

Post-Dilawan Cinema and the Pandemic

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v	Acknowledgements and Sources
vii	Preface
1	Prolegomenon: For a Theory of Movie Going?
7	1: Historical Synthesis
15	2: What is Dilawan Cinema?
45	3: Pandemic and the Aesthetics of Con- finement
55	4: Post-Dilawan Cinema
87	5: Contempt
97	6: 13-Point Program for the Revitalization of Philippine Cinema
98	Appendix

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There may be many others that I forgot to write. You know who you are, I hope, and know that I thank you and hope that we'll see each other again.

Greater thanks to Wendy for bearing with me as I write this project, and for bearing with me all these years.

The writings here are mostly written from late November to early December 2021. It was smooth-flowing writing, as if the outline had been written a long time. Parts of this book are re-edited and updated from my former entries at *Missing Codec* (missingcodec.com), the first issue of my *Extended Negations* Zine (2019) and my article from *Sinekultura* (to which, I am also grateful for having my article published).

The book relies a lot on having seen the films mentioned here, and here lies the flaw of this work with regards to accessibility. At some point, it also asks for your full trust if in case you haven't seen the films I am to discuss here. Some arguments have been repeated from past works for the sake of supporting arguments here which relies on historical specificity. All other faults found in this book are mine.

Preface

I quit academia. There is no point at all with pursuing media studies institutionally, especially at the pace that media technology is moving today. Even with the backwards condition of the Philippines, it seems like media scholarship is also backwards institutionally, with its pursuit of media literacy which only addresses the institutional need to be understood for their own relevance rather than a kind of literacy that arms the population to make use of technology to their own advantage. At this point, media scholarship is already behind the times: everybody is now media literate, just not how the institutions want them to be. Media academic institutions' insistence on media literacy comes from a similar point of moral posturing as your mom in the 90s warning you of the dangers of video games which comes from their ignorance of the machine.

We can only blame the institutions for the horrors that they are facing today. For a long time, media has been for the benefit of the few, with bare minimum useful information being available for everyone. As an insti-

tution with a longer history than the broadcast media, Film has a stronger root for this elitism as it shields bureaucrat capitalism and feudalism from the inevitable democratization of the medium. The pandemic only made obvious to us what was going on for the last century: the ridiculousness of Philippine cinema as it caters mainly to the whims of the ruling classes. Imagine my cringe over people getting excited over QCinema international line-up of boring European-approved arthouse films. What the pandemic exposed further is how really, the international arthouse circuit is a ridiculous cartel hanging by a fragile thread that depends a lot on the surpluses of Hollywood and other national cinema's mainstream.

Even the supposed populism of the bourgeois cinema, of the “pang-masa” only serves to reproduce the very hegemony that the ruling classes enjoy. The “pang-masa” has always been a pacifying tool: presupposing a metaphysics of the Filipino and the Masses to justify their distasteful aesthetics and horrible attitude towards the general audience. Even diasporic right-wingers have had enough: “Filipino Films: they don't make us think.”¹

Who can you blame if the general audience is getting their entertainment and, worse, their research on video platforms? They no longer identify with the big institutions; they now see through their bullshit. There really isn't any effort from media academia to under-

1. <https://www.getrealphilippines.com/2011/12/filipino-films-they-dont-make-us-think/>

stand the more recent phenomena and merely blame them from the supposed lack of “media literacy”, the same thing the bourgeois and petitbourgeois filmmakers utter when people do not watch their films.

Over the first weekend of October 2019, I attended the Alternative Cinema Initiatives Conference organized by Cinema is Incomplete collective, in cooperation with a lot of people. I won't expound much on all the other topics that were talked about there, a lot of which are very insightful. I want to focus more on the idea that a lot of participants are insisting on, which is, the idea of “audience development.”

From what I understand, a lot of the so-called alternative cinema practitioners have finally woken up to acknowledge the economic aspect of filmmaking, and think about its sustainability. If only looking within this frame that “audience development” as consumer development that I'll get to agree on their resolution.

However, the pretext of their proposed “audience development” stems from “development of taste.” That the “common” audience supposedly are fans of “escapist” cinema. Generally, a lot of those who propose audience development, especially former NCCA Cinema Council chair, Teddy Co, thinks that the masses, as general audience, are stupid.

This notion of artists, connoisseurs and the likes of Teddy Co of an imagined general audience as stupid, in the way they consume audiovisual media, comes with an assumption that what they, the elite consume are actu-

ally intelligent. That they are the bearers of good taste. That the masses are brainwashed by Hollywood into liking their films: that they don't have agency.

These assumptions from the bourgeois mindset are typical of them: the only thing that they know how to do is to be in power and to retain it. They do not and can never reproduce the power that they enjoy: they need to exploit other people for this power to be retained. And this is what their notion of "audience development" is all about. The retention of status quo: the power of them to define the false dichotomies between mainstream and alternative.

The pandemic is one great motivation for this work. It's fascinating how this looming threat of death does not make filmmakers, theaters and producers waver to stop a while. Even the non-renewal of ABS-CBN network, part of the largest media conglomerate in the country, did not stop its film studios, Star Cinema and Black Sheep, and all the other studios who reproduce their clones, to continue producing cringe. We applaud this bourgeois fuckers who still stand by their bullshit, despite being obvious bullshit.

Part of the reason I'm quitting academia is because I can't do in there the things that I did for this book. Alexis Tioseco once said that "we" do not have a healthy culture of polemics in this country.² Part of what counts is because no one can do an actual polemic

2. <https://www.nangmagazine.com/ten-years-after/alexis-tioseco>

here. What Tioseco has missed is that part of what constitutes a good polemic in this side of the world is how personal it can get: a polemic can only be personal in the semifeudal semicolonial Philippines. Property and capital being concentrated to very few families and filiations, of course, attacks are always (and should always be) personal. The myth of disinterestedness is what hinders commentators to launch an actual polemic here. Cultural commentators, after all, mostly cater to the ruling classes. If you can read more of what counts as cultural criticism here, it's always an attack to an imagined "masses", a projection of their own stupidity that they conflate with the actual masses who, more or less, do not care about the things they value culturally. Common activist response is to correctly assume that cultural commentators "do not know" what really is happening to the masses, but only to the benefit of them trying to "educate" the ruling class partisan cultural critics. There's a grave consequence that is happening: this led activists to pander to the whims of ruling class partisanship than for the benefit of the masses.

This polemic is personal. I don't want to pin this to the association that I have, this is mine alone. Writing in English is part of the decision since I really mean this to be read by those who would look for this. I won't pretend that I'm writing for everybody, I'm writing for those who care for the things I care about. The broader masses won't care much for what I care about in this book, and it's fine, since they care for more important matters than

cinema. And I'm with them too, with caring for more important matters than cinema.

This book has an expiration. Let's just wish that this will become obsolete in no time. We don't want to get trapped in this bullshit that we're in.

Another part of being personal with this book is that it's meant to hurt ruling class partisans. Let's get into our vocabularies again the notion of class traitors. Ruling class partisans are class traitors, there's no other way to pin it. As much as most of the radical campaigns are focused on forming alliances, it is important also, dialectically, to harness our radar for traitorship. Fanon said it best: spectators are either cowards or traitors.³ Cowards can become brave, and that's the point of getting organized. Traitors, on the other hand, are always out to get you and will forsake you the first chance they get. Film viewers as spectators are either one of the two. Which one are you?

3. Frantz Fanon. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Penguin Modern Classics edition. Trans. Constance Farrington. London: Penguin Books, 2001. p. 161. Farrington's translation uses the word "onlooker", a newer translation by Richard Philcox uses the word "bystander." The idea of "spectator" here came from the self-critical use of the sentence as a slogan by the Third Cinema Movement during their public screenings.

Prolegomenon: For a Theory of Movie Going?

On April 27, 2019, a concern over the current film industry's overproduction of films was raised by Prof. Nick Deocampo in his talk on the Boom-and-Bust pattern of Philippine Film Economy, at the UP Film Institute. The concern centers on the concept of "demand", something the Boom-and-Bust, being the liberal economic model that it is, seems to cover a lot. (Overproduction, i.e., we produce a lot of films which a few to none have seen).

But "demand" in any sense seems to be ghastly, more on the discussion of film. Can one really account for any film's demand? If we quantify the list of top-selling films for the past 20 years, would it account to any fixed notion of "demand"? Can a "demand" for a specific film be established in the first place?

The notion of "demand", in classical discussion of it in market economy, seems to center a lot of its decisions on the consumer. Consumer demand, as exposed by recent history, seem to be less concerned with what the consumers actually want. In a sense, what the consumer wants is the Lacanian real for market economists.

It's that impossibility. That to get close to it, you'd only appeal to its symptoms, and not to its actuality. These symptoms can come in a form of survey, result of focus group discussions, or whatever quantitative research output economists and market researchers use.

Consumer demand, or at least the data of it, seem to be more synthetic than we can accept. It is a ghost from a community ghost story which we believe in strongly, despite only hearing it from someone, or only seeing things which are like it. Especially for a marginalized commodity such as film — a commodity with very little use-value — producers and film marketers oftentimes use a lot of mechanisms to generate or conjure, to be consistent with our gothic metaphors, demand.

The hot topic at the time, *Avengers: Endgame*, did conjure this ghost demand, but it does so in a very long process. Oftentimes this could be mistaken as an “organic” process, but for a company as big as Marvel and Disney, its global audience is nothing organic or accidental. It is at most calibrated. It is capital as Nick Land would put it: an amplified response to positive feedback.

Cinema and positive feedback to it, as the social practice of blockbusters go, never seem to care much of “aesthetics”, or morals, or ethics, so to say. Its mystique comes from what Pauline Kael, in her classic essay “Trash, Art and the Movies,” calls enjoyment. For Kael, enjoyment is the basic thing that we want to get from the movies, everything else is secondary to it. Weird thing is that Kael does not want to equate what's good

in the movies — which is its fun — with art, meanwhile, Hito Steyerl would note that art needs to be salvaged for it is one of the sources of fun.

In any case, Kael's point is never about art, but rather why do people go to the movie houses. Kael would note enjoyment as something which is never really the same for everyone, but she nonetheless points out what she finds enjoyable in films that she sees. I think this dynamic of going to see a movie is something which is less considered when market study of films is being done. I've yet to look though, if studies are done, at least a survey, on why people are going to the movies. Of course, a hunch, just like Kael's, is to enjoy. After all, enjoyment is the most basic of the use-value in consumer societies.

Going to the movies costs a lot. It better be worth it.

Chris Fujiwara's notion of the film critic as an organizer I think comes in here. We can understand why a lot of film critics stretch their hands to reach out to people and tell them to see this possibly underseen independent film or arthouse film. Fujiwara noted that at the most basic, you're supposed to share the pleasure of watching the film on every review. In the context of the Philippines, however, there seems to be quite a few who are being honest on their own enjoyment.

See, for example, this review of Tristan Zinampan

1. <https://www.missingcodec.com/notes/chris-fujiwara-on-criticism-and-programming/>

of *Citizen Jake*.² It is mostly in the parentheticals that we can see what can possibly be enjoyable with the film. Mostly, the review goes back and forth between its director and the “political message” the film is supposed to bring, very few on the plot points, fewest about what made the film worthwhile seeing. If the film, as the title suggests, is worthwhile as a wake-up call, it is never really mentioned in the review how the film wakes you up. It just tells you things you already know.

The general tendency of film reviews center around either this form of moralism, or a point of snobbery. Most of the time, the fault is two fold between the critic and the filmmaker. Most especially, those who treat film in line with the fine arts. It is in this sense that Rappler critic Oggs Cruz flat-out only made a review for a Lav Diaz film, and never really attempted to reach out for more audience, in his review of *Ang Panahon ng Halimaw*.³ He can choose to fault Diaz over this: on why the film seems to be a film for specialists. As it stands, his review reflects a lot from where we can enjoy the film, however, it may be as intimidating also as he said it would be.

There's something I quite find unassuring however, of both reviews' conclusions on both films. A wake up call and a call to arms. Both reviews merely survey the manifestations, but never really pointed out how they

2. <https://www.filmolicereviews.com/citizen-jake-review-wake-up-call>

3. <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/movies/203728-ang-panahon-ng-halimaw-movie-review/>

worked as such. Are they just working metaphorically? And if the times are as they say (dark, violent or whatever), aren't these kinds of work... useless? For surely, who were they supposed to wake up? Who are they suppose to arm? Their already-assured audience?

Then again, if we go about fetishizing auteurs, no one would really watch a Mike de Leon film because one wants to wake up, or a Lav Diaz film because we want to bear arms. Those who follow them as artists already know how and where they stand politically, does it warrant for a repeat on the reviews of their films? What about what made them stand out as films? Isn't that considered into the equation?

It is unfair to fault an audience-base who do not know what they are dealing with to not see these kinds of films. No one even made a good case on whether anyone would have an enjoyable- if not, interesting — time watching those films. The cases which were raised by almost everyone who'd make you want to see *Citizen Jake* is its wokeness. But what if you don't buy wokeness? What if you don't buy film directors either?

Is it time for critics to consider the basic question, why do people go and see the movies, and consider them in their written pieces?

Time and again, the so-called nationalists virtue-call cinemas for blocking their screens with an all-day screening of, and fault audiences falling in line to, the next hollywood blockbusters. They also fault capitalism, "because business", which, of course, is the boogeyman

we need to slay, but never really make a good case for how we came to this. This is a good case of call-out vs critique. The latter is what we always lack when looking at this predicament.

Rather, we are afraid to critique this side of movie-going. Because it necessitates a “downgrading” of cinema from an “art” to a “mere” commodity. Critique of the cinema distributing system in a society like ours would necessitate a critique of the structure and system that enables it. And that will start always, in looking at production, modes of production, and commodities. That production, in the context of capitalism, is not art-production, but commodity production. Because these goods are exchanged for other commodities, more commonly, money. Cinema is a commodity. There’s no use crowdsourcing over at twitter on what your speculative audience wants to see. We can only figure out why people go to see *Avengers* and not our movies, not in-lieu of their desires — these are merely the symptoms — if we start looking at films in the manner of how we gauge our consumption of coffee.

1: Historical Synthesis

Rolando Tolentino's *Indie Cinema*, published by UST Publishing House in 2016, presents a good collection of articles which ties into the cultural history of the indies from the time of its perceived conception (2005 with the birth of Cinemalaya) up to 2014. Of particular note are his general commentaries on the Indie scene and its transition towards "mainstreaming" found in the earlier pages of the book.

Tolentino noted how really the coming of Cinemalaya – by extension, Cinema One Originals – signals a way for the national bourgeoisie to reorganize the burgeoning independent cinema that came out of the Digital Filmmaking scene towards the inclination of capital accumulation through a perfection of mainstream film practices, albeit, at lesser cost. The practices of Cinemalaya – and again, by extension, Cinema One Originals – brought about the indie scene seeking an audience that is already outside of the earlier Digital Film audience: a paying audience. In the mid-2000s, it is still quite easy to conflate the earlier independent digital filmmaking

scene (the ones who are self-producing from the early 2000s like Khavn, JP Carpio, Jon Red, etc) and the indies of Cinemalaya because of their common ground with their use of digital technology at a time when the dominant form in the mainstream is still celluloid and a kind of ideological and practical common ground of an artist-centric production practice. What really separates them is their economic make up. That Cinemalaya indies are actually easier to notice not just because of their filmmaking style, but more obviously, because of their economic make up. Cinemalaya is a brand.

