a stationary shot of New York City's Empire State Building, and Michael Snow's 45-minute zoom *Wavelength* and whirling-camera *La region centrale* (*The Central Region*, 1971). The digital format enabled actual or simulated single takes and provided several notable samples: Mike Figgis's commercially released *Timecode* (2000), with four full-length single takes presented in four interactive frames simultaneously; Aleksandr Sokurov's *Russkiy kovcheg* (*Russian Ark*, 2002), where a ghostly narrator, represented by the camera, wanders through Saint Petersburg's Winter Palace and encounters people and events over the past three centuries; and Alejandro G. Iñárritu's so-titled *Birdman or (The Unexpected Virtue of Ignorance)* (2014), a mixed-genre film with reflexive elements that won the US Academy Award for Best Picture. In the Philippines, Zuasola's subsequent films as well as Pepe Diokno's *Engkwentro* (*Clash*, 2009) were also single-take features.

LAWRENCE FAJARDO

(4 films: 2011–2015)

Amok

Additional Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2011
Director: Lawrence Fajardo
Screenwriters: John Paul Bedia & Lawrence Fajardo
From a story by Lawrence Fajardo
Producers: Cinemalaya Foundation, Pelikulaw, Wild Coyote Pictures
Cast: Mark Gil, Dido de la Paz, Garry Lim, Spanky Manikan, Nonie Buencamino, Efren Reyes Jr., Archi Adamos, Lui Manansala, Ermie Concepcion, Suzette Ranillo, John Arceo, Rolando Inocencio, Acey Aguilar, Nico Antonio, Patricia Ismael, Ku Aquino, Tuxqs Rutaquio, Akira Sapla, Wovi Villanueva, Xavi Hemady, Bryan Cabase, Ivy Rivero, Lowell Conales, Michelle Nollora, Amante Pulido, JM Bermudez, Nino Verbida, Angel Pasiderio, Noel Taylo, Annaluz Cornelio, Gary Gonzales, Dina Ofrancia

> At the intersection of Metro Manila's circumferential Epifanio de los Santos Avenue and arterial Taft Avenue, denizens who live and/or work in the vicinity or pass through it are forced to make major adjustments because of a series of gunshots. Manuel meets his son Samuel so they can return to their hometown and plan the young man's sports plans. Belen watches over her unruly daughter Mai Mai, who's momentarily distracted by young street rappers, while roasting and selling street food. Efren's helping his nephew Makoy apply for a job then discovers that the latter's application materials are forged. An elderly woman agrees to commit arson in her slum neighborhood in exchange for payment by Sarge, a corrupt police officer. A former stuntman fucks a streetwalker he picked up but when he discovers her Adam's apple, he realizes she was transgender and refuses to pay her. A middle-aged man is driving his wealthier sister while arguing with her about his life choices. A gay pimp is taking a handsome youth he picked up to a party of wealthy queers but the cabbie refuses to drive them there because of the distance he has to cover. A former police officer takes leave from his pregnant wife, a clothes seller, to play the native variation on billiards where chips are used instead of balls; when a younger player wins the old man's money and teases him, the latter pulls out a gun, points it at the player menacingly, and walks away. The traumatized younger man throws up, his mood darkening despite his companion comforting him, and he seeks out the ex-policeman, knife in hand.

Despite the absence of any photographic evidence of a traffic circle having once been located at the intersection, Pasay Rotonda maintains its attraction and indispensability as the juncture of tradition (the old government buildings and churches of Quiapo and Baclaran along Taft Avenue) and modernity (the business district, now city, of Makati and the Manila Bay Reclamation Project along EDSA); apparently, it was formerly the site of Plaza Avelino, which functioned as a hub for Manila's pre-World War II tram system. Featuring, among other distinctions, four *barangays* (districts) located at each of its four corners, the area understandably remains congested at all hours of the day and night, with nearly everyone on their way to or from major destinations. More than most films that feature multiple characters, *Amok* requires intensive familiarity with its circumscribed locale as well as its dramatis personae. The fact that it was made by a filmmaker who migrated from the Visayas to the metropolitan capital provides the first clue to its sharply observed yet carefully measured approach: the further the character perceives her distance from the center, the more articulate she is about the manner in which the city (via some middleperson or other) mistreats her. One might readily remark, upon an initial viewing, that the plot's

cynicism is revealed when the few characters who benefit from a happy ending do so by claiming some reward that they believe is owed them. Yet the one reflexive representative, a bitter has-been stuntman (genially embodied by Mark Gil), ironically and comically finds an opportunity for high-profile visibility in being shot. The larger impression of a community brought together by an unexpected crisis makes *Amok* the closest that Philippine cinema has come to replicating the achievement of Ishmael Bernal's *Manila by Night* (1980), a revelation that signifies great promise in its filmmaker's forthcoming output.

Posas

English Title: *Shackled*
Additional Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2012
Director: Lawrence Fajardo
Screenwriter: Zig Madamba Dulay
Producers: Quantum Films & Cinemalaya Foundation
Cast: Nico Antonio, Bangs Garcia, Arthur Acuña, Nor Domingo, Jake Macapagal, Hector Macaso, John Lapus, Wendy Valdez, Susan Africa, Jelson Bay, Raul Morit, CJ Ramos, Jonathan Tadioan, Andy Bais, Ermie Concepcion, Phillip Nolasco, Ofelia Fernandez, Nino Verbida, Honorio Santiago, Rain Robles, Michael Bautista, Raul dela Cruz, James Jaime, Cris Garrido, Ricky Tangco, Dodie Baingan, Philip John Buena

> Jess is a pickpocket who works the busy lower-class district of Quiapo to support his mother and send his sister to school. When he spots a new iPhone model owned by well-off Bangs, he stalks her in a busy mall and lifts the item. After selling it to Musngi, his regular fence, and getting told off by his girlfriend because she has work to attend to, he's spotted on the street by Bangs, who flags some police officers to chase Jess. Bangs promises to reward the police when she gets the phone back because it contains important business information, but in reality she'd recorded a booty session with her boyfriend on it. Led by Inspector Domingo, the police take Jess to a private room to torture him until he admits to the larceny. Jess leads the police to Musngi, and they also try to convince Bangs to drop her charges because of the hassle that a trial process will entail.

Posas, in a sense, resumes the exploration of the squalid urban milieu initiated the previous year in *Amok*, but over a wider geographical area and with the number of major characters reduced to basics. The creative challenge consequently shifts to attaining a reality effect, especially considering how the narrative elements appear to replicate those of standard procedural thrillers. The film conditions a readily progressive perspective by focalizing the plot on the least significant entity, that of the petty thief who slips up once and pays the same price that big-time hardened criminals acquiesce to as a matter of course. In a manner of speaking, the police officials who extract a pledge from him to accept their protection (in exchange for sharing half his profits, of course) may be regarded as allies who encourage him to upgrade his hooliganism so as not to be left behind in the criminality profession. The manner in which they begin to instruct him though will prove distressing to any casual observer, more so to informed subjects: the water cure, introduced to Philippine constables and applied to anticolonial resistance fighters by the US military as part of their subjugation campaign. The variation depicted in *Posas* is a streamlined and less potentially fatal procedure, but (as attested by the performer) it was still traumatizing enough in efficiently rendering the drowning experience. Yet this merely constitutes the gateway

to an even more terrifying process, one that crystallizes the commitment to a life of crime as a step into a point of no return. All the nonsensical commentary about how *Posas* sold itself short by attempting to revive a genre that had already spent itself only wound up revealing the hypocrisy of its critics' premise: as an indie production, *Posas* worked out its contribution not by adopting an anti-genre stance, but by expanding on the limits of the genre's conventions.

The Strangers

Year of Release: 2012
Director: Lawrence Fajardo
Screenwriters: John Paul Bedia, John Paul Egalin Abellera, Enrico C. Santos
From a story by John Paul Bedia, Henry Burgos, John Roque, Armando Lao
Producers: Quantum Films, MJM Productions, Star Cinema
Cast: Enchong Dee, Julia Montes, Enrique Gil, JM de Guzman, Janice de Belen, Cherry Pie Picache, Jaime Fabregas, Johnny Revilla, Nico Antonio, Spanky Manikan, Arthur Acuña, Garry Lim, Tanya Gomez, Rita Daniela, Mark Gil, Dante Balois, Mark Bautista, Ermie Concepcion, Willy Concepcion, Jojo Flores, Cris Garrido, Rolando Inocencio, Erlinda Villalobos, Jibb Llansang, Anthony Macapulay, Hector Macaso, Raul Morit, Abel Napuran, Charles Pantia, Amante Pulido, Marti San Juan, Akira Sapla, Vic Tiro, Carlo Olmeda, Marx Topacio, Franz Co, Kimmy Maclang, Jello Antonio

> Dolfo and his wife are attacked by a wolf-like monster while walking in the forest; only Dolfo survives. In Manila, a curmudgeonly grandfather takes his daughter Evelyn and her family to his distant rural hometown, along with their superstitious maid. Along the way, their vehicle breaks down and they send their driver ahead to look for help. Residents from a small forest-dwelling community say that they're in danger and offer them shelter for the night. The father who leaves for the the next town with their driver and the grandfather who tries to call them back never return. Crispin, one of the residents, narrates the story of Dolfo, now a *kasador* or hunter, whom they believe turned into a flesh-eating monster after his family was attacked. When Evelyn and her kids arrive at the house, however, a dotty elderly lady who's locked up in a room, warns them that they're in danger from the folks who claim to be saving them.

Despite its ability to depict social interactions without the need to resort to symbolizing clusters of characters (thereby flattening or even ignoring the plight of individual members of the subcollective), the multicharacter film's political potential remains theoretical, dependent on its filmmaker's capability to imbue the work with sociological insight to match the complexities that the format enables. For this reason, all of its practitioners weary of it after the initially fulfilling period of discovering its merits, with millennial-era specialist Lawrence Fajardo attempting to explore its commercial appeal and applicability for genre exercises with his horror entry *The Strangers*. Its popular orientation readily accounts for the indifference with which critical evaluators responded to it, compared for example to *Posas* in the same year. Yet *TS* appears to be the Fajardo film that has fomented repeat public viewing—a distinction that can be claimed by only a few other multicharacter titles, all of them from the Second Golden Age: Ishmael Bernal's *Aliw* (1979), Joey Gosiengfiao's *Underage* (1980), Celso Ad. Castillo's *Virgin People* (1984), Maryo J. de los Reyes's *Bagets* (1984). What unifies these samples from diverse genres is the fact that they reward the effort of tracking several overlapping, sometimes conflicting, storylines, with the pleasure of ideological insight arising from a literal form of social realism. That is, the proliferation of dramatis personae replicates everyday social encounters, so their interactions can

be the direct source of sociological observability.[61] No need to marvel that a casual genre exercise such as *TS* can demonstrate this claim, since the film might be easy to access, except for the usual pestilence of the Philippines's Movie and Television Review and Classification Board's censorship of local films in open-access websites. The careful attention to conflicts between class cultures (urban middle and rural poor) foregrounds actual sources of terror from both sides within a politically responsive narrative framework. Medium-specific merits also abound: seriocomic performances, creature effects, and plausible set designs that fortify indexicalities across a wide range of locales, from city comfort to provincial destitution.

Imbisibol

English Translation: *Invisible*
Additional Language: Japanese
Year of Release: 2015
Director: Lawrence Fajardo
Screenwriters: Herlyn Gail Alegre & John Paul Bedia
Adapted from the Virgin Labfestplay by Herlyn Gail Alegre, from a story by Alegre, John Bedia, Lawrence Fajardo
Producers: Sinag Maynila, Solar Entertainment, Centerstage Productions, Pelikulaw
Cast: Allen Dizon, Ces Quesada, Bernardo Bernardo, JM de Guzman, JC Santos, Onyl Torres, Angelina Kanapi, Ricky Davao, Fred Lo, Naoki Takai, Shinpei Suzuki, May Alleman, Kaz Sawamura, Masaharu Imamoto, Oyee Barro, Cynthia Luster, Michael Alfie Bautista, Miki Matsuo, Eisuke John Takamizawa, Rolando Inocencio, Bernard S. Ondap, Freddie Delgado, Alice Delgado, Kazuhiro Okubo, Takahiro Yamada, Kazuya Suehiro, Jess Tillado, Bongjon Jose, Yoshitaka Koyanagi, Quaximodo Wye, Kenji Bondoc, Lui Manansala, The Manoeuvres, Arvy Jay Pingue, Chris Campo, Michael Angelo Mendoza, Mike Francis, Exequiel Rosales, J. Lawrence Cunanan, Rafael Alejo, Sayuri Okaku, John Bedia, Shozo Fujihira, Beng Maclang, Krisma Maclang Fajardo, Makkie Maclang, Kimmy Maclang, Yuta Kadowari, Camille Maclang, Saivitri Villareal, Susumu Kamiya, Lawrence Fajardo, Francis Fajardo, Motoi Matsuzawa, Isato Sugio, Hiroshi Matsushita, Shinya Hayakawa, Takeshi Nonomura, Akira Hatsusegawa, Takafumi Tachibana

> Four Filipino migrants in Japan, acquaintaces of one another, attempt to seek more fulfilling personal and professional options while continuing to support their families back home. Linda attempts to help undocumented migrant Pinoys by providing them with loans and rented spaces despite her Japanese salaryman husband's insistence on evicting them to avoid trouble with the government. Benjie, an illegal resident, works on two jobs to support his family at home but has been wearied down, affecting his relationship with his long-term same-sex partner. Manuel, an aging male entertainer who services elderly women and performs in pornography productions, has to face the prospect of aging as well as his addiction to gambling. Rodel, a naïve and idealistic newcomer, has been encountering friction and rivalry with his supervisor, another Filipino, at work. Their difficulties come to a head and threaten their survival strategy of remaining invisible in a foreign land.

[61] I managed to elaborate on this insight in my 2017 Arsenal Pulp Press publication *Manila by Night: A Queer Film Classic*. See as well "This Genre Which Is Not One: The Philippine Multicharacter Film," *UNITAS: Semi-Annual Peer-Reviewed International Online Journal of Advanced Research in Literature, Culture, and Society*, vol. 95, no. 2, July 2022, pp. 315–347, doi:10.31944/2022950211.

Among the dozens of new directorial talents to have emerged in the current millennium, Lawrence Fajardo is the one who opted to specialize in multiple-protagonist narratives—a challenge so overwhelming that only a few filmmakers have been able to pull it off, much less focus on it for most of their projects. After a series of noteworthy attempts, he confronted the essentially literary challenge of the format and returned to theater, where he had trained. He utilized the same skills deployed by the local master of multicharacter filmmaking, Ishmael Bernal, in allowing for improvisation and revision in accordance with his performers' strengths. Not surprisingly, although *Imbisibol* is set in wintry Japan, delineating the difficulties of overseas workers who need to make themselves inconspicuous so that government authorities would not suspect their illegal-residence status, the movie manages to luxuriate in the warmth of its charcters' occasional camaraderie and concern for fellow expats' well-being. It also holds the possibly unnoticed distinction of being the best local adaptation of a stage play. The movie builds up to a devastating conclusion, but allows the glow from one particular character, a gay TNT (*tago-ng-tago*, or constantly hiding migrant), to suffuse what would have been a chilly resolution. Bernardo Bernardo draws from his own personal history, as former US migrant and, earlier, as an actor who portrayed Bernal's alter-ego in *Manila by Night* (1980), before his own career was cut short by terminal illness.

MARLON N. RIVERA

(1 film: 2011)

Ang Babae sa Septic Tank

English Title: *The Woman in the Septic Tank*
Year of Release: 2011
Director: Marlon N. Rivera
Screenwriter: Chris Martinez
Producers: Cinemalaya, Martinez Rivera Films, Quantum Films, & Straight Shooters Media
Cast: Eugene Domingo, JM de Guzman, Kean Cipriano, Cai Cortez, Jonathan Tadioan, Carlos Dala, K.C. Marcelo, Cherry Pie Picache, Mercedes Cabral, Lani Tapia, Eric Cabahug, Melvin Lee

> Film-school graduates Rainier, Bingbong, and Jocelyn are raring to make what they envision as their Oscar-worthy debut movie, *Walang Wala* (*Impoverished*). As they discuss the film's various possible treatments, they succeed in getting acclaimed actress Eugene Domingo to be their leading lady. However, a series of misadventures threatens to sabotage the project even before their cameras start rolling.

One of the first cautionary comedies about the Filipino film industry's wholesale embrace of the digitalization of the medium was unsparing, prescient, and (true to the nature of the project) guffaw-a-minute funny. The tale of a clueless middle-class team whose members set out to make their mark in foreign film festivals by documenting what they believe are typical Third-World scenes might have failed in halting other local filmmakers' cynical exploitation of contemporary social miseries. In this instance, however, it served adequate notice that Filipino observers were on to the trend. The current blurring of the boundaries between "mainstream" and "indie" projects may yet be considered *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank*'s most constructive contribution. On the basis of its international acclaim, we may meanwhile conclude that Euro-American responders have remained prepared to accept the movie's criticism of their own foreign venues as the primary enablers of what has become known as the "poverty porn" trend. *ABST* has also proved to be capable of sustaining its own sequel, with *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank 2: #ForeverIsNotEnough* (also by Marlon Rivera) released during the 2016 Metro Manila Film Festival; a trilogy-of-sorts was realized via a seven-episode TV series titled *Ang Babae sa Septic Tank 3: The Real Untold Story of Josephine Bracken* [the American-adopted Irish woman who became national hero Jose Rizal's common-law wife] (2019, dir. Chris Martinez), with Eugene Domingo the mainstay in the entire set of presentations.

JADE CASTRO

(2 films: 2011–2019)

Zombadings 1: Patayin sa Shokot si Remington

English Translation: *Zombadings 1: Kill Remington with Fear*
English Title: *Remington and the Curse of the Zombadings*
Additional Language: "Swardspeak" [Philippine gay lingo]
Year of Release: 2011
Director: Jade Castro
Screenwriters: Raymond Lee, Jade Castro, & Michiko Yamamoto
Producer: Origin8 Media
Cast: Martin Escudero, Lauren Young, Kerbie Zamora, Janice de Belen, John Regala, Roderick Paulate, Daniel Fernando, Angelina Kanapi, Eugene Domingo, Leandro Baldemor, Odette Khan, Ward Luarca, Bayani Agbayani, Jess Evardone, Joseph Fernandez, Andre Salazar, Marian Rivera

> As a kid, Remington's inconsiderate behavior toward gays causes a grieving cross-dresser to curse him to a future as a queer man. Fifteen years later, the curse starts to take effect as it changes how he looks and acts, despite his pursuit of a "normal" heterosexual lifestyle. Coincidentally, several gay men die one after another, of causes unknown. Realizing that he might be vulnerable to the same fate, Remington goes on a paranormal quest with his girlfriend and his best male friend (who willingly accommodates his conflicted other personality) to find out how to lift the curse and possibly stop the series of deaths.

By the time *Zombadings 1: Patayin sa Shokot si Remington* demonstrated its creditable box-office clout, local film-industry observers were ready to accept the ability of so-called independent-film projects to challenge mainstream entries. What was exceptional about this particular piece, though, was its spirit—and not just in terms of its fantasy-based premise: it was the first and, as of this writing, the only local digital-indie movie to set aside both its expected high-art ambitions as well as its competitors' mainstream appeal. Instead, it turned to a tradition in Philippine film practice, one that had generally paralleled the art-vs.-commerce struggle that vied for the public's attention but always stayed under the radar, as it were: the much-derided B-movie, where all manner of crowd-pleasing genres clashed without worrying about their mutual incompatibilities, and where the complete lack of respectability allowed their practitioners to engage in occasionally innovative treatments of overlooked subjects. *Zombadings* brings together comedy, horror, action, musical numbers, transvestism, soft-core (same-sex) erotica, science fiction, family melodrama, and just plain old-fashioned weirdness; demands that its cast of veterans and newcomers, notably Martin Escudero in the title role, be good-natured sports in ridiculous-though-fun parts; and sneaks in an unexpectedly hefty critique of social intolerance and personal hypocrisy.

LSS

Alternative Title: *Last Song Syndrome*
Year of Release: 2019
Director: Jade Castro
Screenwriters: Siege Ledesma & Jade Castro
Based on a story by Jessie Lasaten, Emman A. de la Cruz, Nikkie del Carmen, Siege Ledesma, Jade Castro
Producers: Film Development Council of the Philippines & Globe Studios
Cast: Gabbi Garcia, Khalil Ramos, Ben & Ben, Tuesday Vargas, Bernard Palanca, Elijah Canlas, Iana Bernardez, Mika Manikan, Eian Rances, Ameera Johara, Jam Rances

> Zack and Sarah are millennials saddled with their own domestic problems who notice each other on a bus ride because of their love for the music of Ben & Ben. After the ride, Zack contends with his heartbreak over a crush who's unavailable because of her on-again, off-again relationships, and provides much-needed company for his quirky single mother and her determination to find for him a suitable partner. Sarah, for her part, has to give up her dream of success as a singer-songwriter in order to help her younger brother finish his studies. The two navigate the complex challenges thrown their way by modern living until another chance encounter, also centered on Ben & Ben, brings them together once more.

Before she succumbed to an illness that cut off her mid-career productivity, Marilou Diaz-Abaya expressed her concern for the then-ascendant independent-cinema scene: that its practitioners looked down on mass audiences and, consequently, on their preferred genre in film—which for the past few decade-plus meant romantic comedies. She explained how celluloid-era directors had to be careful in planning their projects down to the last shot, because of the great expense involved; for this reason, connecting with the audience, she said, should be a non-negotiable feature of filmmaking practice. Fortunately, a number of indie figures, most of them (not surprisingly) women, seemed to heed her call and began the time-honored tradition of introducing innovations and refining them while maintaining the genre's appeal, which was (per Diaz-Abaya) allowing people to hope for something better. After Antoinette Jadaone's *That Thing Called Tadhana* (2014) made strong femininity, sensitive masculinity, and ambivalent closures viable, *LSS* attempts a mode of seemingly meandering storytelling closer to the Euro art-film inspiration of indie projects, fuses this with *TTCT*'s still-useful elements, and draws from director Jade Castro's confidence in investing seemingly trivial, even corny, developments with dignity, respect for the audience, and faith in his performers—who respond in turn by providing a reality effect all throughout what appear to be random twists and turns of events. The use of profound ironies as well as the subtlety of the film's class, gender, and sexual politics would elicit admiration from the likes of Ernst Lubitsch, if the romcom master were still around today, while its stylistic fluidity would be worthy of comparison with none other than Diaz-Abaya in peak form. Philippine cinema welcomes a brighter future, once everyone takes a breather and figures out what makes an apparently casual yet strangely satisfying affair like *LSS* work.

RUEL S. BAYANI

(1 film: 2011)

No Other Woman

Year of Release: 2011
Director: Ruel S. Bayani [as Ruel Santos Bayani]
Screenwriters: Kris G. Gazmen & Ricardo Fernando III
From a story by Keiko Aquino & Ricardo Fernando III
Producers: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Star Cinema, Viva Films
Cast: Anne Curtis, Derek Ramsay, Cristine Reyes, Tirso Cruz III, Carmi Martin, John Arcilla, Marlann Flores, Ronk Morales, Kitkat, Ricci Chan, Niña Dolino, Kat Alano, Peter Serrano, Fred Payawan, Melvin Lee, Paul Jake Castillo, Malou Crisologo, Johnny Revilla, Matt Evans, Fonz Deza, Via Antonio, Antonette Garcia, Drew Rivera, Veronica Columna, Barbie Salvador, Marnie Lapus, Renan Evangelista, Rodrigo Oliveira, Louie Tan

> Ramses Escaler (Ram for short) attends a Zalderiaga company meeting in order to propose that they hire him to furnish their new upscale resort. He discovers that the owner knew his father as a two-timing business partner, and meets the Zalderiaga heiress Kara, who takes an immediate liking to him. Ram entertains Kara to ensure that he can wangle the resort assignment, but warns Kara that he's married. His wife, Charmaine, is advised by her fiery and combative mother, Babygirl dela Costa, to always be ready to fight for the man she married. When Ram is unable to resist Kara's charms, Charmaine considers her options. What complicates the triangle is that Kara, who's determined to use men strictly as playthings, also finds herself falling for Ram.

A sexist politician's moralistic judgment on lead actor Anne Curtis's appeal led to feminist pushback from concerned sectors, but perhaps the most nuanced response was the social-network argument forwarded by queer critic and short-subject filmmaker Gio Potes in his slide essay "No Other Anne: Some QueerFem Ramblings" (originally posted March 8, 2026, on his *Facebook* page). Referencing Susan Sontag's recuperation of camp and Laura Mulvey's formulation of the male gaze, Potes points out how the contradictions in *No Other Woman* between wife and other woman emerge "not in spite of the film's [glossy properties] but precisely through it: the heightened sheen of commercial melodrama makes these tensions even more visible." Potes's discussion evokes the transgressive properties of pre-Code romantic comedies in Hollywood, controverting the standard charge by less historically aware critics that the film characters are atypically bourgeois and thereby misrepresent the impoverished majority. Déclassé anxieties permeate the exchanges among the women in *NOW*, but get weaponized when the wife's mother (played by Carmi Martin as a witty update of her unapologetic gold-digger in Ishmael Bernal's *Working Girls*, 1984), declares that she won't hesitate to pull out all the stops once she realizes her hubby's fallen for a rival. The challenge faced in Curtis's incandescent performance lay in calibrating how much dignity a thoroughly besotted tiger lady should relinquish while still remaining identifiably upper-crust. *NOW*'s balance between wife and mistress might sound schematic since the former's comparatively lesser status nevertheless enjoys an ethical advantage; yet the other woman

yields just enough of her self-worth to make everyone around her (and the audience, by extension) wish for an intervention. The dynamic will be recognizable to anyone caught up in passionate power games, regardless of class and even gender. The film assists in further explicating this by rendering the prize, the man caught between competing damsels, incapacitated at one point, though only temporarily and possibly unnecessarily. Scandals besetting our social betters is one of the many pleasures that dramatic art affords, with *NOW* exemplifying how the privilege of an intimate peek can provide beyond-voyeuristic perceptions.

BRANDON RELUCIO & IVAN ZALDARRIAGA

(1 film: 2011)

Di Ingon 'Nato

English Title: *Not Like Us*
Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2011
Directors & Screenwriters: Brandon Relucio & Ivan Zaldarriaga
Producer: Cinema One Originals
Cast: Rez Cortez, Franco Reyes, Mercedes Cabral, Donna Gimeno, Jeffrey Ogario, Gabriel Jon Abanto, Gregg Tecson, Marlon Hofer, Bernard Catindig, Aya Ng, Nathaniel Rubio, Cara Muaña Rosende, Ria Araneta, Lito Cardeño, Daday Melgar, Joe Monteño, Ligaya Rabago, Vingenr Tan, Lord Padua, Diane, Mata, Rita Sabal, Ronyel Compra, Dodong, Fatima Padua, Aurora Pacure

> Lauro, the captain of a remote barangay or village in Cebu Province, is alerted by some of his constituents to a deadly infectious outbreak, tracked from mysterious instances of residents or outsiders getting killed in apparently violent ways. His daughter, who works as medic in the barangay health center, is able to determine that the diseased return to life after they die and acquire a hankering for human flesh. A priest and a pagan healer contend in having the right explanation (and consequent solution) for the phenomenon, but their use of magic doesn't stop the illness from spreading. In a parallel development, Istoy, a farmer, sees one such hacked-up body. When his wife is attacked by a neighbor, he uses his bolo to kill the assailant. His wife worries that he committed a crime, but he becomes more anxious when her condition rapidly deteriorates.