Patrick Campos in a 2011 article already has noted these confluences due to a lot of intersections between the Cinemalaya brand and the earlier Digital cinema. This conflation, Campos has reported, has been present throughout the earlier years of Cinemalaya when the term “indie” is being clarified at the Cinemalaya congress every single time. What Tolentino feared and critique to be the mainstreaming of indies, made sense for Campos in all his liberal-leaning politics that is weary of any imposition of resistance. At some point in this article, Campos raised suspicion on the suggestion of Tolentino for political collective filmmakers to be recognized as the site of “true” independent filmmaking. Campos called these collectives “propagandistic” noting how Tolentino had missed that Cinemalaya never really emphasized political intent of an “extreme” nature (on this note, we can easily read Campos calling Tolentino’s and political collective filmmakers as “extremists”).

There's a hint of correctness in the view of the two. Campos is indeed right when he said that politics was never the intention of Cinemalaya. But Tolentino is commenting on Cinemalaya and how it is referring to itself as "indie" without a self-reflexive interrogation of the notions of "indie" and independence. A critique which later on, of course, forced Tolentino to look outside of Cinemalaya precisely because it does not intend to do anything political. Campos in his naivete, noted how Cinemalaya's practices has set for itself a space for "creation of a kind of liminal space, a space for the "becoming" of a national cinema, a space that is poised for cultural expansion, if not for impossible dominance."¹

What was missing in the indies, why it never really sat to anything concrete and was left fleeting, even with most commentators seeing this as a positive thing, is a radical politics. What made indies easy to negotiate with power and hegemony, and later on became practically dominant, is that the practices of indie were never really organized around a radical politics. Of course, indie's tendency was to expand culturally since it was not posed to be of anything politically or economically significant. But what Campos never asked, and has still never asked, is whether or not "cultural expansion" is a symptom of independence. For sure, what any struggle for independence is if one is to look at history, is that

1. Patrick Campos. "The Politics of Naming a Movement: Independent Cinema According to the Cinemalaya Congress (2005-2010)." *Philippine Humanities Review*. Vol. 13. No. 2. December 2011. pp. 76-110.

any struggle or resistance, never “expands” space, but rather they reclaim and reappropriate space. Expansion is imperialist. Campos’ and Cinemalaya’s Indie is imperialist.

Years later, indie’s imperialism set forth, but to cancel out the very notion of independence, and left indie as a brand. What Campos was idealistically noting above becomes the nightmare that is Philippine Cinema as we know it right now: dominating from the indie practices, comes the flattened and unimaginative “middlebrow-ness” (to use Campos’ term to describe Cinemalaya’s “indie”) already from the historical synthesis of this “middle-ground” of the mainstream and indie from before, expressing more of boring middle-class fantasies that they proliferate from mid-tier film productions. Campos’ “middle” here signifies not Deleuze and Guattari’s middle that always gains intensity, but a middle as a center – an imperialist center. This middle is static.

But crises from within and out of culture made “indie” as a concept something to attack rather than to celebrate. Indie as a cultural concept (still having to tie to the core of independence as freedom), which is tied to anything but popular, became a thing of suspicion – at most, as a joke. This suspicion more often than not reflects the effect of the politico-economic crises that was brought by the subsequent administrations.

The politico-economic make-up of the Aquino Administration – following the years after Campos made his report on the politics of “indie” – granted more benefit

to the economic elite² and it passed through with great impunity especially in the cultural field. The Aquino Administration's elitism highlighted the crisis within the popular consciousness as the petitbourgeois and those who ideologically aligned with the bourgeoisie collectively and explicitly cast doubt to the working class. An example of a common expression of their suspicion is their doubt on the economic decision-making of Pantawid-Pamilyang Pilipino Program (4Ps) grantees (that 4Ps grantees use the money for vices, one often hears) while the whole economic situation does not really grant favorable condition for anybody below the elite class line to get any work with bare minimum job security.

In effect, this elitism and class-hate also casted a doubt from the other side: a doubt from the urban and diasporic working class to any member of the bourgeoisie, and then turned to populism. But this doubt comes from a lack of revolutionary politics thanks to the larger anti-insurgency campaigns both from the actual field of struggle to the deployment of pro-Aquino troll-machines online. At the time, revolutionary and grass-roots politics was clouded by liberal social justice activism that presented itself as revolutionary and grass-roots.

At the time, liberal social justice activism, like the indies, were being laughed about by populists. This brings us back to the parallel of politics and cinema

2. "Elitist politics and economics: the real Aquino legacy." *IBON Foundation*. July 1, 2016. <<https://www.ibon.org/elitist-politics-and-economics-the-real-aquino-legacy/>>

at that point: that the promises of liberal social justice and the supposed independence of indies have turned out to be elitist flukes that scream revolution without a revolutionary political intention. Liberal social justice at the time, was often negotiated with Obama's (which extends to the Aquino administration's) social democracy. Indies in the mid-2010s became further negotiated with the mainstream as commercial theaters shifted to full digitization by 2012. Outside of this, cultural populism is arising as a reaction against these two.

By the mid-2010s, by the further expansion of QCinema – a Local-Government funded film-grant organization and festival – indies became the center of dominant practice as it became validated more by the state and more it strayed further from any form of radical political projects. Revolutionary politics in the film scene became content with mere representation: one can remember Manny Pangilinan's Cinefilipino funding Kiri and Sari Dalena's *Guerilla is a Poet*, a documentary-biopic on Communist Party of the Philippines founder, Jose Maria Sison. Even worse is what happened years later that revolutionary politics in the film scene also ate up populism and settled for mere opportunity for propaganda as with the participation of actual activists as extras and props in the Star Cinema film *Alone/Together*.

Decades long of debate on what is "real" independent cinema always tend to answer questions regarding cinema, but the very notion of independence itself, by itself, was never really interrogated. This is quite ironic

for a nation that has a very long history of struggle for independence. The notion of independence promoted by the indies of the 2000s-2010s and of Patrick Campos comes from a very loose sense of freedom that does not struggle – a freedom that acts with impunity and never faces adversary. One is compelled to ask in this case, what is it really trying to be independent of? Within cinema, it sees “mainstream” as its discursive enemy, that later on became negotiated with it that even the very figures of cinematic independence such as Lav Diaz and Kidlat Tahimik failed to dodge the interpellation of the state apparatus.

Here, we go back to Tolentino’s suggestion to consider political activist filmmakers as the site of real independent cinema. Maybe, independence in cinema is independence from cinema. That for one to be an independent filmmaker, their concern must never be cinematic, but something else that puts more premium to struggling for independence than struggling for cinema. In the case of political activist collectives doing films, their point of making films, informed by radical politics, does not contribute further to the feedback loop that indies trapped themselves on.

So, what happened to Indie? It never went out, but for sure they never really embraced to core the notion of independence. Maybe we can erase the term, but let’s retain the spirit of it: the spirit of the imperialist middle that Campos champions. But let’s call it for what it really is: the indie then, especially the brand that was cham-

pioned by grant-giving festivals and the arthouse elite cliques – and later on the “maindie” clique – reflects a lot of the elitism of the Aquino Administration. And it is from here that we interrogate Philippine Cinema further up to the mainstream populist (counter-)reaction in the Duterte era. From here on, we’ll refer to the “indie” we know as Dilawan cinema.

2: What is Dilawan Cinema?

Two deaths brought about significant superstructural change in Indie Cinema by the turn of 2010s. First, the murder of the couple Alexis Tioseco and Nika Bohinc. Then, the death of the former president, Corazon Cojuangco-Aquino.

Tioseco and Bohinc are film critics renowned as champions of arthouse, with Tioseco specializing in international curation of Southeast Asian Cinema. On September 1, 2009, the couple are murdered by suspected burglars in Tioseco's residence. Their case is still open.

The death of Tioseco and Bohinc highlighted the influence they had in the ecology of the then Indie film scene. As a point of self-criticism, my entry in the scene happens also around the time when their death is still fresh from people's memory to which I easily sympathize with the community that I was trying to get into. But even then, I understood and even witnessed how great really this influence is. One of his last essays, "Wishful Thinking for Philippine Cinema" at the time

became not just a naïve wish list, but a manifesto for a significant portion of the indie, particularly with those who are involved with .mov Digital Film Festival.

As the years go by following the death of the couple, portions of the wish list are getting fulfilled, and most of it happened with communal self-consciousness, it's as though there's a movement that brought the scene towards fulfilling those wishes as a bucket list. Khavn's *EDSA XXX* (2012)¹ and Quark Henares' *Rakenrol* (2011)² are two titles particularly mentioned by Tioseco in his wish list that got fulfilled.

On the other hand, the death of former president Corazon Aquino made a significant shift in the political landscape in 2009. It became a signal for the liberal party to shift their leadership and have Aquino's son, Benigno Simeon Aquino III to run as president instead of Manuel Roxas Jr., who then ran as Aquino III's running mate during the 2010 elections.

Cinematically, this shift is polarizing. At that time, antagonism between the indie and the mainstream was still quite clear. The Aquinos are associated with the mainstream with the daughter, Kris Aquino being its showbiz face. By extension, this also made greater association with Star Cinema, then the largest movie studio

1. <https://edsaxxx.wordpress.com/>

2. Oggs Cruz: *Rakenrol* is Henares' "first feature film after the untimely death of his most loyal supporter and most honest critic, Alexis Tioseco, to which he dedicates the film as a partial fulfillment to one of Tioseco's famous wishes for Philippine Cinema." (*Rakenrol* Review, *Screen Anarchy*, 2011 September 28. <https://screenanarchy.com/2011/09/rakenrol-review.html>)

in the country.

The memory of the Hacienda Luisita Massacre is still fresh at the time. The massacre made a mark in the decades long struggle for land and living of the farm-workers of Hacienda Luisita – a farmland owned by the Cojuangco Family. On November 16, 2004, the farmers' strikes were answered by the police and soldiers with bullets and tear gas leading to 7 deaths and hundreds of farmers and children being hurt. The soldiers and police were dispatched by the Arroyo government to assist the Hacienda. Deputy Speaker and congressman of Tarlac at the time, Benigno Aquino III, claimed that the dispersal was justified. Years later, the farmers are still seeking justice for the deaths and for the lands to be turned over; even in the 2010 announcement of Aquino III's presidential run, the memory of the massacre still haunts the popular consciousness.

Khavn responded to this with *Mondomanila*, a film that virtually champions and represents everything that is antithetical with the Aquino III campaign. Weeks before the 2010 election, a clip from *Mondomanila* was released in Khavn's channel, the video was titled "Bakit si Cory Aquino ang pinakagagong tao sa buong mundo?"³ which expresses a dissenting opinion, albeit in a really crass humor, a disagreement with an Aquino presidency.

The election of Aquino III to the presidency also made a significant shift in the spirit of the times. On one

3. <https://youtu.be/p8fahA9ncLE>

hand, the officials of the Arroyo government are being hounded by the then Aquino administration's legal enforcement for cases that are long being pushed for by mainstream progressive forces such as cases against enforced disappearances that led to the capture of Gen. Jovito Palparan in 2014 while former defense secretary Angelo Reyes took his life earlier in 2011. That some of the progressive concerns are being answered added to the class impunity already present in the administration before: right now, no one has anything to complain since the villains are being captured one by one.

This sense of impunity reinforced one of Tioseco's wishes to be fulfilled: "I wish someone, anyone, would make a good, thought-provoking film about the Philippine upper class." This wish was in response to the spate of films of seemingly social realist strain that the film scene dubbed as "poverty porn" as the exploitation of poverty narratives, it was observed, are becoming a filmmaker's entry to the festival circuit. The filmmakers, in the middle of 2010s, had their new found euphoria validated by the class impunity pushed by the Aquino III administration and finally translated their enamor for their class origins.

As early as 2011, this euphoria was already present. Coming from a run of socially-conscious filmmaking addressing timely issues, Lav Diaz released *Siglo ng Pagluluwal* (2011), a film about a filmmaker struggling to complete his film, that, in a perverted manner, parallels his struggle with a woman who was giving birth to

a child that came from rape. The film ended with a kind of ritual-performance that seemingly represent and celebrate this “birthing,” a scene which formally crystalizes Diaz’ liberation theology.⁴

A more perverted approach was expressed in Marie Jamora’s *Ang Nawawala* (2013), a narrative that explores a niche culture that tries so hard to present itself as countercultural without the burden of reorganization of the senses that counter cultures present. The film ended only with struggling with very minor matters. Rolando Tolentino noted of *Ang Nawawala* as an expression of bourgeois juvenilia: a kind of “resistance” that rests a lot on class impunity and so seemingly portrays a “unique” self-expression.⁵

We can take off from the two films mentioned above as forming parts and parcel of the qualities of a Dilawan Film.

What is a Dilawan?

We should have been familiar with it by now but for those who are living outside of our present context, a Dilawan is often used in various degrees to refer to a liberal,

4. See Lav Diaz & Tilman Baumgartel, “Digital is Liberation Theology” from *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*. Edited by Tilman Baumgartel. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012. pp. 171-178.

5. See Rolando Tolentino, “Burgis na Juvenalia” from *Indie Cinema at mga sanaysay sa Topograpiya ng pelikula sa Filipinas*. Manila: UST Publishing House, 2016. pp. 43-45.

but always as a slur. This often alludes to a theoretical, practical and political position that takes liberalism in a way that is dogmatic. Of course, in the very context of the Philippines, this has a very semifeudal and semi-colonial implication. A dilawan is a firm follower of the Liberal Party, particularly of the personalities involved in it. Additional dilawan points if you are a member of the Liberal Party.

The term can be traced to first having a life on on-line social media threads in months leading towards the 2016 Presidential Elections as a way for Duterte and Marcos supporters to diss on their detractors. Initially a product of binary logic, the Dilawan as a signifier made sense later on as something that refers to a liberalism in the context of the Philippines.

What brought the Liberal Party critics to the Dilawan signifier? For the benefit of those who are not familiar with the Filipino language, the rootword of “dilawan” is “dilaw”, which is a term for the color Yellow. The color yellow was first associated with the Liberal party through the Laban ng Bayan’s yellow ribbon campaign for former Senator Benigno Aquino, Jr. as a signifier for his return to the Philippines in 1986 after a three-year exile to the United States. The assassination of the senator amplified the symbolization of the color from embracing a return from exile to a color of popular resistance, as it became one of the dominant colors back in the EDSA uprising during the same year.

The color became of recent prominence after the

death of former Sen. Aquino's wife, and former Philippine President, Corazon Cojuangco-Aquino in 2009. The color then adapted to the campaign of their son, Benigno III, which then led to his election. Since then, what was back then a color of resistance, became a color of hegemony. In the popular mindset, of course, especially to those who identify politically with the Aquino regime, this color of hegemony is often confused with an anachronistic or nostalgic association of its opposition days. It's in this confusion that the liberative euphoria in the zeitgeist often originates.

As a color of hegemony, the yellow or dilaw becomes affiliated also with all the kinds of politics that the Aquino III administration brought about. On the onset, we can refer to a dilawan as a market liberal of a semifeudal and semicolonial kind: a dilawan's market liberalism is marked by their celebration of the end of history – or the high brought about by the fall of Berlin that symbolized the “triumph” of capitalism. In the context of the petitbourgeois, a dilawan is a semifeudal slave-traitor: a clout-chasing liberal who will do everything just so they won't appear negative to the bourgeoisie, even at the expense of desecrating radicals and the proletarians and the peasants. In this sense, a dilawan often acts as how a stereotypical Hacendero might be: flaunting his useless position to peasants. The dilawan semicoloniality generally is an appeal to American-suburban whiteness, including to its fragility of its racial position in the west.