The zombie-apocalypse subgenre is so overfamiliar that one could already predict how its elements of contagion and consequent social breakdown could function in any sample. But *Di Ingon 'Nato*'s impoverished agricultural context provides a resonance that compatriots and invaders alike might do well to learn from: "Filipino farmers hacking the undead," as co-director Ivan Zaldarriega half-jokingly stated in a journal interview with genre specialist Andrew Leavold. Beyond the admittedly distressing representation of the repressed, historical incidents after the film's release added retrospective value on stations both national (the practice of extrajudicial killings during the authoritarian regime of a Visayan President) and international (the intensification of the global Covid-19 pandemic). A narrative that turns on unstoppable contagion that results in widespread and arbitrary casualties would be hampered by severely constricted budgetary resources, a problem that *DIN*, alongside countless other indie productions, confronted. The filmmakers atypically resolved this quandary by taking advantage of their limitations: minimizing the casting of professional performers, shooting in remote locales, apportioning the use of gore in judiciously effective closeups, furnishing sound effects for subtle and well-timed blasts. Along with a few careful strokes at character development, the effect curiously results in an embrace of the monstrous—more pronounced than in the usual zombie-apocalypse outing. With the possibly permanent loss of what may be Philippine cinema's supreme zombie film, Celso Ad. Castillo's *Kung Bakit Dugo ang Kulay ng Gabi* (*Night of the Zombies*, 1973), *DIN* compensates satisfactorily enough; the fact that both are set in rural locales, as are several other horror entries in this list, could have made for productive analysis if the Castillo film could be recovered and considered as the others' predecessor.

ANTOINETTE JADAONE

(3 films: 2011–2020)

Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay

Year of Release: 2011
Director & Screenwriter: Antoinette Jadaone [as Antoinette H. Jadaone]
Producers: Cinema One Originals & Post Manila
Cast: Lilia Cuntapay, Gerladine Villamil, Antoinette Jadaone, Joel Saracho, Bella Mercado, Angel Castanos, Mary Jane Alejo, Opaline Santos, Carlo Cannu, Fernando Cruz, Eivy Rose Lavalle, Mark Sicat dela Cruz, Pio Balbuena, Moises Magisa, Ruffa Zuueta, Cris Lorena, Ring Perez, Neil Colango, Jo Macasa, Roman Perez Jr., Angela Andaya, Chanel Latorre, Rita Vargas, Joe Tutanes, Ramon Rebancos, Michael Orozco, Moncia Galvey-Tan, Edwin Sayson, Senaca Moraleda, Vincent Matteu, Erbin Bajado, Leo Valencia, Frances Mae Ramos, Jason Domantay, Ethel Francisco, Vanessa Abastillas, Mark Dizon, Regina Valenzuela, Aileen Alcampado, Irene Villamor, Candy Cypres, Joenathann Alandy, Ronald Mendoza, Juan Miguel Severo, Jed Medrano, Dingdong Dantes, Kris Aquino, Peque Gallaga, Lore Reyes, Alwyn Uytingco, Topel Lee, Marian Rivera, Camille Prats, Rez Cortez, Maryo J. de los Reyes, Mercedes Cabral, Raquel Villavicencio, Karen delos Reyes, Niña Dolino, Rita Daniela, Armando Lao, Irma Adlawan, Rio Locsin, Erika Padilla

> Real-life bit player Lilia Cuntapay thrives on her newfound celebrity status in her old age, in the working-class neighborhood where she lives. Her daughter has migrated to the US and converses with her by phone occasionally. Since she has no mobile device of her own, she asks her neighbor to take her calls so she can be apprised of any casting call. Genre directors are aware of her strong presence, especially in horror roles. Movie stars, however, had never heard of her—until her nomination for one of the older awards competitions. Her neighborhood shares her excitement when a TV crew arrives to interview her, and she prepares extensively for the ceremony. The night of the broadcast results in some disappointment, but she nevertheless keeps her spirits up all the way to awards night.

Mockumentaries are rarely attempted in Philippine cinema, which may seem ascribable to the limited market for nonmainstream formats. But *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay* helps steer the conversation away from the usual audience-bashing that elitists indulge in when they want to assure themselves of their superiority. Despite the ease with which it can be ingested, nothing about the production looks hurried or low-rent. Director Antoinette Jadaone also had the good fortune to make the acquaintance of Lilia Cuntapay, who died not long after completing the project, and who had enough good sense to know when the roles she accepted had the potential to impact culture beyond their exhibition period. (If anything, Jadaone can be faulted for having too much tastefulness to illustrate the moments when Cuntapay said she'd accepted "bold" roles that involved nudity or obscenity, preferring to present her jump-scare scenes instead.) The format works superbly as an occasion for industry members to uphold one of their own, so amusingly though unsurprisingly we find filmmakers and even stars agreeing to play-act for the sake of providing dramatic anticipation in the then-patently fictional occasion of Cuntapay acquiring an awards nomination. The film will remain one of a kind, as Cuntapay had been, and will reward occasional rewatching for the moments when one wishes to recall once more why the medium is capable of catching fire among its audiences and practitioners.

That Thing Called Tadhana

English Translation: *That Thing Called Meant-to-Be*
Additional Language: Ilocano
Year of Release: 2014
Director & Screenwriter: Antoinette Jadaone
Producers: Cinema One Originals, Epicmedia, Monoxide Works, One Dash Zero Cinetools
Cast: Angelica Panganiban, JM de Guzman, Joem Bascon, Carlos Castano, Joenel Canaria, Bianca Balbuena, JR Miano, Joi Bayan, Kelvin Dy, Martin Mayuga, Jane Torres, Marjarey Kasey Politico, Monique Ladimo

> At the airport on his way home from overseas work in Rome, Anthony Lagdameo sees Mace Castillo unable to check in her luggage because of excess weight. He offers to carry some of her possessions since he will be traveling light. Mace is affected by tearjerker scenes in the movie that she watches, and confesses that her boyfriend had dumped her for another woman. Anthony opts to keep her company to help nurse her broken heart, even when she expresses a drunken wish to take a trip all the way north to Baguio. They discover along the way that Mace's dream was to write short fiction, while Anthony's was to be a book illustrator. Their further interactions reveal a mutual compatibility with each other, but the results of such a quick-blooming romance will sometimes be unpredictable for both of them.

The several crossovers from independent to mainstream film practice generally failed to find sustainable exemplars. *That Thing Called Tadhana* has been the most influential of the lot, and the reasons are immediately apparent: a strong, articulate woman meets-cute with an understandably smitten man, both unfazed by the prospect of overseas employment yet sharing some past experience of heartbreak, venturing into less-familiar scenic spots while exchanging wit-laden insights into each other's situations, ending with a bittersweet lack of closure that heightens their newly formed romantic bond. One may wonder how such a plain, by-now predictable formula can continue to yield such a well-received series of follow-up projects, but *TTCT* is long-ago enough to provide us with clues. The first would be a light directorial touch, reminiscent of the French romantic comedies (notably those of Eric Rohmer), successfully appropriated by Richard Linklater for his *Before* trilogy (1995–2013) as well as by Korean filmmaker Hong Sang-soo. The next would be a feminist spin on the manic pixie dream-girl, a Hollywood stock character who winds up being domesticated by the man she falls for; *TTCT*'s self-ironic neurotic lead female refuses to yield to her male partner's bemused stoicism, instead winning him over to her impulsively free-spirited approach to life. A special touch that only *TTCT* has been able to pull off so expertly that the entire movie takes on the quality of a well-remembered pleasant dream is when the heartbroken woman reaches for an ideal of true love via John Lloyd Cruz's character in Cathy Garcia-Sampana's *One More Chance* (2007). The reflexive touch is unobtrusive mainly because of the credible manner in which Antoinette Jadaone succeeds in integrating it into the narrative. (Not surprisingly, her earlier indie project and full-length debut, *Six Degrees of Separation from Lilia Cuntapay* [2011], foregrounded this process by letting the main subject play herself in a mockumentary.) *TTCT* affirms its innovative roots by being lesser-budgeted than its progeny, but overflowing with so much spunk and wisdom that it still manages to surpass all the romcoms that it had since inspired.

Fan Girl

Year of Release: 2020
Director & Screenwriter: Antoinette Jadaone
Producers: Black Sheep, Gold Studios, Crossword Productions
Cast: Charlie Dizon, Micko Laurente, Camille Penaverde, Bea Alonzo, Paulo Avelino, Milo Elmido Jr., Aikah Agnote, Cristine Calawod, Marjorie Lorico, Jack Alimbuyugin, Sheenly Gener, James Fajardo, Gie Onida, Mina Cruz, Joshua Cabiladas, Melvin Garcia

> Jane's a diehard fan of real-life movie star Paolo Avelino, who's promoting his new movie with Bea Alonzo in a nearby mall. Instead of focusing more intently on her classroom discussions, she cuts her next session to attend the promotional program. Amid the mêlée over the stars' presence, she manages to sneak into the cargo bed of Paolo's pickup truck, sees his penis as he urinates by the roadside, and winds up at the abandoned and isolated villa where he resides. When he discovers her, she tells him she's "almost 17" but since it's already nighttime, he decides to show her the way back to the city the next day. Unable to sleep, she peeks at him and discovers him in coitus with an unknown woman. He sneaks up to her bedroom and invites her to have a beer, upon which she narrates her story of being abandoned by her father and having a stepfather she can't stand.

Fan Girl starts out in mainstream territory, with the promise of conflicted romance enhanced by metafictional devices, despite sustaining lesser-than-usual production values. It moves toward increasingly psychoanalytic territory, with Jane, the central character, experiencing a displaced primal scene where she resolves to present herself as a substitute for Paolo Avelino's female partner (essential background information disclosed during production was that the actress was 24 years old at the time). Avelino's dissipation, exacerbated by his realization that the married working-class woman he fell in love with might leave him and take their son with her, makes him behave toward Jane with appalling irresponsibility, although the film is conscientious enough to depict how her romantic fantasies propel her as well toward self-destructive delusory behavior. The larger revelation, crucial to the project's reflexive intent, is that Avelino produced the undertaking—an unusual affirmation of artistic credibility, as well as a paradoxical assurance that the actor, whatever his shortcomings, will never be as awful as his fictional counterpart; most significantly, the arrangement guarantees that the deliberate distance between actor/producer and his role can be regarded as an exercise in self-amusement, a logic of humor that equilibrizes Jane's increasingly and inexorably serious trajectory. The semblance of *FG* with Lino Brocka's lionized *Bona* (1980) was immediately noted in several responses to the film. We can note at the outset that, while Nora Aunor at her peak will always be worth repeated attention, *FG* as a film does not suffer from the comparison, and might even possess longer-term rewatch value.

DOMINIC ZAPATA

(1 film: 2012)

Boy Pick-Up: The Movie

Additional Language: French
Year of Release: 2012
Director: Dominic Zapata [as Dominic C. Zapata]
Screenwriter: Aloy Adlawan
From a concept by Ogie Alcasid & Eri Neeman and a story by Ogie Alcasid & Aloy Adlawan
Producers: GMA Films & Regal Entertainment
Cast: Ogie Alcasid, Solenn Heussaff, Dennis Trillo, Michael V., Antonio Aquitania, Diego Llorico, Eri Neeman, Boy 2 Quizon, Sam Pinto, Sarah Lahbati, Gwen Zamora, Jackie Rice, Maey Bautista, Albert Sumaya Jr., Roadfill, Moymoy, Pepe Smith, Lilia Cuntapay, Kerbie Zamora, Isko Salvador, Caesar Cosme, Ramon "Bong" Revilla Jr., Jose Javier Reyes, Boy Abunda, Dingdong Dantes, Victor Aliwalas, Ellen Adarna, Ian Batherson, Kristoffer Martin, Adrian Alandy, Paolo Contis, Vicky Belo, Derek Ramsey, Loonie, Dello, Mike Swift, Reg Rubio, Rhon Henley, Apokz, Abra, Jonan Aguilar

> Battle rap mutates into a variation where the contestants freestyle with pickup lines. The long-time winner by acclamation is Boy Pick-Up, who comes off as a doofus who somehow casts a spell whenever he delivers his winning dispatch. His rival Gabbs consoles himself by marrying his girlfriend Queen, but the latter's so infatuated with Boy that she abandons her fiancé at the altar. The despondent Gabbs leaps into the Pasig River but is fished out by a masked manipulator who transforms him into Bagwis, Boy's worst nemesis. Boy meanwhile resists his gay landlord Sharona and seeks a job, finally finding it at Heaven's Bakeshop when he prepares his irresistible fishcake. The shop owner Angel is typically besotted with Boy from first hello, but Bagwis returns to steal her away in order to sabotage Boy's supremacy in the battle rap competition.

The TV mainstay *Bubble Gang* has been around for longer than most of its viewers' lifetimes (three decades and counting) so that it's easy for older audiences to assume that its purpose ends with the entertainment it dispenses. The disappointing performance of the film adaptation of its otherwise satisfying satirical segment featuring a parentally unsupervised rich daughter and her beleaguered though sexually amorous nanny, titled *Yaya and Angelina: The Spoiled Brat Movie* (dir. Michael Tuviera, 2019), was not so much a reflection of the source's limitations as it was further proof of the difficulty of crossover attempts from TV to cinema. By confining itself to the TV property's elements—including unexpected guest stars, with the late rock legend Pepe Smith's definitive film appearance—and punching up its potential for spectacle, *Boy Pick-Up* winds up revealing the tension between forcing a Western cultural innovation to address a developing country's occasionally imperviable concerns. Proof of the approach's effectiveness lies in how *BPU* results in a more holistic unit than the millennium's other significant battle rap film, Treb Monteras II's *Respeto* (*Respect*, 2017), although then again, it might be able to accommodate the latter's allegorical ambition only with far more difficulty. Satire has nevertheless rarely been this rewarding since the departure of our Second Golden Age experts, so both films may be counted as essential twinbill immersions in a working-class culture that might not be around for too long from now.

MARIE JAMORA

(1 film: 2012)

Ang Nawawala

English Title: *What Isn't There*
Year of Release: 2012
Director: Marie Jamora
Screenwriters: Marie Jamora & Ramon de Veyra
Producers: Brainchild Studios, Cinemalaya, National Commission for Culture and the Arts
Cast: Dominic Roco, Dawn Zulueta, Felix Roco, Boboy Garrovillo, Alchris Galura, Mercedes Cabral, Kelvin Yu, Jenny Zamora, Marc Abaya, Annicka Dolonius, Sabrina Man, Dayang Enriquez, Ethan Fabella, Leah Johnson, Boy Laguipo, Zarah Pagay, Sunshine Teodoro, Lianne Valentin, Joy Vargas

> Traumatized when his twin brother had a fatal accident because of a dare he made, Gibson Bonifacio lapsed into silence, never speaking to anyone since then. He remained particularly wary of his mother, who openly preferred Jamie, his late brother. Things remained the same even after Gibson's sojourn in the US, although unknown to anyone, Gibson maintains imaginary conversations with Jamie, who has also grown up along with him. His relations with himself, his family, and his friends come to a head when he falls for Enid, a pop musician who encourages him but later admits that she's on the rebound from a breakup with another musician, for whom she still has some affection.

No other contemporary indie production has proved as divisive as *Ang Nawawala*, owing for the most part to its Fil-Am source. The controversy raised unfair expectations regarding its merits, although these were premised on mutually indefensible ideological differences. The film was denounced on the basis of two crucial properties: its acquiescence to mainstream values, as if a work on pop music could have justified high-art stylistics without courting the danger of pretension; and its focus on a milieu that did not foreground the sociological components of poverty. Its appreciators, also symptomatic of another type of affliction in Pinas film criticism, insistently rhapsodized over what they read as its celebration of bourgeois Americanized culture. Excepting these polarities, and now with the advantage of temporal distance, *AN* may be more properly considered for its critical take on precisely the culture that both sides misperceived and quarreled over. With a modest retinue of domestic helpers, the Bonifacio family members feel entitled enough to wallow in tragic errors that they sustain for years. It is Gibson's relatively less-privileged intimates—his socially awkward brother-in-law, his independent-minded fling, and finally his decently discreet father—who provide him with motivations to work on his dysfunctional condition as well as his mother's. Director Marie Jamora conveys these points without spelling them out (a liability for ideologically fixated evaluators, as it turned out), as well as by drawing out fully sympathetic and lived-in performances from Dominic Roco as Gibson and Dawn Zulueta as his mother, both of whom she tasked with delineating the least reasonable characters in the film.

ARNEL MARDOQUIO

(2 films: 2012–2013)

Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim

Language: Cebuano [theme song in Filipino]
English Title: *The Journey of Stars into the Dark Night*
Year of Release: 2012
Director & screenwriter: Arnel Mardoquio
Producers: Cinema One Originals, Skyweaver Productions, Red Motion Media, HYDEntertainment, Alchemy of Vision and Light Film and TV Productions, Conrad Cejoco
Cast: Fe Ginging Hyde, Glorypearl Dy, Irish Karl Monsanto, Roger Gonzales, Perry Dizon, Christine Lim, Darling Curay, Ethan Smith, Joffrey delos Santos, Dionalon Macalinao, Ruel Dalagan, Leony Diaz, Bagwani Amplayo, Rallaon Monsanto, Annabelle Beldua, Dave Ibao, Victor Fernandez

> Led by an armed but wounded man, Amrayda Mundalana and Fatima Gumbajali traverse the forest by wading through a creek, presumably so that their tracks can't be traced. Their guide however realizes he has been spotted and approaches an elderly man, who stabs him dead. The women avoid getting caught and make their way to the house of ten-year-old Faidal, whom his mother saved from killing by using a zip line. They bring the orphaned boy, still traveling surreptitiously, until they reach Papa Indo, to whom they want to entrust Faidal. Indo refuses but escorts the three of them to find a boat that will take them to Zamboanga. When he asks them why they don't follow the Bangsa Moro leadership's order to proceed to Lanao so they can organize womenfolk, they respond that they no longer wish to participate in the armed secessionist struggle. Via radio reports, Indo realizes that Faidal's parents engaged in kidnapping for ransom while Amrayda and Fatima tell Faidal that the money his parents gave him is difficult to dispose of because it's in dollars. When they reach a hacienda, they realize that Fatima lied about her mobile phone being unable to receive messages; Amrayda reads instructions from Amgar, Fatima's boyfriend, telling her to live with him. Amrayda is devastated by Fatima's betrayal while Faidal raises questions about same-sex desire conflicting with the Quran.

Ang Paglalakbay ng mga Bituin sa Gabing Madilim might seem no different from the usual run of well-intended contemporary film commentaries on Philippine tribal minorities, in the sense that it upholds the primacy of the people and their causes by refusing to spell out these details as the narrative commences. Complete outsiders will be able to pick up the information that the central characters are Tausug tribespeople and that their locale may be neither in Zamboanga nor Sabah (Jolo would be the likeliest possibility) since they discuss the feasibilities of taking boat rides to either destination. The wordless passages define the covert nature of their flight and yield fascinating discoveries, crowned by the mountainside wreckage of a drone whose roar kept them awake the night before. Yet enough information gets proffered in the course of conversations and radio broadcasts, as well as in the reading of clandestine text messages that wind up outing the same-sex relationship that would have been apparent in retrospect for viewers attentive enough to notice this dynamic. The proscribed liaison not only helps explain but also parallels its protagonists' rebellion against the rebellion, even as the film maintains its larger critique of authoritarian systems, with imperial Manila impinging on our marginal brethren via the constant incursion of army soldiers. The definitive commentary (originally in Filipino) in JPaul S. Manzanilla's review articulates the film's remarkable thesis that dwells on the tension between the film's loverly shots of wilderness and astronomical bodies vis-à-vis its urgent human conflicts:

"While the fight against the government to achieve self-determination for the Moros is just, the freedom to love anyone is being suppressed in this instance. This is a problem that should be solved by a war waged in the name of love for country and this is where the democratic goal of any struggle can be tested.... Bapa Indo, the leader of the group, suggested that [the women lovers] need to understand the complications of war, that everyone must make sacrifices. Fatima, on the other hand, kindly explains to Faidal—a child whose biases and decisions in life are just being formed—the pleasures brought by a different kind of love, the stars that are also partners of the moon and the sun" (translated by the author, from "Danas ng Digma, Digmaan ng Pagnanasa [Experience of Conflict, War of Desire]," *Young Critics Circle Film Desk*, August 19, 2013, posted online).

Ang mga Tigmo sa Akong Pagpauli (Riddles of My Homecoming)

Languages: Cebuano [titles] & Latin [hymns]
Year of Release: 2013 / Color with B&W
Director & screenwriter: Arnel Mardoquio
Producers: BordWerkz Productions, Cinema One Originals, HYDEntertainment, Red Motion Media, Skyweaver Productions, Voyage Studios, Local Government of Nabunturan, Compostela Valley
Cast: Fe Ginging Hyde, Perry Dizon, Madz Garcia, Jeff Sabayle, Jillian Barbarona, Christine Austero, Clairejean M. Valentin, Zabrina Bacalso, Joffrey delos Santos, Zosilee Yanong, Yam Palma, Allan James L. Torculas, Lloyd Bon M. Ligones, Kenneth L. Jumamoy, Noel M. Gonez, Joprey P. Aguban, Nino M. Marquez, Dane Clark J. Ortiz, Alvert Q. Monera, Emmanuel Canama, Bryan Palma Gil, Milven Tanduyan, Jan Ryan, John Lister Montiza, Tyron Adapfar, Joseph Alferes, Rey Pequeno, Ace Rommil Ilajas, Buggy Amplayo

> [***Note: characters' names only appear in closing credits***] Several lumad citizens emerge and we only deduce later that these are souls of people who have died. Alfad had wanted to travel overseas for gainful employment but we first see him chained underwater; he explores his earthly dwellings with Aaliyah, a girl who died while still a child. He rejects his lover Mariposa when he discovers her male genitalia, but the latter also has difficulty with a subsequent female partner, Mayka, with whom she participates in revolutionary resistance. Mariposa eventually gets lynched by religious townspeople. Wahab, the religious leader who converts the villagers, enriches himself with a suitcase of cash and flies away on a plane, which crashes into the sea.

Arnel Mardoquio's *Ang mga Tigmo sa Akong Pagpauli* set for itself several ludic challenges, each of which would have been more than enough for most other practitioners. It situates itself in lumad (non-Muslim indigenous) territory and culture, eschews use of dialogue, disavows linearity, and draws in issues of revolutionary politics in terms of agrarian rights and sexual identity. The attempt, always on the brink of toppling over into absurdity and affectation, manages to override these dangers by resorting to symbolist presentation reinforced with a ferocious partiality for Otherness. Mardoquio's vision might nevertheless prove to be too despairing, although no one would be able to argue successfully for nihilism, inasmuch as dark and even savage humor and suspenseful developments interlace the narrative threads. A useful preparatory approach would be to brush up on Cameroonian political theorist Achille Mbembe's

concept of "deathworlds" in necropolitics.[62] The revenants in *ATAP* can be regarded as participants in an ironic social performance where their still-living acquaintances might just as well be more dead than they are. One of the film's images encapsulates this tension: Mayka, a former comrade and would-have-been same-sex lover of Mariposa, who was viciously murdered by a Christianized mob, stands beside the latter's soul, with only the living being marked by old age, anxiety, aimlessness, possibly regret. *ATAP* modulates this occasion just enough to enable engaged viewers to recall past scenes when Mariposa's beauty and shamanic power were increasingly degraded by the encroachments of uneven development, until in the end even the environment around her was entirely unrecognizable from all the material abuse visited on it. The film demonstrates in an undeniable manner the paradox of our times, when necropolitan inducements can only be granted by the state to the still-living, the better to sustain its drive for interminable power and profit.

[62] Necropolitics was the framework utilized by Jay Jomar F. Quintos in his article "Negotiations on Necropolitics and Death in the Cinema on the Indigenous Peoples of Mindanao," from the anthology *Indigenous Media and Popular Culture in the Philippines: Representations, Voices, and Resistance*, edited by Jason Paolo Telles (Palgrave Macmillan, 2025), pp. 25–40, doi:10.1007/978-981-99-9101-3_2. Achille Mbembe's definitive articulation is from his volume *Necropolitics*, Duke University Press, 2019.

CHRISTIAN LINABAN

(2 films: 2012–2016)

Aberya

Additional Language: Cebuano
English Translation: *Hitch*
Year of Release: 2012
Director: Christian Linaban
Screenwriters: Christian Linaban & Ara Chawdhury
Inspired by a short screenplay by Ariel Llanto
Producers: Cinema One Originals, Dream Arts Productions, Epicmedia Productions
Cast: Will Devaughn, Mercedes Cabral, Nicholas Varela, Iwa Moto, Publio Briones III, Gil Maningo, Marilou Lucente, Winsse Villanueva, Jeffrey Ogario, Ralph Padilla, Gabby Nazareno, Syrel Lopez, Darling Dame, Ione Blanche Enriquez, Ara Chawdhury, Steph Jarina, Paolo Varela, Alex Uypuanco, Bambi Beltran, Misha Anissimov, Faith Bernardes, Boy Rupita, Arman Tajanlangit, Edgar Kalinawan, Richard Hearsay, Junjun Paraiso, Homer Medici, Nathaniel Rubio, Kahlil de Pio, Cedric Butron, Ligaya Rabago, Tom Jopson, Anton Java, Roma Oyson, Christian Linaban, Aldrin Sanchez, Raul Luche Jr., Raulito Mendiola, Khriss Bajade, Ada Jimenez, Gerard Miguel Aribe, Gelo Sanjorjo, Vince Rabanes, Josh Salvacion, Frances Villa, Robbi Villa

> Four Cebu-based characters' stories unfold as each one is introduced. Lourd Villegas is a Filipino-American concerned for his parents' home country's welfare and future. He schedules several girlfriends, one for each day of the week, but considers getting serious with Angel, a Manileña. Unknown to him, Angel is actually an escort for Congressman Sta. Maria, who's running on the promise of moral renewal. Angel hangs out with Sta. Maria's son Mike, who introduces her to various substances, many of which he concocts himself, and provides her with what he calls a Delorean, which makes her transform into a nun named Sister Celeste. Because of her heightened state, Celeste confesses some of her transgressions to Mike, but his father's more worried because of the discovery of a porn video on the internet that has his son's name even though he wears a mask. Eden, his partner in the video, attracts Mike, in whom she thinks she might have found a way to evade the scandal that already got her fired from her nurse's job.