It can also be conflated with a neoliberal, which at this point of history in the Philippines, no longer matters what its difference is with a classic liberal. From the point of revolutionary politics, a dilawan is that terminally destructive political entity that leaves itself always open to negotiate with those who are already powerful at the expense of the greater masses.

We can say to this extent that dilawan politics retroactively applies to almost every president of the country, with Ferdinand Marcos, Cory Aquino and Rodrigo Duterte as its worst examples. But every administration of course has their own sets of particularities but they are a lot more of the same: Marcos, Aquino and Duterte all exercised this elitist politics as they keep their cronies fat and have served imperialist interests throughout their term.

To synthesize, a dilawan is a fragile entity whose self-validation, subjectivity and individuality is heavily dependent on the semifeudal and semicolonial ruling class. And when the most visible representative of the Ruling class got elected as a president – an apologetically fascist son-heir of one of the largest corporate feudal lands in the country, Benigno Aquino III – a sense of euphoria from the bourgeoisie and their followers are expressed in the urban culture, including the mass media, adding to the impunity of class violence that is everyday being exercised by the ruling class to the workers and the peasants.

Qualities of a Dilawan Film

The euphoria and ruling class impunity conjured by the Aquino Administration among the dilawans, coming from the two deaths mentioned above, has generated a spate of films that is so centered to the self that the films are often echo-chambers. However, this self-centeredness comes with a cynicism of the self, or to put it simply, to parallel the criticism of Carlo Cielo on post-Erap films,⁶ the Dilawan film is a film that aims at the killing of one's agency. Aesthetically, the Dilawan film poses for a post-(social) realist stance, that is, a kind of realism that does not have any interest in exploring historical nuances, but takes history and reality as informational and trivial bits.

A rough synthesis between *Ang Nawawala* and *Siglo ng Pagluluwal* is Nestor Abrogena's *Ang Kwento Nating Dalawa* (2015): a film about a filmmaker who is challenged by filmmaker issues, along with another issue with his sexual opportunism, while mapping out the spaces where they move. Rappler critic Oggs Cruz celebrated *Ang Kwento Nating Dalawa's* lack of spectacle as if it's a good thing, calling it subtle, its dullness as restraint, and the film's exposition of sexual opportunism as an exercise in non-judgment.⁷ Cruz pointed out that Abrogena opt to present the "things as they are" in this

6. Carlo Cielo. "The Killing of Agency." From *White AF*. Pasig City: Shonenbat Books, 2019.

7. <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/movies/ang-kwento-nating-dalawa-movie-review>

relationship, an insistence of “normalcy”.

This insistence of Normalcy in *Ang Kwento Nating Dalawa* is a dilawan trope for the trivialization of reality, its post-realism. Its bland aesthetic is a way to force one’s eyes to accept the film as it is presented, not asking for any kind of further explanation. That their ordinary lives be sutured to us as ordinary too. But this suturing is in no way a plea for identification and empathy. The blandness of the film’s aesthetic made *Ang Kwento Nating Dalawa* as distant as it comes. This distance, like in *Ang Nawawala*, is an expression of its class position as a niche: it’s a proud distance to highlight one’s class position, not even in an ironic way.

In a classic bourgeois attitude, the film exploits our lack of knowledge about the life of educators and students from private schools funded by bourgeois compradors. Its insistence of normalcy presents a sense of realism, no matter how cringe they talk and move, that it exploits our concern over informed judgment that it holds back to us things from their relationship so as to maintain that distance between them and us the general audience. This approach is as politically reprehensible as it is aesthetically deplorable. It’s a film that does nothing, says nothing, and shows nothing relevant for us to grasp on, just the crumbs for us to see that by the time that the film ends you no longer care anymore whether or not there’s still a space for you to think.

Aside from disarming your intellect, a dilawan film like *Ang Kwento Nating Dalawa* also kills the agency

of its fictional victims. At the end of the film, Isa (Emmanuelle Vera) submitted a script to her teacher, who turns out to be the protagonist of the film, and her lover Sam (Nicco Manalo). This twist on the narrative getting exposed presents the horror of their relationship: that it is indeed a relationship founded on uneven control and opportunism of a teacher to a student. To add to the horror, Sam erased the word “wakas” from the end of the script, signifying that their story has not ended yet. The script as an expression of Isa’s frustration and breaking away from the toxic relationship in the end was cancelled out by the greater power of her teacher-lover who is undecided for the most of his personal life, but wanted to implicate his own self-destruction to Isa. And this is the kind of turn of the narrative, the kind of toxic relationship that Isa wants to escape, that the Rappler critic Oggs Cruz does not want us to judge.

This quality is consistently present to more popular works in Philippine Cinema, not just in the indies.

It is also present in most of Antoinette Jadaone’s works, whose *That Thing Called Tadhana* (2014) is definitely the archetype of a dilawan cinema. In one of her later work, *Alone/Together*, Jadaone opt to present a story with very heavy conflict but did not take it seriously. Her protagonist, Tin (Liza Soberano), an idealist state-university graduate got trapped in a mess of corruption and other fucked up things one can experience outside of school life. But instead of seeking justice to whatever happened to Tin, *Alone/Together* resolved it-

self to treat them as mere challenges to move on to. The conclusion of the film brought Tin to a limbo of regaining herself over and over again. But this is less of a Sisyphean tale but Oedipal: this limbo is a trap for further victimization and its reproduction. The film did not take the salvage of Tin very seriously.

Hugot films, or films that generally are patterned from *That Thing Called Tadhana*, can collectively be referred to as part of dilawan cinema since all of the qualities are shared. But of particular note, the hugot form itself – the talkative poetic nothings that leaves nothing for contemplation – is its most glaring symptom of dilawan killing of agency. Hugot films are kinds of films that do not allow you to think. Some find it appealing due to its literariness, but mere literariness does not equate for it being intellectual. In most cases, this poetic literariness in dialogue is a mere excuse for the lack of skill or interest in spectacularization – on actually making movies.

This lack of interest in spectacularization, on making spectacles, made hugot films lacking also of premises. They leave you at the moment as an excuse for realism (or as it is with Oggs Cruz' insistence of normalcy in *Ang Kwento Nating Dalawa*). We don't really know anything about Carson and Dio in *I'm Drunk I Love You*, they just kept on talking about who they are despite us not seeing them. The flashbacks in *Ex-es Baggage* (2018) say nothing of the present in the film, and we are brought to endless dumbing flirting and talking about

how people change but that has nothing to do with what we were seeing.

The dumbest and the most uninspired dilawan film of the hugot strain is Jerrold Tarog's *Sana Dati* (2013). In this film, we are introduced to a guy who crashed into a wedding of his brother's ex-fiancé with very unconvincing motivation. Like in *Ex-es Baggage*, the flashbacks never really helped. We just know of the dead brother. The wedding crasher never even made it for the spirit of the dead brother, he just "want to know" whatever that may mean. Like in most of the films mentioned above, you never really notice these dumb approaches to the films as your brain is being fried with mere literariness of dialogue to appear intelligent. Kind of similar to how much of a senseless and dumb blabbermouth President Aquino III was, who also happened to have a poet as his speech writer.

Genre approaches to Dilawan Cinema

Dilawan cinema was never exclusively hugot or romcom. There are variants of it too in genre films best exemplified by the films directed by Erik Matti.

While Matti's *Tiktik* films (*Tiktik: The Aswang Chronicles* (2012) and *Kubot: The Aswang Chronicle 2* (2013)) best exemplified his partisanship with the government's anti-insurgency campaign, it is *On The Job* (2013) that best identifies as one of the core films of Dilawan Cin-

ema. *On The Job* tells the story of a couple of prisoner assassins under the payroll of a certain politician which a couple of law enforcers are trying to capture. The film best exemplified the elitism that is at the core of Dilawan Politics: the voice of truth in this film comes from the corrupt elites who tell people about how complicated things are and that they only know the tip of the iceberg. At once, it seems like it's posing as a critique, but the way the film's narrative unfolds tells otherwise that it also expresses the same insistence of normalcy that Rappler Critic Oggs Cruz has identified *Ang Kwento Nating Dalawa*. The exposition here of the corruption – not that it's saying something new – was told as if it's a sermon in a pulpit. The unfolding of a film is Matti's expression of fascination and surrender to this corruption.

Adding to this attitude, a better expression of Dilawan elitism is how the masses are perceived in Matti's cinema. They are either aswang mob (in *Tiktik*), moving targets who know nothing better (in *On The Job*), hypocrite evils (in *Seklusyon*) or a flock of unthinking mob who will charge towards an elite police force to protect a drug lord (in *Buy Bust*).

Punching and talking down to the masses has been the general attitude of Dilawan cinema even before the Dilawan era, as it is with Raymond Red's *Himpapawid* (2009) who treats progressive movement's calls for better life as useless, or the fascination with the corrupt and evil as the truth bearer in both Matti's films and Jerrold Tarog's *Confessional* (2007). More explicitly, Tarog

often depicts the working classes as despicable criminals who either steal (in *Confessional* and *Sana Dati*) or rapes (in *Bliss*), to add to his cynicism (brought about of his political ignorance) of political movements and their actual community effect as expressed in *Senior Year* (2010).

An anti-agency cinema is necessarily anti-cathartic cinema. Dilawan cinema's treatment of victims are often left within the feedback loop of the violence that made victimization possible. From the previously mentioned oedipalization of Tin in *Alone/Together*, more symbolic approaches which seem to present as clever but in the context of violence done against victims, are short of any form of justice. In Antoinette Jadaone's *Fan Girl* (2020), the film only left two approaches for the victim to do: to know the violator and sympathize with him, or go out and have a smoke and call the police.

But what would be more anti-cathartic than the act of throwing the gun away in Rae Red's *Babae at Baril* (2019) just because the very gun in question had a corrupt history. Was there a fear that the corruption that was in the origin of the gun will transfer to the Girl who's just seeking justice for herself? In context, the girl knows nothing of the corruption. How should it affect her? What's there to celebrate by missing her target?

If you can notice, some of the films that I mentioned were released after the Aquino III administration. The extent of dilawan cinema, already hegemonically internalized by the film scene as early as 2012, has

dominated Philippine Cinema in ways that it was able to survive even a shift of presidency. This survival is due to its moralistic imposition for formally liberal but practically conservative values, which is mostly non-antagonistic with the Duterte era conservatism. The shift to the Duterte administration never really shifted the ruling class that the Dilawans are tailing on. The shift of administration never shifted the ruling class, and so never really shifted its ruling values and aesthetics.

The death of Digital Film Movement

We can't talk about ruling values and aesthetics without talking about how these hegemony crossed with the seemingly independent cinema. The independent cinema identified over the world only kept itself apart from the mainstream technologically by the popularization of digital video. The digital film scenes the world over has brought about new waves of filmmaking by the turn of the millennium. Across the southeast Asian region, however, the Philippines may have represented the largely digital filmmaking wave in the mid-2000s, almost simultaneously raising waves with the digital filmmaking scenes of Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia.

The digital film scene that is historically situated at the decline of the local studio system is still moving around marginally and has never really enjoyed wider distribution locally. This status of marginality became

a cause for the more influential members of the digital film scene to celebrate in various manifestos, citing that this very site of marginality is expressive of pure creative freedom that is enabled by the cheap medium that is digital video. These celebrations has led to a kind of proto-Dilawan euphoria from the digital scene as the “democratization of filmmaking,” as reflected in the manifestos of Khavn, echoing the same post-Berlin Wall euphoria of the end of history:

in film, as in life, you make your own rules. you can shoot without a script or follow the words to the hilt. It’s your film, it’s your life.⁸

This rhetoric of independence, freedom, and democratization is repeated in another of his manifesto:

to be filmless is to be free from the shackles of the old brain.

to be filmless is to be fearless of fear itself and all its ghosts.

to be filmless is to be unaffected by the conspiracy of initials.

to be filmless is to realize your rainbow, even if you’re blind.

to be filmless is to be happy because you al-

8. Khavn. “Four Manifestos.” From *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*. Edited by Tilman Baumgartel. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012. p. 119.

ready saw the ending.

to be filmless is to feel truth in fakery, love in hate.

to be filmless is to not give up till the book says "end."

to be filmless is to nevermind the neverwheres that negate us.

to be filmless is to be different from everyone else, like everyone else.

to be filmless is to believe in the sound and the image, and live it.

to be filmless is to go beyond yourself to reach your innermost well.

to be filmless is to nurture amidst murders.

to be filmless is to not serve the money king and lose your soul.

to be filmless is to express your heart whether in a jar or in the cosmos.⁹

This sense of democratization comes from the impression that digital filmmaking was cheap, in ways that is always conflated with a technological determination that this filmmaking is cost-effective because it is inherent with the medium itself: that the digital medium made filmmaking cheaper due to the processing quality, that its lightweightness has done away to minimize crew, that it is flexible, etc.¹⁰

9. Khavn, "Four Manifestos" p. 123.

10. Khavn, "Four Manifestos" p. 123-124.

The overall superstructural landscape of Philippine Cinema has shifted towards favoring digital as the second decade of the new millennium starts. By 2012, the largest cinema theater chain in the Philippines, SM Cinemas, has shifted towards full digitization, upgrading to digital cinema projection on its 240 theaters in 44 branches on top of four IMAX theaters.¹¹ This has changed the terrain of digital filmmaking in the country as it moved from a marginal practice to a dominant one.

This shift to being a dominant practice did not really import the industrial professionalization to digital filmmaking. But this rather has shifted some of the values reflected in Khavn's manifestos for the benefit of corporate enterprise, in particular the cost-effective measures of digital filmmaking. This made manifest the worries of scholar Tilman Baumgartel on the dangers of digital filmmaking, and but was made exponentially worse, especially the concern that digital filmmaking makes everybody an intern.¹²

The shift to full digitization of cinema theaters in the country never really guaranteed an entry point for the indies of the former digital film scene to penetrate the mainstream circulation. As the years go by, the attitude that was promoted by the manifestos of Khavn

11. "SM Cinema goes Full Digital" Philippine Daily Inquirer. August 27, 2012: B2-2. < <https://www.pressreader.com/philippines/philippine-daily-inquirer-1109/20120827/page/34>>

12. See Tilman Baumgartel. "The Downside of Digital" from *From Southeast Asian Independent Cinema*. Edited by Tilman Baumgartel. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2012. p. 141-149.

fade away as the practices of digital filmmaking became more and more conflated with the practices of mainstream filmmaking, especially with the introduction of newer digital cinema cameras, that, again, reintroduced the costly filmmaking of a filmmaking heavily dependent on lighting, depth of field, and heavy post-production due to proprietary codecs getting introduced that is integrated and streamlined to both newer digital cinema cameras and post-production software. Raising cost of digital filmmaking made the stake of the Dilawan indies harder as they pushed for mainstreaming and wider distribution. This antagonism has reached upon the transition between the Aquino era towards the Duterte administration.

Dilawan Cinema early in the Duterte Era

The Duterte administration has a populist character, one that is detested by the likes of Jerrold Tarog and Erik Matti, elevating the Dilawan film approach to an extreme that adds more things to guilt the masses on, like how it is with Matti's depiction of the masses as the collaborator of the drug lord in *Buy Bust*. What really was enabled by Duterte's populism is a secondary antagonistic contradiction between two factions of elites: an elite under Duterte/Marcos feudal lineage and Dilawan elites. And this is easily reflected in Philippine Cinema as the Duterte years progress.

The ‘post-’ in the post-Dilawan can be alluded generally as “what comes after” the dilawan era. There was never a clean break. With Duterte winning a popular vote, there’s even a more plausible excuse for the Dilawans to express their contempt against the under classes. There’s a hint of correctness however: the popular vote for Duterte seems to be a symptom of the popular reaction against the elitism of the Aquino administration. What this popular reaction seems to replace the elitism they are trying to critique is just a change of face and guards but still elitism. As such, what really takes place in the political superstructure is an antagonism against two elitisms from two sides of economic and political elites. The two elites seem to be divided between first, the hegemony of the dilawan from the national capital, to which the dilawan elites mostly can be identified despite being hacenderos; then the elites from the peripheral regions which is a mix of political elites from the southern islands of the Philippines, like the Dutertes and the elites of the northern regions with the Marcoses. This antagonism between the two kinds of elites brought about an imaginary battle for representation, with the first kind of elites representing the so-called “Imperial Manila” then, second kind of elites having to represent the regions outside Manila, even the urban settlers from the provinces and countryside.

This antagonism has been reflected in Philippine Cinema with a similar confrontation between two kinds of elites: the Indie elites of Dilawan Cinema and the

business elites of the big studios. This confrontation reached a culmination with the 2016 edition of the Metro Manila Film Festival as the newly Duterte-appointed chair of the Film Development Council of the Philippines (FDCP), Liza Dino-Seguerra stepped in with a change of rules and regulations. Most important of these rule changes are in the criteria of submissions: only finished films are allowed to enter the festival that year.¹³ The criteria for the “commercial viability” were also removed, something which Tioseco also has questioned in his wishlist. This has resulted from the barring of entries from blockbuster studio staples such as Star Cinema’s *Super Parental Guardians* (starring box office superstar Vice Ganda and primetime TV actor, Coco Martin), OctoArts/M-Zet Productions’ *Enteng Kabisote 10 and the Abangers* (starring comedian Vic Sotto), and Regal Films’ *Mano Po 7: Chinoy*.

The resulting final line up for the 2016 MMFF mostly comes from relatively bigger independent film outfits with Star Cinema’s *Vince and Kath and James* as the odd film out being the sole entry from a mainstream Studio (although it may also be arguable to say that *Seklusyon* also came from a mainstream studio due to the feudal affiliation of Reality Entertainment with Regal’s Lily Monteverde). The first two aforementioned blockbusters, on the other hand, are screened earlier than the festival during the first week of December, while Regal’s

13. <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/metro-manila-film-festival-mmff-2016-new-rules-changes>

Mano Po 7 is screened a week before the festival.

The theaters responded differently to these changes. Talk of provincial theaters not carrying the official MMFF entries has been around since August that year, while only 35 theaters from Metro Manila have participated in the raffle to where films are getting exhibited. The films from the province cannot be forced to participate in the festival as its mandate is solely restricted to Metro Manila.¹⁴ By the festival run, reports of the participating films not being shown in theaters can be read while some theaters show the blockbuster titles mentioned above.¹⁵

The 2016 edition reportedly is the lowest grossing MMFF edition since 2009's.¹⁶ Contributing to this effect is the conflict mentioned above at the site of film distribution. This revealed to some portions of Philippine cinema that the core conflict is territorial, particularly, of “regional” concern.

To alleviate this concern over theater profit, Senator Vicente Sotto III filed a resolution a week after the 2016 festival to have a separate independent film festival during summer.¹⁷ This suggestion later on became what is now the FDCP-spearheaded *Pista ng Pelikulang*

14. <https://www.pep.ph/news/65509/mmff-2016-entries-to-be-shown-in-fewer-theaters>

15. <https://kami.com.ph/60747-sm-cinemas-showing-mmff-2016-official-entries-disappoint-moviegoers.html>

16. <https://www.wheninmanila.com/entertainment-mmff-2016-gross-box-office-is-lowest-since-2009/>

17. <https://r3.rappler.com/entertainment/news/157459-tito-sotto-senate-resolution-indie-film-festival-semesteral-break>

Pilipino. While the December MMFF edition for 2017 reached for a compromise with the mainstream industry that half of the line-up will be considered for script-submissions (the preferred way of the mainstream studios) and half is considered for the finished films while the criteria for commercial viability was returned.¹⁸

If we are to look at the wider political superstructure, the brief “victory” of the indies in MMFF 2016 signified mainly the same euphoria and hegemony that’s left from the Aquino administration. The retaliation from the film distribution sector, the business sector, exposed the hegemony’s unpopularity within the consumer market despite the globalist acclaim of Philippine indie cinema. At this point, it was made apparent that the Dilawan cinema can only be accommodated in a limited capacity in commercial theaters. It was also around within the early years of this administration that the indies settled on micro cinemas.

Microcinemas and the Liberation of the Burgis

After 2 months after their announcement of closure,¹⁹ TBA’s Cinema ’76 reopened.²⁰

Cinema ’76 is perhaps the most popular commer-

[18] <https://www.spot.ph/entertainment/movies-music-tv/70082/new-mmff-2017-submission-rules-a00001-20170508>

[19] <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/movies/cinema-76-san-juan-closing-september-2021>

[20] <https://philstarlife.com/geeky/706221-cinema-76-anonas-reopening-doors>

cial microcinema in the country. Part of its success mainly relies on the fact that the cinema chain of two branches is owned by a larger dilawan film studio, TBA, that mainly provides the content of the films it's going to screen.

Commercial microcinemas such as Cinema '76, Black Maria Cinema, and Cinema Centenario (closed as of last year) provided the economic landscape for dilawan cinema for the latter half of the last decade. Microcinemas became avenues for feature films otherwise won't be bothered by the mainstream distributors to screen. But the microcinema business had a fatal error that made it unable to screen more titles than it was supposed to. Commercial microcinemas still abide by the mandate of relevant government agencies, particularly the Movie and Television Review and Classification Board (MTRCB). If an establishment is registered as a cinema, they are required to submit to the rules of MTRCB that no films can be commercially screened without an allowable rating and a permit to exhibit. Permits have relative expiration which comes at a cost. If a film is not picked up by a distributor, other entities must apply and pay for the permit (either the producers themselves or the cinema). This has limited the kinds of films microcinemas can screen.

The instance above explains why for the most part of the year outside of festival season back when it's still around, Cinema Centenario repeats its programming while also occasionally screening relatively smaller for-

eign movie titles that Viva Films are distributing. On the other hand, since TBA Studios is a relatively larger entity, they were able to secure permits for their own films enough for them to have both a commercial run on both mainstream cinemas and other microcinemas other than Cinema '76.

This dilemma resulted in a hegemonic takeover to the kind of filmmaking that TBA represents to the most part of Filipino productions.

TBA studios is an organization of independent film studios, Tuko Film Productions, Buchi Boy Entertainment and Artikulo Uno Productions, initially founded in 2013. They made their presence loud in 2015 with their support of majority of then QCinema film-grantees by co-producing *Water Lemon*, *Gayuma*, *Iisa*, *Matangtubig*, and *Patintero: Alamat ni Meng Patalo*, and the success of their historically-inspired film, *Heneral Luna*. These titles provided the initial rotation of films being screened at Cinema '76 when it opened in 2016. The company is headed by actor-comprador Eduardo A. Rocha and rent-seeking landlord Fernando Ortigas.

The rotation of titles in microcinemas from 2017-2019 can provide an insight to the kind of film ecology that the past years had. This ecology has also pushed media conglomerates to push for producing in the same niche as TBA, namely, within the niche of the indie cinema that came out of the festival tradition. Globe Telecom launched Globe Studios in 2016, another telco, PLDT's Signal entertainment in 2017, Star Cinema's

Black Sheep Production in 2018, most of which provides seed financial backing co-producing works from other production companies. With these in mind, the road indie took got back to the pockets of bigger companies as the situation ripened up, albeit still traversing a niche existence. The niche has produced a particular aesthetic, which at the same time a political expression of the class position that the niche it is trying to cater to, the one that Rolando Tolentino has already exemplified with his critique of the indies of Cinemalaya in 2010s as those which exudes middle-class fantasies.

What really was exposed by the more recent shift of films towards digitalization in the 2010s is the kind of culture that Philippine Cinema has been trying to come up with ever since its inception, albeit in a more pronounced way, outside the pretension of populism: that it caters to the taste and values of the ruling classes. This has not been more pronounced than it was in the 2010s, with the national bourgeoisie and landlords unapologetically expressing their values in the curation of films they think people ought to see. Some, like Ortigas, have a more direct touch in the films they produce to even explicitly convey a particular message.

“The Liberation of the Burgis”, wrote Rianna Cruz in her review of Siegfried Ledesma’s *Shift*,²¹ seems like an apt description of what has transpired in a larger sense. Outside the purview of Cruz’ review of BPO agents tra-

21. Rianna Cruz. “Shift: The Liberation of the Burgis”. *Kino Punch* 2. February/March 2014: 13-15.

versing the city, is her critique of what she saw as an “overt Marxist commentary” of the bourgeoisie being the *kontrabida*, and finally “making them human.” But one wonders, where is this “overt Marxist commentary” that places the *burgis* as *kontrabida* in the field of representation that Cruz tends to celebrate the opposite? This liberation / humanization of the *burgis* in representation have shifted (pun unintended) to have launched a platform for the real bourgeoisie to unapologetically represent themselves cinematically. However, this flaunting of their privilege already exists without the consequence, the liberated bourgeoisie is already part of the preexisting condition of our lives under semifeudal and semicolonial Philippines, regardless whether or not they are depicted as villains in fiction.

Microcinemas became sites where this liberation is celebrated. And by virtue of its own censorship board, as the rotation of films is limited, so the viewpoint, imagination and opinions of the films they produce are only limited to the worldview acceptable to the bourgeoisie. While seemingly diverse in genre and filmic approach, the whole ideological import of the bourgeoisie made it impossible for *dilawan* indie cinema to escape the bourgeois reactionary cynicism, already present on much of the films TBA produces, to add to their anti-agency and anti-realist approach that was discussed on the third section.

The Covid-19 pandemic made apparent in real life the very uncertainty and cynicism that *dilawan* cinema

presented, as microcinemas temporarily ceased operations at the peak of 2020 lockdowns. Their effect on popular petitbourgeois imagination never waned: by mid-2020, militant expressions and calls for Duterte's ouster from frustrated petitbourgeois are contrasted by the anti-militant opinions of indie filmmakers asking people to calm down and wait the pandemic out, opinions then parroted by some portions of the petitbourgeois from the left. Without the microcinemas as their niche platform, dilawan cinema shifted its focus online at the peak of the pandemic, and attempted to control what they think they must control, out of their fear of irrelevance.

3: Pandemic and the Aesthetics of Confinement

The Philippine government officially locked down on March 15, 2020 due to COVID-19. The next day the World Health Organization (WHO) reported already 140 active cases in the country.¹ The lockdowns paired with an unreliable state response to the needs of the population whose livelihood got halted, exposed the very nature of living in capitalism – only experienced in extremes.² Those who are already poor experienced their poverty more where even their expression of desperation, despite limited by the pandemic situation, are still being silenced by the police under the pretext of their supposed violations irrelevant to their calls.³ On the other extreme, those who are already privileged began to feel their privilege more to the point of guilt or boredom.

The same extreme is experienced in Cinema, only

1. <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/wpro---documents/countries/philippines/emergencies/covid-19/who-phl-sitrep-5-covid-19-16mar2020.pdf>

2. See M. I. Asma. "Chapter Three: Below the Surface Froth" from *On Necrocapitalism: a Plague Journal*. Montreal, Quebec: Kerplebedeb, 2021. pp. 38-42.

3. <https://cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/1/quezon-city-protesters-arrested-.html>

less terminal than the pandemic. Film workers, who had it bad already with freelancing agreements, experienced months of joblessness, to which the concerned film producers and filmmakers responded with a charity drive to give temporary relief. The FDCP responded months later with updated guidelines for a potential resumption of film production if the situation got a little better.⁴ On the other end of the screens, as the cinemas got closed, there's no hope for distribution and the audience settled with either TV or web streaming. Not unexpectedly, this situation has caused capitalist opportunists to gain more profit as streaming sites, the biggest gainer is Netflix which saw a spurt in paid subscriptions exceeding 200 million.⁵

Those who are privileged saw the whole pandemic setup as something novel, it's the first time they experience getting trapped as they forcibly witness something. An extended experience of cinema where one is confined and is forced to look at the screen, only this time, the film never ends. This is maybe why watching something during the pandemic seems to feel too much because our privileged condition brought about a whole new sense of sensuality that's making us feel more of ourselves instead of the escape that cinema promised.

Audiences feel more like an audience. A resurgence

4. <https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/5/15/fdcp-guidelines-production-shoots-new-normal.html>

5. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/industry/media/entertainment/media/netflix-keeps-growing-in-pandemic-tops-200-mn-subscribers/article-show/80357680.cms?from=mdr>

of cinephilia focused on more consumption of films has happened during the pandemic as demands for new things to watch as audiences exhaust what's available on Netflix. Facebook groups such as filmrecs for cinephiles have highlighted their relevance on this never ending search for new films to consume. Netflix, on the other hand, has responded to this phenomenon with more content.

Films as web content: for pandemic audiences, films and “content” are already conflated. Not in any way demeaned, but sure is treated for its common denominator with all the other “consumable” objects found online.⁶ This conflation, found in the new spaces that we are currently confined in, brought about a new sensuality of screen-overfamiliarization and fatigue.

Feeling more, in a way, maybe the new sensuality. This revealed to us how sensual experiences often depend more on the space that surrounds us, not the ones we occupy. What we see in front of us, what our ears capture, what can be smelled from meters away, etc. Cinema, if we believe that it is art, is not exempted and

6. Martin Scorsese commented on the “content” vs cinema debate: “Flash forward to the present day, as the art of cinema is being systematically devalued, sidelined, demeaned, and reduced to its lowest common denominator, “content.”

...

“Content” became a business term for all moving images: a David Lean movie, a cat video, a Super Bowl commercial, a superhero sequel, a series episode. It was linked, of course, not to the theatrical experience but to home viewing, on the streaming platforms that have come to overtake the moviegoing experience, just as Amazon overtook physical stores.” <<https://harpers.org/archive/2021/03/il-maestro-federico-fellini-martin-scorsese/>>

has always been judged first and foremost, sensually. As the audience feel more like themselves, and so seem like the filmmakers. Even more so, while still affected by the conflation above, some filmmakers become deluded thinking they may be on a breakthrough on the things by merely providing content for social media.

For a group of cinema industry elites to call their latest project as “unconfined” not only exposes their cluelessness on the practices and products of the craft that they are doing, but also their disregard for the developments and history of the platform that they are attempting to occupy. Weirdly enough, it’s kind of expected. Elites do what elites do: be elitist.