The one time that a Philippine production was described as inspired by Max Ophüls's *La ronde* (*The Round,* 1950, adapted from Alfred Schnitzler's 1897 play *Reigen*) was in an annual country report by the late Agustin Sotto for the now-defunct *Film International*, when he mentioned Ishmael Bernal's then-banned *Manila by Night* (1980). The reference was inadequate and inaccurate, since the Bernal film was arguably far more significant and innovative and departed in many ways from a sample that the director never acknowledged, unlike Robert Altman's *Nashville* (1975). The millennial regional production of Christian Linaban's *Aberya* was in its own turn compared by reviewers to Quentin Tarantino's *Pulp Fiction* (1994), premised on its *La ronde*-like structure of morally compromised characters who pass around heterosexual favors as casually as they consume recreational drug cocktails concocted by Mike, a Congress official's stoner kid. Once more the comparison is misleading and reflects more on the observers' inadequate understanding than anything else. As its title suggests, archness is far from any concern of *Aberya*'s, although irony is arguably an

inevitable component of this type of narrative material. The film begins with a citizen who's several times removed (as a free-floating Philippine-American) from the place for which he professes concern, an urban center distinct from and subservient to the so-called imperial capital of Metro Manila. The characters with whom he interacts, both women, bring up the drug dealer who's also both supplier and indifferent lay, although their sexual carelessness results at one point in a scandal that disrupts the equilibrium that they all take for granted, as fairly comfy middle-class subjects. For all their lighthearted and cynical affect, they're still unable to resist responding to the slings and arrows that the ideal of financial comfort and emotional maturity launches at them—which is how they find a convergence that they might have hoped for but can't afford to maintain. In being so low-key in dispensing its perceptivity, *Aberya* demonstrates how cinematic potential can be more productively realized in setting enough distance from the country's cultural center.

Superpsychocebu

Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2016
Director & Screenwriter: Christian Linaban
From a story by Christian Linaban & Nicolo Manreal
Producers: Panumdaman Pictures & Retaso Media
Cast: John Dino, Wes Bacareza, Christian Saavedra, John Mark Maglana, Rapi Sescon, Angelica Gamolo, Joshua Aquino, Lyka Flare Ruela, Steph Jarina, Zerah Esmero

> Tired of the usual safe means of getting high, a man approaches Pancho, an adventurous friend who believes in living outside the norm. Pancho recommends a friend who might be able to tell him how to access a drug called Superpsychocebu, which made everyone who tried it unable to forget the experience. The seeker goes to meet Sexy Samson, who commissions a promo video and tells him to seek out a beach-dweller named Beauregard. The latter takes him on a boat ride and professes the life-changing properties of Superpsychocebu, recommending that he look for Hesus, with an unnamed but unpredictable girl driving him to the forest where he lives. Also calling himself Joshua, Hesus transforms into several personalities before handing the sought-after substance to the seeker, who becomes a famous personality and calls himself Idol.

Viewers who approach *Superpsychocebu* thinking that it would be more of the director's previous film, *Aberya* (*Hitch*, 2012), might find themselves adrift at several points in the viewing experience, as the lead character turns out to be. Calling it the country's first stoner film also won't withstand scrutiny after sufficient acquaintance with Pinas film history, with several titles from the 1970s onward from the likes of Celso Ad. Castillo, Peque Gallaga, Tata Esteban, and even Christian Linaban already laying claim; maybe calling it "the first stoner's film" might be defensible, if it didn't sound too nitpicky. All this is by way of cautioning that *Superpsychocebu* should be approached differently from any of the aforementioned samples, including the foreign models that set the template. For despite its appropriation of the habits and optics associated with drug culture, the film's social world is incidental, a means for its

lead character to journey toward, or actually tunnel into, the pursuit of the ultimate high. Like any kind of commitment, such a goal would inevitably prove frustrating, as psychoanalysts from Sigmund Freud to Jacques Lacan once determined in their studies of desire. Yet the only means that narrative texts can complete their journeys is to pretend that desire is attainable, and to celebrate its acquisition. *Superpsychocebu* "rewards" its hero, starting with the name he bestows on himself, but it also raises complications attendant to his new-high existence, which points to the mystery without having to ask it: where will the next high come from? Philippine critics have been trained to downplay such issues as insufficiently philosophical, much less political, but the mere fact that a millennium-era regional film has raised it, suggests that the repudiation itself brings up the essential critical question of who benefits from policing the issues we allow ourselves to confront.

PAM MIRAS

(2 films: 2012–2017)

Pascalina

Year of Release: 2012
Director & Screenwriter: Pam Miras
Producers: Cinema One Originals, Tito & Tita
Cast: Marie Veronica Santiago, Jet Leyco, Anna Vecin, Jessie Silvestre, Randy Punsal, Sanchi Catura, Peewee O'Hara, Cara Eriguel, Alex Medina, Ian Galliguez, Danzen Santos, Marija Vicente, Cora Buenaventura, Rey dela Cruz, Jericho Vega, Jasper Manlangit, Virginia Marcos, Ian Lomongo, Jacyn Esquillon, Ally Lumbera, Teng Cortez, Timmy Harn, Malay Javier, Lili Esquillon, Vicente Diaz, Aila Torre, Kev Abadam, Ei Salcedo, Paolo Domingo, John Arzadon, Divine Aucina, Andrei Lumbera

> Pascalina Lagumbay, Lina for short, wakes up on a day packed with a series of unfortunate events. She picks the wrong color for her hair, forgets to shut the faucet, leaves on time for work but has to chase a thief who snatches her bag then cops a feel before he lets go, discovers a new nurse at her workplace station, confronts her boss while red dye streaks her face and uniform—and gets informed that she's been fired, although her boss pays for the sandwich that she couldn't buy; her boyfriend Jeff screws her beyond the literal sense, by introducing to her his flirty office coworker who'll be accompanying him to an out-of-town assignment. She manages to find employment in the same building where Jeff works, but when she meets her sisters for a family get-together, an elderly though unrelated aunt arrives and tells them that their blood relative, to whom she's devoted, is about to die and needs to pass on her power as an *aswang* or flesh-devouring monster. No one believes her although Lina, always the pushover, agrees to accompany the lady to visit their sick aunt.

Of the many possibly obscure titles in the canon list, *Pascalina* will be sure to reward the adventurous viewer setting out to uncover difficult-to-access samples. Its primary distinction lies in purveying an urban-set horror narrative, a rare achievement considering how most successful horror films have to locate themselves in rural wildernesses, the better to distance the viewer from the double wallop of antinatural material packaged in a technologically sophisticated medium: any shred of doubt by the film artists in their material gets automatically aggrandized at the expense of believability in the presentation. *Pascalina* preempts these pitfalls by bravely harnessing its third-cinema limitations. As confirmed by the filmmaker (via *Messenger* reply on April 23, 2026), it made use of low-end technology during a time when digital production still had to attain its now-standard 4k polish, via the use of the Digital Harinezumi, a plastic toy camera whose manufacturing company halted production a decade ago; the low-resolution imagery might require some playback adjustments—which will nevertheless be entirely worth the trouble. The content is perfectly matched to the technology, with the *aswang* or flesh-eating candidate introduced as a mousy pushover, bullied by everyone who encounters her, reminiscent of the title character in Aki Kaurismäki's *Tulitikkutehtaan tyttö* (*The Match Factory Girl*, 1990), complete with casually

abusive boyfriend.[63] Both dark comedies immerse in developmental detritus and deploy the strategy of enabling identification with central figures disadvantaged by class and gender, so badly treated by people who have to survive by turning a blind eye to any evidence of humanity, that the audience looks forward to their inevitable tipping point. What adds to the movie's cognitive shock, beyond the negligence visited on it by a critical community confident that it knew better, is the fact that Lina's pain was also counted as insufficient by political history. A few years after the movie's release, the larger social horror of murderous extrajudicial violence would descend on a people already stripped of basic decency and barely able to cope with everyday survival.

Medusae

Year of Release: 2017
Director & Screenwriter: Pam Miras
Producer: Quiapost Productions
Cast: Desiree del Valle, Carl Palaganas, Liz Alindogan, Cris Garrido, Rico Fernandez, Edna Leal, Roberta de Leon, Jocelyn Tan, Rener Concepcion, Ria Miranda, Lee Marvin Torres, Honey Grace Mendoza, Jaime Dominguez, Justin Halili, Nori Ann Napeñas, Ana Velle N. Surreda, Glenda A. Alcala, Jayson A. Leal, Ricky Dator, Elson Leal, Joselyn de Guzman, Leonito A. Orantia, Wilfredo Vilanueva, Onel Matriano, Dante Atimtar, Joselyn Paz, Jimmy Laynes, Reynaldo Map, Rodel Buefano, Junar Luna, Rogelio Kinagpisan, Dionisio Laynes, Mamert Asis, Nono Cabrera, Reynaldo Mapi, Benido Embili, Glicerio Cabrera, Rex Rigodon, Federico Coronel, Romana Verzo, Paterno Calamigan, Tomas Santos, Camille Abigaille Yumang, Ayla de Joya, Gerald Nacua

> Since her son Luni had been acting up and was expelled from his school, single mother Alfa takes him to her documentary assignment in a remote fishing village. Luni misses his city friends and easily gets bored by the slow pace of life in the village, so Alfa makes sure to provide him with sufficient sunscreen for his albinic condition and asks him to help her as soundperson during her first interview. Later she quarrels with him when she discovers that he failed to record the answers of the respondent in her first interview. He refuses to accompany her the next day so she locks him in their hut, but when she returns, she finds him gone. A health worker informs her that someone who might be her son arrived with serious jellyfish stings, but when she gets to the clinic, she's told that he left with another adult. When she checks the closed-circuit recording, she sees Luni leaving with what appears to be her blind twin. She starts worrying about the town's belief that firstborn children are ritually offered to the sea in exchange for bountiful harvests, but the townspeople tell her to accept her loss just as they accepted theirs in the past.

Medusae encapsulates the predicament of single parenthood, with the further onerosity of a career woman's situation demonstrated by an initially jarring positioning of extreme samples.

[63] A more contentious point for me is how, despite being an earlier and comparatively impoverished production, *Pascalina* succeeds in what Lorcan Finnegan's *Nocebo* (2022) aspired to demonstrate, although the latter admittedly had global scope and an overt denunciation of neoliberal exploitation. For a discussion of *Nocebo*'s depiction of overseas Filipino workers, alongside Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* from the same year, see Joel David, "Chaotic Waters and Well-Tempered Specters: The Philippines as Source of Overseas Labor," *Kritika Kultura*, vol. 43, March 2024, pp. 222–249, doi:10.13185/1656-152x.2084.

In contrast with Alfa, her child Luni is young, male, melanin-deprived, understandably immature; the only definite similarity between them is their fierce intelligence and its resultant stubbornness. Alfa makes an effort to accommodate Luni's expectations but draws the line in her devotion to her filmmaking career, discovering too late that Luni regards the latter as the equivalent of a rival sibling. She recovers from her anger in scolding him for his negligence in assisting her, but by then his alienation from her (and disappointment in himself) has escalated, and the film, along with her persona, splinters in irrecoverable ways. This schematic description undersells Pam Miras's confident execution, notably her purveyance of an unsentimental melancholy, appropriate to a recollection of childhood as a domain that can never be revisited once a subject has outgrown it. In the end, the plurality of the titular Medusa extends beyond the motherly options available to Luni; in being as much feminized by his youth and helplessness, and monstrous in the demands he imposes, he becomes as much his mother's Gorgon as her own self-imposed challenge to thrive in the profession that yielded the work that contained their story.

ERIK MATTI

(1 film: 2013)

On the Job

Year of Release: 2013
Director: Erik Matti
Screenwriters: Erik Matti & Michiko Yamamoto
Producers: Star Cinema Productions & Reality Entertainment
Cast: Joel Torre, Gerald Anderson, Piolo Pascual, Joey Marquez, Michael de Mesa, Leo Martinez, Angel Aquino, Vivian Velez, Shaina Magdayao, William Martinez, Rayver Cruz, Empress Schuck, Lito Pimentel, Rosanna Roces, Al Tantay, Niño Muhlach, Joel Saracho

> Tatang and his cocky protégé Daniel are let in and out of jail by the powers-that-be to work as hired killers. Handling their cases are local cop Joaquin and promising National Bureau of Investigation agent Francis. But the pursuit of justice becomes complicated when Francis realizes that his search for the truth can lead him to permanently sever his ties with his politician father-in-law.

Changes in technology can no longer be called revolutionary during a time when companies upgrade their electronic products as a means of capitalist survival; but the digital shift in Philippine cinema can be granted a measure of progressive agency if it manages to revitalize a long-dormant genre such as, in this case, the action film. *On the Job* upholds the critical social commentary that the best action samples purveyed during the genre's heyday, roughly from the 1960s to the people-power revolt in 1986: as examples, in the present canon listing alone, we have films such as Gerardo de Leon's *The Moises Padilla Story* (1961), Cesar Gallardo's *Geron Busabos: Ang Batang Quiapo* (1964), Celso Ad. Castillo's *Asedillo* (1971), Romy Suzara's *Pepeng Shotgun* (1981), and several entries by Lino Brocka. *OtJ* depicts a heretofore clandestine situation so abhorrent and extensive that even recent real-life discoveries of similar and worse conditions still enable the movie to retain its shock factor—a tribute to Erik Matti's skill at delineating congested urban spaces steeped in paranoia, betrayal, and ensuing heartbreak. In fact, because of the intensity of the movie's vision of the state as failed and abusive provider, the narrative's cold-blooded resolution regarding the denial of fatherly commitment provides cathartic relief, since it is a flesh-and-blood criminal father (Joel Torre in peak form) who grieves as he executes his professional duty at the expense of his chosen son. Along the way we get treated to impressive set-pieces, harrowing chase sequences, mile-a-minute repartee, even lust and tenderness—so for those inclined to linger further, the complex allegory advanced by the film becomes worthy of contemplation.

HANNAH ESPIA

(1 film: 2013)

Transit

Additional Language: Hebrew
Year of Release: 2013
Director: Hannah Espia
Screenwriters: Giancarlo Abrahan & Hannah Espia
Producers: Cinemalaya & Ten17P
Cast: Irma Adlawan, Jasmine Curtis-Smith, Ping Medina, Marc Justine Alvarez, Mercedes Cabral, Yatzuck Azuz, Perla Bronstein, Omer Juran

> As Israel begins deporting the children of foreign workers, Filipinos Janet and her brother Moises hide their kids so they can remain in the country, with their respective Israeli employers sympathetic to their plight. Janet, a maid, clashes with her daughter Yael, who struggles to define her identity. Moises, a caregiver, looks for ways to make his son Joshua a legal resident. But an unfortunate incident will cause massive changes for these four individuals.

The most persuasive argument to be made for university-administered formal film training lies in this type of output, a debut film made by a fresh graduate, a woman who'd been partly foreign-based. The expected technical limitations will be evident to anyone who watches just for the purpose of cataloguing them, but the filmmakers turn their weakness into an advantage. Although resembling several foreign films that deal with the subject matter, including an Israeli entry, Shira Geffen and Etgar Keret's *Meduzot* (*Jellyfish*, 2007), *Transit* compensates by using surface plainness as an opportunity to interweave globalization issues, fragmented time and space, and multiple characters. The result, as expected, is discursively complex; but the unexpected bonus is that the film is emotionally affective as well. The multicharacter film text has become one of the distinctive specializations of Filipino filmmakers, but *Transit* takes this format a step forward by applying the principle of multiplicity not just to the number of characters, but to the concepts of time and space as well.

SIGRID ANDREA BERNARDO

(3 films: 2013–2019)

Ang Huling Cha-Cha ni Anita (Anita's Last Cha-Cha)

Alternate Title: *Ang Huling Cha-Cha ni Anita*
Year of Release: 2013
Director & Screenwriter: Sigrid Andrea Bernardo [as Sigrid Andrea P. Bernardo]
Producers: Ekweytormc, Pixeleyes Multimedia, Quiapost Productions
Cast: Angel Aquino, Therese Malvar, Jay Bordon, Lenlen Frial, Solomon Mark de Guzman, Marcus Madrigal, Lui Manansala, Gigi Columna, Star Orjaliza, Sarah Pagcaliwagan, Rhea Medina, Leo Salazar, Jim Bergado, Sang Pascual, Fudge de Leon, Marjorie Lorico, Joel Ian Pagcaliwagan, Yano Escueta

> As a military officer, Anita makes sure her cadets observe strict discipline, but when one of them admits that she's distracted because she fell for an enlisted man, Anita smiles inwardly and recalls the time when she was still a child hanging out with her chums Carmen and Goying. The two playact the rituals of courtship and flirtation expected of normal children, but Anita's attention is focused on a new arrival, the grownup Pilar. All the townspeople ostracize Pilar and she accepts their judgment, but Anita eventually realizes that this stemmed from an earlier time when Pilar was not just an abortionist but also a homewrecker. Anita realizes that her early stirrings of desire are for Pilar, and the latter similarly welcomes her as another outcast because of her masculine comportment and choice of clothes. When the past that Pilar left behind catches up with her, Anita realizes that Pilar will have no one else to look after her, just as Pilar also finds ways to nurture Anita in her own way. The looming feast-day celebration of Santa Clara imposes religion-induced conservative values on the townsfolk but also, inasmuch as their icon is famed for fertility, an awareness of the necessity for sexual fulfillment.

Same-sex desire had been around in Philippine cinema since the sexual-libertarian period of the early 1970s (actually 1969, with the first male kiss in Armando Garces's *Eric*). It took lesbianism, however, over a decade, in the 1990s, before non-negative imaging could begin. The emergence of low-budget digital production in the present millennium also once more neglected the women's option, since queer male audiences could use soft-core film presentations as an opportunity for cruising in film theaters, a too-risky activity for women. Hence the serendipitous emergence of *Ang Huling Cha-Cha ni Anita* was more than just an instance of "better late than never"—which, in the wiser formulation of Geoffrey Chaucer, was originally expressed as "better than never is late": local so-called queer films, replicating premillennial US practice, were essentially gay-male romcom stories with lots of skin, with departures from middle-class romances comprising the exceptions that proved the rule. *AHCCA* triumphed partly by proffering some of the charms that inhered in Aureus Solito's *Ang Pagdadalaga ni Maximo Oliveros* (*The Blossoming of Maximo Oliveros*, 2005), with its cross-gender-identified innocent awakening to the insurmountable summons of same-sex attraction. True to her 21st-century habitation, Anita, like Maxie before her, finds nothing anomalous about her baby-butch crush on a near-perfect specimen who just arrived in her community, although their immediate family members, for different reasons, find cause for worry in their respective objects of desire. *AHCCA* proceeds from a more conservative

context because of its religiously inflected rural setting, but then Anita and her *beau ideal* manage to spend intimate though chaste moments together, a near-impossible situation in Maxie's slum residence. The framing device, where Anita's childhood is recollected by her older self, is dispensable for the most part, and fortunately the storytelling aptly makes light use of it, to set the mood of humor in the beginning and nostalgia in the end.

Lorna

Additional Language: Hiligaynon
Year of Release: 2014
Director & Screenwriter: Sigrid Andrea Bernardo [as Sigrid Andrea P. Bernardo]
Producer: Creative Programs
Cast: Shamaine Buencamino, Maria Isabel Lopez, Raquel Villavicencio, Lav Diaz, Felix Roco, Jim Paredes, Juan Rodrigo, Angel Aquino, Miguel Faustmann, Karl Medina, Alex Medina, Lui Manansala, Mackie Galvez, Lem Lorca, Lilit Reyes, Mao Mao, Nesta, Chinky V. Tan, Jona Ballaran, Sarah Pagcaliwagan, Ethel Fernandez, Lexter Capilia, Nicole Benzon, Moisel Apon, Rinald Derosario, Ronald Oliveros, Mayumi Gonzales

> Single mother Lorna hangs out and contrasts with her high-school batchmates Miriam and Elvie. While all three were badly treated by their spouses, Miriam uses her hubby's money to splurge on herself and treat her friends, while Elvie devotes her time and resources to the welfare of her descendants. Lorna admits that her ex-partner never reciprocated the love she had for him, and when she meets the younger woman he decided to marry, she treats her with civility. Their son Ardie, a band player, also deals with a turbulent love life; but while preparing for a reunion on the occasion of Miriam's birthday, the friends discover that their campus heartthrob, a musician now named Rocky, is Ardie's social-network acquaintance. Lorna and Rocky almost became a number way back when. Since she was really ghosted by a long-distance prospect, Lorna finds herself vulnerable to Rocky's courtship. The two of them talk about their past apart from each other and discover that they have more in common now than they used to as HS classmates.

Sigrid Andrea Bernardo announced that her next major film, after *Ang Huling Cha-Cha ni Anita* (2013), was going to be a tribute to her mother, although her first choice for the title role, Nora Aunor, was unavailable when production began. One can see how Aunor could have introduced elements that would have elevated *Lorna* beyond the romantic comedies that she had mastered for most of her film career, but Bernardo had enough perspicacity to recognize where theater veteran Shamaine Buencamino could upgrade the viewing experience in her own way. She situates a teen-movie staple, a scene where female friends turn giggly over the presence of an ideal male catch, after the narrative midpoint, and makes us instantly realize how the accumulation of years makes the experience far more rewarding because of how the participants earned the right to indulge in silly pleasures. In line with her lead actor's career specialization, she devices theatrical situations to highlight the turning points at this period in Lorna's story, and not surprisingly Buencamino holds court in these scenes without any perceptive exertion. Bernardo by this point was already staking her claim as chronicler of the overlooked and/or downgraded members in contemporary Philippine womanhood, but part of the challenge in evaluating her auteuristic output is in recognizing how she appropriates stylistic approaches that serve the purpose of making her material palatable to mass viewers.

UnTrue

Additional Language: Georgian
Year of Release: 2019
Director & Screenwriter: Sigrid Andrea Bernardo [as Sigrid Andrea P. Bernardo]
Producers: Viva Films & The IdeaFirst Co.
Cast: Cristine Reyes, Xian Lim, Rhen Escaño, Peewee O'Hara, George Lasha, Tengiz Javakhidze, Lera Chikvaidze, Giorgi Makharadze, Luminita Gamboa, Anita Haines, Pouna Khalili, Par Maghzi, Andy Knots, Mahle Khiabani, Edison Maghzi, Sophiko Khachidze, Misho Maisuradze, Ramin Ghonghadze, Shota Ghonghadze, Beso Kirikashvili, Irakli Uchaneish, Giorgi Khelashvili, Givi Poti Abesadze, Givi Bauradze, Nodar Kartsivadze, Giorgi Kartsivadze, Karlo Alavidze

> A badly battered Mara tells a Georgian police officer that her husband is missing. Asked to tell her story, she narrates how, on his way to meet his Georgian vineyard business partner at the latter's restaurant, Joachim bumped into her and one of his bottles fell and broke. As it turns out, Mara was the new waitress and Joachim befriended her as a fellow compatriot. Their relationship moved quickly, seemingly borne along by Joachim's impulsive decisions—to move to an isolated residence, for example, and get married. He also had outbursts of rage over minor matters, and swerved while driving because he thought he'd run over a girl. After several attempts by Mara to get him to see a psychiatrist, Joachim presents his version of events to the specialist, going over the same incidents that Mara narrated but this time on the premise that Mara dominated their relationship. The couple's conflicted relationship is rooted in incidents in their home country, when Joachim was a schoolteacher who conducted an ill-advised affair with one of his students, which resulted in a social-media sex scandal.

Sigrid Andrea Bernardo's development as filmmaker is apparently premised on a nonnegotiable premise shared by a few though fortunately increasing number of millennium-era directors: that only those regarded as society's Others deserve to be positioned front and center in her stories. From that point onward, she set for herself challenges that departed further from personal (and even geographic) experience, although it would be safer for us to take the admonition of the Greek playwright's character, that nothing human is alien to any other human. *UnTrue* stands out not just in her body of work or even among Philippine women filmmakers, but as a global text that closely inspects the dynamics of trauma, pain, and the pleasure that has the potential to accompany exceptional cases of our experience of these sensations. Bernardo draws from the privilege exercised by Pinay filmmakers, where women's suffering can be depicted with the certainty that they would be aware of its origins and dimensions, and that the director would never let go of her empathy for the sufferer. Marilou Diaz-Abaya's *Milagros* (1997) would be the *ne plus ultra* in this realm of discourse, but Bernardo's achievement lies in her stepping away from these concerns and revealing, in progressively startling ways, the sadistic pleasure that men might be able to derive and, as payback, the cruelty that women are capable of inflicting. The revelation is subtle and ironic, since in any realistic instance of mutual combat, human females would inevitably physically lose to males. Yet *UT* requires an impartial foreign system to rescue (as it were) the defeated male; the selection of the Republic of Georgia as figurative battleground resonates with the Philippines's labor-export strategies and blends near-perfectly with the detrital beauty that typifies Eastern European film aesthetics, but it also raises parallel issues in both countries' predicaments—i.e., lying adjacent to hostile neighbors, approaching developed status with difficulty, and observing Christian practice (with Georgia fortunately aligned with its own Orthodox church rather than the Vatican State). In its refusal to declare any definitive winner between its flawed though well-matched protagonists, *UT* looks forward to more ambitious material from a still-young but already unstoppable talent.

KEITH DELIGERO

(3 films: 2013–2018)

Iskalawags

English Translations: *Scalawags*; *Rascals*
Language: Cebuano
Additional Languages: Filipino, English
Year of Release: 2013
Director: Keith Deligero
Screenwriters: Keith Deligero, Gale Osorio, Remton Siega Zuasola
From Erik Tulban's story "Kapayas (Papayas)"
Producer: Deligero & Co.
Cast: Kerwin Otida, Reynaldo Formentera, Windel Otida, Johnreil Lunzaga, Joriel Lunzaga, Micko Maurillo, Mark Lourence Montalban, Jeric Raval, Dionne Monsanto, Michelle Acain, Mariah Gonzaga, Marcheta Ortiz, Narciso Dizon, Rey Samaco, Ramil Alcordo, Edwina Alcordo, Jobert Lucero, Pina Gonzaga, Robertson Tampus, Erik Tuban, Keith Deligero, Lawrence Ang, Fel Louise Alingasa, Jerome Villamor

> In Barrio Malinawon, an islandic town in Cebu, seven male friends can't wait for school to end so they can hang out, talk about movies starring their idol Jeric Raval, and embark in new adventures in one another's company. Led by their self-appointed leader Palot (who claimed precedence over the rest by being first among them to grow pubic hair), they adopt the loanword *iskalawag*, which was used as the title of a popular action entry. They set as their goal the acquisition of humongous papayas they heard were growing in the garden of their teacher Ma'am Lina, but along the way they live out typical teenage hijinks mostly from the pursuit of illicit thrills, replicating their classmates' admired declamations in Filipino by mouthing dignified populist speeches uttered by Fernando Poe Jr. in *Asedillo* (Celso Ad. Castillo, 1971) and in *Hindi Ka Na Sisikatan ng Araw: Kapag Puno Na ang Salop, Part III* (*The Sun Won't Rise for You: When the Container is Full, Part III*, Pablo Santiago, 1990). The appearance of the flesh-and-blood Jeric Raval to attend to his personal businesses as Ma'am Lina's military husband demonstrates the power that their imagination holds over reality.

The exemplary final chapter of Bliss Cua Lim's *The Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema* (Duke University Press, 2024) contains as exhaustive a reading of *Iskalawags* as anyone can ask for. To the casual viewer, the film might appear to be a takeoff from the feel-good multicharacter youth films of the Second Golden Age. But then it goes way beyond the realist premise that typified those products. The closest to a Milinawon territory anywhere is a small district in Mindanao, and even the preteen poem "Sa Aking mga Kabatà (To My Fellow Youth)," ascribed to José Rizal and recited from memory in the characters' classroom, is considered a false attribution by historians, thus challenging standard notions of reality premised on acceptability. Drawn from director Keith Deligero's autobiographical experience, the *Iskalawags* narrative moves temporally back and forth in retelling a formative event in the shared lives of its gang of seven, until it flashforwards to an indeterminate future with the story's narrator en route to an uncertain destination. Lim points out how certain details in the film's design may be anachronistically outmoded or advanced, although in the use of Betamax technology, Deligero himself interjected to point out how a technological trend considered passé in imperial Manila denotes prosperity in the margins for people who have no other means to access the pop culture they crave, in the government-prescribed language they have to study. *Iskalawags* also stakes more than a linguistic

claim to Cebuano cinema: the celluloid-era products from the region fiercely partook of genre appropriations, in contrast with the Europeanesque-arty approaches marshaled by the digital-era generation who might have been too eager to distance themselves from the commercialist anxieties of their predecessors. *Iskalawags* could be more comfortably situated with, to name a rare available sample, Joe Macachor's *Ang Manok ni San Pedro* (*St. Peter's Rooster*, 1977), a comedy, originally shot in super-8mm. in order to provide the region with its first color film, where an easy-going peasant gets killed by a rival for a woman but is rewarded in heaven with a magical gamecock. *Iskalawags*'s fantastic counterpart arrives when Jeric Raval, the title gang's movie idol, materializes as the husband of the teacher whose papayas they covet, but stumbles upon her after his counterinsurgency activities, during her moment of indiscretion with a younger lover. The kids suddenly witness everything as members of an outdoor-screening audience, perhaps as a way for them to frame the traumatizing event that was about to unfold before their voyeuristic eyes. In managing to maintain its tonal equanimity to this point and beyond, *Iskalawags* enables us to think through the many implications of its plot and purpose.

Lily

Language: Cebuano
Additional Languages: Filipino, Hiligaynon, Japanese, English
Year of Release: 2016
Director: Keith Deligero
Screenwriters: Pam Miras, Timmy Harn, Keith Deligero
Script Consultant: Dodo Dayao
Producers: 8thumbs, Bards sa Kasamahan, Heritage Productions
Cast: Rocky Salumbides, Charlton Dano, Shaina Magdayao, Rey Samaco, Natileigh Sitoy, Enrie Estevez, Mikka Cabreras, Chrystal Alesna, Sunshine Lim, Georgette Nunag, Gurprit Singh, Kathleen Pador, Niña Igot-Makipig, Nicole Blackman, Tuesday Zabala, Zalde Lapiña, Ligaya Rabago, Edwina Alcordo, Gale Osorio, Chloe Novie Solasco, Darcy Arguedo, Baby Boy Arellano, Jvi James Luib, Ruel Dahis Antipuesto, Lawrence Ang, Gladys Areopagita, Ronnie Gamboa Jr., Ric Rodrigo Porminal Jr., Denzel Yorong, Hesus Deligero, Ramil Alcordo, Juvel Alvarez, Mario Lowell Baring, Anecito Disuacido, Charles Lim, Fel Louise Alingasa, Romy Warain, Earl Vincent Ramirez, Lav Diaz, Eula Valdez, Remton Siega Zuasola

> In hunting for a *sigbin*, a mythological creature regarded as an *aswang*'s (native vampire's) pet, Mario Ungo is distracted by Lily, who hides him in her convent after he suffers a mysterious injury. Mario falls in love and lives with Lily. Although not averse to participating in criminal activity, he's forced to kill a burglary victim, then claims that he will be unable to provide adequately for Lily and their child if he stays put. Despite Lily's protestations, he decides to migrate for work in Manila, where he is reduced to servitude in the employ of better-off people. At one point in his job as security guard of a plush subdivision, he winds up killing an arrogant driver. He also falls for Jane, a nightclub dancer, and they cohabit when she gets pregnant. Lily however has also set out for Manila to find him, her face displaying an unsightly self-inflicted scar.

Lily is an example of what we might term a maximalist approach to filmmaking, as opposed to minimalism. Such a project would necessarily turn on the sustenance of paradoxes, starting with the association of this strategy with the big-budget pursuit of presenting as many elements as possible in order to attract the greatest number of viewers; the fact that the project is not just

independently sourced, but regionally centered as well, may have therefore put off evaluators when it first arrived. The film advances itself with an audacity that can be better understood by going over its director's fairly recent output. Preferring to immerse in genre expression rather than art consciousness, Keith Deligero first tinkered with elements of suspense and the prison film in *Kordero sa Dios* (*Lamb of God*, 2012) as well as comedy and the youth film in *Iskalawags* (*Scalawags*, 2013). With *Lily*, he furnished the usual elements of horror closely associated with rural settings by Philippine audiences, but incorporated the most innovative technical devices ever seen in a local sample of the genre, exceeding the peak achievements of older, mostly gone specialists. Major characters' appearances shift sometimes in the same scene (complete with a nervy reversal of roles in a Catholic confessional), and the erratic, discontinuous, occasionally repetitious cutting provides a distinctly cinematic experience of uncanny disorientation in the narrative's reality effect—described by Deligero in an email response as "like putting back pieces of the mirror that Lily broke in one scene." As if seeking to further top off this already formidable challenge, Deligero introduces an inside joke that keeps advancing toward external dimensions: the male character starts out wearing a jacket inscribed with the director's regional film festival, and reveals a T-shirt after being felled by an unidentified assailant, on which the director's previous film title is displayed. At a peak horrific point much later, the entire production aesthetic suddenly turns conventional, in the best way our most accomplished filmmakers could execute; the reflexive twist, too delightful to divulge here, should be left up to curious explorers to discover. Underlying the entire situation is the profound and melancholy pathos of rural natives grappling with the prospect of permanent poverty by seeking better prospects in the metropolitan capital and discovering there how their status is even further downgraded; the native female, already oppressed in her local habitat, experiences twice the degradation, even if she happens to possess supernatural abilities. In a perfect world, a talent such as Deligero's should be deluged with offers—a prospect that may yet arrive, if we can fix our deeply flawed critical mechanisms.

A Short History of a Few Bad Things

Language: Cebuano
Additional Languages: Filipino, English
Year of Release: 2018
Director: Keith Deligero
Screenwriter: Paul Grant
Producers: Binisaya Movement, ABS-CBN Film Productions, Cinema One Originals
Cast: Victor Neri, Jay Gonzaga, Publio Briones III, Maricel Sombrio, Kent Divinagracia, Hesus Deligero, Rey Samaco, Arnel Mardoquio, Julius Augustus Ambrad, Felicismo Alingasa, Ryles Cameron, Mel Baquiran, Remton Siega Zuasola, Crezzo Paz, Vitto Neri, Shiela Hontingoy, Fe Louise Alingasa, Alieza Despojo, Keith Deligero, Nony Pador, Alice Castro Dizon, Bebot Arias, Minerva Gerodias, Eric Bico, Zeny Nepomoceno

Felix Tarongoy and Jay are described by Ouano, their perpetually highly strung chief, as an ideal police investigation team for being smart and handsome respectively. Despite strict orders to follow their supervisor's instructions and report to him at every turn, Felix interrogates witnesses to the drive-by assassination of a prominent local businessman in Cebu and identifies Tito Abog, an ex-military officer, as suspect. He proceed's to the latter's well-off residence and makes the acquaintance of Maria, Tito's sullen, intimidated wife. Tito confronts Felix and Jay in Ouano's office, confirming his and

Felix's background in counterinsurgency operations, and threatens Felix with retaliation for discounting their shared past. Running into Maria in public, Felix finds out from her that Tito's plantation worker also witnessed the killing. Just when Felix thinks he'll be able to solve the crime, new killings throw more mysteries his way, making him fear for Maria's safety.

A Short History of a Few Bad Things will resemble a light workout after the complex gymnastics of *Lily*. In fact, as studies of Classical Hollywood affirm, its genre consistency and singular vision are deceptive properties that could easily trip up less-prepared practitioners. The script of *ASHFBT* benefits from the contribution of a well-schooled outsider who took up residence in a regional center and participated in academic challenges, acquiring fluency in the native language along the way.[64] Since the Communist Party of the Philippines observes Maoist prescriptions, the protracted guerrilla war it has waged for way over half a century finds its way into the country's most dispossessed rural territories, with counterinsurgency soldiers often opting to retire early due to the trauma of combat operations. *ASHFBT* leans on the tragic irony of the most idealistic members of the Philippine armed forces, who would otherwise have proved heroic fighters in the people's war, being understandably regarded as no different from their less-scrupulous comrades by those who survived their offensive maneuvers. The apparently serial attacks that erupt midway in the narrative could thereby be read in this context, but the film grounds itself in the anxious, conscientious, yet outwardly impassive delivery of Victor Neri, far removed form his teen-idol appearances, redolent of Jaime de la Rosa in Gregorio Fernandez's Cold War spy caper *Kontrabando* (*Contraband*, 1950), minus any hint of smarm. The performance assists in recuperating whatever cynicism might prevail in the material: good intentions will never guarantee positive outcomes, but the moral clarity they provide does make for powerful storytelling. In an interview with Bliss Cua Lim, Keith Deligero described *Iskalawags*, *Lily*, and *ASHFBT* as comprising "an incidental trilogy on the politics of languages," and definite as *ASHFBT*'s formal departure from the other two might seem, its counterfeit final titles ironically represent a more triumphant resolution than its actual closing credits.

[64] ***Essential disclosure***: Professor Paul Grant once interviewed me regarding canonization activities, a way in which this capsule review potentially catalyzes its own mise en abyme, for those inclined to reflect on reflexive activities. See Paul Douglas Grant, "The Transnational Pastime: An Interview with Joel David," *Plaridel: A Philippine Journal of Communication, Media, and Society*, vol. 14, no. 1, June 2017, pp. 135–145, doi:10.52518/2017.14.1-09grant. In returning full circle to the topic of Cebuano movies, Grant is better known as co-author with Misha Boris Anissimov of *Lilas: An Illustrated History of the Golden Ages of Cebuano Cinema*, University of San Carlos Press, 2016. A related issue is that the term proposed by Grant and Anissimov in place of "regional cinema" is "vernacular cinema," which Keith Deligero also strongly prefers inasmuch as, per Bliss Cua Lim, "it exposes the provincialism of Manila culture and the unacknowledged linguistic ethnocentrism that its long-unchallenged dominance fosters" ("Binisaya: Archival Power and Vernacular" chapter in *The Archival Afterlives of Philippine Cinema*, Duke University Press, 2024). While radically ideal, however, such a semantic adjustment would be tantamount to a displacement of nearly all the other categories and premises in Philippine cinema, so it should first be applied in a comprehensive account of non-Manila film production.

GIANCARLO ABRAHAN

(2 films: 2014–2019)

Dagitab

English Title: *Sparks*
Year of Release: 2014
Director & Screenwriter: Giancarlo Abrahan
Producers: Cinemalaya Foundation & Ten17P
Cast: Eula Valdez, Nonie Buencamino, Martin del Rosario, Sandino Martin, Max Eigenmann, Frances Ignacio, Ronnie Lazaro, Rolando Inocencio, Valentin Naguit, Misha Lecaros, Ryan Peter Judd, Whammy Alcazaren, Chris Gallegos, Al Bernard Garcia, Vic Robinson, Ness Roque, Jovita Laureola, Marvin Gomez

> Issey and Jimmy, both academics, have been married long enough for their colleagues' children to be in college. Jimmy takes rural field trips to finalize his dissertation on a folkloric muse, but he also asks about Lorena, a woman fighter who disappeared with no one able to pinpoint her whereabouts; a rebel commander who knows his and Lorena's shared history tells him to give up his quest. Issey knows that Jimmy's research is a contrivance—that he's actually seeking closure with his old flame, who left him to join the insurgent army. Indulging in cigarettes and alcohol, she attends an out-of-town workshop as a facilitator, where her friend's son Gab, avoiding his roommate's same-sex advances, bonds with her. Although aware of the ethical complications, Issey's disappointment in her marriage impels her to allow Gab's interest to acquire erotic attributes.

Over a decade since its initial appearance, *Dagitab* found new life in a stage adaptation. The film itself had an ambivalent critical reception, as observable in the various critics organizations' indicators of appreciation: set aside (except for performance trophies) by the oldest group, declared "best first film" by the late-millennium group, and wholly embraced by the newest (and only non-academic) group in its annual survey. One can immediately comprehend where the hesitation of older evaluators would arise from: the film grapples with the dynamics of a radical movement that abided for nearly half a century, that originated from personalities identified with the national university, and that continues to influence its constituents' deliberations on policy and aesthetics. In this context, one might ascribe the film's silence on the movement's defining upheaval, a schism that led to the formation and eventual strengthening of breakaway groups, to the filmmaker's possible youthfulness. Yet a closer tracking of the male professor's obsession with a former lover, whose disappearance during active service in the people's army may or may not have been a consequence of its tragically rampageous anti-infiltration campaign, raises the further issue, as expressed by the filmmaker, of the male character's "mythopoliticizing" the woman's disappearance, "because otherwise her 'death' would not have been as sublime as someone who loved her could hope for" (*Messenger* reply, October 24, 2025). And the fact that the rebel-army commander he queries refuses to provide him with a useful account (perhaps to own the woman's narrative, or protect his own feelings for her) suggests the standard allegorizing of the nation, or at least an idealized aspect of it, being imposed again on the figure of the woman. Without attempting to spoil any first-time appreciator's viewing experience, we can read further into the handling of the wife's discontent using gender as a means of critique—i.e., between the two academic protagonists, she's the one who gets laid in real life, and her stud, after enduring the male prof's retaliatory attempt at intimidation, will still be able to hope for further sexual liberation. The use of sexual exclusion as a means of indicating where a storyteller's sympathies lie is a narrative tactic closely associated with contemporary Euro-Latin material, but to see it deployed in Pinas culture, with its Euro-Latinate roots, is to realize how much potential still lies in pathways we might have too readily abandoned for the sake of Americanization.

Sila-Sila

English Title: *The Same People*
Year of Release: 2019
Director: Giancarlo Abrahan
Screenwriter: Daniel Saniana
Producers: ABS-CBN Film Productions, Quiapo Collective, UP Cinema Arts Society
Cast: Gio Gahol, Topper Fabregas, Dwein Baltazar, Phi Palmost, Bart Guingona, Kych Minemoto, Vincent Kevin Pajara, Meann Espinosa, Jay Gonzaga, Sunshine Teodoro, Adrienne Vergara, Thea Marabut, Juan Miguel Severo, Lin Javier, Jasmine Curtis-Smith, Wilson Tenama, Rainier Carreon, Justin Hernandez, Maureen Gonzales, Daniel Morial, Daniel Saniana, Ilsa Malsi, Apa Agbayani, JL Javier, Marvin Matias, Gaye Angeles, Boo Gabunada

> Gabriel and Jared, friends since college, are unable to recover from what Gab calls Jared's betrayal when the former sees the latter's flirtation on a dating app. He leaves the city to work at an interisland capital and returns after a couple of years to attend a college reunion. Goaded along by mutual friends, Gab attempts to resume communicating with Jared but his ex is still sore over his sudden departure and they wind up quarreling again. Matters get more complicated when Gab is promoted by the non-governmental organization where he works but the higher position happens to be a vacancy ... back in the same distant place he fled to. He also entertains various degrees of entanglements with straight men, with Jared happening on the presence in his bedroom of a married man he'd been sleeping with and consequently having his own turn at a jealous fit.

After local culture had taken a womanly direction following the humiliating failure of the grand masculinist experiment of martial rule by Ferdinand Marcos Sr., filmmakers realized that they no longer had to resort to camp or negative imaging in order to present queer characters onscreen. The still-unsatisfactory positive characterization may have been intended to justify the espousal of same-sex intercourse—successful enough, despite reactionary gripes, to initiate postqueer storytelling in Philippine cinema. What might surprise observers still fixated on the premillennial valuations of dimorphic differentation and observance of socially designated gender roles is how, as exemplified in *Sila-Sila*, local queer subjects have assimilated Western best practice, possibly exceeding global models by enabling the rest of "straight" culture to arrive at a workable rapprochement with the community. The film in fact not only dispenses with the expected consummation of copulation scenes; it also casts a surprisingly critical perspective on Gab, its central character, who's inclined to flee rather than confront conflicts (termed "ghosting" in social-media parlance, per a clarification on December 14, 2025, from the director via *Messenger* regarding the film's misleading summary at the *Internet Movie Database*), engages in the promiscuity that he abhors in others, and insists on teasing cis-het males to the point where he succeeds in seducing a married man. *SS*'s feat lies in demonstrating the psychological motives behind Gab's resistance to queer culture's prescriptions, withholding moralist judgment while also indicating how his self-absorption becomes a source of frustration for people who genuinely love him. One might be invited to make correspondences between his long journey to self-understanding and the national condition of a young country that still seems incapable of maturation, but that might be a challenge best left to better-prepared social-science experts.

PERCI M. INTALAN

(1 film: 2014)

Dementia

Year of Release: 2014
Director: Perci M. Intalan
Screenwriters: Renei Dimla & Jun Lana
Producer: IdeaFirst Company
Cast: Nora Aunor Jasmine Curtis-Smith, Bing Loyzaga, Yul Servo, Chynna Ortaleza

> Mara returns to Batanes with her adoptive family, who're hoping that her memories of her childhood experience will help cure her dementia. What Mara remembers is how a couple brought her home to keep company with their biological child, Olivia, who suffers from psychotic disorder and has to be chained to furniture. Mara's able to pacify Olivia's violent moods, but she faces a crossroads in her life when the man she has fallen in love with asks her to be his wife.

Dementia succeeds primarily by relying on expectations that it fulfills in unexpected ways. It proceeds primarily as a supernatural horror film but brings up a social condition, that of orphaned subjects for whom exploitation is more acceptable than abandonment. It pursues a narrative throughline that brings up unreliable recollections of traumatizing events, then flashes the title credit like an afterthought, nearly an hour into the presentation; where it goes from then on will have to be part of the discovery process. Finally, it features Nora Aunor, older and wearier after her long-drawn-out sabbatical in the US—but the greater portion of her character arc is taken up and developed by younger actors. In fact, one would be misadvised to expect one of her fireworks-laden readings in this film; her comeback career teems with such treats, but *Dementia* is a reminder that her artistry cannot be separated from her expertise as producer and director.[65] She exercises self-restraint in order to allow the work's various possibilities to branch out and raise further questions about the function of the mind in comprehending pain, memory, desire, and pleasure.

[65] ***Spoiler alert***: on May 21, 2025, in commemoration of Nora Aunor's first birth anniversary after her death, the producer's *Facebook* page uploaded the raw and unedited take titled "Seq. 74, Shot 2," comprising the central revelation in the film. Mauro Feria Tumbocon Jr., who reposted the file on the same date, reported the director's account: "I whispered to her to stare at the camera. I told her that her character will go from not remembering to remembering bits and pieces, then without understanding she remembers the pain, then slowly it all fades away. I didn't expect her not to even blink. There was nothing in front of her except our cinematographer and the camera. She was literally only looking at the lens. But the power her eyes wield. Mackie [Galvez, cinematographer] said he couldn't believe what he was recording. Unfortunately for the film we had to sacrifice this one long take by inserting flashbacks to better serve the story."

ZIG MADAMBA DULAY

(1 film: 2015)

Bambanti

English Title: *Scarecrow*
Additional Language: Pangasinan
Year of Release: 2015
Director & Screenwriter: Zig Madamba Dulay
Producers: Sinag Maynila, Solar Entertainment, Center Stage Productions
Cast: Alessandra de Rossi, Shamaine Buencamino, Micko Laurente, Julio Diaz, Delphine Buencamino, Lui Manansala, Erlinda Villalobos, Celio Aquino, Kiki Baento, Abegail Edillo, Jillian Pearl Paraggua, Noli Tamayo, Cristina Agustin, Ofelia Utanes, Verna Riza Agonoy, Santiago Norberte, Ligaya Rivera, Jeffrey Rivera, Angeles Reginaldo, Helson Cadiz, Jerival Guanco

> After her husband was killed by unidentified assassins, Belyn performs laundry tasks for her better-off sister-in-law Martha, in order to continue the elementary education of her two children and nurse the youngest. She takes her son Popoy along with her because she can count on his intelligence to help her. One day, however, Martha realizes that her teen daughter's expensive watch is missing. A fortuneteller says that a boy and his mother took it, so she queries Popoy, who denies committing the theft. Martha files a complaint with the village officials and the townfolk begin to turn on mother and son.

Zig Madamba Dulay's extensive practice in film storytelling has prepared him for the standard low-budget exercise on which *Bambanti* is premised. Proceeding like any typical indie production, the film draws its strength from the delivery of its narrative's central trio of mother, son, and sister-in-law. Dulay's point of departure, however, lies in allowing the familial and community players to enact their roles as concerned bystanders without casting aspersions on any of them, the way that several contemporaneous entries succeeded with the local elite and even foreign markets by indulging in the victim-centered demonization of Manila's Others. So the film's plot twists, when they arrive, prove as much surprising to the attentive viewer as they do to the characters, and underline the insight that so much potential in this type of material has been wasted in the past because of the essentially exploitative approach of filmmakers who wished to impress their colleagues and superiors at the expense of the hapless folk they trained their equipment on.

LEMUEL LORCA

(1 film: 2015)

Water Lemon

Year of Release: 2015
Director: Lemuel Lorca
Screenwriter: Lilit Reyes
Producers: Blue Skies Productions, Quezon City Film Development Commission, Tuko Film Productions
Cast: Junjun Quintana, Tessie Tomas, Alessandra de Rossi, Meryll Soriano, Lou Veloso, Lui Manansala, Menggie Cobarrubias, Daniel Marsh, Mariella Castillo, Yuwin Cruz, Gold Aquino, Jerald Zarsuela, Tristan Jason Herrin, Dorcas Nilooban, Roann Casimiro, Kathlyn Cabaldo, Maria Theresa Pasamba, Mary Grace Virtusios, Lilit Reyes, Reizel Ann S. Guanlea, Joseph G. Rogado, Kathlyn C. Atienza, Beatrice Lombard

> In Mauban municipality in Quezon Province, Filemon obsesses over the earth's ocean surface, measuring the sea level everyday and entering his findings on a chart. He explains his concerns to anyone who cares to listen, which people in his community generally allow him to, in recognition of his autistic condition. He also talks swiftly in English, following the advice of his widowed mother Pina, who's concerned about the future her son will have after she dies. Because of his inability to focus on assigned work, Filemon loses his job as a filing clerk in a government office. Because of her position as an education supervisor, she asks an old friend to provide a position for Filemon that can make use of his fondness for order and design. Filemon has also taken to hanging out at the internet café, where he makes the online acquaintance of someone he calls "Ms. Seychelles," since she hails from the country. When his cousin, who runs the café, is actually visited by the American she befriended online and winds up arranging to marry him so she can migrate to England, her father invites Filemon to an all-night drinking session.

Philippine cinema has attained sufficient stature as the equivalent of national literature that it can accommodate an intensely personal issue—autism spectrum disorder, in this instance—and not worry about addressing wider topical questions. The fallacy in this formulation is that any well-developed argument will inevitably be able to draw in contemporary concerns as a matter of course, although these must be read carefully and creatively, as befits any intelligent work of fiction. *Water Lemon* situates itself in the filmmaker's own hometown, a decision that endows it with a fundamental level of credibility, although to Lemuel Lorca's credit, what he exploited was his familiarity with the place's scenic locations, specifically those that reveal their wonder from certain vantage points during particular hours of the day. A clue to the film's unusual appeal lies in the setting's name (Quezon being the southernmost Tagalog-speaking province, renamed after the nationalist President who hailed from the place): *uban* refers to hair strands that turn white usually from old age, so the Mauban municipality exhibits a well-kempt vibe despite being situated northernmost geographically and therefore not as distant from Manila as most of the other destinations in the province. The characters in *WL* speak of professional and financial success as premised on relocating to the metropolitan center, with one of the younger go-getters determined to travel even farther, outside of the country, as a marriage migrant. When

the primary character's mother is admired for her abilities and achievements, the same hope of Manila-centered fulfillment is expressed for her; her self-awareness is complimented without any tinge of self-pity—in fact, as she confides to a colleague, she worries about what will happen to Filemon, her autistic son, after she passes on. No cure exists for his condition, as anyone familiar with the medical literature knows. At the presentation's close, with the predicament of mother and afflicted offspring, as well as other characters carrying on with the processes of living, dying, and leaving, what emerges is a recognizable representation of a nation in flux, determined to move forward but also anxious about leaving anyone behind.

RALSTON JOVER

(5 films: 2015–2019)

1—*Da Dog Show*

English Title: *The Dog Show*
Year of Release: 2015
Director & Screenwriter: Ralston Jover [as Ralston G. Jover]
With Sergio Redolosa & Howie Severino as story consultants
Producers: Queen B Productions & sam cinema
Cast: Lou Veloso, Mercedes Cabral, Almira Alcid, Bernard Carritero, Aljon Ibañez, Simon Ibarra, Micko Laurente, Cherry Malvar, OJ Mariano, Flor Salanga, Menchie Diaz Tabije Villavert, Jhorel Bocade, Bobby Tamayo, Joshua Liechtenberg, Janzhed Negrite, Arrian Labios, Roma Oyson, Sandino Buan, Bernard Carritero, Kathleen Reyna, Rener Concepcion, Anthony Camposano, Jasmine Brazil

Although he should be retired at his age, 73-year-old Sergio has to continue earning a living by staging sidewalk programs where both of his trained dogs perform tricks for an audience of strangers in exchange for money. His intellectually disabled grownup daughter Celia helps him while her younger brother Alvin goes to school. For the past thirty years, they've been residing in the mausoleum of Sergio's late employers—an arrangement that upset his wife so much that she fled to her provincial relatives with their youngest son Eddie Boy. Sergio saves up enough money so he could retrieve the kid. After Celia throws a tantrum, knowing she may never see her mother again, he brings her along as well as one of his dogs. His wife however refuses to see him and her relations don't want to accede to his request without any legal oversight. Negotiations with district officials work out and he's allowed to take Eddie Boy back to Manila with him, but their journey home turns out to be far more complicated than their arrival.