There was once this elitist project called “unconfined cinema.” You probably remember it, probably don’t. But it was once viral: it started out as a video live feed of a conversation between actors John Lloyd Cruz and Bea Alonzo. It has been documented all too well by different websites related to the artists’ talent agency.⁷ For the most part, it seems like it is a kind of promo or something. It is obvious that they are performing. There’s a sense of suspicion whenever something “viral” comes from people within the industry, even during this quarantine period. And a lot of these suspicions are probably right.

On April 29, 2020, Star Cinema film director An-

7. See <https://news.abs-cbn.com/entertainment/04/28/20/natatakot-ako-pa-ra-kay-elias-john-lloyd-bares-fear-loneliness-in-video-call-with-bea> ; <https://www.rappler.com/entertainment/259209-bea-alonzo-john-lloyd-cruz-ig-live/>

toinette Jadaone revealed via facebook post that what conspired between the actors Cruz and Alonzo is, indeed, a performance. The performance was assembled by very familiar industry people: Jadaone, publicist Philbert Dy, musician/producer Erwin Romulo, and director/cinematographer Dan Villegas. But Rappler was wrong to think that the live feed was not a promo. It is the “pilot”, so to say, of this very project. A fucking promo followed by a promo by its creators. It rings back as a promo for Romulo’s, Dy’s and Teddy Co’s project prior to the pandemic, the so-called “Unconfined Cinema” where they curate romantic films and screen them on the either at an outdoor setting⁸ or in the confines of an art gallery.⁹ So much for being unconfined.

Well, advertising works differently within the internet, or to use an older term, “cyberspace,” since we’re talking about spaces. Despite the liberal-speak of early cyberspace as manifested by the California Ideology and JP Barlow, neoliberalism has subsumed all of these and made it its own symptom. Early cyberspace commentator, Carmen Hermsillo, has already noted this subsumption of the cyberspace and cyberculture’s posture of “independence” in the logic of imperialist globalization. Writing as humdog, Hermsillo noted the following in the oft-cited personal essay, “Pandora’s Vox”:

8. <https://agimat.net/the-unconfined-cinema/>

9. <https://www.cnn.ph/life/leisure/the-guide/2021/10/11/5-things-to-do-this-week-of-Oct.-12-to-19.html>

i have seen many people spill their guts online, and i did so myself until, at last, i began to see that i had commodified myself. commodification means that you turn something into a product which has a money-value. [...] i created my interior thoughts as a means of production for the corporation that owned the board i was posting to, and that commodity was being sold to other commodity/consumer entities as entertainment. that means that i sold my soul like a tennis shoe and i derived no profit from the sale of my soul.¹⁰

She added further:

proponents of so-called cyber-communities rarely emphasize the economic, business-mind nature of the community: many cyber-communities are businesses that rely upon the commodification of human interaction. they market their businesses by appeal to hysterical identification and fetishism no more or less than the corporations that brought us the two hundred dollar athletic shoe.¹¹

Jadaone's post invites a kind of formation of a

10.humdog. "pandora's vox: on community in cyberspace." From *High Noon on the Electronic Frontier: Conceptual Issues in Cyberspace*. Edited by Peter Ludlow. Cambridge & London: The MIT Press, 1996. pp. 438-439.

11. humdog. "pandora's vox." p. 439.

“community” among filmmakers and artists to join them on that endeavor on developing “our” (read: their) cinema towards a post-Covid19 situation. But this attempt to actualize this community can only be a kind of reterritorialization of the cinema they represent within a distribution platform whose user-base has already developed further a kind of language and convention very far from where Jadaone and Company come from. They do not seem conditioned to leave the cinema that they know. The fact that they brought in the formula from their cinematic work into social media platforms only reflects their inability to really explore the medium and to insist their cinema into this not-so-new platform. This is to advertise their brand and nothing else.

This attempt for an “unconfined cinema” is really just another confinement. This leaves the “unconfined cinema” as nothing more than a hysterical identification: to fetishize an online content into their “cinema.” This might be just the first attempt, but it is never really premature to assess. It’s a colonization of sorts: they announce their arrival, claim the lands for theirs, reconfigure the terrain regardless of its history, the practices of its “indigents”, and its life. While the cyberspace is indeed, a very vast space with a lot of opening for “fringes” or rather multiplicity, none of these acts of the so-called “unconfined cinema” aim to reach that point as they are acting up as though they are “exploring” for things to do the first time as if nothing has ever been done in the space they are trying to colonize.

What they are doing is exactly what they've been doing in their cinema, only they are scaling it down. It is a continuation of their productions which were halted by the quarantine. A confinement of the seemingly novel sensual experience of social media into the backwardness of their Philippine Cinema.

They aim for popular appeal using movie stars. They knowingly use romance — that feudal and macho infested genre — as a populist trope to gain more relevance, as stated on Jadaone's post: "Love stories have always had their place in Filipino cinema, and we wanted to bring the feelings that those movies inspire to a platform that has become more relevant and utilised in this time of quarantine." What everything here reeks of the industrial model of Philippine cinema. It's never really a step forward, both for the platform and the cinema that they represent, but a relapse into the hell that is their Philippine Cinema for their fear of irrelevance.

It's quite witty (lol, I remember Jadaone's clothing brand which capitalizes on being "witty"). But never call it experimental or new, because it isn't. Will it "open eyes" to the issues that the video accidentally tackled? It doesn't seem to be the aim. Nor they are not really trying on the first one. Nor the people involved never really tried ever since will they now? If anything, they sure seem to me a bored bunch.

It is what is left of Philippine narrative filmmaking hanging on to their feudal and colonial lords who've been dictating its aesthetic and political directions.

It's not surprising that they'd jump into the cheapest platform possible, it is after all, what feudal lords and the elites do to capitalize. It's a fucking clickbait. But at least, clickbaits are more honest.

Just a month later, the rest of Dilawan cinema has caught on with this fluke and has launched various web series utilizing the same aesthetic -- and the same old dilawan concerns with *Gameboys* (The IdeaFirst Company) and *NowStreaming* (EpicMedia/Cignal Entertainment). For long, the audiences are as trapped as the films and series available to them. In the same manner as the Dilawan's call to wait the situation out, until the discontent can no longer be contained.

An escape from this confinement was offered from an unlikely side of the scene: from the old guards of the Film industry. The launch of Vivamax promised no novelty, but comebacks of many things earlier on were familiar with the audience of Philippine cinema. Of course, this escape is a bluff, but this is a bluff that made Philippine Cinema again, a topic of really serious conversation and reassessment. It is here that we'll proceed to talk about how Vivamax shifted the direction of Philippine Films from exclusively dilawan content, to varying forms that appeals again to the visceral and the raw emotions and sensibilities of the Filipino movie audience.

4: Post-Dilawan Cinema

On October 19, 2016, months after the election of President Rodrigo Duterte, a mobilization by urban and indigenous people militants on the Embassy of the United States was violently dispersed by the police forces. The protest was led by Sandugo Movement of Moro and Indigenous People for Self Determination and Lakbayan ng Pambansang Minorya, with the support from Bagong Alyansang Makabayan (BAYAN) to campaign to end the Oplan Bayanihan counter-insurgency campaigns and to pull-out military troops and militia from indigenous people's communities, both of which state campaigns were eagerly supported by the US Imperialists since the Aquino Administration. As the protest was nearing the end of its program, a violent dispersal was ordered by Manila Police District's commander, Col. Marcelino Pedrozo.¹ The worst of what the police has done that day is to have PO1 Franklin Kho drive a police mobile and ram them on the protesters. The violent dispersal left more

1. <https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/826954/violent-dispersal-of-us-embassy-protesters-ordered-by-mpd-exec-groups>

than 50 people injured including a 61 year-old Lumad from Caraga.

Still fresh and heated in the public discussion, the next day brought about a streak of shocking sentiments from various parts of the social media sphere. Viral meme pages celebrating the violent dispersal, with the meme page Bulbulito Balagbag hailing PO1 Kho as a hero. And as if it is a bad joke, film director Raya Martin posted a photo of him posing with men who wear police uniforms standing smugly, as he promotes a screening of his then upcoming film, *Smaller and Smaller Circles* which is having a school tour back then.² It's almost impossible to think that Martin has never heard of the incident, it was big news, unless he's living under a rock. If he did know and still pose the photo the same day, it exposes the callousness that he has towards such kinds of state violence.

On December 20, 2020, police officer Jonel Nuezca shot dead a 55-year old woman and her 25-year old son in point-blank range, while Nuezca's daughter stands near seeing everything.³ The crime was caught on video and eventually made it viral that it caused national outrage. The outrage resulted also with a protest and repeated calls for condemnation of police violence and human rights violations against the masses which Rodrigo Duterte's War on Drugs / Oplan Tokhang is the great precedent.

2. See Appendix, p. 96 of this book.

3. <https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/12/22/2065558/cop-shoots-dead-mother-son-tarlac>

In between these two reactions on police violence, one might see what could come after the Dilawan reign in the superstructure. The first reaction obviously is aligned with the reactionary state protectionism of imperialist imperatives. This is unlike the protectionist response from the bourgeois elite back in April 2016 when government spin doctors like Mikael de Lara Co still tried to re-shift the focus of their feudal protectionism and blame the deaths in Kidapawan Massacre on anyone else but the police, actively denying that the deaths are caused by bullets.⁴

But still, the first reaction aligns with Co's denial of victimization. The reactionary response to the police violence of October 2016 is a celebratory feedback from those who think the police are either just doing their jobs or the activists deserve it. Martin's pose with uniformed men the day after is also aligned with Co's denial as if nothing happened (worse case of this is the recent dilawan denial of Hacienda Luisita Massacre).

The response on Nuezca's crime, despite similarly being caught on camera as the March 2016 Kidapawan Massacre or the October 2016 US Embassy Police Violence, was different. Well, of course, there are particular differences between the incidents: that the first ones have mass organizations getting victimized, while Nuezca killed his neighbors. But more recent approaches to police violence brought us to a united sense of senti-

4. See Appendix, pp. 97-99 of this book.

ment, and the sentiment was able to extend to institutional criticism.

This shift of sentiment may be a case of shifting sensibilities between the years of the incident. While we contend that there may not be significant shift in the superstructure as a whole -- that dilawans still exist in lump sum, still defending institutions that think pruning bad apples will solve moral crises -- a newer sense of political imagination coming from the violence that is Oplan Tokhang has brought a different sense of approaching violence cinematically. But before we proceed, let's try to look into a short history on what brought us to where we are before Tokhang: how violence before Tokhang is virtually invisible in screens that made us incapable of interrogating and making sense of it.

Erasing Violence in Cinema

Ever since the administration of the first Aquino president, after the overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos, there seems to be a concentrated effort for the whole superstructure to shove off any signification of violence to the side. To play out with the neoliberal "end of history" narrative, even depictions of liberative violence and resistance are being cancelled out in favor of the reinforcement of the brand of democracy that the 1986 EDSA Uprising represents. The so-called "bloodless revolution" is reinforced in the ideological superstructure

while paramilitary groups are being funded, encouraged and deployed to terrorize communities in the countryside and murder dissidents who question the Aquino brand of democracy.

This became more apparent in Philippine Cinema. While action films are effectively still being shown, it's been gaining less and less popularity in favor of comedies and fantasy. In the early 90s, a notable shift in production output took place as film studios began releasing what later on became film franchises. 1990s marked the return of Regal Films' *Shake Rattle and Roll* - the horror anthology series that ran to 15 installments; while in 1991, the first *Okay Ka Fairy Ko!* was released - the film which started what eventually became one of Philippine Cinema's longest running film franchises more commonly known now as the Enteng Kabisote films.

But of the film series that got released in the early 1990s, of note is the comedy film trilogy *Pido Dida* (1990-1992) which starred popular comedian Rene Requenas and has kickstarted the acting career of presidential daughter, Kris Aquino. The comedy trilogy tells the adventures of orphans Pido (Requenas) and Dida (Kris Aquino) who always believed that they were orphans and were adopted by a poor woman who tells them that she'll shelter them for as long as they work for her.

The Corazon Aquino government was not a politically ambitious rule: it settled with merely fixing the imaginary through the "restoration of democratic insti-

tutions that Marcos' Martial Law bulldozed." This settling for the bare minimum is reflected well on-screen by the orphaned siblings: Pido and Dida do not really dream of anything bigger even until they grow up. They just settle for the minimum for as long as they are together, nothing else matters.

Pido Dida signified all that can be said about the Corazon Aquino administration: the end of history ideology that puts premium more on individualist hustle contrary to collective labor struggle as the semblance of democracy and the seeming blurring of class distinctions which made the ruling classes acceptable to the popular imagination. A gaslighting of the actual violence that needs to be done to maintain the very social order that the film is trying to promote. The presidential daughter, Kris Aquino from this point on became the very embodiment of class impunity as popular imagination began to see the world through rosy eyes of the romantic comedy that Pido Dida was.

It won't be a while before Action Films began to resemble romantic comedies more than action films with titles such as *Maging Sino ka Man* (1991) and *Ang Teacher Kong Pogi* (1996). While hard-edged action films still exist but are entrapped within cliché predictability, soap opera dialogues and out and out police-state propaganda.

Taking off Corazon Aquino's restoration of democratic institutions, her successor, former Marcos General Fidel V. Ramos proceeded with a continuity of Mar-

cosian Neoliberalism with further push for deregulation, contractualization and privatization of state-assets. It is within this period that we can witness the growth of more private institutions,⁵ more particularly of shopping malls which later on by the time that the Ramos administration ended, slowly replaced standalone movie houses by centralizing cinemas within its commercial spaces.

The centralization of film screenings to shopping malls further alienate cinema to the movie-going public who formerly walk in standalone theaters. The Ramos government further favoring private enterprises over public interests has sold everything that is essential to the public of the streets: from the state-owned oil company to the entertainment that they rely on when things get bad. Prices hiked up and you can't just relax and see a movie right away. Noticeable decline in quality of films are also present as the country further declines into the neoliberal agenda of the Ramos administration: action movies that repeats the same thing over, erotica which introduces neophytes who will never see the light of another movie production, and most notably, schemes by film studios to cheapen its production by exploiting young filmmakers who want to break through the movie industry, like Regal Films' pito-pito scheme (7-day shooting schedule, 7-day post-production) of their sub-studio Good Harvest Pictures.

5. Noel Moratilla, "Occluded Histories: Philippine Labor after EDSA." *Philippine Political Science Journal*, 40(1-2), 3-31. doi:10.1163/2165025x-12340001

At this point, we just didn't forget violence, we now find it corny.

The election of former action star Joseph Estrada coincided with the celebration of the centenary of the first declaration of Philippine independence. It is on such occasion that studios rode on by doing prestige productions such as *Jose Rizal* (1998) and *Muro-Ami* (1999) both produced by GMA Films for the December MMFF. However, the industry at large is still suffering outside the MMFF week, still producing meager production of low brow comedies, untitillating erotica and repetative action films. With blatant corruption of the Estrada-administration telling its constituent masses that it does not really care for them.

The impeachment of Joseph Estrada kicked the action films when it's already hurting. The ideological atmosphere shifted to where cynicism against action heroes and the masses that patronizes them perpetrated in a spate of weird violence. The early 2000s saw further exploitation of sexual imagery with Viva Films introducing former child actresses in bloom doing erotica in cinemas while singing and dancing sexually suggestive comedy songs on TV in full disregard of the audience intellect. What was seen as a moral crisis was responded with further censorship by corporate enterprises. By 2002, SM Cinemas, the largest chain of film theaters in the country, had decided to ban films which are rated R-18.⁶

6. Michael Kho Lim, *Philippine Cinema and the Cultural Economy of Distribution*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2019. 120.

Back then, film ratings only stopped at R-13 after R-18. This observably affected the further production not just of erotica, but also of action movies which can't seem to get past the R-13 rating. It is at this point that depiction of violence in cinemas was effectively erased.

The very violent Gloria Arroyo martial-law without martial-law era was responded to by the mainstream industry, particularly of Star Cinema who seems to get the most of the new SM Cinema policy, with an extreme counter balance of rosy romantic comedies for the middle class, while on the other side of cinema, the indies are still grappling on their newfound independence brought about by the digital camera.

Years have passed and interrogative cinematic violence is still virtually non-existent in cinemas. It gets to a point where the violence of the Arroyo era does not seem to exist at all since it was not met with an immediate counterpart even as an allegory in screens, big or small, while the very face of class impunity, Kris Aquino, enjoys a renewed popularity with her involvement in Star Cinema's supernatural horror films where she's just traumatized by the normalized violence around but never really directly affecting her.

Coming from the failure that is the Arroyo administration, the euphoria of the Noytoy Aquino administration renewed the sense of celebration that the former Aquino administration represented, this time, with screen violence virtually invisible to anyone to become a threat. As discussed in chapter 2, the killing of agency

has completed with Dilawan cinema, as it suppresses on-screen violence making us unable to process the daily and historical violence that we face. It is no wonder that the resurgence of Marcos Apologists are actually products of an educational system that Noynoy Aquino has produced: it comes from an education that no longer has any capacity to face violence to interrogate it. The denial of human rights violations during Martial Law from the dilawan-produced Marcos Apologists comes from this pedagogy of unthinking violence. Dilawan cinema has also produced an audience that can no longer process violence without getting easily offended by it.

Asiong Salonga, Heneral Luna and the Dilawan attempt to re-interrogate violence

Coming from the history noted above, it is easy to understand the charm of the films like *Manila Kingpin: The Asiong Salonga Story* (2012) and *Heneral Luna* (2015). They are like a breath of fresh air in the mainstream film ecology hounded by romantic comedies. However, the 2010s approach to action cinema tends to suspend their violence into mere exercise of style. But this is not an unwelcome development, especially in the case of *Manila Kingpin*.

At the very least, the films produced by E.R. Ejercito to boost his image brought us a renewed sensibility. *Manila Kingpin*'s snarky black and white cinematogra-

phy and *Boy Golden's* (2013) neon-drenched Manila in an imagined jazz-era are all about renewing our senses on how these legendary criminals can be re-rendered in the screens. In a way, this gave us a renewed confidence on screen violence: that we are finally realizing that it can also be stylish and hip. Or on the surface, it made us hope for a comeback of action films in Philippine cinema.

But the comeback was never as sweeping as we'd expected. It's gotten worse.

2013 brought Erik Matti's *On The Job*, a fine pastiche of Hong Kong late-90s early-2000s triad films which finesse made a fine veil for anti-poor sentiments. It's a film where seemingly everybody cheats one another, rich or poor, but ethical and political agency are left within the powerful. The poor people in *On The Job*, or in most of Matti's films, have no agency. For someone who's critical of religious hypocrisy, his films reflect a lot of mystical qualities like his belief that it will be impossible for people from the lesser classes to know the truth of the complication of the world because only those in power know. He always projects this in his films, like the senator in *On the Job* or the drug lord in *Buy Bust*, like a priest in a pulpit, pummeling down your mind where you are in the class structure. On the other hand, it also tells about Matti's partisanship, and the supposed return of enjoyable action films became a bully pulpit for bourgeois partisans' cynicism and contempt against the masses.

These sermons in the pulpit and cynicism went on in Philippine films as the first half of the decade went on. This is why the release of *Heneral Luna* seems to be a breath of fresh air. A rowdy, hot-headed, bad-mouthed protagonist, seemingly relatable for some, that a portion of the audience deem as educational due to the film's nature as a historical film.

However, the film also turned into the same cynicism as *On The Job*, worse, it platformed the colonialists as an authoritative voice in Philippine History. The film's director, Jerrold Tarog blamed the mishaps of the country to what he perceive as "our culture of betrayal and divisiveness,"⁷ and hence, he and his films are more trustful in imperialist voices, as seen in how he depicts Americans in his films as straight-forward and cool, as if they are a disinterested party. Like Matti, Tarog blamed a boogeyman out of a perceived collective culture that they see from their comfortable class positions, comfortable enough to even coddle with US imperialists. Sure, there may be a culture of betrayal here, but between the masses who are distrusted by the films and the likes of Matti and Tarog, it's quite clear who's the traitor here. It isn't the masses who gave voices to violators like bourgeois politicians, petty criminals and war criminals to give opinions about the state of the Filipino people.

The genre films of Dilawan strand, as exemplified

7. <https://www.facebook.com/notes/346860919975804/>

by Matti's and Tarog's works turned away from historical violence and has dissected instead the body of the already violated masses and wonder how did this happen like the Eric Andre meme, as if they never have a hand in those violence. As such, in films like theirs, interrogation of violence is quite impossible.

What we had instead, are mere performances of violence. It is in here that Lisandro Claudio's criticism of Tarog's Heneral Luna seems to be close to correct. Claudio claimed that Heneral Luna romanticized strongmen, enabling a favorable response to the coming Duterte authoritarianism.⁸ But this is just close to correct because Claudio's assumption merely came from a short sighted reaction and not somewhere critical. Tarog already straightened out: it's a character, the film is full of liberal wimps who always try to calm down Luna. It just so happens that the focus is on Luna and as the focus of the film, the camera tends to sympathize. Did it romanticize the Strongman? Not quite. If anything, the film is really about the wimps who later on succeeded, and that fictional journalist who then, speaking for the dead, blamed the death of the supposed strongman to the masses. What Claudio and Tarog do not see in their debate is that they agree on one thing: their contempt against the masses and their favoring of the bourgeois elite and the imperialists. Claudio condemned authoritarian populism and favored and applauded those who

8. <https://www.esquiremag.ph/politics/opinion/sorry-heneral-luna-romanticized-strongmen-a1655-20180119-lfrm>

collaborated with the Americans (who, he cried, were pilloried by the “nationalist historians”). Tarog did the same thing by having the traitors and Americans speak in the epilogue.

These whole bourgeois moral posturing led to nothing that made sense to the current violence of the Duterte regime. It merely reiterates the simplistic and idealistic views of the Dilawans regarding governance and nothing really that interrogates current historical realities and the consequences that the masses face.

Interestingly, the whole *Heneral Luna* aesthetic of rowdiness produced a renewed sense of humor to the younger generation. But along with the aesthetic, also came the same moralistic posturing and sermoning from the pulpit. But what comes off this new sense of humor is an interesting case of disagreement from the Dilawans to the new kids on the block which in all senses, came from them.

Vincentiments

Personally, I initially find Vincentiments interesting due to its very polarizing nature. Finally, after years almost everybody tailing hugot like a doomsday cult, something cinematic (or if you don't want to call it cinema, make it audio-visual) sparks debate and thinking outside of formalistic sense. And this debate spans for thousands and thousands of minds, and not just confined within

academic spaces or within film criticism.

Of course, Vincentiments was first snubbed by critics, despite uploading short films online, they are treated as mere content-mill and nothing to be treated seriously as cinema.

But they really started off from what's left of dilawan cinema. Among the first shorts that got popularized from them are the *Agaw-Eksena* (2018) shorts which are essentially reconfigurations of hugot to different rhetoric outside of the niceties of urban liberals. Vincentiments' resident director, Darryl Yap often alludes to "reality", "truthfulness", and "bravery" on every chance he gets when asked about these works.

This allusion is repeated in another series of short films, *Kung Pwede Lang* (KPL) (2018-present), which features wishful thinking of violent remarks one person would have said if they mustered up the bravery to say what they think in their silence. Yap again alludes to "reality", "truthfulness", and "bravery" on his facebook posts defending their works on Kung Pwede Lang that has reached viral controversy.

On one of the KPL short films that went viral, Marius Carlos, Jr. made a remark on how Vincentiments' approach falls short of its perceived criticality. Carlos later on pointed out that this came from its submitting to neoliberal monologic.⁹ KPL short films are still, es-

9. Marius Carlos, Jr. "OPINION | KPL (KUNG PWEDE LANG) SHORT: WHY IT MISSED THE POINT ENTIRELY", *Alternation*. July 27, 2018. <<https://medium.com/@alternationphl/kpl-kung-pwede-lang-short-why-it-missed-the-point-entirely-7adfc6059e4>>

entially dilawan: on how really the point of the films are not really the expression, but the revelation of powerlessness one has against power. This is still an expression of that same entrapment that made hugot “romantic” precisely because of its hopelessness. But the dilawans themselves sorely missed this point and went on to attack its choice of aesthetic (ranting, occasional scandalous acts, the “misrepresentations” etc.), calling it “problematic” due to it not fitting to dilawan’s sense of decency.

The Dilawans don’t recognize how this is the same cinema that they were doing! It’s hugot and Heneral Luna stripped off the limited bourgeois context, importing its aesthetic to more mundane set ups. It seems that the Dilawans are not happy that the non-bourgeois are taking off their empty and boring aesthetic without coming through them.

But the thing about Vincentiments is that, despite their very conservative stances, they are treating what they are doing with a really capitalist grind mindset. What will you do if you’re a small theater and film production group from outside of Manila who happen to get a social media hit, despite the feedback? Of course you capitalize from that. Yap do not seem to have a problem with it.¹⁰ Vincentiments were able to produce works outside of the festival grant system, and were able to make a name of themselves outside the regional fes-

¹⁰. <https://news.abs-cbn.com/trending/07/10/18/kilalanin-ang-grupo-sa-likod-ng-hugot-short-films-ng-vincentiments>

tival circles by exploiting the potential of social media. Of course this was not new as this has been the case of other social media viral productions from the past decade such as JaMichTV. But what really drew the line between internet viral short filmmakers and Vincentiments is that they were able to legitimize themselves by landing a film with Viva Films with *Jowable* (2019).

Vivamax

After film shoots were resumed, bigger studios latched on to cost cutting on other aspects of production while maintaining the above-board cost for medical examination and insurance. This has led to a slate of minimal-to-middle ranged budget productions. While other studios resumed their formula of hugot (in Spring Films' *My Amanda* for example) since it's relatively easier with a smaller setting, some has ventured to riskier projects, healthwise. Viva films with its limited funding, has launched Vivamax with two titles as its first originals: Bona Fajardo's *Steal*, shot in 2019; and Darryl Yap's *Paglaki Ko, Gusto kong maging Pornstar*, shot in late 2020, at the time when film shoots resumed after a long lockdown.

Prior to the pandemic, Viva Films released *Adan* (Dir. Roman Perez Jr, 2019), a kind of predecessor to the erotic films that the platform Vivamax will later be better known of. Vivamax filmmakers were able to ex-

exploit the absence of MTRCB's grasp on the web. The resulting films are far riskier, market-wise, if we are to consider the larger theatrical distribution: films which can't be screened to SM cinemas because of their R-18 ban. Creatively this has pushed Vivamax content in more creative ways on dealing with things filmmakers tend to avoid before due to potential censorship. The films made by Roman Perez Jr., Yam Laranas and by extension, Lawrence Fajardo for Vivamax brought back to popularity erotica while exploring genre conventions on the other hand like in Perez' *House Tour*, Laranas' *Death of a Girlfriend* and Fajardo's *Mahjong Nights*, reopening in popular cinema what was overshadowed by the oversaturation of hugot of Dilawan cinema a window for cinematic violence to be spectacularized again.

But what pushed the envelope to the extreme are the films made by Darryl Yap. Yap is surprisingly prolific even in this pandemic, releasing 10 films and 1 web series for this year alone as of this writing. His works were met with criticism of lacking political correctness and sensitivity¹¹ or just merely being an attention seeker courting controversy.¹² Yap's stance has always been that the works he's doing is "educational" in the least.

This educational aspect of his works are mainly on the nose, providing surface information on concepts or ideas or knowledge which in his films selectively high-

11. <https://www.lionheartv.net/2021/06/its-bullsht-darryl-yap-slams-misconception-that-films-should-always-be-politically-correct/>

12. <https://mb.com.ph/2021/09/01/darryl-yap-on-691-this-is-entertainment-with-education/>

lighted and described in an overlapping text.

But what's interesting for me in his works is initially the aggressive take to hugot, to which its early predecessors have always approached in a soft-toned manner that reflects the very self-defeating cynicism that makes hugot films anti-agency. Yap's take to hugot is always within a place of affirmation, as mentioned earlier, an attitude mixed with Heneral Luna's straightforwardness and crass language. But the films made by Yap for Viva-max, as controversial as they are with his Vincentimint short works, have touched something relevant precisely because of the very problematic character of his works.

***Sarap Mong Patayin's* re-interrogation of violence 1: against Dilawan Cinema**

What may be lacking in contemporary Philippine cinema is an interrogation of violence. Save for one documentary, the Philippine Cinema scene seems to actively avoid the topic or the theme. The avoidance is so apparent that even attempts to make an action film compelling to watch fails. It is in this context that Darryl Yap's *Sarap Mong Patayin*, stands out as it treads a field that no one before has dared to enter. And this is, perhaps, historical.

The plot is quite simple: the connivance between Noel (Lassie Marquez) and Krista (Ariella Arida) to cat-fish someone Noel interacted with on a dating platform

has gone wrong. Their victim, Yael (Kit Thompson) reacted against Noel's sexual advances which resulted with Noel and Krista being violated. The plot is thin, really, but this helps *Sarap Mong Patayin* present a cinematic interrogation of the violence that transpired, with the help of the three dancing figures of a synthesis between the mother-mary figure and the power rangers the film refers to as "sumpong."

Save for the film's conscious observation of mental health awareness propaganda, *Sarap Mong Patayin* interrogates its violence unapologetically and without filters. What made the film historical comes also from this unapologetic attitude: its characters' decadence, stemming from their class-origins, would have been salvaged by films done by the indies prior to this one. Yap made use of this decadence to further insist on hitting the nail on its head. There is nothing to salvage here, no character to root for. This is no pretense also for a general commentary. The film's very plasticity, which is already on-the-nose, made everything so contrived that it locks in its world, and by extension what we see, into the confines of this little world of exclusive club parties with accessible cocaine.

We are introduced to a world where what troubles people is not everyday violence, but the momentary discomforts from their own bubbles. Yael, whose violent outbursts are a product of a repressed childhood trauma, exercised his rage at the moment where his little fantasies were halted by a triggering prayer. But *Sarap*

Mong Patayin did not make an excuse of Yael's trauma for his violence. Yael's rage is not merely a product of his fragile psyche: he's pretty much conscious of what he has done, and the film made it clear that he's not the victim here.

In fact, in the classic Darryl Yap nihilism, no one is a victim here. Everyone is guilty. *Sarap Mong Patayin* uses the sumpong, making them present for everyone, making each of the characters equally guilty of what they have done.

The sumpong is an interesting element. The term itself refers to a momentary outburst of negative emotions. The fact that the three sumpongs dance refer to it in the more common connotation of the term as something that is cute. This, perhaps, is the contradiction that *Sarap Mong Patayin* tries to engage its interrogation of violence with. The sumpongs are almost omnipresent, they are of three colors but never of different behaviors. They all support the characters in whatever that they are doing, even in the process of killing other people.