2—*Hamog*

English Title: *Haze*
Year of Release: 2015
Director & Screenwriter: Ralston Jover [as Ralston G. Jover]
Producers: Cinema One Originals, Keep Me Posted, Black Maria Pictures, CMB Film Services, Wildsound Studios
Cast: Zaijian Jaranilla, Therese Malvar, Samuel Quintana, Bon Andrew Lentejas, Kyline Alcantara, OJ Mariano, Anna Luna, Mike Liwag, Lou Veloso, Ruby Ruiz, Flor Salanga, Junjun Quintana, Vic Romano, Jane Torres, Cataleya Surio, Cyril Dayao, Elyboy Medina, Aljon Ibañez, Meljun Quinto, Vincent Olano, John Lloyd Medina, Bernard Carritero, Vangie Castillo, Kiko de Guzman, Eero Yves Francisco, Victor Taniegra, Charry Castinlag, Jomel Redobante, Jelyn Lavarez, Toby Anthony del Rosario, Luis Ruiz

Four street kids live in open spaces and earn a living by stealing from the drivers of vehicles that slow down at the busy cloverleaf interchange on the Makati City side of Epifanio de los Santos Avenue's Guadalupe Bridge. Moy, the youngest, escaped from an orphanage, while the rest ran away from abusive parents or guardians: Jinky and Tisoy sleep together as a couple, while Rashid is a Muslim abandoned by his mother to his heavy-handed father. They're familiar with the rules that police, social-work, and district officials of the area seek to impose on them, which is why they avoid getting caught. Their modus operandi consists of distracting a target driver (usually male, without a companion or passenger) and stealing his goods and valuables when he chases away some of them. In one instance, Jinky is caught by Danny, a cab driver, and brought by him to the police precinct; Tisoy, who's frustrated in being unable to find her, intensifies his sniffing of rugby (named after the popular brand of addictive contact cement) and hallucinates a vision of Supergirl. In another instance, the loot they stash away is swiped by another gang of street kids. They give chase but Moy is hit by a delivery truck driven by an underage guy who's also fleeing from an abusive employer. With Tisoy too stoned to help, Rashid finds himself alone in arranging for his friend's burial.

Having written some well-received films for their respective directors, Ralston Jover arrived with raised expectations for his output as filmmaker. The passage of time functions best for the kind of work he does, with its focus on the intimate lives and irresolvable problems of overlooked citizens. The two films he released in 2015 recall the paired similar-yet-different scripts he wrote for Brillante Mendoza nearly a decade earlier, *Foster Child* and *Tirador* (*Slingshot*), both about grownups who turn out to be innocents when confronted with the harsh realities of urban existence. This time the characters are mature enough in approaching the challenges of uneven neoliberal development, but we're provided the privilege of watching them cope with curveballs that most of us won't have to worry about precisely because of privilege: consistent with the treatment he provided in all his previous materials, Jover doesn't allow any of his characters to plead their cases with us—only with specific people in their universe, who they perceive as instrumental in determining whether they can succeed in their pursuits. *Da Dog Show*'s Sergio, an elderly father reduced to living in a graveyard but defying the reality of fast-approaching mortality for the sake of his four dependents (two humans and two animals) by staging entertainments for strangers, consistent with the derogatory implication of "dogshow" in Pinas slang. Sergio persists nevertheless in order to recover one more son from his estranged wife. The treatment lends itself to comic or melodramatic handling, but Jover unexpectedly accepts the challenge of utilizing secular humanism, an option that initially softens the rough edges of Sergio's existence but becomes entirely crucial with the increasing unpredictability of events in what should have been a fairly standard mission narrative: wherever Sergio might find himself by the time his hour upon the stage is up, Jover ensures that his fate, or at least an empathetic understanding of it, remains in our hands. In contrast, *Hamog* might seem to have an excess of the same sentiment, with its most vulnerable character, a severely abused young woman named Jinky, reciting improbably poetic introductory voiceovers ... until the troubles that the characters grapple with bring up the question of our own prejudicial assumptions. For if Jinky manages to transcend this vision of hell she'd been plunged into, who's to say if eloquence might still lie outside her range of abilities? As if to illustrate that existence is never always a strictly linear experience when trauma induces inner turmoil, Jover halts the plot and revisits an earlier incident, in order to make definitively clear why Jinky had to disappear from the lives of her comrades. Such a storytelling "error" would never be permitted by conventional script evaluators, but the triumph of *Hamog* lies in how this literal plot twist becomes more a necessity than a correction.

Rene Villanueva's Hiblang Abo

Alternate Title: *Hiblang Abo*
English Title: *Strands of Gray*
Year of Release: 2016
Director: Ralston Jover [as Ralston G. Jover]
Screenwriters: Naning Estrella & Ralston Jover
From the full-length 1980 play by Rene Villanueva, with poem "Tapus Na ang Prusisyon (The Procession is Over)" by Rener Concepcion

Producers: Cinemalaya, Queen B Productions, Keep Me Posted, Heaven's Best Entertainment, Wildsound, Tabula Rasa
Cast: Lou Veloso, Jun Urbano, Leo Rialp, Nanding Josef, Matt Daclan, Lui Manansala, Flor Salanga, Cherry Malvar, Angela Cortez, Mike Liwag, Rommel Luna, Rener Concepcion, Anna Luna, Bernard Carritero

> Four geriatric men, each with his own backstory, share a dormitory room in the Bahay ni Juan (John's House) hospice. Through their voluntary sharing of their individual stories, they find out the reasons that they wound up rejected and, in one case, homeless. Huse was a playwright who came out as gay to his wife but was unable to maintain a student lover and his family's upkeep. Blas narrates how he was a fiery union organizer although one of his companions uncovers a more disturbing version about the labor strike he led. Sotero, Teroy for short, was a farmer who had to allow his depraved landlord, Don Sixto, to collect his beloved daughter as payment for loans that his harvests could not cover. Pedro was the vagrant abused and rejected by his family, eventually found literally wallowing in mud. Unable to find a way back to the lives they once knew, the four find themselves haunted by their memories and upset at finding out about their companions' suffering.

Hiblang Abo is the closest that Ralston Jover has come to melodrama, primarily because the source material by Rene Villanueva was conventionally designed and resolutely stagebound. By deciding to observe the play's lines and structure, and enhancing the artifice by having the same actor depict each of the major characters in their younger years, Jover enables the successfully distinct feel of a filmed play; more important, he allows Villanueva's long-standing concerns with native masculinities to be foregrounded, with *HA* intersecting with his own interest in the plight of people neglected by society. The entire outing might sound like a downbeat presentation, but the major attraction of theatrical events abides herein: each of the four lead performers is associated with different outstanding performing-arts circles in the country, decades of experience providing them with well-honed expertise that each one deploys in recollecting the crucial slice of memory that led to the shame and destitution of their seeking refuge in a hospice home. Although aware that Philippine society regards their status as failures, they admit to themselves that no other option remains for them except to await the arrival of the end in the place they happen to find themselves in at the moment. The fact that other sufferers share the same space ought to be a source of some comfort, but the opposite—that their companions' respective misfortunes remind each of them of his own—could also take hold and upend whatever camaraderie they managed to work on. The most painful aspect of Villanueva's bleak, heartbreaking vision is that the one among them capable of cruelty will endure, but our journey toward that realization, with some of the best performers of their generation treating us to the late playwright's delight in language and drama, documented in full creative flowering by an old-for-his-years filmmaker, ensures that *HA* will age far better than its warmhearted but tragically damaged elderly folk.

Bomba

English Title: *The Bomb*
Additional Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2017
Director & Screenwriter: Ralston Jover [as Ralston Gonzales Jover]
From a story by Ralston Jover & Dennis C. Evangelista

Producers: ATD Entertainment & Heaven's Best Entertainment
Cast: Allen Dizon, Angeli Nicole Sanoy, Alan Paule, Sue Prado, Kate Brios, Joel Saracho, Felixia Crysten Dizon, Tabs Sumulong, Romeo Lindain, Lucas Allric Dizon, Apol Salonga, Bon Andrew Lentejas

> Deaf-mute Pipo flees from a man who recognizes him, then leaves his job as custodial assistant in a funeral parlor. The owner, a police officer, wants him to return, but he expresses an aversion to handling dead bodies, which happen to be in abundance because of the out-of-control drug war of then-President Rodrigo R. Duterte. None of the other jobs he finds, including scavenging at the dumpsite where he lives with his young daughter Cyril, earns enough to tide the two of them over. Fortunately the girl is mature for her age and is able to negotiate with grownups in the community. Finally, neighbors concerned with their condition are able to persuade Pipo to return to funerary work. But when Pipo approaches the site of a terrorist attack and is unable to answer the police's questions, he is mistaken as a suspect and arrested. Cyril meanwhile hears her neighbor Ina pay attention to a man on the radio announcing that his daughter disappeared when her deaf-mute godfather brought her to Manila; Cyril pleads with Ina to leave her and Pipo in peace.

Protagonists in Ralston Jover's films were consistently marked as highly susceptible to legal and social reprisals, but also as seriously flawed; to draw a link from one condition to the other would be tantamount to revealing one's biases, rather than the characters' blameworthiness. *Bomba* trains the harshest light in his oeuvre so far in its presentation of Pipo: the individual in question has to endure abuse even from strangers who misrecognize his regular appearance and never bother to figure out why he seems unable to understand and respond the way everybody else does; his devotion to Cyril makes his plight even more poignant and disconsolate. Although the latter possesses enough wisdom and valor to make a perfect match for her guardian, she first needs to conform to the greater expectations brought to bear on underage women. Rover intensifies the challenge of empathizing with this pair by focalizing our realization of the worst-case scenario in the responses of a concerned neighbor, their strongest supporter. Her suspicions reverberate throughout their circles, the scandal strong enough to overpower Cyril's own warning that her father wishes to treat her as a sexual commodity. The final challenge for us (though not for the community, since drug-war violence already ensures what kind of measures will be taken) is to find a way to accommodate Pipo's reprisal. The navigation provided by Allen Dizon, in a performance that speaks volumes even as the character struggles to articulate basic words, helps in shaping the scope and depth of a person who started with the intent to love and protect and wound up losing everything he held valuable, through no fault of his own.

Latay (Battered Husband)

Additional Language: Kapampangan
Year of Release: 2019
Director & Screenwriter: Ralston Jover [as Ralston Gonzales Jover]
Producers: BG Productions International, Center Stage Productions, Sinag Maynila
Cast: Allen Dizon, Lovi Poe, Snooky Serna, Mariel de Leon, Soliman Cruz, Adrian Cabido, Tabs Sumulong, Renerich Ocon, Dianne Alvaro, Rhea Usares, Adda Musni, Lucas Allric Dizon, Ryan David, Hernand Tulud, Romeo Lindain, Baby F. Go, Khey Dalit, Art Bajar, Sean Andrei Maliwat, Rosalyn Veray, John Lloyd Mallari, Julie Ann Taylan, Tristan Mallari, Stephanie Tolentino, John Mark Guintu, John Nikki Sotto, Michael Mirador, Billy Gutierrez, Glen O. Gutierrez, Gobak L. Pangilinan, Roy P. Sotto Jr., Jemma Magtoto, Tricia Ann de Jesus, Anne dela Torre Tongol

In Minalin, a municipality in Pampanga, straight males cross-dress in the New Year celebration called Aguman Sanduk (Ladle Association). Olan participates although people who know him realize that the scratches and bruises on his body were inflicted by his wife Lorie because of his unfaithfulness to her. Olan endures her rage since she'll be leaving for overseas work in a few days and he wants to reconcile with her. His former mistress Cherry visits him to arrange closure with him but Lorie gets wind of their assignation and creates a public disturbance by violently harassing Cherry; when Olan succeeds in separating them, she turns on her husband. Olan is also jealous of Noy, Lorie's younger friend, and busts the farewell party that members of Lorie's circle were holding for her. Lorie gives vent to her anger but their quarrel is disrupted by the arrival of Lorie's mother, who never approved of her daughter's choice of husband. Olan seeks solace with his father and asks permission to seek his mother in Manila but his father forbids him from doing so. His desperation is compounded by the sudden death of fish in the pond that he's maintaining as well as Lorie's declaration that she prefers to terminate their union as husband and wife, burning their mementos of their happy times together.

Latay takes the unusual step of looking at gender trouble by proceeding from a reversal in straight relationships: the inflictor of violence is the woman, with the man performing the role of acceptor. The arrangement applies the national dynamic to the level of familial transactions, since the ignominious failure of the social experiment in Marcos Sr.'s plan to fast-track development via authoritarian means, led to a welcome shift in granting Philippine women greater roles in public and even global living—with the film itself acknowledging as much when it opens with Lorie preparing to leave for overseas work. The retention of the standard recognition of the male as still ultimately a more dangerous force, derived from relative physical capability, is responsibly maintained in the narrative. Olan's passivity, paralleling the country's experience, derives from a combination of humiliation (his extramarital affair becomes public knowledge) and opportunism (Lorie's prospective earnings will relieve him of the anxiety of inadequate income generation); his prerogatives of initiating intimacy with his wife and recognizing the emergence of a rival still abide. By all accounts, it is Lorie who misjudges her rage as strength, although to elaborate further would be to ruin the process of discovery. The allegorizing with civil society may also have been far from Ralston Jover's mind, but the danger for anyone in approaching and dealing with a battered male, especially in confined circumstances, will be recognizable to anyone sufficiently familiar with the Philippine character.

KING PALISOC

(1 film: 2015)

Tandem

Year of Release: 2015
Director: King Palisoc
Screenwriter: Zig Marasigan
Based on an original story by Mikhail Red
Producers: Tuko Film Productions, Buchi Boy Films, Quantum Films
Cast: JM de Guzman, Nico Antonio, Rochelle Pangilinan, Elora Españo, Alan Paule, Simon Ibarra, Paolo O'Hara, Dennis Marasigan, Joel Saracho, Karl Medina, BJ Forbes, Bongjon Jose, Marga Zaylo, Melissa Ramos, Carla del Rosario, Maja del Rosario, Dennis Corteza, Jenn Romano, Ysabel Yuzon, Prince, Grace de Luna

> Roman commits snatch thefts with his younger brother Rex by working (though not riding) in tandem on their respective motorcycles. As an ex-convict, Roman feels protective toward his brother and concerned for his pregnant wife, although he also once had a fling with Rex's current sex-working girlfriend. Rex however is too compulsive and reckless, as Roman once was. One of their attempts, caught on a security camera, incites an exchange of gunfire between Rex and a security guard. Alba, the corrupt police officer who provides protection for Roman, warns the latter about his brother-partner. The brothers then plan one last lucrative heist with an accomplice, where they pounce on the delivery agent of a construction company and flee with the bag that contains personnel salary. But the understanding that a failed operation will place them at the mercy of Alba drives a wedge between them.

The misconception that art films are antigenre by definition fortunately didn't endure to the present, except for miseducated, often privileged products of the country's communication schools. Unfortunately, the acknowledgment of the universal preponderance of genre principles was unsurprisingly transmuted by influential critics demonizing the socially oriented films that were created primarily for foreign filmfest exhibition. It took a concerted ploy among genuinely progressive commentators to point out that the desire for overseas validation was itself the problem—a critique that implicitly challenged the original film critics circle's tendency to recognize foreign-exhibited films, obviously to suggest a parallel between the members and the foreign evaluators. The term used to downgrade social-problem films was "poverty porn," a problematic throwback to the film-educated preference for genres that were not considered low and therefore dismissible (better designated by feminist critics as body genres, since these incited physical responses in their viewers; pornography itself has become one of the most productive areas of genre study since the late twentieth century). *Tandem* may be regarded as one of the numerous releases designated as worthy but trafficking in so-called poverty porn. Enough temporal distance ought to enable us to appreciate its careful appropriation of the semiotics of social significance even as it refuses to relinquish its valuation of the complexities and ambiguities of well-observed plot and character, with an ironic resolution that can only be fairly described as heartrending in its cold-bloodedness. The fact that the film was exhibited on the eve of the inauguration of a regime that made riding-in-tandem fashionable not for robbery, but for assassination, should alert the country's commentators to their failure to read warning signs prominently presented in popular culture.

JERROLD TAROG

(1 film: 2015)

Heneral Luna

English Translation: *General Luna*
Additional Language: Spanish
Year of Release: 2015
Director: Jerrold Tarog
Screenwriters: Henry Francia, E.A. Rocha, & Jerrold Tarog
Producer: Artikulo Uno Productions
Cast: John Arcilla, Mon Confiado, Arron Villaflor, Jeffrey Quizon, Paulo Avelino, Joem Bascon, Archie Alemania, Arthur Acuña, Alex Vincent Medina, Marc Abaya, Alvin Anson, David Bianco, Nonie Buencamino, Mylene Dizon, Edgar Ebro, Julia Enriquez, Ketchup Eusebio, Anthony Falcon, Dennis Marasigan, Leo Martinez, Allan Paule, Bing Pimentel

> A generally faithful account of conflicts in the ranks of the Philippine revolutionary army, during the transition from Spanish to American colonization. President Emilio Aguinaldo and his cabinet disagree about what strategy to adopt regarding the Americans' offer of help in routing the Spanish army. One faction is calling for trade relations with the US, but General Antonio Luna prefers to redirect against the Americans their largely successful campaign against Spain, to ensure that the country remain free from foreign occupation. When the fledgling government learns that the Americans have already started attacking major centers in the Philippines, Luna leads the charge against the new colonial aspirants. When he discovers that reinforcements from the Aguinaldo camp arrive too little and too late, Luna's well-known hot temper leads to him to burn a few bridges with some of his former allies.

Instances—anywhere in the world, not just in the Philippines—where independent players manage to beat mainstream studios at their own game are so rare that their emergence provides filmmakers and audiences with always-welcome optimism. What adds to *Heneral Luna*'s significance is its historical record as a social-media phenomenon, following earlier pop-culture samples like TV's AlDub *kalyeserye* (a semi-improvised courtship narrative) and prefiguring the successful run of the least conventional candidate, Rodrigo Duterte, during the 2016 presidential election. *HL* distinguished itself further primarily because, a few dissenting voices notwithstanding, it delivered on its promise of providing a now-rare combination of rollicking entertainment, substantial sociopolitical insight, and that emotional intangible that today's young Pinoys call "*hugot*"—roughly equivalent to the millennial generation's "hardcore emo." Jerrold Tarog opted to revive a formerly popular but now-moribund genre, the historical period film, and invested it with humor, magic realism, and the several loose threads that typify any controversial historical account. The movie provided an abundance of meme-worthy lines, with the pithy "*Bayan o sarili?*" [Nation or self?] consolidating the movie's arguments as well as its prescription for the future. Of better subsequent import would be Tarrog's announcement that, because of the movie's unexpected success, two other period projects on similarly larger-than-life controversial leaders, Gregorio del Pilar and Manuel L. Quezon, have been slated for production. High-caliber production values attest to Tarog's whiz-kid stature in taking charge of specific aspects of production, including editing and music.

PEDRING LOPEZ

(1 film: 2015)

Nilalang

English Title: *Entity*
Alternate Title: *Geisha of Death*
Additional Language: Japanese
Year of Release: 2015
Director: Pedring Lopez
Screenwriters: Pedring Lopez & Dennis Empalmado
From a story by Pedring Lopez
Producers: Welovepost, Parallax Studios, Haunted Tower Pictures
Cast: Cesar Montano, Maria Ozawa, Meg Imperial, Cholo Barretto, Kiko Matos, Dido de la Paz, Ruby Ruiz, Richard Manabat, Yam Concepcion, Arthur Acuña, Bing Villegas, Aubrey Miles, Lui Manansala, Alchris Galura, Benson Dalina, Tony Belmonte, Sacho Yoshi, Noel Blanco, Yoshitomo Inoue, Ranny Comia, Alexandre Charlet, Anna Deorca, Raymond Talavera, Will Devaughn, Christine Te Nano, Jack Lee Ochoa, Jerome Calica, Richard Carvajal, Jaime del Rosario, Stanley Carvajal, Jenny Tee, Aya, Iron Maven, Jooley Shen, Junchun Macaraeg, Nico Paulo Muñoz, Jastine Wesley Buan, Rommel Allen Marasigan, Lito Angelo Reyes Bagtas, Brynne James Menguito, Jaspher Casin, Macki Pineda, Reiniesse Ellen Navarro, Edeline Andres, Salvie Cabalquinto, Mayumi Shimada, Elysha Juarez

> During the seventeenth century, in the Tokugawa Shogunate of Aki, members of a samurai clan slay a demon named Zahagur, in order to protect a volume of Ishi written in the blood of ronin. Zahagur is able to escape, however, and commits atrocities through the ages, until in 2013, National Bureau of Investigation agents led by Tony corner Nakazumi, a criminal possessed by Zahagur, who had committed the worst case of serial killing in Japan and was in the process of disfiguring his latest victim in Manila. The agents succeed in killing Nakazumi, but in the present time (2015), some killings reminiscent of Nakazumi's crimes are reported. With his partner Jane, Tony uses his ability to speak Japanese to investigate. Mr. Kazudo warns them that Zahagur has the ability to move from one possessed body to another, and that he has targeted the descendants of the samurai clain who defeated him. He informs Tony that his own daughters are endangered and that the older one, Miyuki, who runs a nightclub, has to retrieve the incomplete volume of Ishi so that it could be completed by the pages in his hands and be used to overpower Zahagur for good.

Nilalang is a sample of the past reclaiming the present: it's an "independent" feature the way it used to be understood in the 1960s, when star-owned outfits led the charge in dismantling the ramparts of the once-impregnable studio system. Critic-historians, even left-identified ones, contrasted the indies' products unfavorably vis-à-vis the supposedly more rational Fordist arrangement, resulting in the propagation of, among things, an entrenched conservative outlook regarding available early cinema. The more practical consequence was the negligence with which indie entries of the period were handled, so the best we can do is rely on the remonstrances expressed by observers—to the effect that, with few exceptions, the 1960s films were rampaging profit-oriented affairs, more concerned with pandering to the audience's baser instincts and stopping at nothing, including pornography, to realize

these goals. The few then-contemporary releases I remember watching, left pleasurable memories in their wake, although I was still far from being able to evaluate narrative material with any confidence. *Nilalang* succeeds in hybridizing sources drawn primarily from Japanese pulp culture, inclusive of historical institutions such as ancient shogunates (rendered as anime) and the yakuza syndicate, and features a performer who first made an impact in adult videos. Director Pedring Lopez demonstrates a connoisseurship of multiple influences, and remains unapologetic about commingling them in order to attain unpredictable viscerality. Along the way, one can devise a metatextual reading of patriarchal abjection if one is inclined in that direction, although the influx of references would more likely result in stimulatory overload and necessitate some rest and reflection.

DAN VILLEGAS

(3 films: 2015–2018)

1—*#WalangForever*

Year of Release: 2015
Director: Dan Villegas
Screenwriter: Paul Sta. Ana
Producers: Quantum Films, MJM Productions, Tuko Film Productions
Cast: Jericho Rosales, Jennylyn Mercado, Lorna Tolentino, Pepe Herrera, Kim Molina, Jerald Napoles, Myke Salomon, Sarah Pagcaliwagan, Patrick Sugui, Nico Antonio, Juan Miguel Severo, Sebastian Castro, Irma Adlawan, Rustica Carpio, Matet de Leon, Paolo O'Hara, Quark Henares, Lilit Reyes, Geraldine Villamil, Phoemala Baranda, Cai Cortez, Phi Palmos, Derek Ramsey, Maja Salvador, Yves Flores, Alyana Asistio, Jon Lucas, Michelle Vito, Julian Estrada, Jason Francisco, Melai Cantiveros, Khalil Ramos, Jane Oineza, Sid Lucero, Liza Diño, Star Orjaliza, Francis Grengia, Ebe Dancel, Miguel Faustmann, Bianca Balbuena, Mackie Galvez, Matt Daclan, Cathy Garcia-Samana, Nonoy Froilan, Edna Vida, Carlo Aquino

Mia Nolasco's a successful scriptwriter of romantic comedy films, although her latest works were box-office disappointments. In a TV interview, she confesses that she lost her inspiration when she broke up with the man she thought she could share the rest of her life with. As proof of the accuracy of her statements, we see scenes from the films she wrote alongside the actual events she experienced. Her ex, Ethan Isaac, resented her for prioritizing her career, even refusing to travel with him to Taiwan to meet his overseas-based mother for that reason. When he returns, he accidentally meets Mia in a bookstore and realizes that his life will never be complete without her. At the same time, he seeks second opinions not about his relationship, but about his health.

2—*How to Be Yours*

Additional Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2016
Director: Dan Villegas
Screenwriters: Patrick Valencia & Hyro Aguinaldo
Based on a story by Dan Villegas
Producers: Star Cinema & Viva Films
Cast: Bea Alonzo, Gerald Anderson, Bernard Palanca, Janus del Prado, Alex Medina, Anna Luna, Nicco Manalo, Jerome Tan, Divine Aucina, Cheska Iñigo, Brian Sy, Teetin Villanueva, Lito Pimentel, Katya Santos, Ricardo Cepeda, Ana Roces, Chkristopher Tan, Marnie Lapus, Geraldine Villamil, Fredison Lo, Alexander Soriano, Evelyn Santos, James Christie, JC Movido

On a night out in Chinatown during Spring Festival with friends from work, Niño notices Angeline Mendoza (Anj for short) and makes her acquaintance. She also finds him attractive and invites him to spend the night at her place, but her roommates make too much noise for them to have an intimate moment. In the morning, Anj introduces Niño to her friends and they invite him to the food stall where she practices her cooking skills; she tells him that she's the only member of her family who didn't become a doctor so cooking's her way of finding fulfillment in something she enjoys doing. One time, Pocholo, a famous chef, tries a dish prepared by Anj and is impressed enough to invite her to apply to his restaurant. She gets accepted but the work demands so much time from her that Niño decides to invite her to live with him so she can commute more easily to her job. She devotes herself to her job so assiduously that Pocholo appoints her his sous-chef; but since investors for a new restaurant that Anj can run are nervous because of her lack of extensive experience, he offers to send her to Paris for further training—a prospect that further strains her relationship with Niño.

The now-expended period of dominance of the romantic-comedy film genre in the Philippines might be good news for the high-brow critics who claimed concern for the mass audience's cultural well-being yet hypocritically denounced whatever mode of presentation happened to draw their attention at any historical moment. A vital component of the trend that set it apart from its Classical Hollywood origin was that millennium-era Pinas romcom production was by and large female-dominated, with women and gay-male directors attending to the creative side of specific projects, including the occasional comedy byproduct. (One way of getting a handle on the homegrown expressions of incommensurate anti-romcom hatred is by recalling the conservative backlash in the US against disco music, for its having been essentially a synergism that brought together black producers, women singers, and gay appreciators.) Romcom had flourished so overwhelmingly that it enabled the emergence of talents who could fill any perceived lacks by resisting or even overturning some of its generic premises. The case of Dan Villegas holds special significance in this context: by providing an identifiable and credible straight-male perspective within the feminist terms of the genre, his output helps explain how romcom films could attract such a broad viewership sector. *#WalangForever* went about its proof of concept by resorting to an admittedly old-fashioned strategy: invest the male partner with a tragic circumstance so extreme that it inhibits him from pursuing romantic fulfillment. The film provides a reflexive device by having the more successful woman partner turning their story into public spectacles—an undeniably creepy choice if it were perpetrated by a man, but it somehow earns its druthers by ultimately enabling the doubt-ridden man to witness, as the audience does, how his lover was processing their affair. *How to Be Yours* can also be solidly situated in this dynamic: it allows its primarily female character to dictate the terms of her relationship (as any of her real-life counterparts would), but in finding a narrative equivalent of Pinay citizens' overseas-labor designations, it manages to refocus some attention on the left-behind chap, contriving to reconstruct a life that had already fully burgeoned in the presence of someone who's no longer around. The depiction of men coping with loss was one of the standard highlights of the best local action films, as was the imaging of women commanded by love—and such are the means by which genre developments address audience concerns regardless of the narrative mechanisms they utilize.

Hintayan ng Langit

English Title: *Heaven's Waiting*
Year of Release: 2018
Director: Dan Villegas
Screenwriter: Juan Miguel Silverio
Based on his one-act play
Producers: QCinema International Film Festival, Globe Studios, Quezon City Film Development Commission
Cast: Eddie Garcia, Gina Pareño, Kat Galang, Joel Saracho, Mary Joy Apostol, Jomari Angeles, Geraldine Villamil, Dolly de Leon, Francis Mata, Karl Medina, Che Ramos, Mel Kimura, Reynald Raissel Santos, Errine Danan, Neil Guillen, Martin Lazaro, Hadaneeah Cubico, Monina Fe Meraces, Jonel Pusing, Miguel Mascareñas, Nina Ybanez, Miko Yu, Angelica Tapia, Elizabeth dela Cerna

> Upon his arrival, Manolo's informed by the halfway place's concierge that the room allotted to him has been damaged, so he'll have to share sleeping quarters with someone he used to know. He finds out that it's Lisang, who used to be his girlfriend before he married someone else several decades ago. After remembering how he died, he figures out that he's in Purgatory, awaiting a final trip to a higher realm along with the other residents. What he wonders about is why Lisang keeps delaying her own ascent, even committing an infraction in his presence.

Hintayan ng Langit would literally translate as "heaven's waiting room," so the idea of Purgatory, problematic even to enlightened Catholics, serves as the closest possible equivalent of the concept of a way station in the afterlife where the recently deceased could resolve their personal issues before attaining a state of eternal peace and happiness. Those with enough historical awareness might also recall that colonial-era Spanish clergy earned for the local church incalculable wealth and property based on instilling the fear of purgatorial suffering on vulnerable wealthy natives, in order to claim their inheritance right before they expired. The challenge for the filmmakers therefore lay in selling the fantasy—which the narrative unexpectedly performs by fusing classical values with a covert modern sensibility. Traditionalists will have to be inordinately picky to find fault with *HnL*'s visual design as well as the first-time pairing of two studio-era old-timers known for both their consummate skills and their willingness to tackle daring roles: their extended exchanges and individual monologues are reserved for the film's climactic section, and unsurprisingly they make it worth the trouble. The modern element, in terms of Hollywood samples, requires a recollection of which American film came closest to *HnL*'s example. In general, US productions could not resist resending their dead characters back to the real world, so even in these terms, *HnL* remains distinctive; but the first American film to focus on a woman's post-life predicament was Gerard Damiano's *The Devil in Miss Jones* (1973), arguably the first undisputed masterpiece of the Golden Age of Porn.[66] It shouldn't be too surprising that what was so unusual for Americans that it could only be initially made on the fringes of their industry became standard fare for Pinas cinema in the late twentieth century, after the collapse of the country's authoritarian adventure.

[66] The title once appeared in the decadal *Sight & Sound* survey of 2002; I was the respondent who entered it, along with another X-rated title, *The Opening of Misty Beethoven* (Radley Metzger a.k.a. Henry Paris, 1976).

MATTHEW ABAYA

(1 film: 2016)

Vampariah

Year of Release: 2016
Director & Screenwriter: Matthew Abaya
With Lawrence Yagomour as consultant
Producer: I Don't Care Productions
Cast: Kelly Lou Dennis, Aureen Almario, Scott Mathison, Arlene Boado, Jeffrey Lei, Roberto Divina, Desciple, Alex Benjamin, Daniel Miller, Ken Shaw, Jason Bustos, Abe Pagtama, Vin (Kaiju), Ryan Liguid, Gabi Dayer, Mahalya Kim, Jamie Nalla, Roczane Enriquez, Jordan Lacey, Will Schindler, Alan Smithee

> An elite US-based secret squad of military-type hunters seek out monsters to destroy. Mahal, the most highly skilled member of her unit, wonders why her commander refuses to give her the more dangerous assignments. Bent on avenging the killing of her parents, she goes to the Philippines to hunt down the *manananggal* (self-segmenting viscera-sucking vampire) that she blames for the tragedy. She finds other monsters, including an East Asian *jiangshi* (reanimated hopping corpse), but her quest leads her back to the US, where she discovers that a particularly violent and powerful *manananggal* named Bampinay has been terrorizing the male population in the city where Mahal operates.

The Philippines's still-underappreciated B-movie tradition is revived and updated for the present millennium by Matthew Abaya, in what remains an uncanny debut feature. The best output of Gerardo de Leon and Eddie Romero toyed with identity politics, a form of activism based on categories such as race, gender, age, ethnicity, etc.; another way of looking at it is by considering it an extension of Marxist principles to cover areas other than, or in addition to, social class. *Vampariah* (evidently a portmanteau of "vampire" and "pariah") is stamped all over with identity consciousness, but it also administers sufficient doses of laughs, stunts, special effects, skin exposure, and synergetic myth-making to keep the pickiest fanboys satisfied. Yet Abaya brings to the table a resource that de Leon and Romero could only approximate at best: a first-hand understanding of race- and gender-based Otherness that only a Filipino-American, schooled in updated cultural and critical theories, would have the ability to process within the framework of a creative project. The standard masculine trope of hunter and hunted finding common causes between them would already be a subversive notion, but Abaya intensifies the situation by making the protagonists not just women, but also people of color, and essentially undead. The B-movie project is critically vulnerable to accusations of being too syncretic, or dependent on the fusion of disparate sources, to be genuinely original; predictable in its reliance on genre formulas; and often more fun to anticipate and discuss than to actually watch. *Vampariah* works out these limitations by embracing them with a vengeance and demonstrating, to both the Filipino and the American communities that Abaya straddles, how being mixed and indeterminate brings advantages and pleasures that the squarest citizens on either side will never be capable of imagining, to no one else's misfortune but their own.

PAOLO VILLALUNA

(1 film: 2016)

Pauwi Na

English Translation: *On the Way Home*
English Title: *Pedicab*
Year of Release: 2016 / Color with B&W
Director: Paolo Villaluna
Screenwriters: Paolo Villaluna & Ellen Ramos
"Inspired by a news feature article which appeared in the *Philippine Daily Inquirer* on September 7, 2003," per opening credit title
Producer: Universal Harvester
Cast: Bembol Roco, Cherry Pie Picache, Meryll Soriano, Jerald Napoles, Jess Mendoza, Chai Fonacier, Bimbo Bautista, Jack the Dog, Shamaine Buencamino, Melinda Tan de Guzman, John Paul Dragin, Emmanuel Dela Cruz, Marichu Belarmino-Cariño, Bombi Plata, Raul Morit, Jam Nhaze Canciller

> Suffering from a cough that he knows will never get better because of his smoking habit, Pepe convinces his family to ride all the way back to their rural hometown by using rickshaws. His opportunity arrives when he's able to swipe a packet of money from one of his regular customers. His wife Remedios objects initially but agrees that their hand-to-mouth existence is no way to live. Their eldest son JP earns ocasionally from pickpocketing and stealing, nicking a smaller motorized rickshaw to complement his father's pedal-driven pedicab. JP's wife Isabel is blind, heavy with child, and regarded as screwy for occasionally conversing with someone she addresses as Jesus. Their younger daughter Pina is a street vendor who plans to hook an AFAM (originally "a foreigner assigned in Manila," currently any white American male) in the red-light district; she goes along, bringing their dog Kikay, although she easily complains when she gets hungry or wants to bathe. They encounter difficulties with traffic rules on the expressway leading southward and endure bouts of hunger. When they find a hand-pumped well at the side of a street, they take the opportunity to wash and fill up their containers. A woman comes up and demands that they pay for the water, and a priest intervenes to pacify the lady and offer the family a place to rest.

About a decade since its emergence, *Pauwi Na* has lost none of its ability to masterfully delineate a national condition thrown into stark relief by the attempt of members of a typical Philippine family, trapped in desperate straits, to better their condition. A major factor toward accomplishing this tour de force is the assemblage of what must be the most impressive ensemble of performers in the present millennium, each of them resolute in depicting the multilayered suffering of the most neglected citizens around, while ensuring that their character's basic humanity remains perceptible. Unsurprisingly, the query that one of these players raises toward the end, whether their story will ever have a happy ending, has already been answered by the mere fact that it has to be asked in the first place. (Felicitously, the narrative's source material appears to have a less downbeat resolution—but then the family traveled even farther, to another island in fact, becoming a national sensation as a result, so one should not begrudge them such a closure.) The means by which *PN* morphs into a road movie worth the trip is the standard decent-artist approach of leavening heartbreaking tragedy with irony and humor, but it distinguishes itself by refusing the sanctification which is commonly bestowed on these subjects. Fantasy passages that interrupt the plot suggest how the family members, in a better world, might have

handled the challenges they confront; but in acknowledging how old-fashioned and conventional these notions are, the film executes these excerpts in early-cinema style—black and white, slow-motion, actors facing the audience, accompanied by achingly evocative native love songs. In the film's actual world, the men of the family are not above two-timing friends and strangers alike, much as the barely mature daughter casually contemplates sex work, and the mother opts for an inhumane option in order to assuage everyone's hunger. An even more daring move is literalizing the Jesus that the family's synesthetic blind daughter-in-law keeps addressing (no spoilers, since he shows up from the beginning): he dresses up like a well-groomed slum resident save for the crown of thorns on his head, and spouts contemporary lingo. When his real-life counterpart shows up, he tells his collocutor that things will take a turn for the worse, a warning that surprises her as much as it places the audience on alert, inasmuch as the parish priest the family meets initially behaves exactly as anyone would expect. A final symbolic touch, the small plastic chamber pot from which emergency funds are drawn to save the family's grandchild, should be no surprise since we already know from early on what it looks like; what's remarkable is how it transforms from a light semihumorous prop into an arbiter of survival, when its contents, though impressing the character who witnesses it, will suffice in covering only one life. How long before this item, alongside even the film itself, becomes a relic of a better-forgotten past, doesn't seem to be a possibility for both characters and viewers, which is the far less laughable tragedy.

LOUIE IGNACIO

(1 film: 2016)

Area

Language: Kapampangan
Additional Languages: Filipino, English
Year of Release: 2016
Director: Louie Ignacio [as Luisito Lagdameo Ignacio]
Screenwriter: Robby Tantingco
From a story by Ferdinand Lapuz
Producer: BG Productions International
Cast: AiAi delas Alas, Allen Dizon, Sue Prado, Sancho delas Alas, Ireen Cervantes, Sarah Pagcaliwagan, Tabs Sumulong, Eufrocina Peña, Cecile Yumul, Bambalito Lacap, Francisco Guinto, Rein Gutierrez, Eugene Garrett C. Euperio, Geraldo Dizon, Kim Duenas, Tin Velasco, Elizabeth Masangcay, Johnny Cabanlig, Tony Cabanlig, Dylan Ray Talon, Bong Ramos, Hernand Timoteo Tulud, Jennifer Cimagala, Vicky Vega-Cabigting, Boy Cayetano, Rustom Agustin, Christian Aquino, Bongjon Jose, Gerald Torrejs, Arnel Avila, Baby Go, Romeo Lindain

> What used to be the most successful brothel north of Manila, set up for servicemen at Clark Air Base when it was still operated by the US Army, has now been reduced to a pitiful joint, its family owners earning their keep from a more reliable neighborhood convenience store. Eldest son Bren manages the hookers, assigning johns to them and ensuring they abide by the law. Hillary, who lost her son when she fled the eruption of Mount Pinatubo, is saving money so she can travel to the US to see him via his American father. Julie, whose looks make her the favorite of many customers, cannot afford to leave because she has to raise three children, with the older two acting as procurers. Bren's mother, a former guerrilla fighter with the Hukbong Magpapalaya ng Bayan or People's Liberation Army, had also seen better days as a sex worker and relates how rebel and counterinsurgency forces would observe a truce whenever they encountered each other in the brothel district, called Area. The approach of Holy Week brings about a decline in customers, so Bren focuses on soliciting residents and neighboring workers as well as taking the women to a clinic for their Pap smear test, and prepares for his annual vow of penance as a self-flagellant.

The mix of insurrectionist history, religious folk practice, and indigent sex work attains a surprising coherence in *Area*. Then again the element that brought everything together—American imperialist interest in the Southeast Asian region circa the Cold War—still overhangs *Area*'s area like the mushroom cloud that would have materialized if one of the military base's nukes detonated for some reason or other. The Philippine government's takeover of Clark Air Base in 1991 (after the eruption of the volcano that also led to one of the working girls seeking employment in the brothel) resulted in a decline in the businesses that originally sprouted to cater to American soldiers, now only a distant memory for folks old enough to have lived through it. The film relieves the pathos that inescapably suffuses the brothel's shoddy, cramped, inadequately lit spaces, with walls so thin that children can hear their mother at work despite her co-workers' efforts at maintaining sufficient prudence, by providing credible moments of levity, mostly centered on frank exchanges among the characters on the conditions of and hindrances to effective sex work. Even more fascinating is the brothel owners' justification of illicit activities, including their support for rebel militias, effectively pardoned since their leaders obtained clemency from Ferdinand Marcos Sr. The

sex workers' individual narratives though evince that the liberation their predecessors fought and died for never really materialized, although the film provides an unexpected personal culmination for Hillary, the most downtrodden among them. She's also furnished with a revelation, a way by which human psychology copes with deep sorrow by reconfiguring it as passion. The shock of recognition when it arrives invites an entire host of responses, although the ultimate question of why such irrational processes are so rarely realized in film and literature guarantees that *Area* will always possess evidence that confronting discomforting questions, while generally useful in opening up new avenues for exploration, sometimes yields answers that everyday existence would be too opaque to grant.

BAGANE FIOLA

(1 film: 2016)

Baboy Halas: Wailings in the Forest

English Translation of Primary Title: *Wild Boar*
Language: Matigsalug
Year of Release: 2016
Director: Bagane Fiola
Screenwriters: Bagane Fiola, Bem Di Lera, Janna Moya
From a story by Bagane Fiola
Producers: QCinema International Film Festival, Origane Films, CoolLab Studios
Cast: Omeles Laglagan, Ailyn Laglagan, Vangelyn Panihao, Jhea Mae Laglagan, Danilo Casig, Sadam Dagsil, Rolly Panihao, Henyo Panihao, Ernesto Capal, Daniel Adang, Daniel Naran, Elvie Magwana, Imelda Lascuña, Jasmen Flores, Jessa Jaime, Lita Lantong, Merlie Lantong, Sheryl Arendain, Daniel Dagsil, Araiz Panihao, April Laglagan, Beah Maguana, Emily Dagsil, Felepe Lantong, Felix Laglagan, Janeth Lantong, John Philip Laglagan, Julius Laglagan, Lita Casig, Lolita Lantong, Mad Laglagan, Marcelino Singkianon, Mercy Laglagan, Nena Singkianon, Nenita Gordo, Nueme Panihao, Pepe Laglagan, Renato Lumin, Ruben Lantong, Taisan Panihao, and "introducing the *Lumads* (indigenous peoples) of Maharlika, Dawag, & Tabontabon"

> [***Note: spoilers provided***] Despite the supplication of his *datu* (tribal chieftain) to their god Manama, Mampog has difficulty catching a wild boar, which his family relies on for their supply of meat. Du, another tribe member, convinces a woman from another tribe to live with him, in defiance of her commitment to another man. Her angered husband attacks Du and succeeds in killing him, resulting in a *pangayaw* or tribal war. In order to wage for peace, the man who killed Du agrees to provide Du's tribespeople with five horses, although he pleads that two brass gongs be substituted for the fifth. The aggrieved tribe's *datu* accepts the offer and the tribe members celebrate their *husay* or restoration of order. Meanwhile, Mampog takes leave of his two wives in order to hunt but, after performing a ritual in a cave, finds instead a fantastically white-colored wild sow. He brings it home but refuses to slaughter it. At night, he sees the sow in the form of a white *diwata* or nymph and follows it through the forest, then loses track of it. He kills a group of young drinkers and leaps into the river by a waterfall; when he surfaces, he finds several wailing nymphs surrounding him. Next day, one of his wives searches for him, bringing her hunting weapon. She asks the drinkers where he went and they answer. When she nears the falls, she finds a black boar and aims her arrow at it.

In ethnographic cinema, feature films on indigenous societies made by well-intentioned practitioners are always in danger of succumbing to the artist's bias, with the subjects subjugated to the filmmaker's vision. One such approach intended to minimize this problem, Jean Rouch's *cinéma vérité*, proved useful enough to be appropriated as one of the new devices in the toolbox of the French New Wave. An even more subject-responsive method, described as the "filmmaker-initiated mode of intercultural filmmaking" by Katrina Ross A. Tan in her article titled "Lumad Image-Making in *Baboy Halas* (2016) through Intercultural Filmmaking" (published 2022 in *Akda: The Asian Journal of Literature, Culture, Performance*, vol. 2, no. 2, pp. 1–14, doi:10.59588/2782-8875.1036), suffuses the entrancing execution of *Baboy Halas*. As such, the film also requires more advanced prep than usual—one reason why its synopsis here is extensive, to the point of including plot twists, though any possible matriarchal influence is no longer apparent. Bagane Fiola's purpose is entirely laudable: to create a work whose primary audience would be the Matigsalug audience, witnessing themselves and hearing their language in film for the first time. As such, the film-viewing experience would place the rest of the global audience in a quandary, since the film eschews the use of a narrator and, admittedly admirably, deploys sophisticated

storytelling devices. The film's several incidents, premised on the parallel narratives of two tribesmen, are filled with nuances, implications, and interrelations, drawn from Fiola's constant consultation with the *datu* and other members of the tribe, and explicated satisfactorily in Tan's article. The rewards of responsible readiness provide extra benefits for the outside appreciator, as befits the best samples of ethnofiction: Who hasn't wondered, for example, whether overfamiliar scenes of seduction, elopement, and bloody revenge in Westernized movies can incite the same level of suspense alongside amusement when played out by indigenous actors (who'll incidentally always stand out by their physical beauty and graceful movements in lush forests, where the sounds of nature provide a unique kind of accompaniment)? Will the enchantment of forces that refuse to conform to our rational understanding prove as terrifying to these people as they undoubtedly would to us? The answers lie in securing a copy of *BH* and stepping into a world that even an ordinary Philippine audience would find enthralling.

PRIME CRUZ

(1 film: 2016)

Ang Manananggal sa Unit 23B

English Translation: *The Vampire in Unit 23B*
English Title: *The Woman in Unit 23B*
Year of Release: 2016
Director: Prime Cruz
Screenwriters: Jenilee Chuaunsu & Prime Cruz
Producers: QCinema International Film Festival, The IdeaFirst Co., Indioboy Productions
Cast: Ryza Cenon, Martin del Rosario, Vangie Labalan, Cholo Barretto, Japo Parcero, Marcus Morales, Gabby Padilla, Dino Pastrano, Aldrico Padilla, Eric Kim, Jeffrey Hayd, Pjay Tayem, Harvie Tayem, John Pedraya, Victor Sanchez, Anjos Rome, Joel Lacap, Jerry Tolentino, Noel Blanco, Jason Conanan, Rosalie Pulitado, Glea Burban, Alain Morata, Nico Gomez, Maqui Farr, Nestor Abrogena Jr., Prime Cruz, Galileo Te, Jenilee Chuaunsu, Chad Angelic Cabigon, Adi Lopez, Angelo Estanol, Robert Ruiz, Erik Reynoso, Rhon Dival, Adrian del Mundo, Red Musni, Halman Lambrento, Nick de Leon, Marol Adelan Eugenio, Hope Eduarte, Ichi Sotto, Peter Matrinez, Prime Cruz

> Newly moved to her new apartment, Jewel makes the acquaintance of Nico. She lives alone while he stays with his hotheaded grandmother. He finds Jewel strange for her appetite for meat, including the duck embryo in *balut*. Some killings occur in their neighborhood but are attributed to the police prosecution of drug users. Jewel hangs out in dance clubs where a man attempts to pick her up and flirt with her while driving her home. She finds Nico at an outdoor cafeteria and manages to draw him out regarding his ex-girlfriend, then confesses that she never had a relationship because of her evil nature, which Nico finds hard to believe. Later that evening, she experiences pain in her belly and rubs ointment, then returns to the club all dolled up. She finds the man who tried to seduce her and takes him to an isolated place. She dominates him during intercourse and bites through his guts as they climax. Another night, Nico gets drunk in a bar and beaten up by his ex-GF's companions: Jewel rescues him but stops herself after she tastes the blood from his wounds. Jewel gets along with Nico's grandmother, but when the latter dies, both of them find themselves increasingly isolated and cornered for different reasons.

Made during the first year of the first fascist presidency since the elder Ferdinand Marcos's ouster, *Ang Manananggal sa Unit 23B* directly references the extrajudicial killings that landed Rodrigo Duterte in the custody of the International Criminal Court at The Hague. None of the actual EJK victims were as badly mangled as the vampire's victims in *AMU23B,* but their wholesale demonization by the regime and its apologists could have left them in similar conditions and the public would have hesitated to look more closely then, at least initially. The film's premise also turned on the victims deserving their comeuppance as sexist bourgeois deplorables, and later as hapless victims sacrificed for the sake of feeding the title character. But at roughly midway, a community event allows the characters to disclose themselves, sometimes inadvertently: an outdoor costume party, where the *manananggal* dresses up as a B-movie winged vampire and ironically assumes the guise of what she carefully hides from everyone. After a declaration of their passion for each other, her beau espies her undertaking her modus operandi as well as its murderous consequence, and has to contend with his own conflicted response. *AMU23B* wisely desists from further pressing its national-scale irony, where the rural spaces that engendered the fictional *manananggal* also contrived the horrific war on drugs (inspired actually by right-wing US presidencies). The lovers who lose everything in the film still have each other; the country that acquired a few developmental paces at the expense of some of its most vulnerable citizens will be lucky to regain its soul.

JUN ROBLES LANA

(1 film: 2016)

Die Beautiful

Additional Language: "Swardspeak" [Philippine gay lingo]
Year of Release: 2016
Director: Jun Robles Lana
Screenwriter: Rody Vera
From a story by Jun Robles Lana, with Fudge Silva as consultant
Producers: The IdeaFirst Company & Octobertrain Films
Cast: Paolo Ballesteros, Christian Bables, Joel Torre, Gladys Reyes, Adrian Alandy, Albie Casiño, Inah de Belen, IC Mendoza, Cedrick Juan, Lou Veloso, Mimi Juareza, Iza Calzado, Eugene Domingo, Jade Lopez, Kokoy de Santos, Juris Ocampo, Rica Paras, Kyle Gabrielle, Adrianna So, Lui Manansala, Sue Prado, Mel Martinez, Bekimon, Patricia Ismael, Lito "Shalala" Reyes, Karen delos Reyes, Jace Flores, Erlinda Villalobos, Star Orjaliza, Lao Rodriguez, Giovanni Baldisseri, Steeve Fernandez, Khalid Ruiz, Sunshine Teodoro, Joy Desales, Perry Escaño, Ernie Enriquez, Bing Yumang, Laurence Mossman, Kenshee Montefalcon, Christine Joy de Guzman, Jordhen Suan, Faye Alhambra

> Upon fulfilling her lifelong dream of winning a televised gay beauty contest, Trisha literally drops dead. Her best friend Barbs strives to fulfill her final wish, which is to be dressed and made up as a famous celebrity for each day of her week-long wake. Each costume change occasions a recollection by the people in her life, of Trisha's struggle as a destitute transgender woman, banished from home by her homophobic father and abused (though occasionally also loved) by the straight men she falls for—though she nevertheless remains focused on the goal, difficult for someone in her station, of being recognized and celebrated as someone with beauty, wit, and chutzpah.

Most pop-culture experts might wonder about the advisability of presenting a trans person's narrative as an epic tale, considering its intensely private dimensions and its psychoanalytic conflicts. Like its central character, *Die Beautiful* might come across as too loud, strong, insistent, confusing even; but like the *Entwicklungsroman*, or development narrative, that it actually is, it will be capable of fully rewarding those who may have resisted it initially but return to it after a while, preferably with some intervening maturity. Jun Robles Lana's careful (sometimes overcareful) cultivation of his handling of queer material over a long period of time has resulted, with this film, in the fulfillment of the promise that the always well-patronized outings of our comedy stars, from Dolphy onward, kept pursuing: a life in full, from an always-queer awakening, through adversity in the pursuit of happiness and pleasure, to a too-early though fittingly fabulous ending (though sometimes with ill-advised—because unnatural, unlikely, and moralistic—conversion to the straight option). A structural marvel, the *DB* screenplay enlightens the audience just enough to be able to "get" Trisha's emotional placement through the various stages in her life, with the prospect of further, often painful but always well-earned insight serving as narrative cliffhanger. Paolo Ballesteros and Christian Bables, the actors who appear in nearly all the major scenes, provide the unexpected bonus of fomenting an interactive chemistry, overflowing with confidence, humor, and humanity, that effortlessly diffuses through the rest of the cast. It may sound ironic, but Trisha's truly beautiful death betokens a life well-lived in the only way a genuinely heroic citizen could make it.

MIKHAIL RED

(2 films: 2016–2017)

1—*Birdshot*

Year of Release: 2016
Director: Mikhail Red
Screenwriters: Mikhail Red & Rae Red
Producers: Pelikulared, Tuko Film Productions, Buchi Boy Films
Cast: Mary Joy Apostol, Manuel Aquino, Ku Aquino, John Arcilla, Arnold Reyes, Dido de la Paz, Elora Españo, Ronnie Quizon, Rolando Inocencio, Suzette Ranillo, Angelica C. Ferro, Ernani L. Antonio, Tony Leyba, Lowell Conales, Mark Justin Aguillon, Bongjon Jose, Jason Skyblue, Wil Setias Dizon, Ryan Toledo, Philmar Quilona, April Ann Hugo, Simon Nicolas Jr., Katrina Asturias, Joselito Mancio, Ariel Francisco, Rogelio Clemente, Allan Teves, Argo

> Maya is taught by her father Diego, the sole tenant of a plot of farmland, to handle a gun. Against her father's warning, she crosses the fence of a forest sanctuary and, once inside, shoots and kills an endangered Philippine eagle. In order to investigate the whereabouts of the missing animal, Domingo, a rookie police officer, is instructed by his station commander to drop his investigation of the disappearance of a bus of farmers who were planning to go to Manila to protest the harsh conditions that landowners, in collusion with corrupt government officials, were imposing on them. Domingo persists in following up the earlier case but is pressured into focusing on the disappearance of the eagle, leading him on a collision course with Maya and her father.