With those interrogations in mind, *Sarap Mong Patayin* shares something with the post-9/11 gore films in the west. They are working mostly as symptoms of the historical violence that they found themselves in. It is almost apparent that the *Hostel* series to the *Human Centipede* series are all superstructural reflections of the post-9/11 world that they are in and are contained in themselves both fear and fascination of the monsters that they face. With *Sarap Mong Patayin*, it is symptom-

atic of the post-Tokhang condition: a symptom of bourgeois impunity presented as bourgeois suffering. The post-Tokhang symptom makes one believe that we are all suffering the same, in as much as we are all equally guilty: trapped within the pandemic, one finds themselves confined in their own bubble with built up stress and middle-class fear that overwhelms and fascinates at the same time. Add to it the suspicion against information technology while being reliant to it. This, in the case of *Sarap Mong Patayin*, it may just be one of the first that critiques this post-Tokhang impunity that does not just allude to some boogeyman figure.

Darryl Yap's *Sarap Mong Patayin* may just be the first film that is a real product of the Duterte Era, the real Post-Dilawan film. That is, a film which does not allude to anything from a past "better" life before the Duterte administration. Yap has always been a post-dilawan/disente filmmaker-writer and it is shown in most of his works, but *Sarap Mong Patayin* is a complete expression of rupture from past cinematic expressions, away from the anomaly that is hugot.

Sarap Mong Patayin's re-interrogation of violence 2: Reviewing Dilawan Cinema's approach to violence

Let's do a quick survey of Philippine Cinema's response to the Duterte Administration.

Perhaps the most common response from Filipino

narrative filmmakers is to touch upon bourgeois humanism to judge the situation. There are morality plays such as Adolfo Alix's *Madilim ang Gabi* or Erik Matti's *Buy Bust*. Brillante Mendoza gave the most nuanced take on these morality plays with *Amo*. Even Lav Diaz responded with some of his more heftily funded works such as *Ang Panahon ng mga Halimaw*. But such morality plays are kept within the ideological confines of the cultural elites of the former liberal administration, often with a hint of nostalgia and guilt-tripping.

Other responses, such as Dustin Celestino's *Utopia*, Mikhail Red's *Neomanila*, and Diaz' *Ang Hupa*, seem to get their seemingly 'anti-fascist' remarks confused with their westernized fantasies of dystopia – and that is coupled, again with a nostalgic fantasy that there was a past that was better. (Well, in the case of Diaz, was a post-traumatic hysteria of a Marcosian regime).

Since Duterte seems to be the only villain in these narratives, it is not surprising that Duterte partisans also appear in the cinematic scene such as Dinky Doo and Njel De Mesa.

But these are merely reactions towards tokhang. Majority of Philippine Cinema seems to pretend that they are still living in a different time. We can recognize how in the latter part of the 2000s, where a barrage of romantic comedies occupies most of the screens. On the margins, bourgeois interpretation of poverty or just plainly, exploration of bourgeois life and insights have been gaining traction in "arthouse" festival spaces until

they began mainstreaming by the mid-2010s. This later developed in the flatness that is hugot, which peaked in the Duterte era. While efforts for development of regional cinema happened during these years, it became apparent that it's mostly for the federalistic interest of the superstructure that Dutertismo has built.

Of course, an inevitable synthesis between the very urbanistic focus of hugot and regionalism also reached the regions. Hugot is an easy sell, especially when it allows an expression for class impunity. Hugot allowed violence to be internalized with self-loathing as new escapism. But the insistence of Duterte's federalist agenda through NCCA's Cinema Rehiyon perhaps brought a renewed confidence to the regions just as when Manila films began falling further into reactionary cynicism. Darryl Yap's films may just be a product of this synthesis: their Vincentiments shorts are formalistically hugot pumped to the extreme that fronted more the confidence of a regional filmmaker, unfiltered by Manila/Dilawan Indie intervention unlike the Binisaya films.

This synthesis informs *Sarap Mong Patayin* strongly and in a more mature tone. Yap does away with the timing lapses that the hugot form does to his older work to make way for a more sleek and rhythmic exposition. This approach gave way for the sumpung to be more than the three weirdos on screen: the rhythm of the film itself is "sumpungin" with a mixture of momentary bursts of negative energy. It is with this form that the film resonated better with the whole complexity of the world after

tokhang, that of a downward spiral enabled by tantrums, trauma mixed with a sense of perverted confidence.

Sarap Mong Patayin's re-interrogation of violence 3: completing the circle

In an earlier version of the documentary *Beastmode* that I saw back in 2016, a commentary was placed on the so-called banality of violence in everyday life. How violence became acceptable in everyday life, the documentary will claim, is this so-called “spectacularization of violence.” Part of this claim for banality is the proliferation of home video footage of fist fights uploaded online that reach thousands of views. And as we know from the news, this led the documentary with a project, a “social experiment,” that culminated with a mixed-martial art special event. The project attempted to expand their critique to Duterte’s oplan tokhang as itself, being on the news for the earlier parts of the Duterte administration, is suspect to this so-called spectacularization.

And as I mentioned in a writing about it half a decade ago, the experiment explodes on their faces.¹³

Granted, that there’s indeed a banality of violence, this isn’t because there is a spectacularization of it. Far from it, as I already pointed out: the capitalist expropriation of labor power, being the worst and most common

13. <https://www.missingcodec.com/cinema/the-tranquilizer-is-still-in-effect/>

iteration of ruling class violence, is mostly unspectacular, in a sense that it's mostly "invisible." The mainstream media has no interest in interrogating it. The military and private armies do the best they can to keep its images off anybody's screens.

Tokhang is mainly its surplus: it's nothing but another way for the retention of the capitalist order in the urban areas. Tokhang kept the vagrants off the streets for the benefit of street rehabilitation: which includes road widenings, beautification projects, and "development projects" that convert communities into commercial lands. The fact is that tokhang, despite its massive resources, never really touched drug lords. Its "intelligence" work is mostly down to listing a watchlist of users and sellers from the streets. Tokhang isn't a "spectacularization" of violence: it is an erasure of a particular class in the urban spaces to replace them with empty boxes of concrete high rises. If there's anything spectacularly violent, these are the business districts. Tokhang is the bridge to the actual spectacular violence: Duterte's Build Build Build.

In some ways, *Sarap Mong Patayin* initiates this bridging between erasure of the proletariat of the screen and the spectacle of Build Build Build. This isn't to say that it started the actual erasure. Hugot is what made the normalization of the erasure of working classes in cinema at the expense of middle-class and bourgeois self-expression. What Yap did with his cinema is to bridge what hugot has started in an attempt to make

its bourgeois characters face the Real of their existence. That what lies in Krista, Noel and Yael's fun and sexual exploits is a horrifying base founded on creepy bourgeois impunity for long. That it can no longer be contained in the framework of decency, it flips showing the other side of the coin. That what really is this current condition, but a continuity of the Aquino Disente ideology exposed with its perverted side a liberal sexual decadence. Where Yap left it finally to sever the bridge lies within a seemingly self-conscious attitude for self-critical exploration of these extremes, making it seem that this is more common than you think.

The Post-Dilawan fragility

Coming from the remains of Dilawan hugot and elitism, it is easy to recognize the non-antagonism between dilawan and the post-dilawan cinemas. How the contradiction appears on the surface is merely a contradiction of secondary quality: what really is happening is a clash of elitisms. The Post-Dilawan also bear with it the very same elitism of Dilawan cinema that can easily reflect the same attitude towards the masses and the resistance movements as it was in Dilawan's denial of victimization and Yap's and Vincentiments' anti-victim stance.

Dilawan cinema mainly stands on the affixed structure of hegemony, and so affixes its aesthetics with what it understands as "cinematic." Along with this aesthetics

is its ethics mentioned above that aligns with its ruling class partisanship: that its aesthetic choices must not offend the sensibilities of its feudal and imperialist masters that fund their films and screen them at international festivals.

The post-dilawan, as currently represented by Yap and some other filmmakers who similarly work in Vivamax, feeds on more populist forms to inform their cinema. Notable with Yap's films is his fixation on introducing dictionary definitions as on-screen pop-ups whenever someone mentions a seemingly unfamiliar concept, which one can root as common with youtube Vlogs. Aligned with this Vlog inclination is the aesthetic and narrative depthlessness heavily informed by the social media influencer framework. This framework, which started as an advertising strategy separated from social media posting, is now resolved with the daily activities of social media personalities. The social media influencer is now a confused entity: at once identified as influencing market flows, it now confuses itself as a moral entity. While dilawans are also apologists of capitalism, they are doing so in favor of older semifeudal and semi-colonial relations, making them at least more conscious of their own privileges, and thus, capable of expressing guilt while displacing this guilt to someone else. Post-dilawans – as cinema and as influencers – are more staunch apologists of market-driven individualism. This position is fragile as they can't really escape the very anti-human nature of the capitalist free market that they

are being apologetic for. The post-dilawan resolution in this matter is to further the apologism in moral posturing: an extreme ideological theology of imperfection that excuses even actual criminals and even dictators, all on the basis of a perceived epistemic injustice: that one can't possibly know everything to "judge" a certain person. The influencer ideology to "judgers" and "bashers" here comes handy: they are ignored.

The Post-Dilawan cinema, having to pattern itself from social media influencer framework, bear with it a very similar ideological strand. Just looking at the top social media influencers in the country from CongTV's Lincoln Velasquez, to expat model Wil Dasovich to actress-siblings Toni and Alex Gonzaga, it is easy to identify them ideologically: despite their difference in social class origins, they currently harbor the very same ideology of capitalist apologism that comes from their imagined hustling, and so must be "respected" just on the virtue of that. What's more, this hustle involves baring their personal lives to everybody online. In consequence, they take feedback very personally, hence, the common influencer-attitude aversion to "bashers". The influencer framework provided ideologically capitalist individuals in pop culture frontlines in a nation-state that does not really have a capitalist industry to speak of.

Post-dilawan cinema pushed the non-resolution of dilawan indie in the way that the non-resolution that also bears the burden of truth which gives a semblance of agency to the post-dilawan protagonist, contrary to

a non-participant and often idiotic dilawan protagonist. This non-resolution adds to the post-dilawan inclination towards the influencer framework. This is what Yap's *Pornstar 2* (2021) and GB Sampedro's *Crush Kong Curly* (2021) chant in unison: that the protagonists of the films know the consequences of their acts, acted upon based on necessity or desire, with nothing to regret.

They present more properly capitalist protagonists, but they are fragile in the face of the real of their situation: Elle (AJ Raval) in *Crush kong Curly*, is pushed to being a sex worker when her semicolonial and neoliberal education failed her despite checking all the boxes of individual success. Of course, ideologically, Elle believes that these are all from her own choice to subvert her own life, that even if she's haunted by her past mistakes, she's been changed. But her economic condition otherwise tells the audience that whatever that she's doing never really helps change things around her, and in fact, only reproduces the very thing that pushes her to desire her own captivity.

The Post-Dilawan's coming hegemony resides on the same populist politics that the Duterte campaign has rolled out in 2016, a politics that has a hint of revolutionary potential due to its popular character. But as the political development of the past years have seen, this politics is fragile and vulnerable in the face of actual authoritarianism. The reopening of cinemas in Novem-

ber 2021 is the first signal of a renewal of antagonism between the Dilawan and the Post-Dilawan with the re-activation of MTRCB's role as the gatekeeper of ruling class' cinematic morality.

What hasn't changed with the coming of the Post-Dilawan is the same contemptuous attitude that Dilawan cinema has for the marginalized. The last stretch of 2020 saw a spate of united police campaigns by MMFF and movie producers against those who pirate MMFF entries. While on the other end, those who are "legitimately" watching the movies are subjected to horrible user experience and treatment of the ugly web platforms the films where the films are streaming. The same rhetoric of policing can be heard from the Vivamax camp. On the contrary, it seems that the more that Vivamax gets pirated, the more it's becoming successful, hitting 1 million subscribers as it opens globally. Where the whole antagonism between the Dilawan and the Post-Dilawan brings us is where the true site of struggle in cinema comes from: the site of cinema as enjoyment. As the pandemic exposes the true nature of each class, it also exposes this in cinema: that cinematic enjoyment has a lot more to do with class struggle than it is with mere "film literacy." Enjoyment is aesthetic: it depends on a space that one occupies. There is no enjoyment in an unenjoyable space. Piracy makes an intolerable place a bit nice for the time being. But the ruling classes are forcing you to pay for that peace of mind.

5: Contempt

In September 2021, the Inter-Agency Task Force for COVID-19 response (IATF) opened for pilot testing a new Pandemic Alert Level and Granular Lockdown system in Metro Manila that was fully implemented for the whole country in November.¹ Metro Manila is set on Alert Level 2, which means entertainment and amusement centers will be allowed to open, including cinemas. Cinemas reopened with either the Princess Diana biopic, *Spencer*, or a Marvel Cinematic Universe title.

The alert level system addressed a long call for reopening of businesses that got hit by the pandemic lockdowns. This move addressed and validated a point that most of the mainstream economists dismiss. The role of the consumer, with its activity of consumption as an extension of its laboring capacity, is what primarily contributes even to neoliberal economic framework and not the graces of the few capitalists or some shoddy speculation of some crypto trader. It is labor alone that

1. <https://mirror.officialgazette.gov.ph/downloads/2021/11nov/20211118-IATF-GUIDELINES-RRD.pdf>

brings value to the economy.

It has been the case ever since and even more so highlighted by the lockdowns. Urban workers not working halted economic activity. Bults of the workload are shouldered by rural agricultural workers in a form of imperialism more extreme and violent than before. In each case, death looms either from the pandemic or hunger.

This looming death entraps the IATF Alert Level system. Sane is the worrywart in a time of panic. Why, indeed, when there is a pandemic going on which has killed millions worldwide and thousands locally, should we go to movie houses? Or go out and shoot a film? At the expense of infection, we are motivated to participate in production and consumption. Production of films has resumed since the mid-2020s, but theaters remaining closed made it hard for the circulation of film products to happen. Last year, the film businesses experimented with online platforms which reportedly failed (especially in the Metro Manila Film Festival), in a classic manner, however, producers blame film pirates.

But let us take a step back: hasn't this always the case for local film production? The tragedy of contemporary Filipino experience is that nothing has really changed. Ever since the turn of the 21st century, Filipino film production's main problem has always been distribution and exhibition. While the industry heads point to piracy as their nemesis, they seem to be relaxed with the reality of market liberalization, which harmed them more in both quantitative and qualitative manner. Hollywood

franchise films dominate screens as film theaters get centralized to shopping malls, and with the full embrace of digitization by the largest cinema chain in the country, nothing is stopping the Disneyization of the Philippine film ecology. Isn't this the real reason why no more than three Filipino films cannot share the same showing week in the theaters (except for the Metro Manila Film Festival week)? The reopening of theaters does not guarantee success for the Philippine film productions. If anything, distributors would be more than willing to give slots to Hollywood films which were supposedly scheduled last year.

Again, the tragedy of contemporary Filipino experience is that nothing has really changed. Even more tragic are the violent efforts the state and the ruling classes exert just to maintain this order. While we can say that audiences and producers have an intersection in suffering within the wretched condition of this country, discursively and legally, it is always that the salvation of Philippine cinema is left to its audience. And it is also its audience that takes the blame for its fall.