2—*Neomanila*

Year of Release: 2017
Director: Mikhail Red
Screenwriters: Zig Madamba Dulay, Mikhail Red, Rae Red
Producers: TBA Studios, Artikulo Uno Productions, Buchi Boy Films
Cast: Timothy Castillo, Eula Valdes, Rocky Salumbides, Jess Mendoza, Ross Pesigan, Angeline Andoy, Angeli Bayani, Ron Villar, Raul Morit, Shandii Bacolod, Donna Cariaga, Astrid Hernandez, Edwin Nombre, Soliman Cruz, Cris Garrido, Mike Lloren, Lowell K. Conales, Oliver Mayor Rama, Timmy Harn, Tabs Sumulong, Boo Dabu, Aerys Rafael Virtucio, JD Lopez, Vince Manrique, Fernando Villareal

> Toto's capable of running fast because as a street kid, he earns a living from snatching. His older brother, imprisoned for some unspecified petty crime, asks him to report a well-known drug pusher, since one of the standard covert practices in fascist President Rodrigo Duterte's war on drugs is *palit-ulo* (literally head-swapping), where a suspect surrenders a higher-ranking criminal in exchange for favors or freedom. After his girlfriend informs him that the guy he has to find is dead, a plainclothes narc named Irma, who was his mother's friend, checks up on him. When he discovers next day that his brother's jail was bombed, he confronts the gang that he suspects of the act but they proceed to mess him up. Irma saves him from getting killed and, since he no longer has any family left, he accompanies her on the extrajudicial rubouts that she and her partner and lover Raul have to accomplish. However, Toto is still unused to cold-blooded killing and protests when one of their targets is a mother who brought her infant child with her.

The problems that confront the country's dispossessed offer no reprieve regardless of political regime. This principle plays out in the two consecutive works by Mikhail Red that happened to straddle the end of the last liberal-democratic President and the start of the first authoritarian President since the earlier Ferdinand Marcos. As it turned out, *Birdshot* was set in a distant rural

locale while *Neomanila* was in a slum community adjacent to the business district. The promise that *Birdshot*'s filmmaking talent holds forth is a throwback to the heady days of the then still relatively benign years of the 1970s military dictatorship of Ferdinand Marcos, when the country's most gifted aspirants could propose subject matter that implicitly criticized the political system by insistently focusing on narratives of survival. This resulted in a few instances of verisimilitude that martial-law authorities were quick to seize on, so Filipino filmmakers during the Second Golden Age managed (for the most part) to be subtle and ambivalent whenever their material came too close to mirroring real-life events. Such considerations no longer impinge on the generation of talents since then, so *Birdshot*'s presentation of a local reality so insulated that the disappearance of a busload of politically significant passengers can be successfully hidden from outside investigators, does not fully square with the traumatic real-life horror of the 2009 Maguindanao massacre that it apparently references. The narrative's seriocomic factual incident of an older male peasant shooting down an endangered eagle to be able to cook *tinola*, or poultry stew with green papaya and chili leaves, is transformed here into the case of a young maiden similarly unaware of the consequence of killing wildlife—in a government sanctuary that she entered surreptitiously, against her father's injunction. The plot opts instead to turn on character transformations that affect the protagonists: frustrated by his superior officers' corruption, an idealistic policeman vents his anger on the wildlife-killing suspect's father by torturing the latter; the daughter then responds by killing the policeman, along with any prospect for moral clarity. *Neomanila*'s dramatis personae, in contrast, respond to the terrors of an openly oppressive political system either by banding together in gangs or, where family is still available, by fulfilling whatever filial injunctions may be passed on to them. When the protagonist, still barely an adolescent, finds himself divested of relations and rejected by his would-be homies, he turns toward parental figures who welcome him for his ability to run, during the historical moment when emergency situations could profit from such a skill. None of these safety-in-numbers options works out satisfactorily for anyone concerned—although the movie's canniness lies in how it offers glimpses of affective connection between substitute mother and abandoned son, enough to prepare us to empathize with the latter's insistence that children are any war's true victims, and to dread the easy prospect of rupture. The country's film output as a whole attains a certain salience during periods of authoritarian repression, although this property will still have to be described, explained, and evaluated; when cinema of the Duterte drug-war gets defined, preferably in comparison with the Marcos martial-law era, *Neomanila* deserves to be one of the foremost items to be sampled.

THEODORE BOBOROL

(1 film: 2016)

Vince & Kath & James

Year of Release: 2016
Director: Theodore Boborol
Screenwriters: Daisy Cayanan, Kim Noromor, Anjanette Haw
From a story by Daisy Cayanan, Kim Noromor, Anjanette Haw, based on the book of the social series *Vince & Kath* by Jenny Ruth Almocera (writing as Queen Elly)
Producer: Star Cinema
Cast: Julia Barretto, Joshua Garcia, Ronnie Alonte, Maris Racal, Ina Raymundo, Shamaine Buencamino, Ana Abad Santos, Jeric Raval, Alan Paule, Manuel Chua, Joshua Zamora, Axel Torres, Milo Elmido Jr., AJ Urquia, Sarah Carlos, Pontri, Gerry Bricenio, Kim Andaya, Kelley Day, Jessica Marasigan, Jose Sarasola, Rafa Esplana, Paul Pujante, Uajo Manarang, Pamela Gonzales, Pauline Palomique, Jan Urbano, Hessa Isabelle Gonzales, Curse and Bless, Mark Joshua Edrosa

> Kath, a campus beauty queen, and James, a varsity basketball player, find each other attractive. Vince, who also fancies Kath, endeavors to keep amusing her, knowing that she finds him annoying. Vince's mother has a new hubby whom Vince can't get along with, so she asks James's mother to allow him to live with his friend. Kath's mother also has to deal with her husband abandoning his family when he found another partner while working abroad. Kath and Vince enroll in their university's internship program so Vince uses the opportunity to get close to Kath. But because his varsity practice demands a lot of his time, James asks Vince to impersonate him using his well-developed social-media skills. Because of Vince's efforts, Kath and James become steadies, although Kath can't deny Vince's charm and sincerity.

A loose adaptation of Edmond Rostand's 1897 play *Cyrano de Bergerac*, *Vince & Kath & James* not only updates the 17th-century setting to the present millennium but also relocates the drama from Paris to Metro Manila. The romantic and comic elements function satisfactorily, although *V&K&J* has to proceed necessarily wordily, with Vince, the Cyrano equivalent, articulating his sublimated passion using James's alias as well as an anonymous viral account of someone who expresses himself, haiku-like, in exactly six words every time. Kath, who falls for both of Vince's ruses, maintains some propriety by instead having a giggly best friend, Maxine, who comments on everyone's motivation but most of all on Kath's emotional development. Kath's own realization, drawn from her mother's domestic struggle, that she must learn to look beyond surface attractiveness in men, leads predictably enough to her reassessing James's maturity and his overreliance on Vince, with her resentment that Vince agreed to masquerade online as James constituting the final obstacle to their happy ending. In fact a more reliable anchor for an appreciation of the narrative is the film's roots in the briefly popular social-series phenomenon, where it was originally titled *Vince & Kath* and utilized another updated format, the epistolary narrative, with the story unfolding via screenshots of fictional messages from SMS and chat exchanges between the characters; the series proved popular enough to be spun off into a 24-chapter book version (another now-less-popular format) early the same year that the expanded film version came out. The intertextual references have since extended beyond the film's originary material. Vince and Kath bond over a shared enthusiasm for Olivia M. Lamasan's *Got*

2 Believe (2002), which starred the real-life aunt of the *V&K&J* leading lady but became a record blockbuster because of the death of its male lead, allegedly due to depression caused by his breakup with his costar. The Vince and Kath character players would figure out in their own subsequently messy breakup, while the Maxine performer would first be featured in the social-media scandal of the year before recuperating her belated status as extremely capable performer and sensible netizen. These reflexive elements can no longer be regarded as independent of the media product they attend, and it would be specious to insist they don't impinge on one's awareness to those with access to such information, much as stars' personas will always be crucial to the appreciation of their showcase features and just as the actual Cyrano de Bergerac's biography inevitably haunts the staging of the play (and their adaptations) about him.

J.P. HABAC

(1 film: 2017)

I'm Drunk, I Love You.

Year of Release: 2017
Director: JP Habac
Screenwriters: JP Habac & Giancarlo Abrahan
From a story by Giancarlo Abrahan, Shayne Guevara, JP Habac
Producers: TBA Studios, Tuko Film Productions, Buchi Boy Films
Cast: Maja Salvador, Paulo Avelino, Dominic Roco, Jasmine Curtis-Smith, Jim Paredes, Irma Adlawan, Thou Reyes, Paul Montecillo, Lei Ponce, Kai Honasan, Iego Tan, Juan Miguel Severo, Carlo Lava, Harrold Go, Benjo Robles, Fernando Ortigas, E.A. Rocha, Sharina Magbojos, Celina Penaflorida, Mercedes Cabral, Bianca Patungan

> Social-work major Carson practices for her graduation, but her film-major crush Dio picks her up along with her gay best friend Jason Ty to watch him perform at an indie-music bar. Afterward Dio invites the two to take a road trip to La Union province, several hours' drive away from Manila. He treats them to hotel rooms at a beach resort, promising to get them back in time for graduation. The prospect of ending their university-student lives intensifies Carson's infatuation for Dio, with Jason constantly reining her in so as not to make a fool of herself. Then they discover that Dio brought them along because he wanted to hook up again with Pathy, a girlfriend he had before his college years, and he needed his confidants to tell him whether or not he was on the wrong track.

Although it had a modest viewership during its original release, *I'm Drunk, I Love You.* (commonly abbreviated *IDILY*) tended to have an enduring social-network presence, mainly because of its laid-back storytelling as well as a decently successful soundtrack. The songs are acoustic emo pop-indie numbers that comment on the story, referencing cultural icons including romcom star John Lloyd Cruz. Like most music-intensive presentations, the film runs longer than what its narrative would require, but then it proffers nothing out of the ordinary and even pales in comparison to some mainstream romcom samples. Its payoff banks on its independent setup—meaning it allows itself to get away with meandering and haphazard turns in storytelling, reflective of its characters' anxieties about their transition from financial dependents to income earners who're suddenly unsure of what directions their lives can and should take. The safe recourse of genre entries is also observed here, in having performers who look sufficiently attractive, so as to warrant stationary closeup shots when these become necessary. On the other hand, the actors also unfailingly provide an edginess to their readings, a factor that would nominally disqualify them from mainstream lead roles, where insistently (and sometimes scarily) realistic options like polyamory, women's sexual prerogative, and absence of closure or direction can be productively negotiated. Their reward is secured by the occasional endurance of offbeat projects like *IDILY*, as well as the commitment of native film talents who both abjure the spoiled ipseity of global-filmfest evaluators and the conservative moralism of mainstream adjudicators. It's a difficult faultline to traverse, but any close observation of any extensive film canon will reveal that most of the culture's best talents actually flourish in this territory.

ARNEL BARBARONA

(1 film: 2017)

Tu Pug Imatuy

English Translation: *The Right to Kill*
Language: Manobo
Additional Languages: Cebuano & Filipino
Year of Release: 2017
Director: Arnel Barbarona
Screenwriter: Arnel Mardoquio
Producers: Red Motion Media, Kilab Multimedia, Yellow Kite Productions, Skyweaver Productions, Sine Mindanaw
Cast: Malona Sulatan, Jongmonzon, Luis Georlin Banaag III, Jamee Rivera, Jillian Khayle Barbarona, Henyo Ehem, Mentroso Malibato, Nona Ruth Sarmiento, Bhong del Rosario, Roweno Caballes, Charisse Lisondra, Louie Logronio, Barry Ohaylan, Buggy Ampalayo, Bong Artil

> After Obunay and Dawin's son Awit dies, Dawin leaves with his children to ask for mungbeans from their village datu. On their way back, Dawin is accosted by a group of soldiers, who also bring Obunay when she meets up with her family. The couple are tortured and humiliated, and forced to walk roped and naked through the forest. Lt. Olivar befriends them, dresses and feeds them, and promises to free them once they point out the hideout of Communist rebels. Dawin brings them to a solitary schoolhouse, where the soldiers hold the teacher, mothers, and their children prisoner. The cost of the struggle between the two contending forces, represented by the Manobo couple and the soldiers, will exact a toll that can only lead to losses all around.

The simple, almost fabular narrative of *Tu Pug Imatuy* may resonate as one of the many instances of abject cruelty visited on Filipino lumad or the ethnic non-Muslim populace of Mindanao. When events take an even more horrifically inhumane turn and the Manobo abductees (including the women and children peacefully attending to their education) have no other choice except survive by their wits and intimate knowledge of the local terrain, it may help to keep in mind the opening disclaimer, as well as documentary evidence during the end credits, that these events actually occurred. The movie makes no pretense about taking the side of the people caught in the crossfire between rebels and government soldiers, and acknowledges via a modicum of visual clues that, whereas the Communist fighters uphold the lumad's right to uphold their ancestral territory, the government shamelessly enforces the interests of foreign mining companies, bent on extracting minerals at the cost of displacing first peoples. The struggle is extremely dangerous for only one side, as it had always been through the years of colonizations, wars, and dictatorships, with the potential of genocidal extermination always present. Hence a film that provides a measure of hope in people's determination and ingenuity may be a desperate gesture at denying historical reality; or it may be, as *TPI* suggests, a long-overdue call to arms, a challenge to a neglectful nation to recognize the most Filipino among us. The movie's expert attention to pace, performance, costume, cast, and language ensure that it is a message we can no longer afford to overlook.

TREB MONTERAS II

(1 film: 2017)

Respeto

English Translation: *Respect*
Additional Language: Cebuano
Year of Release: 2017
Director: Treb Monteras II
Screenwriters: Njel de Mesa & Treb Monteras II
Producers: Dogzilla, Arkeofilms, Cinemalaya, CMB Film Services, This Side Up
Cast: Abra, Dido de la Paz, Loonie, Kate Alejandrino, Chai Fonacier, Ybes Bagadiong, Brian Arda, Thea Yrastorza, Nor Domingo, Vim Nadera, OG Birador, Negatibo

> Inspired by the success of his idol, Breezy G, Hendrix plans to join *FlipTop Battle League*, a rap competition that has also become a YouTube sensation. His unruly behavior during a street showdown gets him and his homies, Payaso and Betchai, into trouble with another rap gang. While running away from the gang they encounter Doc, an elderly bookstore owner who's fond of an older form of improvisational poetry, the *balagtasan*. Facing his own problems with his son Fuentes, a corrupt policeman, Doc tries to mentor Hendrix to enable him to surmount the world of drugs, crime, and moral decadence that poverty had plunged him into.

Like its counterpart in US pop culture, Pinoy rap has barely been able to attain the kind of respectability accorded to "finer" forms like the musical, art songs, and even pop and rock numbers. Even the proposal of a few academic experts to consider it the modern-day equivalent of the early twentieth-century verbal joust, the *balagtasan*, has met with resistance from more conservative sectors, owing to rap's use of strong language and violent imagery. In this manner, *Respeto* goes beyond referring to the striving for self-fulfillment of its lead character, a young man of the slums. The movie weaves into its complex narrative several problematic issues that arise from the populist administration of Rodrigo R. Duterte, from his support for the Heroes' Cemetery burial of martial-law dictator Ferdinand E. Marcos, to the deadly and scientifically contested war on illegal drugs. Yet *Respeto* formulates its critique without the trollish arguments that typify social-media exchanges. The issues get raised as part of the characters' struggle with their slum environment and with the administration that seeks to wrest control of it, often at their expense. Authentic personalities in local hiphop culture, including the director himself, ensure that the viewing experience will be highly realistic—even when the movie overturns its realistic premise and introduces poetic and dream imagery. More unexpectedly, *Respeto* handles the slum situation with as much titular respect as any local movie has ever mustered. In the process, it reveals how people in the midst of poverty and social degradation manage to survive and even embrace their situation: their sense of community and their hope to better their condition provide the means of binding everyone together, as well as the rage with which they meet values that run counter to their cherished ideals.

IRENE VILLAMOR

(3 films: 2018–2020)

Meet Me in St. Gallen

Year of Release: 2018
Director & Screenwriter: Irene Villamor
Producers: Spring Films & Viva Films
Cast: Bela Padilla, Carlo Aquino, Angelica Panganiban, Nonie Buencamino, Lilet Esteban, Kat Galang, Sean Padlan, Happy Laderas, Joel Vitor, Joseph Manuel Hernandez, Wenah Nagales, Eljhay Gonzales, Nino Aquino, Welwel Silvestre, Arvin Trinidad, Paeng Sudayan, Barry Gonzales, Xyrus Rodriguez, Edwin Serrano, Kevin Almodiente, Kian Dionisio, Nicole Johanntgen, Sputnik, Chanel, Rhedd de Guzman, Jonathan Bausas, Patricia Tan, Sarah Ereneo, Mark Cai

> After being asked to return to office for an urgent last-minute revision of her advertising design, Celeste leaves when her computer breaks down and informs her boss of her resignation. Jesse, on the other hand, performs with his band on an open-air stage and gets scolded by his parents, who want him to review for a med-school exam. Stranded by the rain, the two converse and find enough in common but pledge to keep apart after a farewell kiss, so as not to ruin the memory of their acquaintance. Four years later, Jesse encounters Celeste in a coffee shop and attends her exhibit; she shares how she realized he was getting married from his social-network post, but they decide on having a one-time fling. A few more years later Jesse, having heard that Celeste was in Switzerland, flies to St. Gallen to see her.

Meet Me in St. Gallen manages several tricky maneuvers that apparently escaped the appreciation of local evaluators when it came out. It was an indie production that had enough commercial potential to be distributed by a mainstream studio; it presented a variation on the manic pixie dream girl romcom familiar, but somehow managed to reverse gender expectations; finally it presented the aspirational lifestyles (a no-no for the original critics group) of millennial kids, but provided its characters with enough exceptionality to make their status credible as rebellious struggling citizens. Ironically the jurors of the Filipino Arts & Cinema International's annual film competition, comprising foreigners including a Fil-Am, were sufficiently impressed with the film to even explain why they gave it top prize. The passage of time has proved which critical perspective fell short. *MMSG* still manages to sustain enough interest in its interpersonal intrigues and pack its final mixed-feelings jolt even with the viewer aware of its plot twists. Lesson for serious appreciators: listen to elderly critics at your own risk. The auteurial voice announced by *MMSG* will be among the strongest in global cinema for some time to come.

Ulan

English Translation: *Rain*
Year of Release: 2019
Director & Screenwriter: Irene Villamor
Producers: Viva Films, N^2 Productions, Hooq
Cast: Nadine Lustre, Carlo Aquino, Ella Ilano, Perla Bautista, AJ Muhlach, Marco Gumabao, Josef Elizalde, Limer Veloso, Andrea del Rosario, William Martinez, Leo Martinez, Angeli Bayani, Meghan Dee, Kylie Verzosa, Keagan de Jesus, Dingdong Dantes, Mercedes Cabral, John Roe Apolis, Antonette Garcia, Lotlot Bustamante, Hazel Valera, Lauren Rei, Nathan Khatibi, Jourdanne Castillo, Vangie Martelle, Kristine Mangle, Daniela Carolino, Aries Go, Aerone Mendoza, Tim

Macardle, Gayle Maxine Villamor, Dennah Bautista, Jeremiah Cruz, Andy Kunz, Olan Chan, Irene Celebre, Jenny Silvino, Fhayeng Alarcon, Marlyvic Suavillo, Bruce Venida, Joshua Cillo, Aldrin Pababero, Mitch de Guzman, Reynalyn Bermejo, Jimmy Tesorero, Kiko Paglilauan, Christian Pianar, Peter Gabrielle, Archie Ventosa

> Bright and impressionable, Maya thrives on her grandmother's tales of native mythological creatures, particularly fascinated by sunshowers, which supposedly occur when kapres, or horse-headed tree giants, are getting married. Her imagination is strong enough to steer her through the mockery of her contemporaries and elders, but then she grows up an attractive but socially awkward woman, her closest confidant a gay best friend. She becomes the girlfriend of a sportsman, but he dumps her when she asks him about a trip he'll be taking with a female athlete without informing her beforehand. She takes on a writing assignment and covers an educational program for indigent children, where Peter, the teacher, explains the premises and dynamics of the setup. Maya and Peter find their mutual respect and attraction growing, upon which Peter informs her that he's a seminarian under regency, meaning he's allowed to circulate in civil society but only until he has to fully commit to the priesthood.

The filmic fairy tale unadopted from preexisting sources is such a rare occurrence that *Ulan* will seem even more exceptional in having been produced and released as a mainstream-studio entry. The narrative moreover apprises adult audiences, with the central character's childhood scenes only serving to provide backstory when necessary. The presentation turns on the contributions of authoritative performers, who deliver the goods—specifically Perla Bautista as the eccentric granny doing what she thinks is best to protect her now-orphaned charge from the harsh realities of life; and Carlo Aquino as the reserved but smitten admirer who recognizes in Maya the ability to appreciate metaphysical concepts since he'd been trained along a similar line for years. But the film's crown jewel is Nadine Lustre, who succeeds in the highwire challenge of embodying weirdness without being offputting and without soliciting audience sympathy either. Like all responsible realist dramas, *Ulan* allows the so-called real world to supersede the fantastic, but its triumph remains visionary, enabling audiences to glimpse an existence that would be counted as intolerable (queer in the nonsexual sense) in anyone's experience of contemporary normality.

On Vodka, Beers, and Regrets

Additional Language: English
Year of Release: 2020
Director & Screenwriter: Irene Villamor
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Bela Padilla, JC Santos, Matteo Guidicelli, Rio Locsin, Kean Cipriano, Jasmine Hollingworth, Danita Paner, Kathleen Paton, Phoebe Villamor, Lucho Beech, Jiad Arroyo, Bridge Martin, Brian Sombero, Timothy Abbott, Jeffrey Castro, Carrie Lopez, Clay Mercado, Ronald Regala, Candy Arcangel, Carmela Faye Viray, Edwin Serrano, Meryl Margaux Bunyi, Rod Marmol

> An actress declining in popularity and saddled with a colorful past that marks her as a target for abusive men, Jane relies on alcohol more heavily than she used to. She even forgets how Francis, an aspiring band member, once dedicated a song number to her. Realizing that Francis's romantic motives are genuine, she starts hanging out with him although her violent steady, Ronnie, insists on his privileges with her. Friends and family insist that she needs rehab intervention in order to solve her addiction, but she keeps finding ways to evade their influence, even Francis's. When she loses a minor role in a plum assignment, she meets a former flame who also burned out like she did, and they go on a drinking binge which lands her in jail. Francis tells her that he's unlike the privileged crowd she hangs with and feels helpless about handling her problem.

Non-Filipino audiences (including members of the native bourgeoisie alienated by their own culture) might need some historical preparation for the variation that *On Vodka, Beers, and Regrets* performs on the standard alcohol-addiction treatment emblematized by such Hollywood samples as Billy Wilder's *The Lost Weekend* (1945). That is, one of the distinctions of the Second Golden Age of Philippine cinema was not just the emergence of previously marginalized racial types (i.e. everyone who failed to conform to the Euro-mestizo preference of the fresh-off-the-ark elite) but also the predominance of women actors as top stars, in contrast with men in all preceding eras. Hence what might appear to be a masochistic male persona is really nothing more than an adjustment to contemporary realities that span across a wide swath of local experience, including even overseas work. In fact, what might count as a weakness of *OVBR* would be its unavoidable reliance on quotidian exchanges between the dominant-but-dissipated celebrity and her committed-but-frustrated fan. The film mitigates this situation via the twin-pronged strategy of utilizing a near-documentary level of credibility in its range of options, as well as casting a mature and equally matched acting pair well-versed in each other's capabilities and responses.

JASON PAUL LAXAMANA

(1 film: 2018)

The Day After Valentine's

Additional Languages: Hawaiian & Baybayin (written)
Year of Release: 2018
Director & Screenwriter: Jason Paul Laxamana
Producer: Viva Films
Cast: Bela Padilla, JC Santos, Regine Tolentino, Jordan Castillo, Stacey Gabriel, Phoebe Villamor, Rayton Lamay, Hermie Go, Merwyn Abel, Aries Go, Rhedz Turner, Don Michael Roxas, Easy Ferrero, Ianne Oandasan, Lars Magbanua, Maverick Manalang

> Lani, a salesperson at an *ukay-ukay* or secondhand clothes shop in Angeles City, proceeds to assist a customer, Kai, after she realizes he needs to buy arm sleeves to hide the scars of the self-harm he committed. He tells her that he decided to remain in the country after his family returned to the US, because of a woman he had fallen in love with but who broke up with him afterward. Following psychological advice she learned, Lani realizes she could use the native writing system, which Kai's ex had taught him, to help him heal. Grateful for her intervention, Kai invites Lani to his home on the Hawaiian island of Lanai, where their relationship tenses up and raises questions for both of them.

The travelogue romcom was bound to reach a level of maturity despite the antimainstream misgivings of local critics, partly because of the persistence of expert practitioners, but also because of the still-expanding overseas Filipino population and their wealth of still-to-be-tapped stories. *The Day After Valentine's* exemplifies new potentials in the format, focusing on the first generation of overseas migrants—kids who could still return to their parents' country of origin and find enough familiarity to be able to thrive by themselves. It also makes use of a cis-het partnership that may be the most satisfactory in Pinas film culture, both partners being equally matched in terms of appeal, intelligence, and chemistry. Their maturity (relative to the usual teenage age-group of local movie love teams) ensures that their teamups won't generate hysterical responses, but that also enables their projects' creatives to focus on discursive issues that can guarantee longer-term satisfaction. The manner in which *TDAV* steps beyond romcom territory and transforms into social-problem drama may be so subtle that the realization might only arrive after the viewing experience. Whether we regard this type of innovation as useful or insignificant, the fact of its availability should be justification enough.

ROMAN PEREZ JR.

(1 film: 2018)

Sol Searching

Year of Release: 2018
Director: Roman Perez Jr.
Screenwriters: Roman Perez Jr. & Norman Boquiren
Producer: Universal Harvester
Cast: Pokwang, Joey Marquez, Gilleth Sandico, JM Salvado, Conrado, Raffy Tejada, Raul Morit, LotLot Bustamante, Mayen Estañero, Troy Aquino, Francis Magundayao, Jelson Bay, Chokoleit, Lee O'Brian, Paulo Rodriguez, Sue Prado, Hector Macaso, Chad Kinis, DJ Maki Rena, DonJake Consuega, Vic Romano, Sky Labastilla

> Elementary school teacher Sol collapses after swilling liquor on the job and stressing herself with the students' usual infractions, but fails to recover. Her colleague and best friend Lorelai makes it her mission to ensure that Sol gets an extended wake, where her long-missing husband is expected to show up, followed by a decent burial. Unfortunately Sol is a non-entity in their small town, her family property grabbed by influential claimants, whom she in turn antagonized by agitating for farmers' welfare. Initially only Bugoy, the student whom she saved from parental abuse, assists Lorelai, but eventually the other players in the school and town hall come around to help solve Lorelai's predicament while ensuring that their personal agendas can also be pursued.