There is a ring of truth in this: the resilience of Philippine cinema relies not on the creative capacity of artists and producers, but from the eyes that consume the images. Pandemic or not, what remains to the dwindling relevance of Filipino films locally – especially in the age of accelerating globalization, streaming services, and social media – relies on audiences and their feedback, with film critics mediating as expert audiences. As a

synthesis of spectacle and literary narrative, contemporary cinema's aim has always been communication. From capturing attention, the audience pays it back with attention. This feedback process has always been essential to cinematic productions.

But as mentioned above, there also exists a contempt towards this audience. Writings of Filipino thinkers of Film are rich in this contempt not just to any audience, but to a particular audience: the masses, with its composition of working classes, the farmers, and lumpen proletarians. There are those writings which treat the 'taste' of the masses with great contempt as though it is pathological, like Rafael Ma. Guerrero as he likened Tagalog Movies of his time's recurring themes and formulas as those with the popularity of disaster movies which, for him, is not a question of art but a question of a shared psychosis between filmmakers and audiences alike.² Or when nationalist Petronilo Bn. Daroy likened watching bomba films to spectating "a couple of freaks fornicating in the [sic] park."³

It would take decades before this contempt gets reflected in films themselves. One would just note the treatment of the mindless masses that attack the Police force indiscriminately in Erik Matti's *Buy Bust*, where

2. Rafael Ma. Guerrero. "Tagalog Movies: a New Understanding." *Readings in Philippine Cinema*. Ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero. Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983. p. 109.

3. Petronilo Bn. Daroy. "Social Significance and the Filipino Cinema." *Readings in Philippine Cinema*. Ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero. Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983. p. 108.

armed policemen and buffed grunts such as MMA Fighter Brandon Vera break skulls of untrained attackers. While some may argue that this is a statement showing the gruesomeness of the drug war, for a film that attempts at realism, especially of violence, it only does so by being faithful to the violence of the police force while placing the fantastic zombification towards the masses of people who seemingly protect the drug den. This, in effect, may have justified in the big screen Duterte's war on drugs that targeted the poor population as they are depicted as protectors and sympathizers of drug cartels. Matti did a better job justifying the killing of the poor than Brillante Mendoza's nuanced approaches in *Amo* and *Alpha: The Right to Kill*.

On a more general note, this contempt is expressed also in film productions which are explicitly made for foreign festival audiences. In the celebrated "end of national cinema", these "quality works", validated by their presence in international festivals, are catered in the face of the local audiences with the same limitations of the market liberalism that the theater exhibitors embrace. But it is the audiences that get blamed that they have not patronized these "relevant" works.

This blame comes from a perceived "lack" of film literacy. The late director, Lino Brocka, expressed this perception,⁴ noting that "an audience raised in an at-

4. Brocka, Lino. "Philippine Movies: Some Problems and Prospects." Readings in Philippine Cinema. Ed. Rafael Ma. Guerrero. Manila: Experimental Cinema of the Philippines, 1983. p. 260.

mosphere of motion picture commercialism and escapism would regard a good film totally alien.” On his correspondence in a thread Matti started on facebook, Director Frazco Mortiz expressed the same blame on the lack of “education” that the Filipino sensibility are “dumbed-down”.⁵ On a more recent note, filmmaker and historian Nick Deocampo would echo the same sentiment, but directly characterizing the taste of the general film audience:

Perhaps it may only be among those studying film that one may say there is film literacy, but generally no efforts have been made to widen the public’s knowledge of film. The public knows film as entertainment only, and their appreciation ends there.⁶

This whole web of contempt against the masses from multiple fronts are presented in a kind of pseudo-distinction between art and commerce in film. This distinction, however, is present merely within the sphere of film producers and some connoisseurs that access the film culture. For long, there has been this impression that there exist films which are for profit and there

5. The thread is still active and can be found here: <https://www.facebook.com/erikmatti/posts/10156605389986446>. I made a synthetic response to this in-relation to Education on my blog at <https://www.missingcodec.com/2019/08/27/notes-on-audience-taste-education-and-capture/>.

6. Anushrut Ramakrishnan Agrwaal. “A Life in the Archives: An Interview with Professor Nick Deocampo.” *Frames Cinema Journal* 17 (2020).

are films which are not for profit. This may be correct from the point of the producers: that the use-value of their products may be either for profit or not. But these identifications are left within a particular ideal, and not something that exists in actuality. This idealism, the ideology of the demarcation between film as art and commerce, is also the core principle of the kind of Film Literacy that the production side would want to implement.

In particular, the more common advocacy for Film Literacy resides in the promotion of film as art. This is manifested in the general commentaries of the panelists and respondents from the first Alternative Cinema Initiatives Conference (ACIC) back in 2019. Groups of alternative film practitioners expressed the challenges of their own activities, may it be alternative screenings or film production, and most of them expressed a challenge on the feedback part. Most of the participants, especially those who organize film festivals, resolve the need for audience development through film literacy.

What was echoed to the resolution being suggested by the ACIC participants mentioned is the same kind of assumptions presented by the general make up of film ecology at large. It is not much of an alternative suggestion either. What is behind this is the replication of the relevance of the “film as art” assumption of the film producers, which brings with it the contempt for a popular taste which extends to the contempt towards the masses. It is the same literacy, looking at the bare minimum of film knowledge, to appreciate production

and shift perspective.

This parallels the demands of contemporary education in the Philippines at large where shifts in basic education curriculum provide bare-minimum knowledge of aspects of life that exist outside of the reality of the masses such as “21st Century Literature” and “Contemporary Art.” What does the current order benefit from this? In general, the shift of contemporary basic education readies the future Filipino worker to the context of globalization. Much is the same with the kind of Film Literacy being advocated that is rooted in understanding of film as art whose hegemonic backbone is within the realm of global film festival circuits.

This dynamic expressed the good-old import-dependency and export orientedness of the Filipino economy. Again, falling into the tragedy of contemporary Filipino experience where nothing has changed, as this is also the case of our more famous commodities: from mangoes to our labor force, in exchange for lesser important commodities that we import from junk food to junk movies to junk expats.

The contempt for the working class, the lumpenproletariat, the indigenous, and the marginalized has always been the content of the blanket term globalization and the so-called “transnationalisation.” While Philippine Cinema seem to benefit from this, this is at the expense of the reproduction of the conditions that produced this contempt. More outwardly, this contempt is expressed by the Philippine Government to motivate

people to consume films at the expense of their health; by government agencies laying out guidelines to have people work on film productions despite of the dangers of the pandemic while this same agency gives money for export-oriented film productions. This is the same government that cuts budget to scientific research and healthcare: its last straw of contempt against the working people.

On the other hand, this contempt is expressed through a celebration of celebrities. Birthday parties of celebrities who are allegedly vaccinated privately just so they could go back to normal, whilst still violating government-imposed protocols. Partygoers from celebrity Tim Yap's party have been fined P1500 pesos each. While protesters from the militant jeepney association PISTON, who were expressing their call to allow their jeepney lines to work again to help them live through the pandemic, were fined 18000 each and a week of detention for the same quarantine protocol violation.

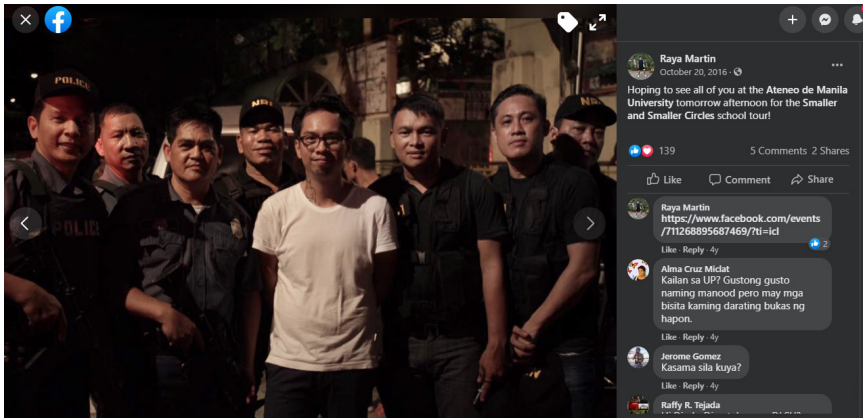
The lockdowns may make it look as though that we, the masses, are sharing suffering with the elites of any kind. But we know from which side death is nearer. And it is the masses who are being pushed towards death even more just so to keep the economy, and by extension, cinema alive. But the film complex' contempt against the masses is still there appearing in multiple forms, from cinematic representation of their vices in the guise of "realism" to legal threats against those who pirate films. To push for this even further is to push for

the death of the Filipino film Audience. That is, if the death of the Filipino Masses do not arrive first.

6: 13-Point Program for the Revitalization of Philippine Cinema

1. Death to the Landlords!
2. The national bourgeoisie must succumb to the masses, redistribute land and wealth!
3. Death to the Marcoses!
4. Death to the Cojuangco-Aquinos!
5. Death to the Dutertes!
6. Double death to the Marcoses and Cojuangco-Aquinos and Dutertes!
7. Death to US Imperialism!
8. Death to Chinese Imperialism!
9. Down with neoliberalism! Defenders be put to people's court!
10. Put class traitors into trial in the people's court!
11. Resume the GRP-NDFP peace talks! Oust the next president of the Philippines if this is not on the table!
12. Onwards People's Agenda! Sign and Implement CASER!
13. If your cinema disagrees with any of these, death to your cinema!

Appendix



Raya Martin's facebook post promoting Smaller and Smaller Circles a day after the US Embassy Police Violence (October 20, 2016)

Mikael de Lara Co's defense of the Kidapawan Massacre (April 2, 2016)



Mikael De Lara Co

April 2, 2016 · 🌐



Rowie, feel ko dapat mas maraming makabasa, post ko ito as status ha. In response to "is aid reaching farmers" and other aspects of the Kidapawan incident, here:

1. Re: aid: There are ongoing DA interventions for this, primarily cloud-seeding, and aid re: drought-resistant crops. Maraming nakakuha nito. Since Feb, ongoing yan, may dialogues, etc. Maraming natulungan na farmers, at talagang maling sabihin na "walang tinulong" at hinayaan lang sila.

2. Re direct aid in the form of food, the way I understand it, chokepoint seems to be at LGU level. NFA is steward of rice, it can't just release. LGUs and even DSWD must transact with NFA. Sa LGU side, ang basa ko, and if no appropriated funds for this, answer is calamity fund. Which needs state of calamity to be tapped. Which needs local bureaucracy greenlight. In any case, ang basa ko sa Kidapawan: State of calamity, kaya si Gov Mendoza was able to procure. But: Only for her own constituency. Yung mga dayo, it cant be justified (mako-COA siya) na basta ibigay lang. Kaya may nag-disperse before yesterday e. Yung mga natira, dayo from other provinces, along with other cause-oriented organizers.

3. So paano kung walang state of calamity? DSWD cash-for-work ang puwedeng mechanism. But this has to happen at farmer's own barangay level. Yan ang sinabi nila dun sa farmers-- may cash-for-work, uwi na kayo, coord with your barangay and LGU. This kind of thing ang dapat iaccelerate. LGUs must be proactive. Hindi abang, kundi dadayuhin nila ang mga El Nino hit areas, among others.

4. Which brings me to the sentiment which prompted me to post the Vicky G status. The lens that most people are viewing this from is humanitarian. Totoong may aspect namang ganun-- pero kung yun lang ang aspect, dapat di ba ang daling mag-usap. Engage, find ways to work within rules, find compromise or workable solution. Pero, yun nga, hindi lang humanitarian ito: May dahilan kung bakit hindi lang North Cot residents ang isinama (dineceive na sumama?) sa mobilization. Kasi nga alam na tali ang LGU sa pagrespond-- hindi puwedeng basta mamigay ka ng bigas sa hindi mo constituents. Ang mga nasa gobyerno, gets na gets yan. Nakakatakot ang COA. Nakakatakot magrealign nang basta-basta.

Mikael de Lara Co's defense of the Kidapawan Massacre (April 2, 2016) (cont'd)

5. Re: Deployment itself: May opinyon ako, pero may mga tanong din na dapat masagot. Sa videos, naka-M16 ang ibang pulis. Rubber bullets ba yan? Kung hindi, what prompted their deployment? May imminent threat ba? Pinaputukan ba ang pulis? In that case, out the window ang protocol na unarmed dapat tumugon. Hindi kaya ng Civil Disturbance Management Units kung sila mismo pinapaputukan. Ito ang dapat masagot ng investigation. EDIT: I note that initial reports say na hindi gunshot wounds ang cause of death ng casualties. But then again, yun pa rin ang tanong: Proportional ba ang use of force, excessive ba, maximum tolerance ba, dispersal pa rin ba ang naging mission objective, o may kasama bang pagkabadtrip galing sa mga pulis? EDIT ulit: May bullet wounds daw pala sa cause of death as per updated info.

6. Again, hindi lang humanitarian, pero dapat silipin ang political aspect. Orchestrated mobilization ito. Yung mga alam ang diskarteng kaliwa, gets ito. Agitate, Organize, Mobilize. Hanapin ang chokepoints ng bureaucracy. Kailangang idiin na ang motivations nito ay at least equal parts political and humanitarian, perhaps the former even moreso than the latter. Coincidence ba na ang NPA anniversary ay March 29, at nagsimula ang blockade ng madaling araw ng March 30? Annual ritual na ang mass mob pag anniv nila; don't get me started on that. May mga police reports na-- I think they're collating lang for a single narrative statement-- na isa sa mga casualties, positive for parafin. May reports ng putok galing sa side ng rallyists. May slugs ng .38 at .45 sa area; 9mm ang standard issue sa police. May nahuling NPA commander. Point being: I think unfair sa lahat ang simplistic "bigas hindi bala" sentiment, kasi sa totoo lang, ginagawa naman ang lahat para ibigay ang "bigas" e. Higit pa. Sino ba talaga ang nagdala ng pangyayari sa "bala"? Kapag hinubad ang drought assistance aspect nito, doon tayo mauwi: There are political agendas at work behind this. Vicky G's post doesn't even begin to paint the entire picture.

7. Alam ko: The best answer here is, "Ganito ang kulang, gets namin kayo, next week meron na." Pero kung ganoong kadali lang, di ba. Hindi e. Ganito nag-evolve ang government, dahil sa history natin-- cumbersome, ang daming checks and balances, naoobscure na ang intention na tumulong dahil sa buhol-buhol na shit ng burukrasya, dahil andaming nagnakaw dati. Hindi siya parang, as you say, Globe na may call center tapos madaling magdemand na, "Sagutin mo ang concern ko now na." Siguro dapat minsan sa buhay ng lahat ng tao makaramdam silang magtrabaho sa gobyerno, para magets nang solid ito. Pero may nagtetry, sa kabila ng lahat, sa kabila ng open hostility from some quarters, sa kabila ng agenda na ang strategic objective naman talaga e itumba ang lahat ng ito para mag-install ng isang world order na feel nila okey. Sa huli, tama ang natutuhan ko diyan sa Katipunan: Padayon lang.

See Translation



28 Comments 1.1K Shares



Sarge Lacuesta

Pre, no. 5 ang big question ko. Thanks for bringing it up.

Like · 5y · Edited



Most Relevant is selected, so some replies may have been filtered out.



Author

Mikael De Lara Co

Pare, i note na ang cause of death ng casualties ay hindi gunshot wounds.

Like · 5y