An entry that's guaranteed to surprise close observers of contemporary Philippine cinema, since it left no traces behind save for a popularity prize at a now-defunct film festival and the usual tepid appreciation automatically bestowed on anything that spells "indie production." One possible clue as to the eventual critical negligence visited on it lies in its throwback properties: its crude surface is reminiscent of celluloid-era hack work, while its thematic preoccupation with localized developmental issues creates disturbing parallels with early martial-law media policy during the regime of the elder Ferdinand Marcos. Yet the achievement of *Sol Searching* lies in the way in which it subverts developmentalist requisites while deploying stouthearted wit and humor, in delineating a narrative that would be recognized as tragic in any context. The creative tension generated by the material encourages broad delivery from a cast that, large as it already is, increasingly proliferates toward the end; yet these risk-taking attempts are substantiated by further forays into rewarding twists and revelations. A forward-looking throwback then, as good as it's possible to get.

EDUARDO W. ROY JR.

(1 film: 2019)

Lola Igna

English Translation: *Grandma Igna*
Year of Release: 2019
Director: Eduardo W. Roy Jr.
Screenwriters: Eduardo W. Roy Jr. & Margarette Labrador Garcia
Producers: Film Development Council of the Philippines, Hong Kong Asia Film Financing Forum, EMBA Productions
Cast: Angie Ferro, Yves Flores, Meryll Soriano, Maria Isabel Lopez, Royce Cabrera, Jojo Riguerra, Soliman Cruz, Armando A. Reyes, Peewee O'Hara, Joel Saracho, Rener Concepcion, Conching Ani, Shantel Ruiz Galang, Gemma Amacaha, Sarah Pagcaliwagan, Chamyto Aguedan, Star Orjaliza, Jilla Sara, Sang Pascual, Robert Manalo, Hernand Timoteo Tulud, Rodel Pamarez, Jayson de Guzman Gonzales, Regie Delaluna

> With all her contemporaries gone, Ignacia converses with her memory of them, impatient to end her existence and exasperating her daughter Nida. Her small town, where she's known as Lola Igna, is excited by the news that she might be proclaimed the oldest woman in the world, with Nida claiming exclusive rights to sell merchandise based on this possibility. A small group of followers call for her to awaken from her siesta and greet them, but she hurls a container of her piss at them. Tim, a young teener, walks up to her and introduces himself as the son of her estranged daughter, Ana. He accompanies Lola Igna on her rounds but after she sees an image of her late husband and converses with one of the kids that she delivered as a midwife, who dies soon after, she decides to ask Tim to prepare her coffin. When the result of the oldest-person contest doesn't favor her, she's relieved to be rid of the crowd around her house. But then Ana, who broke up with the man who made Tim run away, shows up, heavy with child.

Alter-indie enthusiasts will find a possibly dismaying anomaly in *Lola Igna*, which may be expected of them but comprises no one's loss but theirs. The material adheres to old-time realist melodrama, reliant on nonmainstream funding only because it won't fulfill contemporary expectations of blockbuster cinema. But a closer look will reveal the mechanics of why it succeeds on its own terms. The narrative material is constructed on the persona of Angie Ferro, who was at the age when accomplishing any task or gesture requires considerable patience on the part of any observer. What makes the treat exceptional is that, unlike most serious performers, Ferro never aspired to a level of finesse and dignity. Her delivery was always broad, until straight-talking directors advised her to perform for the intimacy of a camera rather than for the apprehension of an auditorium. She never became defensive about her urinary incontinence, which resulted in a passel of amused anecdotes among her fellow stage performers—in fact, in her opening sequence in *LI*, her character empties her bladder in a chamber pot that she maintains throughout the film for her personal convenience, including as a means of dispersing fans who disrupt her siesta. Most impressively, Ferro foregrounded all the physical vexations of aging, from tooth gaps to osteoporotic posture, and leaned into the now-disciplined theatricality that results in an

always-arresting screen presence. Anita Linda, Rustica Carpio, and an aged-for-her-age Nora Aunor demonstrated how worn-out bodies can be bearers of significances that younger performers can only dream of conveying, but Ferro trumped them with a tough honesty and tender humor that did not deny the infirmity of old age but refused to surrender to its mortal implications either. The surest measure of her achievement lies in how the movie's plot developments no longer have to depend on novelty or unpredictability: whether or not a forthcoming episode can be anticipated, the reward will be contained in Ferro's response, and she never disappoints in being raw, funny, and ironically suffused with sweet youthfulness.

VERONICA VELASCO

(1 film: 2019)

Nuuk

Additional Language: Greenlandic
Year of Release: 2019
Director: Veronica Velasco [as Veronica B. Velasco]
Screenwriters: Aileen Alcampado, Veronica Velasco, Jinky Laurel
From a story by Erwin Blanco & Aileen Alcampado
Producers: Viva Films, OctoArts Films, Mavx Productions
Cast: Aga Muhlach, Alice Dixson, Ujarneq Fleischer, Elaine Yu, Amisuna Berthelsen, Ane Marie Ottosen, Cherisa Chy Dupitas, Maja Thomsen, Giard Paul Dupitas, Kim Kimsen, Jennifer Baquit, Ann Cortez, Stephen Bonotan, Jemina Sørensen, Mikkel R. Sørensen, Geraldine Lontac Lastein, Kevin Dalugdug, Tom Lynge, Ike Giroy, Bertha Lynge, Tuperna Kristiansen, Silvia Olsen, Angel Calmiag Teran, Junie Ducay, Jovanie Ducay, Harold Ducay, Marlouis Ducay, Hugh Ducay, Henrik de Leon, Jason Jensen, Mario Castillo, Irwin Lee Dupitas, Jesper Øraker, Nukakkuluk Kreutzmann

> Elaisa Svendsen, a recently widowed overseas Filipina, needs Prozac for her insomnia, but the pharmacist refuses her request unless she can get a renewed prescription from her still-vacationing doctor. Mark Alvarez, a fellow Filipino whom she doesn't know, overhears her predicament and offers her some of the tablets he just purchased. He asks for her number in case he might get into trouble for violating the law. When she gets home, she takes too many pills and dials her phone for help. She wakes up next morning to find Mark attending to her, saying she dialed his number and he had to break her window to be able to get to her. She tells him about her situation, including her problem with her rebellious son Karl: she identified his girlfriend using a rival girl's name and the depressive woman, consumed with jealousy, wrangled with Karl and killed herself. Karl arrives during Mark's later visit but runs away that night after quarreling with Elaisa, just as Mark's driving away and almost hits him. The two of them have a conversation about their difficulty coping with Greenland culture and Karl admits that he prefers to stay in the Philippines, which he'd visited once with his parents. Mark tells him and, later, Elaisa that he thinks it's a great idea, since she plans to set up a business in the home country. Right before boarding the plane for their trip, Karl discovers that he forgot his passport and has to retrieve it at home. Elaisa tells him to take a later flight but he tells her a blizzard began and flights have been canceled. Elaisa though encounters a few more surprises when she arrives in Pinas.

Greenland has assumed increasing significance since the relase of *Nuuk*, titled after the country's capital city. Under the second presidency of Donald Trump, it has become an object of colonial contention between the continentally co-located US and European leaders responding in support of Denmark, its postcolonial administrator in a still-evolving conflicted relationship. More relevant to the Philippine condition are two matters: first, overseas Filipino workers constitute the biggest number of foreign residents in Greenland, poetically apposite for a population with a history of both European and American occupations; and second, another local film, also woman-directed and set in the margins of Western Europe, came out the same year by the same producer. Sigrid Andrea Bernardo's *UnTrue*, set in the Republic of Georgia, would stand tall on its own terms and would therefore be an unfair basis for comparison. Nevertheless, certain similarities between it and *Nuuk*, as well as with other celebrated works from 2022 where the OFW presence looms later in the narratives—Ruben Östlund's *Triangle of Sadness* and Lorcan Finnegan's *Nocebo*—raise cautionary issues recognizable to any outsider who ventures to reside in cold

countries: any excitement or romanticism will eventually be subsumed under issues of sustenance, if not survival. As in *UnTrue*, these get formulated in terms of heterosexual gender conflicts, linked to incidents in the home country. *Nuuk* distinguishes itself by turning on the tragedy of a pursuit of retribution that overrides any possibility of remorse on the part of the wrongdoer, although the more unexplored aspect of the narrative lies in the cause of conflict between the protagonists: their offsprings' thorough immersion in a culture (signified by their fluency in the local language) that their parents are too alienated from handling, and therefore understandably helpless in intermediating. *Nuuk* justifies the treatment it presents in order to provide a handle for the audience in figuring out, along with the parents, what their children are undergoing. A forthcoming wave in the OFW saga would be works where second-generation Filipinos in foreign places narrate their own stories, on their own terms, already evident in a limited number of hyphenated works (mostly Fil-Am) but insufficiently global enough to acknowledge the presence of fellow nationals in every part of the world.

J.E. TIGLAO

(1 film: 2019)

Metamorphosis

Year of Release: 2019
Director: J.E. Tiglao [as Jose Enrique Tiglao]
Screenwriters: J.E. Tiglao & Boo Dabu
With Ricky Lee as script consultant
Producers: Cinema One Originals & Rebelde Films
Cast: Gold Aceron, Iana Bernardez, Dylan Ray Talon, Ricky Davao, Yayo Aguila, Germaine de Leon, Bodjie Pascua, Lui Manansala, Sarah Pagcaliwagan, Raqs Regalado, Mae Ann Tiglao, Daryl Zacarias, Jasper Martinez, Christian Sta. Maria, Robert Villar, Arj Acierda, Daniah Alysandra Jamon, Divine Grace Magaru, Len Jamby Malinab, Johna Pasamonte, Karla Luisa Espas, Paola Gumpad, Annie Meting, Trina Sobrepena, Alex Vistro, Patrick Mesiac, Jaelen Greece Merin, Jeffiyl Medina, Erika Jianzid Malinab, Mark Gabrielle Costales, Carl Mesias, Marian Albay, Christian Perez, Harry Reymundo Niño

> Adam keeps getting teased by his male classmates for not being as masculine as they are. He calls their leader "supot" (meaning uncircumcised) and manages to beat him up during confrontations. During class, their teacher welcomes Angel, who's pretty but looks old for her age. Adam keeps hanging out with Angel, who reveals that she's actually 24 years old; but when they swim in a river, Adam panics and runs home. His parents find him bleeding through his shorts and his father, a church pastor, contacts a doctor in their congregation, who says that Adam will need to be tested to determine his exact genital condition. Angel assures him that she can accept whatever he is and confesses that she performs sex work to be able to live alone. In the course of making out, she discovers Adam's intersex nature and tells him later that she doesn't judge him. Adam's father, however, is convinced that the child he raised should be a daughter and makes plans to raise money and move to a different community. A young doctor stays over at Adam's residence because of the rain and Adam finds himself getting attracted to the guy.

The presentation of any precarious human condition will always be the greatest strength of the narrative arts, and *Metamorphosis* has earned satisfactory notices from the admittedly narrow circle of observers concerned with the condition of intersexuality. The compliments are fully earned, with the film avoiding any dogmatic issue-raising and promoting the easily overlooked principle of allowing the intersex subject to determine their own preference in their own good time. (Those who still believe in intervention should be encouraged to read *Herculine Barbin: Being the Recently Discovered Memoirs of a Nineteenth-Century French Hermaphrodite*, tracked down and published in 1980 by Michel Foucault, where the implementation of a law that required that citizens be classified as either one of only two genders resulted in scandal, heartbreak, desolation, and early death.) J.E. Tiglao also devised several means of evading the verbal supplication of understanding their social Otherness, except possibly for the argument of sisterhood articulated by a female sexual outlaw. Adam's highlight scenes are bathed in a late-afternoon glow that evokes the Japanese concept of *mono no aware*, or the inevitability of melancholy in realizing beauty. The project also benefits from

the execution of Gold Aceron, an extraordinary new talent who, in spite of his real-life cis-het orientation, manages to perform androgynously without any self-consciousness and succeeds in pulling off the several potentially awkward scenes involving the growing awareness of difference and isolation, the unpredictability of sexual desire, and the revelation of taboo body parts; the highest compliment one can pay for such a performative achievement is the mistaken impression of at least one foreign viewer that he must be intersex himself. Deserving to have a wider impact than it had, *Metamorphosis* is poised to greet a future where its presence will be more than welcome.

KIM BONG-HAN

(1 film: 2020)

The Golden Holiday

Language: Korean
Additional Languages: Filipino, English
Year of Release: 2020
Alternate Title: *Gukjesusa* (literally *International Investigation*)
Director & Screenwriter: Kim Bong-han
Producer: Yeonghwa-sa Jangchun
Cast: Kwak Do-won, Kim Dae-myung, Kim Hee-won, Kim Sang-ho, Nico Gomez, Fredie Abao, Mon Confiado, Shin Dong-mi, Joshua Eliason, Lee Han-seo, Jo Jae-yoon, Marnie Lapus, Hwang Moo-young, Cindy Miranda, Neil Ryan Sese, Shin Seung-hwan, Christian Villete, Fredie Abao, Loren Burgos, Kim Chang-ok, Yu Jinoo, Lee Chanyu, Kang Chaemin, Lee Kyuyeong, Kim Chaejun, Lee Sojin, Lee Yuri, Park Changhee, Rafael Robles, Candy Arcangel, Taos Obach, Cherish Maningat, Marnie Lapuz

> Hong Byeong-soo's house will be foreclosed by the bank if he's unable to raise funds soon. He explains, to no avail, that his childhood friend, Kim Yongbae, absconded with the extra income he was hoping to raise and fled to the Philippines. His wife and daughter petition him to bring them to Pinas for his tenth wedding anniversary, since they'd never taken a foreign trip in their lives. He can barely afford the expenses on his salary as a rural detective in Daecheon City, so his colleagues chip in and raise some money for him to spend. While searching for Yongbae, he gets framed for murder by corrupt police officers and solicits the help of his Korean tourist guide, Mancheol. He then finds out that Yongbae's in prison and confronts his friend there. Yongbae offers him a share of the legendary Yamashita gold, a collection of treasures hoarded by the eponymous World War II Japanese general who was executed for war crimes, with the location of the trove remaining a mystery that he (Yongbae) managed to determine.

The Golden Holiday is all that any national cinema can reasonably expect from the Korean pop-culture industry at the peak of its prowess. A number of Pinas-shot K-productions have come out during the millennium, ranging from the furthest "indie" extreme (made by a protégé of the late Kim Ki-duk and better left to oblivion) to several gangster stories that raise issues of identity and difference; Koreans also hold the global record of having the most number of overseas *kabayans* acknowledged in varying degrees in their film material.[67] But like in the case of Hong Kong, specifically Alan Chui Chung-San and Yuen Bun's *Mabangis na Lungsod* (*Ferocious City*, 1995), it

[67] One potential for added insight was debunked, to my relief: the production company's name resembles that of the Chinese Changchun studio (which it actually credited in *Wikipedia*), active since the 1940s, whose record is consistent in covering foreign-set material, with generally a pro-China stance. I'd feared that since *The Golden Holiday* was created and released during the presidency of Rodrigo Roa Duterte, known for favoring China in defiance of US policy, but also at the expense of Philippine territorial and economic interests, then its producer may have been attempting to replicate the Koreans' success in deploying soft power. As it turns out, the actual production company of *TGH* "doesn't have an official English name online (yet) ... but has no connection to the Chinese film company" (from a *Messenger* note sent December 8, 2025, by Son Boemshik, a former student researcher of mine). The company's Korean name, used in the credit listing here, is owned by the director and has only three other productions as of this time. I am grateful well as to Yu Taeyun, a former graduate advisee, for uncovering these vital details, and to Jerrick Josue David for providing me with access to the film.

took a tongue-in-cheek approach to devise the most effective entry, in the face of the expected hemming and hawing on the part of less-informed global appreciators. The use of Yamashita's gold as MacGuffin in resolving the differences between childhood friends who grow up to find themselves on opposite sides of the law, turns out to have a larger significance in suggesting a critique of the various forays by shady foreign and local forces on the Philippine treasury. The Korean characters also keep reminding one another of their presence in a foreign country, in which corporate and government (including police) services are much less responsive to less-privileged individuals, even if they come from developed territories: a sharply observed series of Korea-set events, where the lead character's friends raise an amount that would be able to cover the cost of a full vacation in the Philippines, lands a real-world cognitive blow when we realize that it would barely last the family a day or two of sightseeing in Seoul. A final populist gesture pops up when a streetsmart Manila-based Korean recruits a pair of assistants, whom he accurately terms *tambays* (a Tagalized clipping of "standbys")—layabouts with expertise in violence, or lumpenproles in short. The total takeaway is something that now mostly gone Pinas experts could have imparted: that pop-culture pleasure need not preclude political significance, a lesson that practitioners and evaluators of all stripes need to constantly relearn.

DODO DAYAO

(1 film: 2020)

Midnight in a Perfect World

Year of Release: 2020
Director & Screenwriter: Dodo Dayao
From a story by Dodo Dayao & Carljoe Javier
Producers: Globe Studios & Epicmedia Productions
Cast: Jasmine Curtis-Smith, Glaiza de Castro, Anthony Falcon, Dino Pastrano, Bing Pimentel, Soliman Cruz, Dolly de Leon, Charles Aaron Salazar, Brian Sy, Aljhon Agnila, Nate Agustin, Rolly Catchuela, Elmar Flores, Timmy Harn, Patti Lapus, Joey Pinera, Jerico Ramota, Veronica Reyes, Jeriko Tan, Hank Valentine

> In an unspecified future that still resembles the present, when the country has attained a level of developmental sanguinity, four friends decide to venture outdoors despite the possibility of a localized midnight blackout and their awareness that a mutual acquaintance has disappeared. They go to a club to score a new kind of powerful hallucinogenic drug but after their seller is killed, they leave the place. A power outage causes them to panic and they run along with a crowd of strangers fleeing from a death squad. One of them, Tonichi, knows of a safehouse where they could hide; but when they arrive, they realize he's no longer with them. His panicked phone calls make them realize he's lost. As they attempt to figure out their hiding place, they meet Alma, an older lady who says she'd already been to two other safehouses. They plan to go outdoors to save Tonichi but then Glenn gets left behind. Mimi and Jinka have to rely on each other for survival, not just from the death squad but also from a monster that lurks in the darkness.

Midnight in a Perfect World embodies the exception that proves the rule: that independent cinema should not necessarily be valorized just for existing, or else it raises the vexed predicament of dismissing a mainstream that had proved capable of containing great work in the past. It sets up the challenge of working in sci fi-horror, a generic hybrid routinely associated with developed economies because of its technological assumptions. What an adequately exposed practitioner like Dodo Dayao has figured out from existing samples provides the key for his audacious approach: that, on a certain level, the social impact of late capital does not differ much from one culture or period to another. The spaces, services, and law-enforcement policies for underclass citizens will be recognizable to anyone whose political sensibilities are sufficiently rooted in the here and now. From this point moving forward, the apparent limits of indigent production get transformed into useful resources, with darkness, squalor, inhospitable outdoors and constrictive indoors, and barely adequate hardware serving to intensify the atmospherics of fear. The attentive readings of an age-grouped collection of responsive performers draw us into a series of geographical and narrative culs-de-sac, while the seemingly unrelated prelude initiates the slasher structure that more or less gets observed along the way; the standard global-indie earnest demonization of lumpen characters that marred his debut feature has also apparently decamped for now. Once we realize that the confusion—of the characters and therefrom the audience—becomes an essential component of the presentation's promise of pleasure, we're well on our way.

DOLLY DULU

(1 film: 2020)

The Boy Foretold by the Stars

Year of Release: 2020
Director & Screenwriter: Dolly Dulu
Producers: Clever Minds, The Dolly Collection, & Brainstormers Lab
Cast: Adrian Lindayag, Keann Johnson, Iyah Mina, Rissey Reyes, John Leinard Ramos, Jan Rey Escaño, Victor Robinson III, Jemuel Satumba, Renshi de Guzman, Kalil Almonte, Jethro Tenorio

> Dominic, an out gay student in a boys' high school, asks a fortune-teller, Baby R, about his still-nonexistent love life. Baby R tells him to watch out for three signs in a forthcoming relationship. Dominic then makes the acquaintance of Luke, a basketball player who feels dejected because he just broke up with his girlfriend. He invites Luke to participate in the school retreat and conducts himself properly as a religious counselor. That includes providing Luke with the necessary emotional support that his newfound friend needs.

A beacon of hope and grace amid calamitous devastation, *The Boy Foretold by the Stars* arrived at the end of the year when the Covid-19 global pandemic succeeded in stalling development projects and personal pursuits alike, and forced film audiences to watch all kinds of material on their mobile devices. One of the unexpected novelties was the proliferation of so-called Boys Love series, originating in Japan and arriving in Pinas via Thai versions uploaded to streaming websites including *YouTube*. Originally a subversive innovation in manga culture, BL addressed itself to women consumers who would have otherwise been alienated by the overtly normalized (and occasionally violent) sexism in Japanese comics. *TBFBTS* (an abbreviation sanctioned by the film's gender-fluid director-writer, whose preferred pronoun is the singular *they*) recuperates the butch-femme and woman-positive terms of Japanese *yaoi*, providing its own resistance to the queer-cinema standardized exclusion of femininity via mutually conventional paired masculinities (as exemplified in works like Ang Lee's 2005 film *Brokeback Mountain*). In fact, as pointed out by BL scholar Jerrick Josue David, *TBFBTS* hews closer to the romantic-comedy genre. Dolly Dulu also provides certain further departures, one in which their narrative's religious-retreat setting is reconfigured as nurturing rather than oppressive, and in which their characters' final kiss is not really their first one. The cast members also display a facility for switching between English and Filipino that harks back to the glory days of the Second Golden Age, affirming that the film, with all its intimate awareness and seemingly casual handling of craft, is essentially an autobiographical recollection of intently observed and intensely cherished private-school experience. It may be an unrealistically rose-colored way of moving on from the trauma of Covid-19, but since the world that *TBFBTS* represents is rooted in a past, then all that we may need to do, as the film proposes, is look back at the best that we all once used to be. For their part, Dulu announced that their film will be extended in the format that gave rise to it: a BL series, not exactly foretold by the stars, but still a way of living through their unusual, insistent, and newly resistive vision of a better future.

Cessations

I planned a number of mini-articles to accompany the findings, starting with a preliminary quantitative analysis, but the exhausting nature of the completed project as well as a plan for an anthology of metacritical materials convinced me that relieving myself of this burden would match the kindness it would bestow on readers masochistic enough to read through the entire text.

I also conducted myself as close as possible to a "no title left behind" principle, which intersected perfectly with a world where the open-access practice (in acknowledging the primacy of the public domain) became a value strong enough to contend with capitalist profiteering. Once more, the members of my team of unpaid consultants were assiduous and patient enough to urge me to consider titles I had dismissed or that I still had to watch.

Since the project began in the early 2010s, I approached the conclusion of every year with greater anxiety than the typically careless award-givers among my elderly colleagues. Unlike news reports and fan celebrations, book publications exist in a realm where they have the potential to outlast even judgments made about them. But when the second decade of the millennium rolled in, I agreed with several colleagues to announce 2020 as the project's cutoff year, and was pleasantly surprised at the manifold advantages that increasing temporal distance provided. Any individual who believes that the gaps from 2021 to whatever happens to be the year that you read this, urgently needs to be filled in as perfectly updated a manner, is welcome to take up the challenge.

This leads to the final gesture I wish the project to make. Critics and academics in the field of film discourse have been making hay and getting away with mediocrity for far too long, which means that no amount of textual deconstruction or reconstruction will prevent them from persisting in their practice. The book is not for them, fortunately; it is for me (which should go without saying) as well as for all concerned appreciators of Philippine cinema. It is also for world-cinema enthusiasts who might share the same excitement in evaluating other historically and geographically circumscribed realms of practice, and for scholars curious about reading strategies and/or areas for further studies.

I recently discussed in an online forum how I went over then-existing critical writing on Philippine cinema, which was how I knew what strengths I could bring and what weaknesses of mine I could work on. The rest won't matter, and I hope that any future critical practitioner who thinks of attempting a similar project can exert as much effort (and have as much fun) to make what I finished not matter, which is how I'm already regarding it at this point. At this stage, my post-canon life can finally begin.

Incidental Subject Index

Adaptation of foreign material—*100–101, 187–188*
Anonymous locale—*13–14, 16–17, 54–55*
Camp & Campiness—*95–96, 178–180*
Exoticization—*6, 109*
Foreign culture—*13, 26, 30–31, 318, 339–340*
    The West—*153–154, 166–167, 318, 367–368*
Foreigners' gaze—*47–48, 49–50, 225–226, 371–372*
Foreigners' presence—*54*
Komiks fantasy—*11, 12, 121–123*
Malaysian setting—*28–29, 35–38, 39–40*
Music—*97–98, 148–149, 182–183, 357*
Native myths—*144–145, 148, 159, 274, 323–324, 344, 351, 360–361*
Period material—*10, 14–15, 76–77, 82–83, 134–135, 167*
    American occupation—*29–30 49–50, 76, 117–118, 140, 246, 288–289*
    Japanese occupation—*8–9, 102, 139*
    Spanish occupation—*15–16, 56–57, 277, 338*
Pro-Japan propaganda—*8–9*
Queer imaging—*27, 78, 247, 352, 369–370*
    Men—*64, 137–138, 231–232, 266*
    Women—*60, 118, 113–114, 189–190*
Reflexivity—*64–65, 82, 210–211, 213–214, 270, 305, 322–323*
Rizal, José novel adaptation—*10, 15*
Ruritanian fantasy—*21–22*
Sex work—*87–88, 128, 132–134, 162, 172–173, 256, 280–281*
Socialist realism—*18–19*
Superspy narrative—*20–21, 59–60*
True-life material—*14–15, 43, 51, 76–77, 167, 270*

The Author

Joel David was a professor at Inha University in Incheon, the first Filipino to be granted tenure in Korea. He was the first solo graduate of the Philippines's first bachelor's program in film, final Director of the University of the Philippines Film Center, and founding Director of the UP Film Institute. He holds a PhD and an MA (as Fulbright scholar) in cinema studies from New York University. He has published several books and articles on Philippine cinema, and maintains an archival website, *Ámauteurish!* at amauteurish.com. He has been awarded life-achievement recognition for his film criticism and scholarship, in 2016 at the FACINE International Film Festival in San Francisco, California, followed by the first Dean Gloria Feliciano Award for Outstanding Alumni of the UP College of Mass Communication (2017), the Platinum Stallion Media Award of the Trinity University of Asia (2020), and the Balagtas Award of the Writers Union of the Philippines (2021).